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Women's Embodiment and Performance of Masculinity in Nepali Short Stories

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Abstract
This article examines the representation of the females with masculine features in the Nepali short stories through the analysis of the selected Nepali short stories: Prema Shah's "Panhelo Gulaf" ["The Yellow Rose"], Padmavati Singh's "Mauna Swikriti" ["The Silent Consent"], Kumar Nepal's "Maiyasaheb's Dayari" ["Maiyasaheb's Diary"], and Mani Lohani's "Nirbastra Ira" ["Stripped Ira"]. Despite stigma as well as taboo attached to female body in the Nepali society, the female characters honestly express their bodily experiences, such as love, sex, pregnancy, breastfeeding, menstruation and ovulation. Going beyond the conventional ways of representing the Nepali women, these stories present the Nepali women with masculine characteristics like gazing at males, expressing their desire for sex, asserting their freedom, and resorting to revenge, among others. Engaging with Laura Mulvey's notion of gendered gaze, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity, and Holin Fern Haber's idea of putting together familiar images in an unfamiliar way, the article claims that the women, as represented in these stories, appropriate, embody and perform masculine gestures, desires and bodies to become subjects and thereby gain agency and bring change. In the context of the present Nepali society, the current study expects to open a new avenue of research to look into the women who embody and perform masculine features in terms of class, caste, ethnicity, religion, and region, among others.
Keywords: Body, embodiment, female, gaze, masculinity, performativity

Introduction

While translating thirty Nepali short stories from five different volumes of *Pragya Adhunik Nepali Katha* [*Academy Modern Nepali Story*] published by Nepal Academy, the portrayal of most of the female characters reminded me of Virginia Woolf's remark about women from her famous *A Room of One's Own*: "But the paradox of this world, where in real life a respectable woman could hardly show her face alone in the street, and yet on stage woman equals or surpasses man, has never been satisfactorily explained" (32-33). Woolf finds a gap between the positions of women in the real world and the world of art

quite inscrutable. Keeping Woolf's observation in mind, all the four selected Nepali stories- Prema Shah's "Panhelo Gulaf," Padmavati Singh's "Mauna Swikriti," Kumar Nepal's "Maiyasaheb's Diary," and Mani Lohani's "Stripped Ira"- have been analyzed to foreground the ways the females are perceived in the Nepali short stories. According to Jamie Kristen Ayers, "For the female, her body is traditionally meant to behave in a way which exemplifies its fragility and femininity. With gendered norms there are certain behaviors or actions that come along with them" (34). These behaviors and actions conforming to the gendered norms shape the female body in terms of femininity. Going beyond the conventional ways of seeing the Nepali women, these stories represent the Nepali women as audacious, subversive and liberated. These women express their bodily experiences, including pregnancy, menstruation, ovulation and breastfeeding. They embody and perform normative masculine characteristics like gazing at fe/males, expressing their desire for sex, and resorting to revenge, among others. Deriving ideas from Mulvey, Butler, and Haber, this article claims that the women appropriate and perform masculine gestures, desires and bodies to achieve agency and power.

In connection to the representation of the women in the Nepali short stories, Mahendra Kumar Budhathoki, in his article, analyzes short stories of Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala and Prema Shah in relation to the portrayal of the widowhood in the Hindu society. Budhathoki argues that these writers "have depicted miserable widowhood in the Nepali Hindu society. Although sati tradition has been abolished and remarriage of widows are encouraged in the present time, widows are psychologically shattered because of Hindu socio-cultural viewpoints on them . . ." (68). Budhathoki sheds light on the legacies of the infamous Sati system in the present Nepali society. On the other hand, in "The Feminist Utopia in Prema Shah and Rokeya S. Hossain: Linking the Real to the Ideal," Komal Phuyal examines real in Prema Shah's "A Husband" and imagination in Rokeya S. Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" as complementary counterparts. Moreover, Phuyal asserts, "Shah locates a typical Nepali woman in the protagonist in the patriarchal order while Hossain pictures the contemporary Bengali Islamic society and reverses the role of men and women. Hossain's ideal world and Shah's real world form two complementary versions of each other: despite opposite in nature, each world completes the other" (79). Though the female characters selected for this study are located in the patriarchy, they are close to Sultana from Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" than those from Shah's "Husband." Unlike Sultana, these female characters, however, do not live in fantasy.

The discussion above demonstrates that the Nepali women, in literary representations, have been homogenized in a parochial way. In most of the cases, the female characters tend to conform to the conventional discourses about the Nepali women. Scholars have not looked into the female's appropriation of masculine traits in the Nepali short stories yet. Therefore, the present study seeks to fulfill this knowledge gap, and thus contribute to an ongoing debate on performative nature of gender/body in the context of Nepal.

Methodology

Based on analysis and interpretation of the selected Nepali short stories, this qualitative study follows comparison and contrast method so as to glean the female characters' performance and embodiment of masculine traits. The study primarily follows constructivism as it seeks to reconstruct knowledge about the Nepali women through the analysis of the short stories. Moreover, the study draws on critical theory as it critiques patriarchy that denies women agency. All the four Nepali short stories have been selected eclectically so as to examine the ways the women are represented in the Nepali short stories. As all these stories have been originally written in Nepali, I have translated the required

words, phrases and sentences on my own. Meanwhile, the selected stories and the texts from which theoretical insights have been derived were major sources of data collection. Meanwhile, the insights from the texts of Mulvey, Butler and Haber have been derived to form a theoretical framework to analyze the selected texts.

As one can observe various kinds of gendered gaze in the selected stories, the ideas about the gaze as theorized by Mulvey have been used. Referring to Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell's film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), Mulvey claims that the masculine gaze feminizes the spectacle: [T]his way of looking is understood as gendered "male", in keeping with Freud's naming of the pleasure of looking, voyeurism, metaphorically as active and therefore masculine. And this masculinization of the look also responded to a feminization of spectacle . . ." (7). In the present study, the masculine gaze emerges while examining male writers' portrayal of female characters as well as the male characters' ways of looking at the female characters. On the other hand, the female characters, just like female spectators of cinema, gaze at females the way males do or develop a self-conscious detachment. Mulvey echoes the same: "I also argued that this gendered gaze produced contradictions, especially for the female spectator, whose position would necessarily oscillate between an alignment either with the male gaze or a self-conscious detachment from it" (7). Moreover, the gendered gaze of these female characters is performative as they consciously use gaze to express their desire or give their male or female counterpart a signal about their intention.

As different degrees of gender role reversals can be observed in the selected stories, Butler's idea about performative nature of gender helps one understand such role reversals. In her seminal text *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that gender is performative. Gender is performed reiteratively through an array of "acts, gestures and desires" (173). But for Butler, these "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires, create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (173). This is how gender is naturalized and thereby an essentialist identity is constructed. Identity, however, does not refer to an independent agency. Instead, it is constituted through reiterative acts. Butler does not find any difference between body and gender. She persistently focuses on the absence of essential core of body. Just like gender, it is a construct. After all, both of them are constitutive in nature. Echoing Butler, Jack Halberstam argues that body "is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and the manner of this bearing is fundamentally dramatic" (122). Butler's ideas about gender and body inform the analysis of gender/ body performativity of female characters from the selected texts.

Meanwhile, ideas from Haber have been used to analyze and interpret the masculine traits exhibited by the female protagonists. Haber thinks that the problem for women starts with the way they are perceived as bodies first and foremost. Therefore, "it is with her body that she must fight" (152). One of the ways women can fight with their body is to do their body in a different way so that they could construct and project new meanings in their bodies. Haber, in her analysis, uses the muscled woman, a body builder, as a case in hand and demonstrates how her image as a muscled woman challenges the normative ideas about body and gender. Challenging the normative image and constructing a new image will "call to attention the fact that she is not just what society made her, while at the same time not creating a psychological, economic, and sexual ostracism within that very society" (147). As our society is used to making sense of masculine and feminine separately, it—if they are put together—cannot make sense because "the best catalysts of change are those that put together familiar images in unfamiliar ways" (153). Therefore, Haber finds subversive potential in doing body/gender in a mixed way. Indeed, the female protagonists under the scrutiny of this study perform their gender and body in a subversive way by appropriating masculine traits. Combining the ideas of Mulvey, Haber and Butler, this article argues that

women appropriate and perform masculine gestures, desires and bodies to practice their agency. Despite differences in sources and approaches, all these theoretical notions share concerns about the women in terms of the way they perform their gender/body and the way they are perceived or represented in patriarchal societies across the world.

Embodying and Performing Masculine Gender/ Body in Nepali Short Stories

Against the backdrop of the Nepali middle-class society from 1960s, Shah, in "Panhelo Gulaf," portrays a woman, who takes revenge on her husband for abusing her sexually. The protagonist keeps a diary. A tuberculosis patient at a hospital, she reflects on her experience of being abused at the hands of her husband in this way: "Since then [marriage], I have been squeezed like a lemon in his fist and I have melted like chewing gum in his hot spit. Now what is left in me? Only a hard rubber. No matter how much you suck or bite it, no juice oozes" (101). She, therefore, calls her husband a caterpillar and herself a yellow rose. She notes, "My poor yellow rose! A caterpillar on each leaf! All flowers are about to be eaten. How fast these caterpillars eat the leaves!" (105). The way the caterpillar consumes the rose without offering anything in return, her husband consumes her body without respecting her as a human being. She, to her husband, is just an object to be consumed.

Her negligence towards her health is a symptom of her exploitative relation to her husband. She has come to realize that he loves her only as a woman, not as a human being: "He is a man and I am a woman. Except for this, he forgot everything. After all, I, a mouthwatering piece of meat, was right in front of him. He was satiated at that. Like a greedy fox, he pounced on me and tore out a layer of my ideals" (101). To him, she is just a juicy piece of meat waiting to be eaten. Once his desire is quenched, he has no respect for her ideals that make her a human being. This kind of oppressive as well as exploitative relation has rendered her empty. She reflects on her emptiness in these words; "The hole in my lungs has grown so big that it can accommodate the whole sky. The empty sky. I also fill as much emptiness within myself as I can accommodate" (99). The hole in lungs functions at two levels. Firstly, she is dying of tuberculosis. Secondly, her terminal illness stands for her exploitative relation to her husband. Rather than bringing fulfillment in her life, this relation is rendering her hollow.

Her husband does not stop exploiting her body even when she is in the hospital bed. She notes, "Yesterday, he tortured me as much as he could. The way an eagle carries a rat in the sky, he made me hover all over the sky. It was a never-ending sky" (103). He abuses her while administering her medicine. She reflects, "Eventually, he held my head by force and poured that liquid into my mouth. I could not wipe even the sticky liquid spilled on my face. All of a sudden, the sharp teeth of a crocodile chewed my lips. I got stunned. . . . I fell unconscious" (99). She feels that he is ready to exploit her till the end of her last breath. She does not share a reciprocal relation with her husband. He only cares for fulfilling his sexual urges. Therefore, she thinks "[h]e is not aware of my longings and anxieties. Like a big cat, the man within him manhandles, slams and claws me" (100). Here, the narrator portrays her husband as a blind masculine force that goes wild with sexual desire and thus ignores her feelings and anxieties: "The man within him is stronger than he is" (100). Therefore, he does not know how much harm his uncouth sexual advances have caused her. She questions, "But how could he know how much I have been disturbed and laid bare because of his caress?" (100). Rather than bearing with humiliation, insult, and exploitation in her marriage, death sounds more appealing to the narrator. Therefore, when she comes to know that she "was diagnosed with TB, I did not grow sad. Instead, I grew happy. I thought at least I would get rid of this torture. On that very day, I lit an incense stick in the name of God. My mind was assured" (101). She is relieved as her days of freedom from exploitative

relation are approaching nearer. She is grateful to God for granting her this opportunity to escape her husband's inhuman treatment.

Eventually, the narrator decides to take revenge on her husband for the suffering he has caused her. She makes a plan to get him infected with her disease. In her diary entry of 14th of Asar, she notes, "I will also bite him. . . . I will also become a cat and lick all over his tender body with my rough and thorny tongue. Biting into his rosy body, I will take out his flesh piece by piece and fill it with all my germs. The rosy body that loves me should also grow into a scaly hard fossil like that of mine" (105). Ironically, she calls this act her love towards her husband. In order to take control of the situation, she resorts to masculine self and feminizes her husband. She uses the word 'cat' to refer to her masculine self. She uses the phrases like 'tender body' and 'rosy body' which are conventionally used to describe women. Even her gaze turns into a masculine gaze. This role reversal gives one a hint at the association of masculinity with power, domination and self-control.

In the patriarchal society, the females are denied their agency in such a way that they—as females—cannot fight against oppression and exploitation inflicted on them by their male counterparts. They are supposed to uphold the respect of the family as well as clan through propriety in etiquettes and sexual behaviors. Thus, the women fall prey to *ijjat* economy, which regulates body of the woman. The middle-class people, as per Mark Liechty, produce social capital through a few practices like "sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs, and education" because "they give them *ijjat*" (84). In this patriarchal middle-class social economy, the women are supposed to strictly adhere to certain codes regarding their behaviors related to sex. The narrator, therefore, cannot share her feelings with other relatives or friends. Owing to these reasons, the diary becomes the protagonist's friend. Bereft of her agency as a woman, the narrator adopts the masculine self to fight back. Eventually, she challenges the *ijjat* economy imposed on her and thus decides to gaze at her husband's body and kiss him so as to get him infected with tuberculosis. Her ideas about her relationship to her husband and her decision to take revenge on him go beyond the conventional ideas about the Nepali women not only from 1960s but also from the present times.

Similarly, in Nepal's "Maiyasaheb's Dayari," Maiyasaheb—a daughter of a Nepali aristocratic family from the early 1960s—chronicles in her diary her experiences with menstruation and sexual attraction towards Malati, a young woman assigned as her caretaker. Maiyasaheb reflects, "I had a period. A little blood was spotted. The color also looked darker. I have a light headache" (l 14). Next month, she, however, has a very different experience of period: "I did not have a stomach pain this time around. I bled well" (16). She registers a painful period next month around: "It has been three days since I had a period. I had severe cramps in my stomach. I did not feel like eating a meal. I slept throughout the day" (17). These details about menstruation foreground Maiyasaheb's expression of femininity. Still today, many women from different parts of Nepal are supposed to isolate themselves from their family members during their menstruation. Moreover, they- as impure ones- are not allowed to take part in any religious rites and rituals. If one examines the society's attitude towards menstruation back in the 60's when this story got published, the situation was certainly worse.

Indeed, Maiyasaheb's family is an aristocratic family. They have maids and male servants. The very name 'Maiyasaheb' is not a typical name. It is an honorific term used to refer to a daughter from the aristocratic family. Maiyasaheb's elder brother impregnates Bachaspati, one of the maids of the family. However, "[t]hey flogged her. Eventually, she was forced to say that it was Harkabahadur's baby. She agreed only after a relentless thrashing" (23). Not only do they abuse Bachaspati but also Harkabahadur, one of the male servants of the family. One should take note of the fact that even if both come from the

same aristocratic family, Maiyasaheb cannot be as licentious as her brother is. As an unmarried young woman, she has to maintain propriety regarding her sexuality so as to maintain the *ijjat* of her family intact. This is one of the reasons why she has to resort to her fantasy as well as diary. Against the backdrop of feudal Nepal before 1960s, Maiyasaheb's frankness in the expression about her period—though in a diary—is subversive, to say the least.

Additionally, in her diary, Maiya expresses her attraction towards Malati in this way: "My Malati! In gown with red embroidery. She was lying in a big lawn somewhere. Seeing her, I fell in love with her. I caught her, pouncing" (15). Maiyasaheb finds herself as a male in her dream: "I did not feel like being a woman even a little in today's dream. I did not see any young girl either. I had become a proper male" (16). In terms of her fantasized lesbian relationship with Malati, she presents herself as the butch, the male partner, and the latter as femme, the female partner. Drawing on the Hindu myth of the lord Krishna and Rahda—much worshipped lovers—Maiyasaheb addresses Malati as Radhika: "Radhika, my Radhika. Malati, I equally love her in reality" (17). She dreams of Malati frequently: "Today, too, Malati appeared in my dream. Clearly, I saw her face, trunk, and chest" (18). Maiyasaheb, like a male, gazes at the body parts of Malati. Indeed, she turns herself into a young man by wearing the clothes of her brother: "I put on those clothes yesterday. Very comfortable. I looked exactly like a boy. There is no difference between my face and my elder brother's face" (19). Her embodiment of masculine self makes her feel like a man: "I forgot that I was a woman and I relished the experience of being a man. How wonderful it would be if I had shoes, socks, undergarments and coat! How awful it is to be a woman! No freedom at all" (19). Her embodiment of a man makes her feel free and powerful.

Nevertheless, she is as vulnerable to sexual abuse as other women are. As she is accompanied by her brother at night, the latter tries to abuse her. Maiyasaheb notes, "Suddenly, my brother hugged me tightly and kissed me, biting. He pressed himself against my chest" (20). However, she manages to escape him. Later on, she justifies her brother's act as she daydreams of hugging Malati: "I hugged her as tightly as my brother had done me. She said nothing. It was thrilling and intoxicating. Maybe my brother hugged me for the same reason. When my chest was pressed hard against her, I forgot everything. I had a glimpse of being a man" (21). Her daydream gives her a taste of being a man. Her masculinity gets established as she fights with her licentious brother for Malati: "My brother reprimanded me. He pounced on me, saying 'Malati is mine. Why did you take her?' time and again. I also got furious. I also reprimanded him in response. As we had a row, I became a man" (21). Indeed, her performance as a male in terms of her dress and desire helps her drive her brother away. Maiyasaheb notes, "As he saw a change in my appearance, he fell silent and returned at once. Malati was overjoyed to see my brother go away" (21). In the patriarchal society, "power," as per Haber, "is not [conventionally] a quality that includes a feminine component. Power tends to relate to traits of masculinity, authority, and control. If power were to have a feminine component, it is typically illustrated by a woman that takes on masculine traits either in her mannerisms, clothing or leadership style" (Ayers 34). By performing and embodying masculinity, Maiyasaheb feels that she has become a male like "Krishnaprasad Bahun. I had thick hair on my chest. I kissed Malati on her cheek and chin. I fondled her breasts" (Nepal 21). Modeling on her family's male servant Krishnaprasad Bahun, Maiyasaheb positions herself as an upper caste male.

Nevertheless, when she daydreams of having an intercourse with Malati, she is aware of being a woman. She knows that she and Malati have female body parts like breasts and vagina. She notes that Malati "has well-developed breasts. Well, my own breasts are not less developed either. Ours are same" (22). She adds, "Both of us were naked. There was a

thin forest in her vagina. There was a thick and rough one in mine" (23). With her awareness of biologically being a female, Maiyasaheb plays the role of a male in the intercourse. Describing her imaginary intercourse with Malati, she notes, "As I tore her blouse, she fell silent. She also looked intoxicated. Her eyes drooped. I could not control myself. I kissed her in several places" (23). One can observe male aggression in Maiyasaheb in the intercourse. Meanwhile, Malati plays the role of a passive female: silent and shy. Moreover, Malati becomes an object of Maiyasaheb's gaze: "Malati has a beautiful body. A symmetrical body. Small eyes. Short stature with short frame. Round hands. Small fingers. Long hair" (22). Here, Maiyasaheb, performing her part as a male, gazes at Malati's body parts. Maiyasaheb practices her agency by embodying and performing certain aspects of masculinity.

Meanwhile, Padmavati Singh, in "Mauna Swikriti," creates a disabled young woman named Karuna, who uses her caretaker's son Rame, a young boy, to fulfill her desires to have sex and a baby. Set in Kathmandu in the early years of 2000s, this story portrays Nepal undergoing political upheavals. Her parents live in the United Kingdom. They have arranged caretakers to help her with all the household chores. They "have gathered all the means of materialistic convenience. After all, isn't this room the only world she can call her own? Leaving her room, she can't go anywhere" (Singh 216). Both of her legs do not function. Karuna wonders, "Why did God make me disabled after giving such active mind and playful heart?" (216). In the absence of movement, she finds her life meaningless. Meanwhile, Jamuna, her maid, appears there with a pair of bras sent by Karuna's parents from the UK. She says to Karuna, "Well, you are a beautiful woman. On top of that, you have symmetrical breasts. If only you had normal legs, you . . . ." (217). Her disability has deprived her of several opportunities like affairs, marriage, giving birth to child and raising a family of her own, among others. Therefore, she is agitated when Jamuna refers to her legs. She asks Jamuna to look at a picture on the wall, which "consisted of a nude young woman, who was breastfeeding her baby on her lap" (217). Then, she responds to Jamuna, "If I had normal legs, a baby would suckle on my breasts like that, wouldn't it?" (217). Jamuna reminds her of "her legs, hanging in a helpless way" (217). She is fully aware of what inconvenience these legs have caused her. However, she decides to overcome an obstacle posed by her legs: "Now I also need a man to live and satiate my sexual hunger" (217). Karuna "deeply felt this need for a lover within her heart for the first time in her life" (217). Then she expresses her desire to have a baby in this way: "Look Jamuni, like that woman, I want to suckle a baby holding it on my lap" (217). She expresses her desire "without any shame and hesitation" (217). Jamuni challenges her: 'But you have not been married yet" (218). Karuna counters her in this way: "You need to have intercourse with a man to give birth to a baby" (218). She is not delusional. She is aware of her reality as she says, "See, thanks to my disability, it is impossible for me to get married. Should I be deprived of the motherhood because of these disabled legs? I also have an ability to give birth. I want to show that ability" (218). Then she asks Jamuna to send Rame to her room.

A shy boy in his teens, Rame appears there. Karuna feels that he "has grown up into a young man" (220). She finds him appealing. Karuna gazes at the body of a young man. In his presence, Karuna "felt like flying as if the wings had grown on her body. Her body felt light like a flower" (220). She asks Rame to give her a massage. During the massage, she initiates a sexual intercourse with Rame. During her intercourse, "she kept wishing for the transformation of this ecstatic moment into an inception of a baby" (220). As she sends Rame away following the sex, Karuna "felt as if the process of inception had started in her womb" (221). This is how Karuna fulfills her desires to have sexual satisfaction as well as give birth to a baby. Here, Karuna's direct expression of her need for sex, her gaze at the body of the opposite sex and her initiative to have sex are the things expected from a male.

Despite her disability, her masculine performance enables Karuna to practice her agency and authority and thereby fulfill her desires.

Finally, Mani Lohani's "Nirbastra Ira" depicts Ira as an upper middle-class single mother with two daughters in the early years of 21st century. Ira enjoys all kinds of freedom, including the sexual one. Indeed, the story starts with a conversation between Mani, the narrator, and Ira following their sexual intercourse. The narrator, a male, gazes at the naked body of Ira in this way: "Like a kid, she picked up her clothes one by one and started putting them on. I kept gazing at her" (Lohani 297). After savouring the beauty of Ira's naked body, the narrator, however, remarks, "You look beautiful in dress" (297). Ira challenges Mani's male chauvinism in this way: "You are scared of my bare body. You cover me. But how long?" (297). Ira has no problem with her body and she knows that males—even when they love ogling at the naked female body—are scared of it as the naked female body stands for resistance to male control and patriarchal notion of honor. Therefore, the males try to control female sexuality. Unlike Mani, Ira is scared of her bare soul: "My soul is bare, Mani" (297). The cloth cannot cover the bare soul that has been exposed to manipulation, humiliation, momentary affairs and exploitative relationships. Mani does not even understand what Ira is hinting at. However, he imposes his ignorance on Ira: "I don't understand what she says. Does she herself understand the words she has just uttered?" (297). This is a typical example of a male failing to acknowledge a female's intellectuality.

Even if Mani claims to have noticed her bare soul at the end of the story, he is worried about her body. In this connection, one can use Ayers' explanation of Haber's idea: "[W]omen are first read as a body. This means that before a woman does any action or is involved in any type of discourse, she is first judged by her appearance and bodily characteristics" (34). He loves the female body but wants it to be covered. In a way, he wants it under the male control. Finally, he confesses to her, "I love your body" (Mani 297). Again, he reflects on her body: "I wondered whether the temperature outside was higher than that of Ira's body" (297). Mani finds naked body attractive. However, he justifies his love for her body in a different way: "Ira lives in the present. And, I have fallen for her fascination with the present. Not for her" (298). As a typical hypocritical male, he tries to intellectualize his fascination to Ira's body.

An amazing aspect of the story is Ira seems to see through her lover. Questioning her relationship with Mani, Ira asks, "Does our relationship go beyond the warmth of the bed which has just moved under us?" (298). Instead of responding to Ira, Mani still shows his obsession with her body: "She is hardly forty-eight now. She takes care of herself so well that she does not look less attractive than a girl in her early twenties" (298). His observation reminds one of Butler's idea of performing body: "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body . . ." (122). According to Butler, one performs one's body and gender. In the present case, even though Ira is a middle aged woman with two young daughters, she makes her body perform the things generally associated with the young women, trying to push the conventional boundaries of body's possibilities of embodiment. Under the spell of her body performance, Mani has fallen for Ira. Not only Mani but her ex-husband seems to have been insecure because of her attractive body. The narrator reflects, "A man into politics, her husband accused her of having an affair with his own brother" (298). Failing to handle her sexuality, her husband seems to have grown jealous and insecure. As a result, he divorces her. Ira becomes a victim of her husband's insecurity and jealousy caused by her body. Both Mani and her ex-husband are examples of typical males, who victimize females when they fail to handle women's sexuality.

Meanwhile, Ira knows exactly what she is doing: "The way I get stripped in front of you . . . stripping my ego away . . ." (300). She has no justification for being naked in front

of him. She does not allow her ego or emotion to be on the way. Therefore, she takes her body the way it is. However, Mani's male ego is manifested in his male chauvinism. The male chauvinism cannot be missed in the final observation of Mani: "I wondered if her soul would have been covered if her husband had loved her enough. The husband's warm love is the cloth to women" (300). Indeed, Mani cannot take Ira as an independent human being. In the absence of her husband, Ira, as a woman, is exposed to the dangers of the wild world out there. Mani's observation of Ira's bare soul is his concern over dangers the female body could invite to her. In a way, Mani, in the absence of Ira's ex-husband, is trying to play the role of the male, who protects and controls her. Though Ira has been typically reduced to an object of male desire, her courage to challenge her male counterpart regarding her body is noticeable. Unlike the typical shy female, she is defiant, cerebral and expressive. She enjoys her freedom, including sexual one, as an independent woman. One may certainly wonder: Would she have been able to enjoy such freedom if she had not divorced her husband? Does the absence of her husband motivate her to perform the masculine role? Nevertheless, Ira emerges as a subversive female, who appropriates masculine traits to maintain her agency and freedom.

Discussion, Findings and Conclusion

In this manner, the female characters from the selected stories claim power and agency through embodiment and performance of masculinity. However, one can notice differences among them. Maiyasaheb and Ira from the stories by male authors seem to be way more subversive and rebellious than Karuna and the unnamed character from the stories by female authors. Indeed, Maiyasaheb is way ahead of others in performing 'female masculinity', a form of "masculinity which is produced by, for and within women" (Halberstam 362). In terms of gaze, too, the female characters created by male authors, despite their rebelliousness, are gazed more by males than the ones created by the female authors. In line with Woolf's observation, these details help one infer that male authors tend to exaggerate and objectify their female characters more than their female counterparts do. Even when the male authors are creating subversive female characters, their fantasy about the females is filtered through the masculine way of objectifying women in general.

On the other hand, the female characters created by female authors, though idealistic ones, tend to be more realistic than the ones created by their male counterparts. For example, many females would identify themselves with "Panhelo Gulaf"'s unnamed protagonist, who suffers from sexual abuses at the hands of her husband. Certainly, her upper middle-class background and poetic way of expressing her feelings may alienate many female readers. However, the anger she has towards her abusive husband is palpable. The same, however, cannot be said about Maiyasaheb and Ira. Likewise, Karuna from "Mauna Swikriti" may sound too unrealistic in terms of her expression of her desires. However, if one looks at her everyday life confined to the four walls of her house, Karuna sounds more realistic than all the other female protagonists under the investigation of this study. Moreover, she does not suffer from cognitive disability of any kind. Only her legs under her waist do not move. Therefore, it is commonsensical for her to have yearning for sex and baby. Only the way she expresses it sounds a bit more dramatic and masculine. Nevertheless, one cannot undermine her agitation at Jamuna's reference to her crippled legs. Karuna feels provoked and humiliated. Hence, she takes it as her mission to get sex and baby to show her abilities to the people, including Jamuna.

Despite these differences, one noticeable common feature shared by all these female protagonists is that their masculine performance—to a great extent—enables them to gain what they want. Masculinity, as per the representations of these stories, seems to stand not only for aggression and violence but also for power, agency, freedom and dignity. Echoing

the same, Foucault asserts that "it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, and gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals" (98). In the Nepali society, it is the male bodies, gestures and desires which are identified as subjects. Therefore, one important step women need to take is to take the position of subject in power relation because the subject is the effect as well as vehicle of power as it "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (194). Iris Marion Young calls it subjectivity and argues that "if women are to achieve any subjectivity it can only be through adopting this position of the male subject who takes pleasure in the objectification of women" (65). Women, only through the knowledge of these power practices in contemporary society, can turn themselves into the individuals who can herald change. As a case in hand, Emmeline Laszlo Ambjörnsson, in her article, studies how the Swedish rural women deal with both hegemonic masculinities and hegemonic femininities by embodying and performing certain features of masculinity like being a tough forest owner with the use of machinery, clothing and safety equipment and an entrepreneurial forest owner with the practical and managerial skills. She explains, "The primary way the interviewees resisted subordinate hegemonic femininity and challenged hegemonic masculinities in forestry was to perform female masculinities or appropriate features of hegemonic masculinities, . . ." (1592). Ambjörnsson, however, is aware of challenges of such appropriation of hegemonic masculinities. She argues that "these women also consolidated the hierarchical relationship between masculinities and femininities in that they positioned the performance of masculinities as being superior to femininities" (1596). Nevertheless, these women's appropriation of masculinity has offered them agency and authority they would lose otherwise. Along the same line, the unconventional body/gender performances by the females from these stories are signals to the Nepali women to switch their body/gender performances from hegemonic femininity to female masculinity for agency and power.

Summing up, as illustrated by the gender/body performance of the female characters of the stories, women—just like Haber's body builder woman—can have access to power by performing their body/gender in ways that do not fall into either masculine or feminine molds but reap the benefits of both the categories. Eventually, such subversive performance of body/gender leads women to power as resistance, according to Foucault, is a part of power. Foucault claims that "where there is power, there is resistance and yet this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). Power is right there on the other side of resistance. Therefore, the female characters from these stories, as subjects, play the power game to become vehicles of change. Though women embodying and performing masculinity risk reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity further, they—as hinted at by the female characters of these stories—can assume the position of power that enables them to have agency and freedom. As things stand for women today, this is not the worst option, if not the best. This article expects to reignite scholarly debate on the unexplored aspects of female masculinity, which have been dismissed in the Nepali society with the misogynic and homophobic expressions like *uttauli* (vain, coquettish), *boksi* (a Nepali version of a witch), *chhakka/ hijada* (third gender), *pothi baseko* (a crowing hen), and *aimaiko kilkile hundaina* (women do not have Adam's apple). Moreover, further studies can be carried out on the representation of female masculinity in terms of other vectors of identity like class, caste, religion, region and ethnicity, among others.

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