

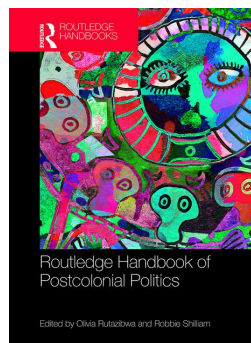
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### **'Telling a Tale'**

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# ‘TELLING A TALE’

## Gender, knowledge and the subject in Nepal

*Rahel Kunz and Archana Thapa*

### Introduction

*I was too hapless to understand the reason for my misery, but miserable I was in my half-Nepali, half-American life. Tortured. ...*

*I wanted to be a boy. And not just any boy. I wanted to be a freeborn Western boy. Not just any freeborn Western boy. I wanted, specifically, to be Björn Borg, the Swedish tennis star.*

(M. Thapa 2010, 70–2)

How does a Nepali girl come to dream of being a white male Swedish tennis star? Manjushree Thapa's story is part of *Telling a Tale*, a collection of personal narrations about being, becoming and writing as a girl or woman in contemporary Nepal (A. Thapa 2010). The stories highlight the diverse ways in which Nepali girls and women from various social backgrounds navigate complex social structures such as gender, caste, religion, marital status and ethnicity and how these have shaped their identities. The authors also narrate how they resist, subvert and move beyond social norms to create their own alternative ways of knowing and being in the world as they 'move into modernity'. These stories address two key issues at the heart of coloniality and post/decolonial politics: the ways in which coloniality has shaped, and continues to shape, gendered forms of knowledge production and subjectivity formation, even in a country that was never colonised, such as Nepal. In this chapter, we draw on *Telling a Tale* as an archive to explore post/decolonial politics and alternative imaginaries.

You may wonder why a chapter on Nepal would be included in a handbook on postcolonial politics. Even though Nepal officially remained a sovereign country during the colonial era, it was strongly influenced by colonisation. For one, it has been argued that Nepal experienced an 'equally oppressive but noncolonial Rana government' (Des Chene 2007, 215).<sup>1</sup> The broader influence of coloniality and imperialism has been summarised as follows:

A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal's relationship with British India, a history of labour migration that is similarly rooted in the political-economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India.

(Des Chene 2007, 218)

Moreover, various authors have discussed multiple ways in which coloniality has shaped and continues to shape Nepal, highlighting for instance the ‘colonialist aspect of early anthropology in Nepal’ (Des Chene 2007, 212) and the ‘continuing influence of colonial borders on the ways South Asia is thought about, and of the hold of intra-regional imperialisms’ (Des Chene 2007, 209). In this light, Nepal is a particularly interesting site to explore post/decolonial politics, given that it was not formally colonised and yet coloniality has shaped and continues to shape the country (Des Chene 2007).

Gender politics in Nepal has also been influenced by coloniality. Nepali social structures are characterised by a rich diversity of 123 languages, castes, ethnicities, religions and cultures and there is not one single gender regime but many (Mittra and Kumar 2004; Yadav 2016). Yet, a complex combination of influencing factors imposed from outside have shaped and continue to shape knowledge production and social norms about gender in Nepal. Most prominently, these include Hindu nationalism, British imperialism, the arrival of development projects in the 1950s and the 10-year-long civil war (1996–2006). Hindu nationalism has strongly shaped knowledge and norms about gender in Nepal. Particular interpretations of Hinduism and their codification in laws and regulations influenced social norms regarding gender, caste, etc. and promoted particular binary models of heterosexuality and procreation (Sharma 2004; Mittra and Kumar 2004).<sup>2</sup> In this context, marriage is considered a necessary and key event in everyone’s life, based on cultural and religious norms, and women are considered to accept their husband’s world as their own (Yadav 2016, 47). Despite the fact that Nepal was declared a secular state in 2007 and despite significant policy and legal reforms, these social norms are still widely considered relevant.

With the end of the autocratic Rana regime in 1950, Nepal experienced an influx of large amounts of foreign aid and development experts. In the imaginaries of the international development community, the country was a particularly desirable ‘development laboratory’ and a ‘blank slate’ (USAID officials in Nepal, cited in Fujikura 1996, 271), reproducing typical colonial metaphors. Nepal was perceived as a ‘small, pure, non-modern country’ due to its ‘independent’ status during the age of colonialism and its insignificance in terms of international politics (Fujikura 1996, 271). The development project created ‘a conceptual space of cultural contact, carving into the social complexity of rural Nepal the paths along which nations from the “first” and “third” world can meet’ (Pigg 1992, 492). Some have argued that this encounter created similar erasures and silencing of living knowledge traditions as colonialism did in other contexts (Pigg 1992; Tamang 2009). What is certain is that the development project has significantly contributed to shape gender politics in Nepal. It was involved in creating the trope of the ‘poor, helpless Nepali women’. This trope remains situated within broader international discourses on gender and development that created the identity of the ‘poor third world woman’ in its various guises (Mohanty 1984). It continues to dominate mainstream discourses in Nepal and much of the internationally-driven development work in the country.

During the 10-year-long civil conflict in Nepal, knowledge and norms on gender received a makeover. Women and girls constituted an estimated 30–40% of the Maoist political and military wings and were at the forefront of the struggle for intersectional transformations (International Crisis Group 2005, 16). Maoist ideology in Nepal emphasises the importance of the role of women, and includes an explicit commitment to end discrimination against women, but their voices have often been marginalised (Lohani-Chase 2008, 154ff.). This led to a new trope of the fierce combatant that moved grassroot Nepali women from victimisation to empowerment. This trope depicts women combatants as fierce, brave, selfless and willing to be martyrs, carrying guns and fighting alongside their male comrades. Such depictions influenced the perception of women in Nepal, as one Maoist combatant argued that ‘today, the image of tired malnourished

women carrying children and herding cattle has been transformed into the image of dignified fighting women with gun' (Hisila Yami quoted in Tamang, n.d., 7).

All these elements have influenced not only the political-economic structures of Nepal but also systems of signification within which current forms of knowledge on gender and gendered subjectivity formation are situated. *Telling a Tale*, edited by Archana Thapa, is situated against this background (A. Thapa 2010). This collection of personal narratives of Nepali women illustrates the ways in which coloniality continues to shape gender politics in Nepal. It brings together thirty-one girls and women between the ages of 14 and 60, from various social backgrounds, telling their personal stories related to growing up as women in Nepal, addressing issues such as education, relationships, marriage, sexuality, moving abroad, spirituality and religion, trauma and death. Internationally, there has been a proliferation of such literature of self-writing, especially women writing autobiography, diary, travelogue, memoir and personal narrations. In Nepal, a context where it has been mostly men who write, *Telling a Tale* is the first major anthology of women's personal narrations in English.<sup>3</sup> Some contributors are trained creative or critical writers; for others this is their first publication. The book has been adapted into a play and staged in Nepal in 2012 and 2013. In 2012, Archana Thapa compiled, edited and published the second anthology in Nepali entitled *Swaastitwako Khoj*. The second book is currently being translated into German and adapted for a theatre performance scheduled to go on stage in 2017.

We consider this collection of stories as a legitimate archive to read post/decolonial politics in light of the new importance that storytelling has taken in IR. Storytelling has entered IR within what has been called the 'narrative turn' (Inayatullah and Dauphinee 2016; Jauhola 2015; Dauphinee 2013; Naumes 2015). Stories can make a number of contributions in IR and in social sciences more broadly. They can bring marginalised voices into IR to complete, complexify or disrupt existing pictures. They contribute to challenge established 'truths', to complexify dichotomies and problematise pre-established categories, and to make space for entanglements and contradictions (Naumes 2015, 820). Stories also show alternative ways of being and thinking that do not correspond to prevailing social norms. Bringing lived and embodied experience into international politics, they allow us to bridge the intimate, the local and the global. As a form of contestation and resistance, stories can move beyond zero point writing (Doty 2004, 389). Finally, stories also 'call into question the ability to construct a self that is free from internal contradictions' and show 'a state of being that fuses conflicting identities' (Naumes 2015, 826).

Situating our contribution within this 'narrative turn', our chapter proposes to read the collection of stories *Telling a Tale* as a site of post/decolonial politics. We argue that as explorations into subjectivities, these stories teach us a lot about Nepali society, about the entanglements between the subject and the world, about the imbrications between macro and micro dimensions of power. They contribute to disrupt conventional knowledge on gender in Nepal and fixed notions of the subject of 'the Nepali woman', and they make space for marginalised voices. Listening to these stories, we learn about the multiple and contradictory nature of subjectivity and the various ways in which women in Nepal deal with and resist gendered and other social norms, and develop their own forms of knowing and being. Through their practice of situated knowledge, these stories move beyond zero point writing. Finally, they also show how writing and other forms of art can be a site of contestation and liberation.

The context of the creation of *Telling a Tale* is also intensely political.<sup>4</sup> Archana Thapa recalls that gathering the contributions was a very challenging but also intensely rewarding process. Given that women in Nepal are not used to writing their own life stories and feel that these stories are not interesting to others, this process involved encouraging many of the contributors to write their personal stories for public readership and convincing them that it was okay to publicly share feelings and experiences. The book then is not only a book, it is also a process and

project of personal counselling and bonding among the contributors and with the editor, building trust and friendship, and believing in each other. The text came much later. As such, *Telling a Tale* is an example of struggling against social norms and gender discrimination, developing care and solidarity amongst women and alternative ways of thinking and living 'womanhood'. The book has been applauded for constituting a 'plural ecology of knowledge' (Nandy 1989), for its boldness and solidarity, and for a non-androcentric epistemological stance.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we read *Telling a Tale* as a contribution to the decolonial project of promoting alternative ways of knowing and being and opening up the horizon of possibilities for epistemic equality in knowledge production.

In order to analyse gender and coloniality in these women's stories, in the next section we first present the theoretical debates around gender, knowledge production and subjectivity in post/decolonial thinking. Then, in section three, we draw on these debates and on subjectivity as 'a mode of enquiry' (el-Malik 2016) to present how we read *Telling a Tale* as a form of post-colonial politics. We offer some concluding remarks in section four.

### Postcolonial politics, knowledge production and the subject

*I would never be 'I', because I would always be looked at as someone's daughter, sister, would-be wife, and eventually someone's mother.*

(Ojha 2010, 84)

Post/decolonial thought highlights that colonialism not only operates in the realm of material exploitation and military administration, but also in the realm of knowledge production and subject formation (Fanon 1994; Said 1979; Césaire 2000; Spivak 1988; Lugones 2010). Knowledge-making is a fundamental aspect of coloniality, understood as 'the hidden process of erasure, devaluation, and disavowing of certain human beings, ways of thinking, ways of living, and of doing in the world' (Gaztambide-Fernández 2014, 198). Post/decolonial thought focuses on how dominant forms of knowledge came into being historically through silencing or suppressing other forms of knowledge; challenges the epistemological and ontological assumptions of dominant forms of knowledge; and brings to the fore silenced knowledges, non-Eurocentric cosmologies and knowledge traditions. The aim is to unveil the logic of coloniality, to delink from the rhetoric of modernity, and to reconstitute legitimacy to subaltern knowledges and various visions of life (Mignolo 2012, xvii).

In this effort, post/decolonial scholars have pointed to the problematic implications of modern knowledge practices, such as othering, boundary drawing, and dissecting and boxing people's lives into fixed, narrow subjectivities (Mignolo 2012; Lugones 2010; Allison 2015; Enloe 2015). At the centre of their critique is a challenge of the supposedly objective narrator position occupying 'point zero' that hides itself as being beyond a particular location and claims access to universal knowledge (Castro-Gómez 2005). Describing the 'hubris of point zero' (Castro-Gómez 2005), Doty notes:

Zero-degree writing is not neutral, but ... an extraordinarily powerful style that is often almost successful in mystifying the fact that it is a style that harnesses desires and intensities in the quest for theoretical progress. The identity of the writing subject as scholar becomes a faceless, formless authority positioned at a removed distance from the human element at stake in what is being written about.

(Doty 2004, 389)

Post/decolonial work on the subject starts with the assumption that the subject is not pre-existing, fixed or natural, but incomplete, flexible and contradictory and cannot be captured by a fixed theory of the subject. As a social construct and product of society, it is a site of the workings of power where social norms are reproduced and instantiated. Thus, 'subjectivity' is not the free and spontaneous expression of our interior truth. It is the way we are led to think about ourselves, so we will police and present ourselves in the correct way' (Mansfield 2000, 10). Analysing processes of subject formation allows us to understand the entanglements between us and the world, and the workings of society, revealing how our daily lives are always already linked to complex political, social and philosophical concerns (Mansfield 2000, 2–3). Focusing on the constitution of subjectivities makes it possible to 'account for how *macrological power* – system forces, authority and governance – and *micrological power* – everyday negotiations and navigations – simultaneously represent the subject and are represented by subjects' (el-Malik 2016, 214). Concretely, such a focus allows us to highlight the ways in which subjectivities are constituted through complex webs of race, gender, class, nationality, religion, etc. that vary across time and space. Importantly, this opens space to consider situated knowledge and to challenge the epistemic violence of modern knowledge practices (el-Malik 2016, 224).

Postcolonial thought is concerned with understanding the ways in which colonial rule and coloniality constituted and continue to constitute particular subject positions. Nandy argues that colonialism colonises minds and bodies and 'helps to generalise the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds' (Nandy 1983, xi). Fanon sees the subjectivity of the colonised as a direct product of the colonial system: 'it is the settler who has brought the native into existence and perpetuates his (sic) existence' (Fanon 1967, 28). And Césaire emphasises the mutual co-constitution of the subjectivities of the coloniser and the colonised (Césaire 2000). Colonised subjects are perceived as fundamentally 'other' and coloniality produces the marginalising, silencing and dehumanising of the colonial subject. Yet, the subject is also a site of resistance and source of alternative ways of being. For Spivak, this debate takes place around the notion of the subaltern (Spivak 1988). Post/decolonial feminists have called for a conceptualisation of subjects as both victims and empowered agents, both oppressed through, and resisting, the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2010).

Feminists have been at the forefront of the post/decolonial project, highlighting the key role of gender in colonisation and coloniality (Anzaldúa 2012; Lugones 2010; Pérez 1999; Casas 2006; Maese-Cohen 2010). They analyse how the 'colonial imposition of gender cuts across questions of ecology, economics, government, relations with the spirit world, and knowledge, as well as across everyday practices' (Lugones 2010, 742). Post/decolonial feminist research challenges Western (feminist) discourses and the ways in which Third World Women have been portrayed in these discourses (Mohanty 1984). Instead, it asks: what counts as (authoritative) knowledge (on gender), who is (legitimately) involved in producing such knowledge, who gets heard and who does not, what forms of subjectivity are created, and what forms of knowing other-wise exist? It focuses on how relationships between power and knowledge shape women's lives and influence gender and other social dynamics, analysing 'the power to name, the problems of translation and the role of language in the production of subjectivities' (Ali 2007, 192). Post/decolonial feminist highlight how modern knowledge practices tend to produce exclusions and silences, deny agency and voice, and reinforce gendered and racialised structures of global inequality (Tickner 2006; Toulmin 1992).

At the same time, postcolonial feminists also engage in attempts to decolonise knowledge production on gender issues. This has traditionally taken the shape of listening to the subaltern, linked to the famous question 'Can the subaltern speak?' (Spivak 1988). Spivak's



provocation prompts us to think about whether we can hear subaltern voices and whether they can be legible in our Western (academic) context and within modernity more broadly, and how they could become heard or are already being heard. This has been accompanied by various efforts to listen and to recover. Yet, feminist scholars have had heated debates regarding the politics and risks of 'recovering silenced voices'. Some have critiqued the project for reinstating the civilisational trope of the 'Western woman helping brown women to get their voices heard' (Spivak 1985; Razack 2004). Instead, the approach of this chapter is one of critical listening and learning. It is inspired by an attitude that has been described by post/decolonial thinkers as 'a subaltern historiography that actually tries to learn from the subaltern' (Chakrabarty 2002, 33).

Within post/decolonial feminist work, this listening and learning has taken various forms. In our chapter, we seek to contribute to this project of decolonising knowledge on gender issues in the context of Nepal. We follow the call to carefully listen to personal narratives to learn about the ways in which people are embedded in a complex web of power structures and how they negotiate contradictions, resistance and alternative ways of being. We draw on the discussions around coloniality, gender, knowledge production and subjectivity to explore the post/decolonial politics of *Telling a Tale*. This collection challenges and moves beyond existing disciplinary boundaries and dominant gender knowledge. Through narrating the self, it highlights the variety of subjectivities and disrupts the idea of the fixed subject, reveals processes of gendered subjectivity formation embedded in coloniality and shows the embracing and negotiating of contradictions and tensions in alternative ways of being and becoming.

### The post/decolonial politics of *Telling a Tale*

The stories of *Telling a Tale* are personal, first-person accounts that 'articulate women's feelings and emotions, including their desires, fears, and fantasies: subjective experiences that they passed through as girls and women in our society' (A. Thapa 2010, xx). They are situated knowledge, women's personal truths. Yet, as explorations into subjectivities, they teach us a lot about Nepali society, about the entanglements between the subject and the world, about the imbrications between macrological and micrological power. Here we explore two key dimensions addressed in *Telling a Tale*: knowledge production and subjectivity formation.

### *Challenging knowledge and beyond*

*We have to ask ourselves, 'WHO ARE WE?' Our struggle isn't going to end until we (women) respect ourselves and believe we are not less. For sharing, we need some mediums. Writing is only one of them.*

(Sheila 2010, 109)

Archana Thapa presents her collection as a 'disruptive interdisciplinary text' that 'explodes disciplinary boundaries' (A. Thapa 2010, xx), mixing various writing styles, such as literature, history, experimental writing, cultural studies and autobiography. The free-flowing writing styles ignore the dichotomies of creative and critical, aesthetic and unaesthetic, serious and surface, sharp and rumbling. Writers simply swing between various borders and manifold emotions, they move in and out of the local and the global, rejoice and then turn sad, tell tales of victimisation and then come out triumphant. They shift as their heart desires and redefine

literary sensibility as they like. The tales mix poetry with prose, autobiography with analytical style. Thereby, the contributions challenge disciplinary boundaries established through modern knowledge practices and overcome them through their own ways of mixing and inventing (writing) styles.<sup>6</sup> The sudden shifts in women's stories indicate subjective experiences of out-of-place-ness, shaped by restricted ideals of androcentric styles. They strive to find their own space, style and ideals. The collection is a site of knowledge production that contributes to the disruption of disciplinary boundaries and proposes forms of writing other-wise. The book received mixed reactions for its 'inconstant' style and narration, which testifies to the power of the disciplinary grip.

It is not only the style and form, but also the content of the tales that contribute to challenge existing ways of knowing. Each writer, in her own way, talks about the gender matrices and gender politics of contemporary Nepali society. They critique the dominant knowledge created by powerful formal and informal institutions in Nepal such as religion, law, cultural practices and so on. They challenge dominant Nepali gender tropes and social norms and expose them as one-sided and misleading. They challenge gendered dress codes and norms that discourage women from cutting their hair and that suggest that women should be subservient to family members and dedicate their time to the nurturing of children and work in the household.

Each writer opens a window to let readers have a glimpse of her life. For example, Rashmi Sheila shares her experience of bearing most of the domestic chores because she is a daughter. Her father's explanation is: 'It is daughter's duty to help their mothers at home, not sons. Your brothers will go out to earn when they are grown up. Your practice of helping Mother at home is preparing you for your work that you will have to do at your new home when you get married' (Sheila 2010, 102). She states:

The major cause of gender discrimination and violence lies in the interpretations of religious scriptures and beliefs. ... In the world we live in, the term 'woman' is either a relational term (dependent on the male) or is religiously defined. ... Even educated women and girls abide by the gender-biased cultural norms, and if a woman tries to define the social norms in her own way, she is branded as a characterless woman.

(Sheila 2010, 103)

Sheila's narration challenges cultural and religious Nepali norms that render women dependent in various ways. Her story also shows the complex ways in which gender, religion and class intersect in shaping women's lives. As highlighted in the opening quote of this section, writing her story becomes a medium for Sheila to explore her identity, share her experience and affirm her independent personhood, disrupting tropes of the powerless Nepali woman.

In the opening lines of 'Not Being a Fool Anymore', Amrita Gurung writes:

Growing up as a girl was never easy, and worst of all was the teenage period. ... Since the time I passed my School Leaving Certificate, I've been continually bombarded with marriage proposals. Those marriage prospects have been the most nerve-racking experience of my life. ... Everyone seemed perfectly assured that they would eventually cajole me into marrying a man I hadn't seen. I would not have married even if I had known the man or if I was in love with him, because I never want to marry without having a career of my own.... My maturity has given me the confidence to live my life on my own terms.

(Gurung 2010, 13–17)



Gurung's narration explains the frustrations she endured during her teenage years because of her gender. She was insistently pressured to get married for various socio-cultural reasons prevalent in Nepali society: her parents wanted to fulfil their parental duties by marrying her off at an early age for – what if she fell in love? Or, eloped! Worse even, lost her virginity! Out of wedlock pregnancy! Gurung suffered as a result of her parents' anxiety, and her story becomes the intervention to subvert the dominant gender knowledge that labels women as emotional and irrational by nature. From Gurung's lively revision and reposition, we learn about Nepali society's norms and beliefs. Her story creates an opportunity for dialogue between parents and teenage girls. She concludes with 'Why did I not have the courage to admit earlier in my life that I was wrong many times? Why did I run without taking a pause to reflect and be myself, instead of joining a rat race and pursuing things that were never of any interest to me?' (Gurung 2010, 17). She posits her own experience as a source of alternative knowledge about gender. Ending her story as a reflexive, empowered subject, she questions her powerless position and prevalent tropes regarding Nepali women.

These stories are both representations of individual experience and of a socio-cultural context that has shaped the writer's subjectivity. Deconstructing androcentric knowledge, the stories in *Telling a Tale* dislodge universal claims concerning gender and reveal the many ways in which gender oppression intersects with class, religion, geographical location, education, marital status, etc. They insist on the fact that gender knowledges are neither value-neutral nor universal. And they highlight that the exclusion of alternative perspectives decreases our chance to have a better understanding and to achieve an epistemic-equal space where all can have equal reciprocal legitimation as knowledge producers. As such, *Telling a Tale* is a site of resistance to zero point knowledge: it is a critique of the supposedly objective narrator position occupying point zero. As Archana Thapa explains: 'the ideal traditional narrator had always been the unified, transcendent (male) subject – the representative of the autonomous self, family, community, society and the nation' (A. Thapa 2010, xxiii). Decolonising this modern knowledge regime, in this collection, women writers have endeavoured to become 'knowing subjects' as first-person narrators (ibid., xxiv). Thereby, they become knowledge producers and contribute to decolonising knowledge on gender in Nepal.

### *Narrating and negotiating the self*

*In one life, one moment, one can live so many lives as lives are embedded into one another. It's not just my life as I live it, but the interconnections of me, you, and they that make life's memories. If memory is what I am, I see myself as non-existent without the others touching my life. There is no single me but you, you, and you as infinite dots connect to make what I think is my unique, individual self. ... I have tried to look deep down inside to unearth the unspoiled, untainted subjectivity ... yet what I remember are representations of tainted happenings, moments, impressions.*  
(Roma 2010, 115)

One key red thread going through all the stories is the question 'Who am I?' The stories evoke liminal personae, ever-changing identities, a pendulum of being swinging from one side to another, and the feeling of being one thing and its opposite at the same time (see for example Gupta 2010; Mishra 2010). They testify to the difficulty of 'finding oneself' in a context where one is constantly considered as a dependent of someone else (e.g. someone's mother, sister, wife) and not as a person in and of herself. They identify the social structures that influence the forming of subjectivities in Nepali society. They reveal the constraining gendered, religious and caste-based norms regarding marriage that coerce women to get married early, encourage them

to give up their education and dedicate themselves to their families instead, and that stigmatise non-married women or widows.

Yet, they are also conscious that one is never completely independent of others, that we are all connected and touching each other's lives (as Roma points out in her story above). In that sense, the stories challenge the idea of 'unchanging and stable feminine selves' and focus on the 'unique cultural locations of individual identities' (A. Thapa 2010, xix–xx). This opens space for contesting essentialist assumptions of the dominant tropes regarding the Nepali woman. Thus, these 'narrations fracture the singularity of the category "women" by rewriting it in terms of plurality and heterogeneity' (ibid., xxi).

The narrations also reveal the continued significance of coloniality in shaping subject creation and its gendered nature. What is a desirable subject continues to be shaped by gendered coloniality, as illustrated most poignantly by the introductory quote to this chapter of a Nepali girl dreaming of being a white male tennis player. Many stories talk about modernity and 'modern woman' and describe processes of 'moving into modernity'. They illustrate the various embodied and gendered processes of 'doing better', 'getting out', 'moving up', 'escaping', associated with understandings of colonial subjects. Implicit in many stories is that in order to move into modernity, one has to leave Nepal behind and move up or abroad. This process of moving into modernity can take various forms, such as moving from the rural to urban areas (Pokharel 2010, 77), enrolling in an English-speaking boarding school in Nepal or communicating in English (Khadka 2010), escaping traditional marriage norms and emigrating abroad (to Canada, the US or the UK) (Pokharel 2010; Shrestha 2010).

Swastika Shrestha tells her story of 'moving into modernity' through going abroad for higher education. Her story helps us understand what 'moving into modernity' can include. She narrates how at home she enjoyed spinning dreams with her father. Following social conventions for obtaining a good education, she left for the US. Yet, her experience of 'moving into modernity' was fraught with contradictions and upon her return to Nepal she found that her father had stopped dreaming and turned bitter:

Spinning dreams with Baba, I turned twenty-one. My sister was in the US. I decided to go there for further education. 'Don't ever look back thinking about us. We are history', Baba had said. I wanted to be happy in the US. I thought that childhood fear, guilt, and shame would not follow me to a faraway land.

(Shrestha 2010)

Through this move into modernity, Nepal and its cultural traditions are relegated to history as her father tells her when she leaves for the US: 'Don't ever look back thinking about us. We are history'. The tempo-spatial processes at work in this move recalls Chakrabarty's insights regarding how those labelled as 'other' and 'backward' are placed in the 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty 2001, 8). Her narration shows how she experiences this as a split within herself, as a feeling of being in-between and a constant fear of departure and loss (Shrestha 2010, 202).

The move into modernity is often experienced as wearing a mask, and writers are conscious that it comes at a cost. Neeta Pokharel's story highlights, for example, the social pressure to 'move up', and the gendered impacts this has on people's identities. She recounts her experience of putting on a mask to be able to move up and her fear of losing herself in the process:

I have worked continuously to hide my insecurities and complexes of the little town girls from the west of Nepal with no class. So all classed-up now, and with my all-grown-up-been-everywhere and done-just-about-everything self, living in the coolest

city in America with the coolest job one can find and with all the accolades and assurances that I have made it, one would have thought that all of my masks had merged into my face and my turning art into reality would have disappeared. Nope. Sadly, I feel that I don't even know what is my own anymore. ... Anyway, wrapping up the story, do I feel all is lost now? No. There may still be a saving grace for me in the sense that I don't think I have ever really let go of the little town deep within me. I have hung onto it so tightly – perhaps with the fear of turning into my mother and the imprinted memory of her ever-smiling face with a distant and lightless gaze – lest I lose myself completely, lest when my own children, all born in the 'right' class and beaming with confidence, ask one of these days what my real persona is! Perhaps I can then actually dig it out, however hard it may be. So, all is perhaps not lost.

(Pokharel 2010, 79–80)

While these stories show the continued influence of coloniality on subject formation, they also reveal spaces for resistance and reflexivity. Moving beyond existing tropes of Nepali women as either 'helpless and poor' or 'warrior women', the stories evoke various processes of negotiating, reinventing and being other-wise. For example, some stories narrate the process of breaking away from the severity of gendered Hindu identity and the efforts to make a 'new woman' out of themselves to be able to transcend boundaries and wander across borders as and when they wish (M. Thapa 2010). Others show how they have created a space for themselves 'to be different' (Sheila 2010, 100). As Ashmina Ranjit writes: 'I have reclaimed my own identity and dignity within and outside the prescribed cultural models' (Ranji 2010, 27). These stories represent a radical challenge to the constraining social norms in Nepal.

## Conclusion

A collection of narratives of women's situated knowledge in Nepal, *Telling a Tale*, contributes to give voice to gendered realities and alternative forms of knowing and explores possibilities to resist gendered norms. The first-person 'I' in each tale stands out as a knowing self that does not require a man's presence to exist. For Nepali women, to write about the self is a radical act because they break away from prototypes of traditional 'selfless' femininity, take their *ghumto* (veil) off and discard their attributed phantasmic identity. They break taboos in talking publicly about supposedly private issues. The representations of characters, words and expressions, and the language structure contribute to destabilise established knowledge systems. The stories also contribute to disrupt the notion of a 'single me', a fixed subjectivity. They demonstrate how people are embedded in complex webs of macrological and micrological power structures. The writers do not shy away from talking about the contradictions they inhabit. They also recreate identities that sometimes differ drastically from hegemonic identities, resisting gendered and other social norms. *Telling a Tale* is a political act in its effort to create new knowledge that resists stereotypes that box women into narrow and fixed subjectivities.

The collection as a whole can be read as a form of defiance and resistance to oppressive social norms and to the continued influence of gendered coloniality on subjectivity formation in Nepal. In this spirit, the tales are two-way strategies: women become knowers and producers of knowledge as they write personal stories from situated locations; and the collaborative effort to create non-androcentric knowledges becomes a political agenda of building solidarity and promoting ways of being other-wise. *Telling a Tale* is an endeavour of solidarity amongst women from various backgrounds writing collectively against dominant forms of knowledge that constrain women and relegate them to marginal positions. The tales are anchored in the

idea of a heterogeneous feminine force in solidarity, yet they do not desire to conquer the centre. Instead, they want to draw attention to their voices and be heard. They undercut the stereotyped homogenous knowledge regarding 'women' and celebrate plurality with heterogeneous reality. In this sense, they contribute to constitute a 'plural ecology of knowledge' (Nandy 1989), enhancing alternative ideas in the corpus of non-androcentric knowledge and opening up the horizon of possibilities for epistemic equality in knowledge production.

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## Notes

- 1 The Rana dynasty ruled the kingdom of Nepal from 1846–1951 (Des Chene 2007).
- 2 It is important to note that this is based on a particular understanding of Hinduism, although other interpretations also exist. Thus, for example, the Blue Diamond Society, one of the main LGBTI associations in Nepal, uses Hindu imagery as an inspiration to challenge and broaden dichotomous understandings of gender and sexuality (personal discussions with BDS representatives, Kathmandu, January 2015).
- 3 *Telling a Tale* includes only English-writing authors. As such, it does not claim to represent the whole diversity of Nepali women's experiences, nor do they claim the superiority that is often adopted by the standpoint of privileged women's position.
- 4 The choice of focusing on *Telling a Tale* has another personal dimension: the book kept coming up during conversations between Archana and Rahel since 2014. In 2015, Rahel invited Archana to come and present the book at the University of Lausanne in a seminar entitled 'Narrating the Self'. During her research visits in Kathmandu while working on gender politics in Nepal, Rahel also met with some of the authors to talk about their contributions to the book and their broader activities.
- 5 This comment was made at a book discussion group in Kathmandu in 2010.
- 6 The fact that the collection was subsequently transformed into a theatre play whereby some authors performed their own life stories further contributes to challenge disciplinary boundaries.