An Ethnographic Review of
Saubhagya Shah's *A Project of Memoreality*

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This review paper scrutinizes a critical ethnographic methodology and its implication in the research Saubhagya Shah, a renowned anthropologist, conducted in a rural village in Nepal. The book, entitled *A Project of Memoreality: Transactional Development and Local Activism*, was published in 2018, nine years after his sudden cardiac death. As a field site for his doctoral research at Harvard University, Shah chose a rural village called Viman, located in the mid-central part of Nepal. Since the village was linguistically diverse, the author experienced complex challenges in the research process for his ethnographic study in this community. This book investigates how women in Viman were involved in the social activism and development process to fight collectively against domestic violence, gambling and alcoholism, and political repression. It also uncovers how crucial were the national and international agencies in promoting and transforming women's socio-political life through women's activism.

In this review, we critically examine the overall research methodology that shah (2018) utilizes, including theoretical framework, methodological implementation, and reflexivity and objectivity in its entirety of the research process. To help readers understand the methodological implementation, we divided this paper into seven sections in terms of the author's excursion from an ordinary person into becoming a well-known anthropologist contributing to the lacuna of Nepali academic knowledge and research. Following the introduction, the second section discusses the ideas used for and the activities performed in his fieldwork. Methods implemented in the research and the challenges the author

encountered during his fieldwork are discussed in the third section. We delve into the author's theoretical stance in section four, followed by an exploration of the notion of reflectivity and objectivity manifested on this project. We critically examine the author's positionality and our final remark in sections six and seven, respectively.

Ethnographic Method and Implication

As a social research method, ethnography has been used widely for exploring society, culture, language, beliefs, practices, categories, and rules, with its development and expansion during different phases of history (Van Maanen, 2011). According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997), early ethnographers concentrated mainly on cultural descriptions instead of interpreting a social group using broader theoretical parameters. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) explain the functions of armchair ethnographers and amateur data collectors, as well as the strategies of theorization, data collection, and interpretation. Jones and Watt (2010) argue that some social scientists today may use the traditional account to investigate the ideas of "otherness," "ethnicity," and "racism," but this kind of work cannot be counted as a true methodology. However, Shah conducted his research without the traditional ethnographic imposition of much theoretical jargon. He avoided the notion of armchair ethnography, which denies having the truth, the lived reality, and the experiences of Indigenous peoples. Shah grappled with many obstacles while exploring the fieldwork, observing the people and their activities relentlessly. He rigorously explored the fieldwork and closely participated with the people and their activities to collect the actual data on the ground.

Shah deconstructs the traditional concept of ethnography, as it was considered a research method until its evolution as a methodological approach in the late nineteenth century. Jones and Watt (2010) define "method [as] a tool to collect data whereas a methodology is the theoretical, ethical, political, and philosophical orientations of the researcher to the research" (14). Eventually, ethnographic research became the most popular method of investigation because of some fundamental components, including "positivism," "imperialism," and "evolutionism" (Jones & Watt, 2010). Shah delved into the diverse sociocultural and socio-political realities of the people to challenge the traditional ethnographic method of gathering and transcribing data. As he articulated in the book, he had nothing occupying his mind before he explored his fieldwork; he wanted to excavate the truth associated with the people in Viman. Notably, he challenged the monolithic tendencies of Nepali ethnographic study, which was influenced by the concepts of traditional armchair anthropologists. Shah avoided the ideas that traditional anthropologists interpreted and formulated the discourses on objectivity and fieldwork.

Shah explored ethnographic research, being aware of the output of the philosophical concepts of traditional ethnographers and the emergence of a new methodological approach in ethnography today. He ethnographically examined the issues of women's activism in Viman, where caste practices were, and still are highly influential. However, a major drawback of his study, however, is the aggregation of all women belonging to different ethnic groups as a homogenous group. Such homogenization limits our understanding of women of a specific ethnic group to their socio-political life. For this reason, he was criticized for highlighting the privileged groups of women in Nepali societies. Moreover, he failed to appreciate the social movements of other disadvantaged groups in the Nepalese society (Lawoti, 2010). Regardless of the content and bias in terms of appropriating the disadvantaged in society, this review has informed the ethnographic elements employed in Shah's research conducted in the geopolitical and sociocultural settings in Nepal, in terms of the core concepts of fieldwork as its method of observation.

Methods and Challenges

Shah used an ethnographic research method that studied people's expressions associated with culture, ethnicity, women's identity, and activism. People's expressions in terms of their cultural and ethnic practices are always meaningful and prominent in ethnographic research. Shah's ethnographic investigation contributes to sharing the knowledge to the world coming out of the interaction, engagement, communication, and symbolic expression. Shah extensively used intensive personal involvement alongside theoretical and methodological knowledge to expand the scientific research (Geertz, 1984, 1973). Shah employed an ethnographic method as a tool of social research to conduct knowledge-provoking methodological application in an intensive and communicative engagement with the people and communities that reflected the activities during his fieldwork. Most importantly, ethnographic research he conducted revered the complexities, obscurities, and objections of the human condition while bringing the unheard voices of the women in rural communities, and their lived experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and disempowerment in a society that carries a centuries-old male chauvinism. Nonetheless, Shah, in lieu of raising the oppressed voice of the women in the marginal class, he fundamentally explored how the women organized their executive committee for their own liberation and how they conceptualized their present situation in a so-called male-dominated society. It means that Shah observed and evaluated combining all the women of different classes and castes together.

Shah, as an ethnographer, engaged with imperative questions based on discourses, social practices, and people's experiences. Relating to all these methodological approaches, he integrated epistemological knowledge

into research exploration in his fieldwork. His write-up suggests that the application of participant observation as an essential tool of ethnographic investigation strengthened the interview process. As suggested by Musante and DeWalt (2010), Shah strongly used the participant observation method to specify interview questions. He jotted down the information during his fieldwork and interview, but he was very aware while taking notes, since there was a possibility for participants to be distracted. He grappled with many difficulties and hurdles that real ethnographers face during their field research. Secret experiences and thoughts emerged as methodological knowledge from the fieldwork experiences based on his encounter with various challenges during participant observation. Shah (2018) indicated that "the ethnographer is a marginal figure, almost queer and strange . . . he does not belong there to the local flows of life" (p.30).

Theoretical Ground and Ethnography

Shah conceptualized the implication of the theoretical framework in ethnographic research, which is a controversial issue in academia today, yet it was important for him to validating his findings. Shah seems to have been aware that the debate concerning the theoretical implication in ethnography is ongoing, but he acknowledged the theoretical framework in his ethnographic study. His research broadly incorporates theoretical frameworks to validate the empirical evidence for analyzing the data critically by addressing the public discourses and the actual findings.

During the development of ethnographic research practices, European sociologists adopted different methodological orientations. While Britain and France adopted positivism as their central methodological orientations, German sociologists took up an alternative methodological practice. The University of Chicago, on the other hand, synthesized the ethnographic practices of Malinowski (his method is known as functionalism) and the German tradition of philosophical and theoretical perspectives. However, Shah acquired extensive knowledge of the aforementioned theoretical emergence and application, but he neither used the notion of functionalism nor did he emphasize the theory of relativism in his research project.

Shah conceptualized a post-structural theoretical framework to help him deal with issues of human experiences, as well as the grand narratives and discourses. It allowed him to break issues into parts and analyze these parts at a micro level for finding problems associated with social lives. Shah debunked the traditional discourses made by patriarchal normativity in Nepali society; therefore, he did not avoid the poststructuralist theoretical application in his ethnographic research. This theoretical framework provided him with knowledge and insights as he investigated people's experiences in terms of gender, race, language, and ethnicity.

Shah also employed the theoretical framework of Fox (1985) and Ortner (1992), which connected the cultural background of the activities of his participants and identified subjective intentions by creating a ground of association between the local habitus and the structural process of the research he designed. Shah argues with Bourdieu's model of habitus as "unable to take into account consequences of dramatic shifts in the larger equation concerning the reproduction and transformation of social life" (Shah, 2018, 23). The theoretical ideas of Fox (1985) and Ortner (1992) provided him insights into transcribing the data, which is the implicit usage of poststructuralist theoretical perspectives.

Objectivity and Reflectivity

Shah does not search for objectivity within core theoretical perspectives, which means that he did not go to the field with a theoretical idea for investigating and observing the people. In this sense, he was closer to Fabian's ideas that "in an anthropological investigation, objectivity lies neither in the logical consistency of theory, nor in the givenness of the data, but in the foundation of human intersubjectivity" (Fabian, 2001, 25). Shah tried to produce knowledge intersubjectively by grounding the communicative interaction approach. He focused much on the communicative strategies for an in-depth observation to produce objective knowledge based on intersubjectivity.

In terms of reflexivity, Shah, in the text, became an objective of the provocative. To produce an objective knowledge from the subjective experience of the people in the rural areas, Shah critically reflected upon theoretical frameworks when he analyzed the data. As an ethnographer, it was difficult for him to avoid the authorship throughout his investigation. His reflectivity is transparent in the transcription of the data and the reflection of authorship is apparent in most parts of the impressionist tale and his avoidance of the issues of disadvantaged women so far.

Author's Positionality

The positionality of the author in ethnographic research impacts data collection, as well as dissemination of knowledge coming out of it. The positionality of the author in anthropological research is important, even in the post-positivist approaches of distancing oneself from the participants. However, poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers argue that, due to concerns of objectivity, the foundational reality of Indigenous life and experiences fell under the shadow of the colonial system of power of evaluation. The development and discourses of ethnographic research today have moved in the direction in which they debunk the objective stance, impersonality, and rational ideas by reconstructing the essence of subjectivity, participation, and personality. Shah also avoided the traditional ethnographic notions of objectivity and rationality. Rather, he fully engaged

the participants to investigate truth embedded with intersubjectivity. However, he maintained closeness with his participants and simultaneously was aware of ethical concerns in terms of their cultural and ethnic values. During his fieldwork, he stayed in one of the teachers' houses, but he would eat meals at the inn nearby.

The author's positionality in this ethnographic research can be reflected in both emic and etic approaches. It was emic because he shared the same languages and culture as his participants. Most importantly, he was a Nepali citizen conducting research within a Nepali community. On the other hand, it was etic because he was not from the local community, nor was he a female. As a male, he observed the world of the female by exploring a new community located in the rural valley of Nepal. In this sense, learning (or having the capacity to speak) the language of their participants is crucial for ethnographic researchers. Shah benefited from his capacity to speak the same language as his participants in terms of gathering the original data and getting into the precise meaning of what participants articulated.

Conclusion

The women's organization the author worked with was a women's executive committee of different ethnic groups and castes. Shah mainly focused on the consciousness of women in establishing their organization and their motivations in this effort. What roles did the women of the lower castes hold in this organization? How many women from the lower caste participated in the committee? Were there representatives from the lower caste in this organization? If so, why did the author not mention this in his write-up? Does he mean that there are no more caste hierarchies in Nepal? These questions are not explicitly explored in his research. Thus, these knowledge gaps warrant other scholars to further investigate using a robust methodology.

However, this book provides much information regarding conducting ethnographic research successfully by using participant observations and interviews as methods of data collection. In a sense, this book has deconstructed a monolithic and traditional concept of ethnographic studies in Nepal. It highlighted that fieldwork is the crux of ethnographic research, with the message of innovating new knowledge from the grassroots of fieldwork. The chapter division of the book is also remarkable in terms of the flow of ideas it presents. Many anthropologists argue that breaking the information from fieldwork into different chapters is a challenging job. Shah has done an excellent job in analyzing the data with proper chapter divisions. As maintained by Van Maanen (2011), Shah most interestingly and skillfully merged the realist and impressionist tales together in his research. However, he did not explicitly incorporate the ideas

of confessional tale, despite the obstacles he encountered during his fieldwork.

Shah worked and participated with the people in such a way that he was well-trained in fieldwork. He collected details randomly, as in the realist tale. However, he did not leave the data for participants to interpret. At the same time, he was inspired by the impressionist tale in terms of the use of the language. Shah narrates, "the growing influx of land-hungry peasants since the 1960s precipitated a serious ecological and economic crisis all along the Kamala valley" (45). The colourful language the author used and the story he narrated beautifully impresses the reader. While reading the book, we sometimes felt that we were reading fiction and that the writer was drawing us into his own world of fantasies. He characterized the scene and the people in such a way that the characters seem to have a colloquial conversation. His skills as an ethnographer to draw the attention of his readers is praiseworthy. This work, therefore, is a blend of realist and impressionist tales with substantive use of ethnographic elements in terms of fieldwork and interview.

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