

Bhutanese Women in Public Spheres: Agency, Existence and Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This research attempts to explore Bhutanese women in public spheres in exile. Bhutanese refugees- their agency, resistance and existence- fascinated me since 2005, when the author was a Ph.D. fellow on subaltern studies. Visiting the refugee camps, the author figured out the roles of Bhutanese refugee women and the oppressed groups in public spheres. This qualitative paper blending with personal narratives introduces instances of representative Bhutanese women who have marked traces in the resistance history. It also talks about women who exist outside the bourgeois public sphere via their case studies and meager references available in fragments. Theoretical insights from Nancy Fraser have been used, who proposes subaltern public spheres instead of singular bourgeois public sphere. Presenting available foundations and insights, this paper posits possible ways to articulate plural public spheres for the Bhutanese women in exile.

Keywords: bourgeois public sphere, subaltern publics, women historiography.

Introduction

This paper explores the existence of Bhutanese women in exile with reference to Nancy Fraser's theory of subaltern public spheres. Jurgen Habermas firstly coined the idea of a "public sphere" in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 1962, which was translated from German into English in 1989. For him, public sphere is a realm of social life where public opinion can be articulated in an

unrestricted form and important issues are discussed critically for shaping common interest (Habermas, 1974). Unlike Habermas, who advocates of *one* public sphere, Fraser (1992) talks about subaltern publics.

Theoretically the idea of unrestricted or autonomous public sphere, as Habermas talks, sounds fascinating. But in practice such an ideal space has never been established due to the absence of a truly equitable society. The space to practical autonomy, freedom and common interest oriented public role is far from the reality. Equal access to public opinion and participation are offered in practical sense for shaping collective agenda. Historically, marginalised groups are hegemonic within multiple layers.

Fraser (1992) suggested, such groups in practice form their particular space, the subaltern public spheres. Unlike official bourgeois public sphere, subaltern counter publics are discursive space where members of oppressed groups articulate alternative identities against exclusion. Fraser is more concerned to rethinking the public sphere. Unlike Habermas, who traces the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere mediating the state and citizens/society through critical discourse to common good, Fraser highlights exclusion and importance of forming counter publics of the oppressed groups. For her, as Antonio Gramsci argues, bourgeois public sphere is an instrument of forming and maintaining the structures of “hegemony.” Since power relation persists on, as Michel Foucault (1988) argues, the ideal notion of seeking equality within bourgeois public sphere is a sweet dream. So, Fraser recommends forming counter publics that can be expanded up to wider publics for discursive contestation and antagonistic politics against common sense because hegemony, in the words of Gramsci, is established and sustained via common sense. Unlike the Habermasian notion of *one* public sphere, the notion of subaltern counter publics affirms to a nexus of multiple public spheres.

Bhutanese women in exile have played versatile roles in the history of ‘unbecoming citizens’ though the fragmented stories of Bhutanese women are sadly invisible in the bourgeois public sphere. The author has not been to Bhutan but engaged in reading and writing about Bhutanese refugee issues. This article is a part of author’s personal narrative associated to reading about Bhutan and meeting Bhutanese people in exile. ‘Bhutanese in exile’ means the people from Bhutan either living in the refugee camps in Nepal or resettled in third countries. Some of them are living in India without refugee identity. Author visited refugee camps of Nepal frequently and meet poets, writers, teachers, and activists living in and outside the camps. Author met them, (and still) formally or informally, and engaged in discourses about Bhutanese issues. They were (are) all males.

Unlike pre-1990 Bhutan, in the camps, everyone could join the school irrespective to gender. Non-formal education programmes run in the camps offered adult women an opportunity to read, write and speak in public domain. Those who performed well became teachers in and outside the camps.

Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum mobilised women to engage in skill development trainings and non-formal education courses. They earned through knitting, tailoring and weaving. They played significant roles as sector and sub-sector heads, community coordinators, focal persons, secretaries and elected representatives (these are all elected office holders) in the camp management committees. Women representation quota was placed in the community organisations mandatorily. Organisations engaged in supporting women affected by violence. Males while seeking works or jobs outside, women stayed in the camps caring the family and also learning skills.

The third country resettlement has changed the scenario. Females have been working equal to males both outside their home and indoor. They have been independent, though most of them are engaged in labor force (Dahal, 2024). In Dahal’s view, young women

are pursuing nursing profession. Some of them are entrepreneurs. Woman in resettled countries look more independent than before. The traditional family dynamics have been changed.

Still women whom author approached for key informant interviews (five resettled women) lamented that Bhutanese women exist nowhere in public sphere. Author approached a dozen Bhutanese people including 40 percent females and all respondents said that no Bhutanese women intellectual found visible giving public opinion in public sphere in exile. Sadly, in more liberal societies in the resettled countries, too, powerful public sphere exists far from their access. Bourgeois public sphere appears tougher for them to exist and speak. They believe that existing in public sphere in resettled countries appears not only tougher, those women who were visible in public sphere at the refugee camps in eastern Nepal also have been turned less visible in the resettled countries.

The key objective of this research was to initiate the discourse on Bhutanese women's existence in public spheres with specific questions: What are the public spheres of Bhutanese women? How do they struggle to exist and speak in public sphere? Why do they look invisible in public sphere? Keeping these questions into consideration, this qualitative paper primarily presents historical evidence of Bhutanese women in public spheres. Secondly, it documents role of Bhutanese women from exile that exists outside the mainstream. Finally, the paper presents possible ways to formulate subaltern counter public spheres for their agency, existence and resistance.

Methodology

This study based on personal interviews, case studies and desk reviews applies theoretical insight "subaltern public spheres" from feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1992) with reference to Jurgen Habermasian notion of "bourgeois public sphere." In total 12 key informant interviews (KIIs) and four focused group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. In total nine KIIs out of 12 were conducted virtually since the informants have been resettled in the third

countries. Other three KIIs (two males and one female) were conducted with the Bhutanese refugees living in the camps in eastern Nepal. Two KIIs and two FGDs were conducted physically in Kathmandu, Nepal. Two further FGDs were conducted virtually. In total, 75 percent of the participants of both KIIs and FGDs were from resettled Bhutanese refugees, who hold citizenships of the countries. The researcher's personal narratives (experiences) about visiting refugee camps and resettled countries United States of America and United Kingdom meeting Bhutanese community have been used to glue the gaps in information left by the interviews. The author also talked with multiple concerned intellectuals to cross check the facts about the women figure, their biography and historiography.

Findings and discussion

The notion of subaltern public spheres criticises the Habermasian public sphere from three fronts: Firstly, the historical exclusion of the subaltern communities in the single bourgeois public sphere, where structural dividend holding advantaged groups are obviously dominant and subaltern communities do not have access to enter the sphere. The public sphere of the subaltern, differs from the bourgeois public sphere. The subaltern cannot exist in bourgeois public sphere. The women subaltern, in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, "cannot speak" (Spivak, 1988) in bourgeois public sphere. The bourgeois institutions act against the welfare of the subaltern communities. Habermasian dream of "unrestricted inclusion and equality in the liberal bourgeois public sphere" (Habermas, 1992; p. 429) in practice appears problematic.

Secondly, seeking rationality of the discourse in a single public sphere found further problematic, where voices of the oppressed are not heard and inequality is not discussed deliberately in the name of common greater good. The so-called standard elite space stops the subaltern from raising their voice, their real consciousness. The bourgeois public sphere restricts equal participation of the subaltern. In the name of rationality, in the words of Fraser, the bourgeois public sphere intends to impose fictitious universalism. So, Fraser longs for

real rationality within subaltern public spheres excluding internal hegemony and violence. Questioning Habermasian notion that the rationality of the bourgeois could help practice participatory parity, critics including Felski (1989) and Lyotard (1984) claim, autobiography and self-discovery narratives (also affective experience) have contributed to the construction of the female (subaltern) public sphere (Zhang, 2012; p. 148). Critics like Negt, Kluge and Hansen (1993) argue, without referring to discursive participation, any practices that bring the subaltern consciousness (experience) into the visible horizon of politico-cultural domain can carry the embodiment of the public sphere (ibid; p. 149). This notion backgrounds Habermas's emphasis on rational debate of elites and foregrounds everyday experience of the subalterns. In this notion, resistance from a pluralistic mass public is possible. Habermas was pessimistic about the possibility of resistance from a pluralistic alternative subaltern (mass) public (Habermas, 1992, p. 438).

Third disagreement with Habermas is the institutions of public sphere that favoured a single public sphere. The critics who favour subaltern publics believe multiple institutions- political to welfare agencies. Historical necessity gives birth to alternative institutions and brings experiences of the subaltern out at alternative public spheres. This paper, in this regard, attempts to explore the existence of the Bhutanese women in exile from the perspective of subaltern public spheres. Bhutanese women exist in multiple public spheres countering single (bourgeois) public sphere.

Bhutanese women and public sphere

After Bhutan's first motor roads were built in 1961, the Himalayan kingdom did not remain in the self-imposed isolation. Before that Bhutan was a country accessible to Indians, British, Tibetans, and Nepalese on foot, horseback, or on yaks. Apart from motor vehicles, Bhutan got connected to the world by jet planes. Bhutan joined the United Nations in December 1971 (Pradhan, 2012; p. 11). When the Bhutanese delegation led by His Royal Highness Paro Penlop Prince Namgyal Wangchuck was in USA to join the UN in 1971, the prince

was greeted in surprise by a western diplomat saying, as Pradhan writes, 'I didn't know Africans looked like you' (ibid; p. ix). Until then, many westerners believed Bhutan was in Africa.

Until 1990 Bhutan was untouched by westernisation. There were not many places on earth where people still lead lives not spoilt by globalisation, westernisation, TV, Coca Cola, and McDonald's (Crins, 2008; p. 2). Bhutan with about 650,000 people remained the only Mahayana Buddhist country in its *Tantric* form in the world undisturbed for centuries because of its geographical isolation and self-imposed politico-cultural system (ibid; p. 5). Women played significant role in such traditional society in Bhutan. With reference to her 17 years of experiences in Bhutan, Crins (2008) writes:

In Bhutan, at the village level, women's positions are generally equal to those of men. In some cases women have even a stronger position.... Women and men work together, and their work is equally valued. On a transcendental level women and men are equally important as mediums (shamans) and healers.... Women are not excluded either from the society or from sacral rites. Bhutan does not have a matriarchal culture, but matrilineality and matrilocality do exist. (p. 89)

In social life, women in Bhutan enjoy more prestige and freedom than in many other Asian countries. In many cases women own land, houses and assets, and the inheritance is matrilineal. Husbands move in to live with their wife's family (uxorilocality). Women have power in trade, in nomadic herding, the management of large farms and families and as *Ngejum* (shamanic healers). Men help in domestic chores and raise children, and in many cases, it is the women who take important decisions. However, women have not been active (visibly seen) in public life (Brauen, 1998; Crins, 2004; Crins, 2008). But, most of the families of the women have a matrilineal heritage system that not only exists in the villages, but also in cities. Stores and businesses can be bequeathed to the owner's daughters. Women manage large hotels and companies. Women are industrious and like to be independent from their husbands (Crins & Wangdi, 2001). There is no "dowry system" in Bhutan and there is no stigma attached to

widows who remarry (Pommaret, 1998, qtd. in Crins, 2008; p. 135).

In the southern part of Bhutan, a patrilineal system is dominant where most of the residents are descendants of Nepalese and Indian migrants and predominantly Hindus (Crins, 2008; p. 135). However, in the words of Crins (2008), “unlike Western tradition, where gender differences are derived from the supposed fact that women are less than men in all walks of life, Bhutanese gender relations are marked by a high level of gender equality” (p. 167). For her, Western mindset in Bhutanese cosmology regarding the concept of gender turned out to be totally unsuitable (p. 167). Apart from their names and their free attitude towards sex, she also noticed the attitude of the men towards them. The men cooked, sewed, took care of babies and mostly were very respectful towards women...most of the time the man lives with the family of the wife, so when there’s a divorce, the man has to go back to his family (Crins, 2018; pp. 31-32). In Bhutan, people generally prefer daughter to sons, in sharp contrast to Nepal and India, where daughters are seen as burdens (ibid, p. 50-51).

Crins observed Bhutanese holistic cosmology shifting drastically losing the values of ideal society- reciprocity in work, when barter was more important than money and people lived on the rhythm of the seasons (Crins, 2008). Bhutan’s marriage act permit both polyandry and polygamy and provide flexibility to marry up to four times but discourages marriages between Bhutanese nationals and non-Bhutanese spouses (Rizal, 2022). The first three spouses can claim alimony or a share of property upon divorce but in case of a woman marrying multiple husbands, the court issues a marriage certificate to the woman with the name of one husband only (National Assembly of Bhutan, 1980).

After the western capitalist culture invaded Bhutan through a ‘hot tourist destination,’ hype, gender role started shifting. Male have become more active in public spheres. However, several women have

achieved fame, who exist in public spheres. Maina Khadka as the head of tertiary education, Ministry of Education, RGoB represented the government in the universal periodic review in 2009 in Geneva.

Dorji Choden established her existence making records of several firsts female of Bhutan like first female engineer, commissioner, cabinet member and the first minister. She formed and led a political party that was ousted from the 2013 primary election and she moved to another party to become a minister. Likewise, Hiranya Mayi Lama has been recognised as the first lady in Bhutan to enter the National Assembly as an elected member. Many women have been successful in private sector and entrepreneurs.

Still, civil society in Bhutan is neither pro-active nor politically conscious. It is rather unorganised. Civil society organisations in Bhutan are primarily controlled by royal family (Adhikari, 2022). Democracy in Bhutan is mandated and controlled by central machinery in palace. The political discourse is designed in such a pattern that competition at the local level is absent completely and public scrutiny is not well developed (ibid). Bhutan still lacks public sphere (its larger forums) for wider inclusion of people in political and democracy education, which is essential to sustain Bhutan's 'young democracy' (ibid). The space for the subaltern counter public spheres is still meager in Bhutan.

Bhutanese women in transition

Bhutanese women have formulated a distinct history of contestation and compromise. After Masur Chhetri, "one of the earliest known activists of Bhutan" (Hutt, 2006), was assassinated, his second wife Jaga Maya with her son Ranjit, 12, (only son from the first wife of Masur) began a long march meeting the Chief Minister S. T. Dorji's son Jigme Palden Dorji for justice in Bhutan (Paudyal, 2001).

Jaga Maya, in the words of Rizal (2024), went to Delhi from her rural village in Bhutan, Lapsibote, to tell the story of assassination of her husband to Indira Gandhi. She also travelled to Kalimpong to meet the Assassin's mother Rani Chuni Dorji, who offered her some money to pacify her resistance. She got some pieces of gold and cash to complete the funeral ritual of Mahasur. In the cost of Bhutan government, Jaga Maya organized *mahapuran* in Sankosh River to offer peace to her husband's soul. She got one house with land, confiscated, out of their six houses (Paudyal, 2001; p. 89).

Jaga Maya did not stop her mission of telling the story of her husband's assassination. She travelled to Kathmandu Nepal via Biratnagar and met Prime Minister Matrika Prasad Koirala along with other leaders and tried to express her pathetic history to the broader public (Rizal, 2024). She dared to speak the truth to the international community. But her struggle could not sustain up to the political activism level. She is hardly recalled in the bourgeois public sphere. In the words of Lamitare (2024), however, during the period of rigid dictatorship, Jaga Maya dared to outreach to the international communities, met authorities by lamenting for justice, and contributed to return Bhutanese citizens exiled after Masur's assassination. There are hardly any other women in Bhutan at par with her (ibid).

Bhutanese women have generated leading stories. Tashi Dorji had been worked in the mission to include Bhutan in United Nations since 1956, led a women team to Australia and enlisted Bhutan as the newest member of the Colombo Plan (Colombo Plan, 1962). In 1964, following her brother PM Jigme Palden Dorji's assassination, she took asylum in Nepal and expanded her enterprise with brand Rijal-Tashi and offered jobs to many refugees and victims. Like Jaga Maya she returned Bhutan (Rizal, 2024). She is currently in Bhutan at her post-centenarian age.

Bhutanese women in exile

The counter public sphere of Bhutanese women in exile is next important area of discourse. Becoming stateless is the most vulnerable stage. In the sudden dilapidation of refugee emergencies, women often face the longest odds for survival. Humanitarian assistance groups can increase changes from the initial phase. Refugee women and girls, at greater risk when crisis strikes, are perhaps more resilient over the long term. Careful, deliberate efforts to give refugee women a voice will pay off (Diaz, 1999; p. 59).

Mangala Sharma, a Bhutanese refugee, kept record as a human, women and refugee rights champion. She as an activist engaged in social service and played pioneering role in empowering refugee youths through Bhutanese Refugees Aiding the Victims of Violence (BRAVE) in Nepal. She set an example that refugee women are capable of overcoming the odds, starting anew, and providing leadership even in the most difficult circumstances.

In 1992, Mangala encountered a young woman in the refugee camp in Nepal who was crying, with suicidal thoughts because she had been raped by members of the Bhutanese army and had become pregnant. Her husband had taken their two sons and abandoned her in the refugee camp. Mangala soon found dozens of other women who had been raped or sexually abused and stigmatised by families (ibid; p. 59). More than 2,700 women who said were raped or abused in Bhutan received counseling in the refugee camps in Nepal (Gartaula, 2001). Mangala worked for them and won the Ginetta Sagan Fund Award in 1997. It was a great honor to Bhutanese women in exile when Sharma was awarded with Ginetta Sagan. Amnesty International had initiated an annual Ginetta Sagan Award for activists in her honor. In the words of Rizal (2024), she had been a guardian to the victims of violence in Bhutan and in the refugee camps providing counseling, technical trainings and scholarships to the youths. She was born in Tsirang (Chirang) and exiled from Bhutan in March 1992. She formed BRAVE, a self-help organisation and earned fame. She led a Bhutanese women team from the refugee

campus to Beijing to participate the International Women Conference, got support from United Nations and other international communities.

In the fourth World Women Conference held in Beijing, the RGoB had sent a delegation led by Princess Sonam Choden Wangchuck. Women forerunners from Bhutanese refugee community Mangala Sharma, Bala Sharma, Bidhya Chhetri, Sitara Sharma, and Chit Kumari Gautam drew attention of the delegates in the conference. Royal delegation faced awkward situation and after returning to Bhutan, the RGoB declared the refugee delegates as non-nationals. The news appeared in *Kuensel*, “The five refugee women attended NGO conference in Huairou, Beijing. The delegates mentioned that none of them was a refugee but presented the details of four women in Bhutan; the report mentioned that Mangala worked with UNDP in Thimphu, took leave in February 1992 and never returned; Bidhya Chhetri was teacher who left Bhutan in February 1991 with her husband who was a medical doctor. Sitara Sharma was assistant matron at national referral hospital in Thimphu, resigned from her post and left Bhutan on 10 January 1993, after claiming her retirement benefits; and Chit Kumari Gautam left Bhutan in December 1992 to join her father who had left the country in April 1991 (Kuensel, 1995). The report looks ambivalent. On one hand RGoB presented detail of their life in Bhutan and on the other they were called non-Bhutanese (Rizal, 2024).

Mangala resettled in the USA in 2000, served to Refugee Women Network and started Nirvana Center to support resettled families. Mostly females contributed to take care of the vulnerable groups of refugees. Mangala appeared as a pioneer in public sphere. She still found active to serve the vulnerable groups of her community.

Recent studies show increase in sexual abuse and gender violence among women and young girls in the Bhutanese community in resettled countries. Male-dominated community organisations have not come up with any programmes to address the issue. The problem

is unlikely to receive any attention. The community leaders, the patriarchal system promoters, believe the problem is with females (Nirola, 2022; p. 75). Bhutanese refugee women, who have been resettled in the Global north countries like Mangala, found dedicated serving their communities, wherever they live.

Pursuing public spaces in exile

Yeshe Pelzom Pradhan, originally from Kanglung, fled Bhutan in 1990, lived in India for 3 years and joined Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. She worked as a teacher, worked for INGOs and sought political asylum in the USA in 2000. Yeshe was active as a woman rights activist. She presented the Bhutanese refugee concerns in front of the UN General Assembly in Geneva and in multiple other international women rights platforms. These include the special UN session General Assembly in New York on gender equality and empowerment, Beijing conference in 2000 and 2005, among others. She worked as a programme manager for two resettlement agencies: Lutheran Services of Georgia and International Rescue Committee in Atlanta, Georgia.

Yeshe feels, if giving is empowering, receiving can be disempowering. For her, as much as giving can be fulfilling, receiving can be a traumatic experience for those always extending their hands to receive (Pelzom, 2020). She believes that humanitarian organisations, with the best of intentions, give whole-heartedly to such an extent that they appropriate the role of savior. As a former refugee, she could not and will not be able to disregard her past at the receiving end. Yeshe writes, “I emphasised encouragement and empowerment instead of services. Beneficiaries, especially those who have been living as refugees for many decades develop a culture of dependency. Numb by the trauma of helplessness, clients internalise the act of receiving and depend on external help, pecuniary or emotional. They will ask for more and expect more” (Pelzom, 2020). Yeshe is clear that clients need not only to be provided with services and goods, but also need to be empowered. Yeshe is optimistic, “We have not let the atrocities of our past limit us,

but instead have used the experience to reawaken our sense of giving; we have given to. But when we give, let us not forget that the receiver at the end is a human being, not statistics. Let us give with the belief that we will heal ourselves, our friends, family and members of our community” (ibid).

Tulsi Bhattarai, who came USA from a refugee camp in eastern Nepal, has become a pilot. She was born in Bhutan, fled her country and resettled in the USA in 2008. She worked as a flower girl in Walmart. Her support worker told her that it would cost US\$ 80,000 to complete the pilot course. Then, she planned to be a flight attendant and managed to attend training. She saved US\$ 100,000 and joined pilot training. Her height, less than 5 feet, was also a challenge to her. However, perseverance and commitment led her to her destination.

Aviation is male-dominated industry and there are only seven percent women pilots around the world. Tulsi became the only pilot from Bhutanese in exile in May 2019 when she received a license from the Federation Aviation Administration. She is the first Bhutanese refugee woman, who chose to fly airbus. She says, “My long-term goal is to fly Airbus 320 for Delta Airlines. I know there is a long way to go. But I won’t stop until I get to that. For pilots there is no stop” (Pradhan, 2023). Tulsi found trying to exist in public sphere through her professional experience becoming an established pilot.

Struggle within the community

Community is bigger than a family- an important platform for agency and existence. Through community mobilisation many Bhutanese women have been visible as socio-political activists in exile.

Devika Gazmere was born in Darjeling, India. She married political activist Jogen Gazmere in Bhutan. She witnessed the moment of writing *Bhutan: We Want Justice* (1989), the first document that drew the attention of the authority. Jogen was declared a traitor in Bhutan after he was identified to have joined democratic movement. When Jogen and his brother Ratan were arrested, Devika went to

Thimphu from her village, met Chief of Police and tried to explore about their situation but was forced to leave the country.

Devika, in 1990, fled Bhutan with a baby. She lived in multiple places in India. Leaving her daughter with her relatives, she travelled to Garganda and met her community leaders. She worked with Binsha Gurung, Kirtika Sharma, Devika Adhikari, and Subhadra Sharma. They established Bhutanese Women Organisation (BWO) on 8 December 1990. Devika as the chairperson began to expand their activities by publishing a pamphlet - *Bhutani Mahila Awaj* (Bhutanese Women's Voice).

In January 1991, Devika, Binsha, and Kritika travelled to Kathmandu and met human rights leaders – including popular writer Parijat - to lobby for the justice to political prisoners in Bhutan. They participated in resistance movement, distributed pamphlets and calendars and attended seminars. After Indian government forced them to leave India, they shifted to eastern Nepal. They reformed Bhutanese Women Organisation with Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum.

Devika with other activists kept on visiting India and Kathmandu meeting political and human rights leaders, working in Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum. Devika, along with a large number of women social activists, contributed to changing lives of the refugee women.

On 17 February 1992 her husband Jogen was released. They took shelter in refugee camps in Nepal. Devika remained active in women empowerment programs and social activism with dozens of women activists. She resettled in Australia in 2009.

Indrawati Rai served as the first secretary of Bhutanese Women Organisation. After she fled Bhutan, Indrawati struggled for survival of her children and family. She worked in farmhouses in India, and ultimately came to Nepal. She was with the most vulnerable groups who entered Nepal as refugees on 15 February 1991. She is one of the

key actors in taking care of the victims in the refugee camps, collecting supports and basic care. She involved in lobbying various agencies and engaged in women's welfare activities till 2007 and finally got resettled in the USA.

The bildungsroman of dozens of women similar to Devika and Indrawati look remarkable, but invisible in the bourgeois public sphere (Gazmere, 2024). Devika found busy in collecting the personal narratives of the women invisible in the public sphere despite the fact that they contributed a lot from the bottom.

Politico-cultural counter-publics

Injustice against women persists in the name of social norms and values. Centuries old existing politico-cultural structures keep women often invisible in public sphere as if it is normal or acceptable (Priyadarshini, 2014).

Bhutan, going by the official records and sources, is considered to be literally an island of women's entitlements in Asia, where women have held a place of honour. Nevertheless, there is a tremendous difference between the ideals, the aspirations and the reality. There are subtle discriminations in political representation and religious beliefs and marriage act of Bhutan. The issue concerning Bhutanese women's social status has always remained vague since Bhutanese women appear to be more privileged and gender related prejudice is being carried over in the 21st century Bhutan as well (ibid; p. 920).

Bhutanese community intact in the refugee camps has been turned into virtual community after third country resettlement. The politico-cultural gatherings exist differently in the resettled countries. The Habermasian public sphere that talks democratic potential of cyberspace also look far from universal and integrated. Subaltern public spheres perform more practical and applicable actions. Unlike private or community sphere, the notion of public sphere refers to a specific social category that appears as a political actor (Splichal, 1999; p. 2).

Before 1990, Bhutanese youths would go to Banaras to study, where they acquired politico-cultural consciousness apart from religious and ethical study. Women- subtly engaged in literary practices- began to write and publish. Few female poets published poems in *Druk Losel* (1979-83), *Amar Bhutan* (1971) and *Biruwa* (1980) magazines. Most of them were students, teachers and civil servants (Dahal et al. 2022; p. 21) including some from India.

After 1990s, number of emerging women poets and writers increased within and outside the refugee camps. Literature Council of Bhutan (LCOB) and Global Bhutanese Literary Organisation (GBLO) along with few other literary platforms gave space to the women writers. The politico-cultural upheavals of Nepal offered progressive consciousness within the camps (ibid, p. 24).

The territory of Bhutanese refugee camps in eastern Nepal was once a center of literary cum politico-cultural discourses. Poets, writers, and activists within and around refugee huts gathered for literary programmes and political protests; intellectuals and activists from India and Nepal joined literary cum politico-cultural discourses. This author joined national and international discourses in the camps. One of them was *Vrihat Antarastriya Srijanatmak Anusthan* (Grand International Literary Assembly) organised on 28 January 2012 in Khudunabari refugee camp by GBLO (Shrestha, 2013), the author joined it as a special guest. Intellectuals and authors from India and Nepal assembled to discuss about the Bhutanese refugee issues.

In refugee camps, this author found Leela Nisha reciting poems with few other female poets. She was born in India, married with a Bhutanese, and living a single woman life. Author knew about her but did not meet her. In fact, this author never met Bhutanese woman as an opinion maker during his one-and-half decade of engagement in and out of the refugee camps. However, this author found Bhutanese women writers Maya Bhattarai, Mamta Tamang, Tila Rupa Acharya, Shanju Giri and Sita Rai in subaltern public spheres; they published

literary texts, mostly the collection of poems and *gazals*. Maya Bhattarai published multiple books including lyrical album. But, one could not find them visible in bourgeois public sphere.

Bhutanese youths, influenced from Indian and Nepalese political upheavals, engaged in politico-literary activities, living in West Bengal – the bastion of communism. *Akhil Bharat Nepali Samaj* was extending Marxist ideology. Nepal was in the second phase of political transformation, moving towards multiparty democratic system from the party-less Panchayat. The youths subtly started political mission inside Bhutan. Before open political sphere was formulated, the state apparatus exercised its power. After atrocities, Bhutanese were forced to leave their country and took asylum in Nepal. Inside and outside Bhutan they kept unified after 1990s in subtleties.

Youths living in the camps had freedom to run programme in public domain. But situation in Bhutan was different. Public sphere was confined. Youths included political consciousness subtly in cultural ritualistic programmes. Cultural organisations *Sayapatri* and *Srijana Sanskritik Pariwar* along with few others organised cultural programs. Members of cultural groups visited villages singing, dancing, and performing in open spaces. They celebrated *Saraswoti Pooja* kinds of apolitical programmes mixing with political consciousness. In 2003, the members of such cultural groups established Bhutan Communist Party connecting Bhutanese living in exile (India and Nepal). Many females involved in political activities via cultural programmes.

Rupa Subba, the focal person of Bhutanese Refugee Women Forum (BRWF) appeared as a versatile figure. A martial arts champion, Rupa was such a bold figure from school life that no one could dare to tease girls in front of her (Rai, 2024). People knew her as a singer, dancer, writer and public speaker. She played role as a political group organiser and leader; she led *Akhil Bhutan Mahila Sangh*. She worked in India and Bhutan as a politico-cultural activist. She worked

underground in Bhutan taking shelter in villages as a cultural performer. She was good at theatrical performance and well-trained trainer. Her colleagues recalled her role in orienting people inside and outside Bhutan.

Bhutanese community in exile were scattered in India and Nepal. A significant population of Bhutanese community lived in Kathmandu. Rupa moved to Kathmandu, refugee camps, India and Bhutan for politico-cultural presentations. She was equally active in dealing with issues related to domestic violence in the camps. She was both social campaigner and political activist. Unfortunately, in Beldangi-I, she died at the age of 28 in the lack of proper treatment. She was suffering from tuberculosis and jaundice (BNS, 2010).

History does not die. “Nobody can take her position”, Leela Nisha recalls Rupa from USA (Nisha, 2023). “Those who did not meet Rupa,” Nisha claims, “also knew stories about her agency, resistance and existence” (ibid). Tila Rupa Acharya supports Nisha’s claim (2023).

Colleagues published *Rupa Subba ka Sirjanaharu*, a collection of Rupa’s writings, posthumously. The book presents Rupa’s available poems and *gazals*, excluding her opinion articles. Rupa speaks bold in the pages of the book. Her expressions sharp and clear come deep from her politico-ideological roots:

आकाशतिर फर्किएर थुक्न हुन्न हजुर
असत्यलाई साथ दिई झुक्न हुन्न हजुर
आफ्नो माटो खोसिएको बेला हो यो साथी
कायर भई हामी आज झुक्न हुन्न हजुर ।
आकाशतिर फर्किएर थुक्न हुन्न हजुर ।

We shouldn’t spit facing the sky, dear
Nor should we befriend with untruth, dear
Friends, this is the time we lost our land!
We shouldn’t bow as a loser, dear
We shouldn’t spit facing the sky, dear...

हुने मात्र मान्छे जस्तो तिमी देख्छौं किन ?
दुःखिलाई दुःख पर्दा आँखा छोप्छौं किन ?
निधारमा पसिना, हातमा ठेला हुने गरीबको

Why you treat as human only to riches?
Why close eyes to sorrows of the poors?
The true history of the poor workers
Knowingly you try to erase, why?

जानी-जानी सत्य कथा तिमी मेट्छौ किन ?
महिला, दलित, बेसहाराको पीडा जान्दा-जान्दै
रुढीवादको तगारोले बाटो छेक्छौ किन ?

You know the pains of women, Dalits
You stop their pace with stigma, why?

Rupa would say, “One voice may disappear; so we should speak collectively” (Limbu, 2075 BS; p. 22). Her dream of collective intervention faded away soon. Most of her colleagues and community members resettled in global north countries.

A versatile female figure Rupa remained alive only in story. Rupa had also published articles with pseudo-names. They have not been explored and incorporated in the book *Rupa Subbaka Sirjanaharu* (Thulung, 2024). Her articles fragmented and scattered remained waiting to be compiled and published (Limbu, 2024). Some video clips of Rupa apart from her collection of writings found available among her close colleagues.

Most Bhutanese in exile knew Rupa. Her daring acts survive in the collective memories (Angnambe, 2075 BS). No Bhutanese refugee community members dared to play such a versatile role in short period of time that Rupa did (Thulung, 2075 BS), as a freedom fighter. She lived with clear thought- fight for the rights rather than surrender- rejecting the proposal of third country resettlement (Limbu, 2075 BS).

Rupa’s friends recalled her daring actions against domestic violence and other injustices from resettled global north countries. Some of her colleagues found living in the refugee camps in eastern Nepal. They recalled Rupa’s struggle though the mission of repatriation and liberation of the oppressed remained obstructed sadly and badly.

Conclusion and recommendation

The stereotypes related to gender bias stop women to exist as equal to men in public sphere. This paper explored instances of Bhutanese women existing in exile from the perspective of Fraser’s notion of the

subaltern counter publics. Bhutanese women constitute equal percentage of the total population of Bhutanese community. Under the traditional norms and national law Bhutanese women enjoy freedom equal to men. But they hold meager space in the bourgeois public sphere. Community members become a public only if they engage in open contestations on issues that have consequences in their lives; the public sphere supports critical concepts and contestations. Habermas argues public sphere should be autonomous from both the state power and the market economy, which appeared fictitious urge in the case of Bhutanese in exile as well. More than a hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees resettled in the so-called developed global north countries. The bourgeois public sphere remained far away of the access to Bhutanese women. Establishing alternative plural public spheres of Bhutanese women of their own apt to their contexts appeared as an inevitable option available for them to exist and speak. As Fraser suggests, a historic demand of subaltern counter public spheres of the oppressed, Bhutanese women need to formulate anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist eco-socialist counter public spheres. Foundation, for them, persists in the roots of the Bhutanese culture- the reciprocal relationship between men and women as equal. This root offers space to live harmonious eco-friendly life in the rhythms of seasons.

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