

Transgressing the Border of Gender in Sheeba Shah's *The Other Queen*

Sheeba Shah'in *The Other Queen* Adli Eserinde Toplumsal Cinsiyet

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ABSTRACT

The Other Queen documents the actions and activities of King Rajendra Bir Bikram Shah (1816-1847 BS) and his queens Samrajya Laxmi and Rajya Laxmi, which resulted in the unbalanced power sharing of the nation. Shah stresses that the main cause behind this is the crossing of the gender boundary between the King and the Queen. In the selected text, the king disobeys to stick to the image of an authoritative valor, so he appears as a subservient coward. Queens are self-confident and powermongers; they deny performing the roles of submissive and self-sacrificing women. Thus, this article analyzes the motives behind the disobedience of conventional gender image by the major characters. It also showcases the results caused by trespassing and the gender confinement by the characters. To address this objective, Butler's concept of gender performativity has been used as she claims that the 'performances of gender' are not natural; they are imposed on an individual through the script prepared by society. She views that an individual creates one's gender by performing the scripted gender roles continually; nevertheless, s/he finds the space to repeat the acts differently. Hence, one gets options within those constraints to break them. Moreover, gender is constantly reconstructed in response to socio-political changes. The implication of this article is to observe how the Queens seize power from the king, and dismantle the role of submissive women. It concludes that in *The Other Queen*, the characters contest the stereotyped gender roles, and they recurrently cross the gender confinement.

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Introduction: Gender as a Key Issue in Nepali Novels

The Nepali authors engage their literary narratives with gender issues rigorously after the people's movement in 2005-6. However, female issues have already been addressed in Rudraraj Pande's *Rupmati*, as the novel depicts a society that confines females to conventional gender roles. In this novel, Pandey displays the pain and anguish of female characters. This novel provides a true picture of the then Nepali society and the condition of females. Whereas Gyanu Pandey believes that though Rudraraj Pandey has exposed the miserable condition of females in his novel, he is not a feminist writer because he has not advocated for the rights and equality of females. Rather, he has endorsed the inferior place for women in *Rupmati*. He applauds the female character for tolerating the injustice mutely (28). Similarly, Indra Bahadur Rai argues that Nepali authors portray the characters in a conventional way. In their novels, characters appear in stereotyped

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gender roles because they believe that for the establishment of an ideal society, both males and females should be restricted to conventional gender images (25). In the same line of argument, Rajendra Subedi claims that the novelists present the female characters as the weaker sex because people of the then society treated females as the “other sex.” So, in society, females never enjoy equality, rights, and justice as their male counterparts (68). These critics believe that acquiring feminine traits is a must for females as the female characters are idyllic.

After the 1930s, Nepali novelists showed their concern for gender equality and deployed gender equality as a major theme in their literary creations. Baral observes that during the 1930s, the novel became a prime medium to inculcate the idea of gender equality among the people (398). In the same way, Baral and Atom observe that Nepali novelists have presented gender issues immensely in their literary narratives (94). These novelists provide the changing gender status of the people in Nepali society. Likewise, gender becomes one of the major themes of Nepali literature, particularly after the Maoist movement, because significant political changes in Nepal, along with the promulgation of the new constitution, brought awareness to the authors regarding gender equality (Baral, 87). Baral points out that due to the effect of the People's Movement, the novelists deploy new themes such as gender, ethnicity, environment, and the like. Among them, they use gender as a prime subject in their novels. These novels depict the characters' struggle for equality and identity based on gender. Similarly, in Acharya's perception, influenced by the changed scenario of the nation, authors focus their writing on gender issues. Moreover, gender has been used to deploy the gender issue in novels as gender becomes a common social issue (para. 12). Consequently, Sheeba Shah also focuses her writing on gender issues in her novel *The Other Queen*.

Disobedience of Gender Roles in Shah's Literary Narratives

Mostly, in Sheeba Shah's novels, the female characters appear intolerant towards the injustice done to them. In her female-centric novels, the female characters belong to an aristocratic family where they get a chance to exercise power like their male counterparts; therefore, they are vocal against any kind of disparity that is done to them. The article "Retailing the History" points out that in her novels, Shah has presented the story of women who are furiously passionate and daringly ambitious and who are brave to denounce society's repressions (par 3). In her novels, the female characters intend to achieve authority. Consequently, they are unhesitant to take part in the conflict and conspiracy that often happen in their family. Shah herself discloses that her novels portray the rebellious behavior of the female protagonist who belongs to a prosperous and oppressive class. She allows her female protagonists to dismantle the social barriers and set them free. Shah admits in the interview "Sumansanga" that in *Loyals of the Crown* and *The Other Queen*, she gets fascinated by the sagas about the rebellious nature of the Queen Rajendra Laxmi and makes it the subject of her novels (Interview). In her view, though society has constructed both attitudinal and behavioral barriers to constrain women's freedom, by their effort, they get liberated both psychologically and physically.

Similarly, Kathmandu Tribune mentions that, in her novel *Loyals of the Crown*, Shah has presented the story of women who are furiously passionate and daringly ambitious. In this novel, she has shown that the queen's rebellious fervor seems to be the product of the society's repressions (par. 7). Shah discloses that exploring the taboo areas of gender and sexuality, she has rebelled against the restricted themes assigned to the female writers by the society. In her novels, she provides agency to her female protagonist who trespasses the social restrictions imposed on women. Her female characters rebel against atrocities, violence, and oppression meted out by male members to women.

In her novels, Shah delves into how female characters rebel to bring an end to the domination,

torture, and assault of males. In Devi Raman Pandit's view, her first novel, *Loyals of the Crown*, revolves around the rebellion of Kanchhi Maharani. Likewise, her third publication, *Facing My Phantoms*, depicts the rebellious zeal of the protagonist Sanjeevani (12). Set in one of the most turbulent times in Nepal's political history, against the backdrop of political turmoil, she depicts several upheavals faced by the protagonist, Sanjeevani. In *Facing My Phantoms*, the major characters break the gender confinement. She denies to follow the values prescribed for females. Her behaviors and attitude, what the standard society would call transgressions, constitute the major portion of the narrative.

In the same way, Alisha Sijapati observes that in *The Other Queen*, Shah has explored the family history of the Shah dynasty and projects her female protagonist as a tough, independent, and courageous lady who is always ready to take steps against every kind of discrimination designed against her. According to Sijapati, in *The Other Queen*, Shah has used historical material and has imaginatively reconstructed the life of the Queen Rajendra Laxmi, who subverts the stereotypical image of women as demure, self-less, and weak. Rather, she appears as fearless and stubborn (par. 5). Similarly, Peter J Karthak claims that in *The Other Queen*, Shah equips her female character, Kanchhaa Maharani, with unrestrained passion and energy so that she can reflect the psychological state of the queen when she is left ignored by her husband (par. 3). Karthak points out that depicting her inclination towards Gagan and the initiation of passionate love affairs between these characters, Shah has presented *The Other Queen* as a bold and ruthless queen who does not hesitate to commit the massacre in the palace. She does so as revenge against the indifference shown to her by her husband, which reveals her rebellious nature. Thus, the critics have analyzed Shah's literary narratives as the rebellious zeal of the female protagonists. Still, the above mentioned critics have left the room for evaluating the gender issues of her novel *The Other Queen*. Therefore, the researcher explores the novel *The Other Queen* from the perspective of gender theory.

Crossing the Border of Socially Imposed Gender Image

The novel *The Other Queen*, centers on the queens', Samrajya Laxmi's and Rajendra Laxmi's, never-ending clandestine efforts to take agency. The novel's story revolves around the clash of two women to get the authority of the nation. Defying the socially imposed roles of a submissive wife, these female characters appear in the role of power mongers. In fact, while seeking the way toward the throne, they try to make the king their instrument at every turn. Not only the king, but the whole power structure of the country is set by the queens. Therefore, though King Rajendra runs the estate, his wives stay behind the wheel while he makes decisions for the country. Likewise, they show their incredible ability to uphold authority by converting the courtiers as well as people to their followers. Thus, the queens manage to throw off the restricted gender image imposed by society when they feel that they cannot be confined to the gender boundary in order to achieve authority.

In *The Other Queen*, both of the queens, Samarajya Laxmi and Rajendra Laxmi, break the gender confinement. Actually, they even seem to be completely negligent towards the socially imposed gender roles and identity. Both of the Queens persistently behave masculinely, confirming the claims of gender theorists that gender is an unstable entity, so it can change according to circumstances. Jenet T. Spence and Robert L. Helmreich provide constructive views on the shifting notion of gender. They believe that masculinity and femininity emerge not from the biology of an individual; rather, one's gender is a sociological process. In fact, an individual acquires through learning, adaptation, evolution, assimilation, and upbringing (87). Since gender behavior is not a biological process, the queens act in a so-called masculine way as they get a favorable environment to establish their agency.

Transgressing the socially imposed gender image, Queen Samrajya Laxmi, the eldest queen of King Rajendra, appears as a farsighted and rational lady. From a juvenile age, she plans to gain authority in the country. For that, she designs to hold the king completely in her grip. Her sister Rajendra Laxmi notices that Samrajya Laxmi learned to keep her husband under control from her juvenile age, and for that, she finds out her own way: she began to mother him. She helped him with his reading and learning. She cleaned his wounds when he was hurt and brushed his face when he came back from many excursions from the stables or the fields, smeared with mud and dust. She learned to comfort him when he was reprimanded by the regent queen (36). Samrajya Laxmi appears authoritatively because "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (Butler, 25). Hence, crossing the limited gender image set by society, Samrajya Laxmi constructs the image of a wise ruler. She knows that by becoming the ruler of her husband, she can easily rule over the nation.

Queen Samrajya Laxmi denies being restricted to the stereotyped female's image of an emotional and irrational being. Instead, she works on her personality and constructs the image of an authoritative lady. Through regular practice, she acquires all the qualities that are needed to become a queen. Samrajya Laxmi's actions support Bacchi and Eveline's claim that gender is just a social process. Bacchi and Eveline point out that: "gender is accomplished through the disciplining of bodies, actions, and language" (96). In their perception, it is not possible for an individual to exhibit the prescribed gender image all the time (96). Coping with the regent queen, she practices appearing authoritative. She laughs, talks, and walks like the regent queen because, with the same solemn grace, she aspires to be as eminent and as commanding as the regent queen.

Samrajya Laxmi never gets confined to the so-called feminine image of a docile woman. Rather, she acts assertively even though assertiveness is regarded as a masculine trait because "Regardless of one's sex, one's gender identity may consist of some combination of feminine and masculine behaviors"; therefore, both males and females may exhibit masculine and feminine traits in their personality (Tyson, 115). She regulates her younger sister's activities all the time. Likewise, she gives instructions to her sister to follow the protocol of a queen. She thinks that as a queen, one should not spend valuable time on a petty thing like makeup. So, when she notices Rajendra Laxmi is spending too much time in makeup, she rebukes Rajendra Laxmi for wasting her time on a useless thing. She expresses her dissatisfaction: "You waste too much time beautifying yourself, Rajendra Laxmi! Festooning yourself with this and that" (25). Falsifying the cliché that women should look beautiful and for that, they have to spend pretty much time in it, Samrajya Laxmi presents a very different image of herself as she herself gets indulged in state affairs most of the time.

Samrajya Laxmi appears as a very astute person who always works on very carefully to take the agency over people. She recurrently imposes her authoritativeness on her sister, Rajendra Laxmi. She criticizes Rajendra Laxmi for becoming a liberal mistress towards her slave women and asks her to keep them under control. Doing her duty as an elder sister and the eldest queen of the nation, she gives her instruction to her younger sister Rajendra Laxmi: "Do not forget you are queen, and these are not your companions but your slaves, Rajendra Laxmi" (26)! Likewise, she very wisely creates a rift between the king and his beloved friend and wife Rajendra Laxmi when she notices their growing intimacy. She realizes that to get the power of the country in her hand, there should not be anybody's presence between the king and her.

Dismantling the image of a weaker sex, she displays courage in her deeds and actions. She fearlessly challenges the English regiment and decides to attack the English troops and small villages because she wants to expand Nepal's boundary further. Likewise, she wishes to straightly protest against any kind of interference in the nation's internal affairs. Displaying her courage, she

declares: "Hodgson is a fool if he thinks I will comply with his outrageous demands; I refuse to tolerate his meddling in my private affairs" (39). She is so clear and determined about her opinion regarding the independence of the nation that she believes that the king should take action against the British's interference. She restlessly opines that the maharaja cannot remain silent when an intruder such as Hodgson reproaches queen's words and commands over her jurisdiction. Her actions display that she performs the role that is expected to be done by the king as a male. As Butler claims: "Gender is not real; gender is revisable. So, what we take to be real, what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality" (xxiii). Samrajya Laxmi's thoughts and actions confirm that there is no obligatory relationship between one's body and one's gender.

Samrajya Laxmi takes the agency in the state's affairs. She gives instructions to the ministers and prime ministers on the issues of the nation. Showing her authority, she instructs the government officials and ministers to follow her will: "I am the queen of Nepal, and I insist that my government shall run as I dictate" (40). Butler points out that an individual can challenge the gender identity simply by reconstructing the gender identity or deviating from the prescribed gender temperaments while performing. Likewise, an individual can resist exhibiting stereotyped gender images by executing the gender role in an alternative way (as cited in Lloyd 65). The narrator highlights the so-called masculine attributes such as reason, gallantry, tactfulness, and the like of the queen: "Samrajya Devi Shah is not one to be led on by fickle talk. She needs assurances that are validated by facts and good reasoning" (42). Likewise, she persistently asks queries about the British's interest in the nation and decides to protest against their action.

Samrajya Laxmi hardly fits in the conventional gender image of an unambitious, tolerant, and passive woman because she is an ambitious woman fixated on the idea of ousting the British. For that, she is actively involved in several plans and plots. But when, out of hesitation and fear, the king refuses to take a stand supporting the queen's will, she feels insulted and gets enraged. Since she is an obstinate woman, she wants her plan to reach a successful end. So, when her implacable desire to rid the English of her domain has been put on hold by fearful misgivings of her own husband, she rages and desires to hurt her husband. Then furious queen warns the king: "They are not your allies, but are using you as a pawn. They merely encroached upon the territories. History is evidence" (115). Revealing Samrajya Laxmi's nature, Shah has confirmed that Samrajya Laxmi's image of a tolerant woman seems inappropriate. Her sister further highlights her so-called masculine traits: "Over the years, I have seen her arrogance become irrationally compulsive, forcefully assertive and extremely overbearing" (56). As Judith Halberstam rightly points out that, "female also can be masculine through her efforts and actions. Female masculinity is all about who feels themselves to be more masculine than feminine"; so, female masculinity is not the result of biology (xi). Since Samrajya Laxmi is a haughty, intolerant, and belligerent woman, she leaves the palace to put pressure on her husband. She decides not to return to the palace unless the king agrees to her plan.

Her mind remains active, reflecting and examining every possible way of throwing out British influence from her domain. She keeps on thinking: "What if we start a war? If General Amar Singh Thapa could do it, then what stops us now" (147)? As a skilled queen, she calculates the condition of the state and draws the conclusion that "We are better equipped now. Our soldiers have increased in numbers. They are well-trained guerrilla warfare, and the rugged mountainous terrain of my country will give my men an upper hand over the fingers soldiers" (147). She believes that what one needs to win the battle is courage and determination. So, having these qualities in her, she thinks that she can give command to the soldier to wage the war against the British. She dreams of signing a new treaty to take back the lost Garhwal and Kumaon in the Sugauli treaty.

Samrajya Laxmi develops herself as a wise leader who regulates the king's every move. Butler

argues that "An individual is constructed through repetition because gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (45). She insists the king to take a bold move against the British's interference. When she notices the king's weakness and fear, out of which he is unable to fulfill her wish, she urges the king: "This rajgaddi belongs to you, maharaja, not the British. Do not give in to their masquerades. They merely bide time" (115). The wise queen knows that if the king keeps on succumbing to the British government's will, they will make him weak and dependent and eventually seize the king's rights as well as territory and call it their own. As a farsighted queen, she tries a lot to save the nation from the interference of the British government in the nation. Ultimately, she dies while struggling to maintain the sovereignty of the country.

Like the eldest queen of the king Rajendra, his youngest Queen Rajendra Laxmi also grows as a bold ruler of the country. Whether it is a matter of the nation or of her life, she wants to take full authority into her own hands. Therefore, when, as a wife, she goes through utter indifference from her husband, she seeks a way out to keep her happiness and self-respect. Consequently, she gets closer to Gagan Thapa. In a patriarchal society, keeping a mistress is regarded as a male's part, but challenging the social practice, she declares Gagan Thapa as her lover. She spends her time in his company. Not only that, she provides valuable clothes, jewelry, food, and money as lures to Gagan's wives. Hence, she prioritizes her desires and wishes instead of suppressing them.

After the death of the eldest queen, being acquainted with the king's weak nature, Queen Rajendra Laxmi decides to hold the leash of the kingdom. Moreover, she designs to become a supreme power. As a result, she makes the king declare that he hands over the power to her: "Whatever you decide, Maharani Laxmi Devi, or suggest for the government and for the welfare of the kingdom will not be applicable to any option by me, the king, nor anyone else. This is my order" (220). Queen's activities show that she crosses the gender border of so-called femineity and enters the masculine zone, confirming that "masculinity and femineity are socially defined state; therefore, masculinity is not exclusive to males, neither are feminine traits exclusive to women. Women may be more or less masculine and men more or less feminine; it depends upon the situation" (Synnott, 12). After the king's declaration, she held full authority over the government. Coins are minted in her name, and one after another, men of worth and great accomplishments bow to receive her coin. In fact, she becomes a queen with power and a queen in command. She starts giving audiences and orders to powerful ministers and commanders like Chautaria Guru Prasad Shah, Kazi Ranjore Thapa, and Captain Jung Bahadur Rana.

Likewise, exhibiting her rational self, she moves forward a friendly hand towards the British. Since she realizes that king is not able to protest against the Britishers, she also decides to stand beside the king and to get the support of him as well as the British government. As a smart lady, she makes a smart decision and sends her message to the British regiment via Nepali personnel: "Make it clear to him that I esteem the English highly and am friend as long as they are mine. Make it very clear that my approach will be different from that of the previous queen, my dear departed sister" (222). By assuring the support of the British residents, she wants to maintain her authority.

Rajendra Laxmi is eager to acquire the agency. Her eagerness for power pulls apart the belief that females are self-sacrificing and she always prioritizes other's desires; rather, it confirms her so-called masculine gender image of self-centeredness. Judith Halberstam argues: "Feminity can be produced in the male body as well; likewise, masculinity can be produced by and across both male and female bodies; however, female masculinity has been blatantly ignored in the culture" (2). In order to reach power, she weaves a plot, and to concretize her scheme, she develops a circle of supporters who shield her from every kind of problem. Following her plan, she appoints her closest friend, Junga Bahadur, and her lover, Gagan Singh, as ministers to the King's court. Hence,

she becomes more and more confident, as she reveals her growing confidence when she realizes that she is the prime factor behind the vicissitude of cabinet of ministers. Moreover, she becomes the cause of happiness and sorrow for everyone. She admits: "I am the designer and prime mover, and I am the queen supreme. At my will, I can make a man weep and laugh at the same time. I feel omnipotent" (237). She is desperate to obtain authority, and she succeeds in it.

Females are not supposed to be ambitious, but Rajendra Laxmi exhibits her ambition in her every action. In order to hold the supreme power, she designs a plan to remove the eldest prince, Surendra, from the line of protocol as the first successor and dreams of placing her son Ranendra on the throne. She instigates Junga Bahadur to file a complaint against Surendra for his atrocious and barbaric behavior towards his companions just for entertainment. She is well aware of his nuisance habits that unfit him to become a crown prince. So, she wants to use this weakness of the would-be crown prince against him.

Crossing the feminine gender territory set by the society, Queen Rajendra Laxmi wants to follow her free will. Following her free will, she plans to make her son the crown prince; likewise, she continues her extramarital affair with Gagan Singh. She makes Mathabar Singh Thapa the prime minister of the country so that he distracts the attention of the king and his council to other more important issues and allows her to continue her love affair without interference. Similarly, she knows that when she makes him the prime minister, out of gratitude towards her, he will remain her ever-willing servant, protecting thereby all her interests. She also knows that none of the ministers and courtiers will dare utter a word that will harm her when all of the ministers, including the prime minister, will be in her clasp.

Ultimately, Rajendra Laxmi makes all of the people effortlessly acknowledge her sovereignty. Consequently, every matter of the state is discussed with her. She reports her authority: every decision was taken after her consultation. Every commission of each kazi was received from her hands. Every command to the army given by the Sardar is first brought to her for consideration (275). The authoritative image of Rajendra Laxmi confirms that women also possess so-called masculine traits such as aggression and self-centeredness; moreover, they appear dominant and violent as well (Whitehead and Barrett, 16). From foreign affairs to religious and economic matters, not a single decision is made in her absence. She discloses her supreme power: "In a word, I am the law. The mukhtiyar and commander-in-chief, General Mathabar Singh Thapa, not only supports but endorses all my instructions without a furrow on his brow. Her utmost desire to get agency over the people, her rationality, courage, tactfulness, haughtiness, and self-centeredness are evident that she is not confined to the gender boundary set by society.

Later, though her illicit relationship with Gagan Singh is disclosed to the King Rajendra, she remains undistracted as she admits: "I never fought with my fears. Over time, I learned to play with them. I learnt to manipulate my fears to my advantage....My fears have fortified me" (288). She keeps on trying to influence the ministers to be involved in her plan of ousting Prince Surendra from the line of a crown prince. She still makes vicissitude in the ministers' cabinet. She appoints Jung Bahadur as the premier of the nation along with the rank of Major General and Gagan Singh as the chief commander of the army. Likewise, she unhesitatingly and cruelly punishes the people who come in her way to freedom and ambition.

Conclusion

In *The Other Queen*, both queens transgress the gender boundary set by society. Gender is a constructed phenomenon, so it is practicable to stay out of the restricted gender roles and gender images. Since the queens get a favorable environment to sabotage the socially imposed gender image, they freely appear in the so-called masculine image. Samrajya Laxmi all the time act boldly. She defies the stereotyped gender image of a self-sacrificing wife and acts as a haughty woman

who wants to fulfill her wish at all costs. She not only holds power over her husband and the nation, but she also recurrently exhibits her authority over the British government. She protests against the interference of the British government when she observes the British government's intrusion into the nation's internal affairs. Likewise, she encourages the king to return the territory of the country that had been lost to the British government in the past. As a rational leader, she also plans to reappraise the treatise done with the British government and to set the nation's equal status with that of the British government. In fact, as a determined lady, she refuses to compromise with her plans and desires. Moreover, she even sacrifices her life in order to materialize her dream.

Shah's novel unveils that though society confines the women to the conventional gender images. However, queen Rajendra Laxmi dismantles those images. She displays the attributes such as farsightedness, assertiveness, and even malice in her behavior. Since she is in a privileged position, the society cannot force her to remain in a so-called feminine image. Consequently, she transgresses the gender boundary and constructs the so-called masculine gender image through her actions and activities. She takes the authority of the nation into her own hands. She regulates not only her life but also all the state affairs. In fact, she constructs such a powerful image of her that all of the government officials, army generals, ministers, and prime minister of the nation accept her sovereignty. Hence, both of the queens violate the gender boundary and construct the socially restricted image of a bold, self-centered, rational, farsighted person. Through their actions and behaviors, they confirm that gender is a constructed entity. Gender can be constructed by both society and individuals, who can construct the gender image. In the novel, the queens defy the socially imposed gender and construct the one on their own.

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