

Book Review

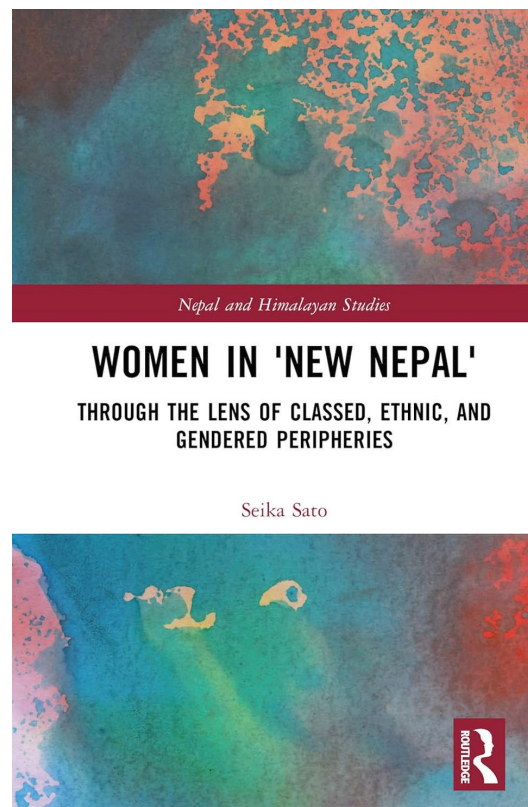
Review of *Women in 'New Nepal': Through the Lens of Classed, Ethnic, and Gendered Peripheries* by Seika Sato

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Seika Sato opens *Women in 'New Nepal'* with the modest words of a woman who says, “*Mero ta khās kura pani chaina. Aru kōhi jānneko saṁga sodhnus na ta*” (Nep. “*I have nothing special to tell. Ask somebody else who is knowledgeable*”) (p. 1). This seemingly simple statement captures the book’s central tension: women at the margins often regard their own experiences as ordinary and unworthy of attention, even though those very experiences reveal profound truths about Nepal’s social transformation. A professor at Teiko University, Sato has conducted extensive research on experiences of women at the margins, including her earlier work *Conversing with the Hyolmo Women* (2015) in Japanese. This book collects Sato’s essays written during Nepal’s post-conflict period from the mid-2000s to the late 2010s. Sato frames her inquiry against the backdrop of neoliberal globalization and the national discourse of inclusion. She asks how these macro-level political and economic shifts are actually lived and experienced by women positioned at peripheries of class, ethnicity, and gender. Informed by feminist critiques, Sato grounds her study on ethnography and discourse analysis. She uses Malinowski’s (2013) ‘imponderabilia’ of everyday life that argues to record minute, habitual details of daily life and engages with Global South feminists’ critiques of ‘victimhood’ framings, drawing on Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (1988) (p. 6) to challenge portrayals of marginalized women as passive subjects. The introduction positions the book not merely as a study of women but as a deliberate attempt to shift the academic gaze away from the center and toward the peripheries. The book contributes to South Asian feminist studies by providing ethnographic narratives that challenge universalizing western feminist frameworks centering situated knowledge and lived experiences to represent from below. Extending debates initiated by scholars such as Tamang (2002) and Menon (2004), the volume theorizes social formations and agency as mutually constitutive, demonstrating how marginalized women’s decisive performances of resistance within their daily labor actively transform public and

representational spaces. It offers a more context-sensitive understanding of feminist practice in the region enriching broader debates on decolonial and transnational feminism.

The book discusses how the economic participation of Nepali women is shaped by both opportunities and exclusions across different contexts. Despite advancing a degree of financial autonomy, women working in informal sectors such as domestic workers, street vendors, and construction laborers in Kathmandu have to navigate precarious and often exploitative work. Sato interprets the ‘*satisfied*’ (p. 19) job evaluation expressed by construction workers as a strategic and resilient response to their circumstances. This resonates with the work of Kabeer (2000) and Agarwala (2013) who illuminate this paradox. Additionally, the debate situates Nepali women’s engagement as informal worker within the broader neoliberal restructuring where the expansion of flexible labor markets disproportionately relies on cheap and feminized labor that reveals a complex duality of economic agency and vulnerability coexist. Though Sato offers rich ethnographic insights, the experiences of women could have been further situated within a broader political economy framework, particularly by examining how state policies, labor regimes, and neoliberal restructuring systematically produce and sustain women’s precarious labor conditions.

A detailed account of how migration and transnational caregiving labor has become transformative for the Hyolmo indigenous community shows a fundamentally altering of traditional gender roles, agency, and property relations. By extending Hochschild’s (2000) global care chains into the Nepali context, the book illustrates how women heavily engaged in care work and employment are linked to the struggles of “*othered*” women globally, highlighting that their local agency is part of a much larger circuit of feminized labor. With increased grossly feminized remittances (p. 96), the economic contributions are highly visible

and recognized as central to household prosperity. In this context, the Hyolmo women reflect broader national trends where community is moving toward more equal status among sons and daughters. Crucially, Sato does not frame these changes as straightforward empowerment. She calls it “mixed blessing” (p. 99)—despite migration opening new avenues for agency and recognition, it also produces social dislocation, labor shortages in rural areas and uncertainty for returnee women navigating traditional expectations. This argument advances the South Asian feminist debate by exposing the straightforward narratives of women empowerment. The discussion demonstrates the gendered gains under neoliberal globalization is contested and uneven. Yet, the discussion could further engage in how these dynamics differ across caste and class in groups, where not all women are equally able to access the opportunities offered by migration.

The book argues that lumping all women into the single category of “Nepali women,” by dominant discourses on democratization and development reinforce cultural discourses of *ijjat* tied to sexual purity and effectively erase the multidimensional diversity and intersecting exclusions faced by minority groups. These intersecting exclusions create a state of invisibility where minority women find themselves in a discursive “aporia” (pp. 143–144) that they are deemed either too free (as in the case of Janajati women) to need a feminist movement and or too backward (as in the case of Dalit women) to lead one. This dual positioning functions to exclude them from political voice and feminist representations, thereby perpetuating a hegemonic structure where high-caste men and elite women continue to speak for “Nepali women.” The question of who is Nepali women is critically valuable in the Nepali feminist scholarship debate as the category itself represents a site of vigorous contentions and exclusion. Further, critiquing how inclusion within national and development frameworks operates through structured exclusion.

Despite being methodologically rigorous and committed to feminist scholarship, the book has limitations. The focus on working-class and ethnic minority women, while analytically powerful, leaves out other groups such as high-caste, middle-class women and those from the Tarai/Madhesh region, whose experiences are equally important for a comprehensive picture of marginalization. The geographic concentration of fieldwork in Kathmandu also raises questions about how representative the findings are for women living in more remote or rural areas. Although class, ethnicity and gender are foregrounded as distinct peripheries, the book pays less attention to the complex ways these categories intersect. The lived realities of marginalized women often emerge at the crossroads of caste, class and gender, yet the analysis tends to treat these dimensions in parallel rather than as mutually constitutive. Intersectional feminist scholarship has long cautioned against such compartmentalization. Crenshaw’s (1991) foundational work demonstrates how experiences of oppression cannot be understood when race and gender are analyzed separately, a lesson equally applicable to caste and gender in Nepal. Sato’s analytical lens on Dalit women is highly compatible with the Dalit feminist standpoint articulated by Rege (1998), particularly in its emphasis on intersectionality and critique of dominant-caste frameworks. However, her discussion tends toward more as an observation of Janajati and Dalit women’s “views” (p. 150) on the developmental order and “momentum for inclusion” (p. 152) than as a sustained standpoint ethnography of Dalit women specifically.

Since its core ethnographic chapters are revised versions of articles originally published between 2011 and 2017, sometimes the book reads as a compilation. The primary research reflects the socio-political climate of the early ‘New Nepal’ transition rather than more recent developments. It engages less with current gender politics as the author addresses recent shifts such as the decline in women’s municipal leadership following the 2022 elections primarily

through brief updates and footnotes instead of the same ethnographic depth applied to her earlier fieldwork.

To conclude, these strengths and acknowledged limitations make the book a significant contribution to feminist and South Asian scholarship. It not only challenges reductive discourses but also opens pathways for further research into underrepresented communities and contexts. By centering lived experiences while critically engaging with structural inequalities, it offers both a nuanced understanding of women's realities in 'New Nepal' and a valuable foundation for future studies on inclusion, labor, and gender justice. This book deserves attention from anyone invested in feminist ethnography, South Asian transitions and the politics of inclusion.

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