

Special Section Research Article

Seeing the Mother's Face

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Abstract

An anthropologist describes her journey to visit a friend's mother in Nepal. As she crosses over mountains and valleys with her friends from the village, she considers the concept of *maiti*, the maternal home, and what it means to see a mother's face.

Keywords

Mother; *maiti*; belonging; flash ethnography; Nepal

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We are going to see your mother's face. We are a rag-tag team looking for adventure and it's a good excuse to see the world. We leave the village in the dim dawn light. Rekha has bought blue plastic sandals for the occasion, which she wears with a matching purse. You've wrapped a bright new *lungi* around your waist. Vishal wears a suit vest and his finest dress shoes. I've brought a heavy bag which I will regret carrying. Today we will walk from Khotang to Solukhumbu.

What kind of journey is this, this journey to see a mother's face? *Aamako mukh hernuparcha*. "One must see the mother's face", they say. But what does it mean to see a face, and a mother's face of all faces? We anticipate the destination and all that it promises. We have little money between us, but we are healthy and strong, and our friendship makes the time pass quickly.

We are going to see your mother's face. We are walking together and the path is very long. The path is long and steep and we climb. Together we are dragging our feet up

and up, one more step, one more stone. Up and up, there is always more to climb.

"How much longer will it be?"

"It will take some time."

"But how much more, how much further must we go?"

"We are almost there, but it will take time."

The light fades. We climb. You take my hand. We go together, alongside each other.

Fifteen hours have passed since we started walking to see your mother's face. We have crossed rivers, valleys, fields, and landslides under the rain and the burning white sun. Thighs chafed, feet blistered, ankles sore, limping, we go on.

Sometimes you take my hand and we walk together just smiling and thinking. I wonder what lies at the end of *this*. What are you hoping for? The love of the *maiti*, your natal home, the maternal home. They say in the *maiti* one is forever a daughter and sister.

Maybe you will be at home in the world again.

We arrive.

“How are you mother? Are you well?”

“How could I be well? It’s time to die.”

Your mother is very ancient and her back is bent into the number 7. She can’t look up to meet your eyes. Her spine is curved, it doesn’t move.

Your sister is there and she’s not well. She doesn’t speak. She washes her hands in puddles of rain.

Your mother’s house is small and bare. We eat watery *dal* with weak, salty tea. There is barely anything to live off here. This village is not far from the wealth and tourism of Lukla and Namche Bazar, yet there is no electricity. In the distance is Sagarmatha, Mount Everest, and the red roses are blooming against the white glacial range.

You see your old neighbors and they laugh at you. They laugh at your *lungi* because you are not wearing the clothing of your *jat*, your caste. You say it is easier to walk in. Then, you come running to us, crying.

“Who cares about those people, what do they know?”

“They are just ignorant!”

“Don’t listen to them! What they say doesn’t matter!”

You are crying and we are leaving after only two days. It hasn’t been what you had expected. You had hoped it would be a homecoming.

The road is steep and the path is long but we walk lightly as we scramble over soil and stone.

We are walking alongside, we are moving toward, we are crossing together, we are going.

Aidan Seale-Feldman is an Assistant Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. Grounded in ethnographic explorations of disaster, mental health, and psychosomatic disorders, her research asks how to approach forms of affliction that are not bound within the individual but instead move across bodies, environments, and generations. Based on two years of fieldwork before and after the 2015 Nepal earthquakes, her first book project is an ethnography of the psychic life of disaster.

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