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Deconstructing the “Ideology of ability”: Jhamak Ghimire’s *A Flower in the Midst of Thorns*

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Jhamak Ghimire is a Nepali writer having got birth in 1980, in the eastern suburb of Nepal, Dhankuta. She was born with the severe disability i.e. cerebral palsy which has robbed her of her motor controls of her arms, slurred her speech and limited her movement. She writes with her foot. She has published eight volumes of poetry, stories and essays and is a regular columnist in *Kantipur* newspaper. She has won many awards for her writings in literature. She has won Madan Puraskar, Nepal’s most prestigious literary prize in 2011, for her autobiographical novel *Jeevan Kanda Ki Phool* which is translated by Nagendra Sharma and Safal Sharma, in English as, *A Flower in the Midst of Thorns*. The article attempts to explore the challenges which Ghimire has to confront for deconstructing the “ideology of ability” through her novel. So, this article selects some excerpts from the book to show her subordination at multiple levels.

Keywords- Disability, Struggle, Shame, Autobiography, Ideologue

A Flower in the Midst of Thorns is an autobiographical epic novel with a composite whole of forty-seven readable essays. The book is a masterpiece by the author of Nepal on disabilities studies. Her book explores the meaning of life into new horizon and relocates the value of life after a long struggle because she had to fight the family and society by critiquing the established but prejudicial thoughts, and extends the vista of ideologue, used to perceiving life and disability, at a farther distance. In this context, in her article “Writing as Feminist Rhetorical Theory”, Laura R. Micciche writes:

Writing is essential to feminist projects, particularly for those projects that critique oppressive practices and discourses, articulate strategies for change and collective action, identify and describe how rituals of the ordinary are, in actuality, problems, and generally depict the expansive multiplicity of women’s and others’ realities. (173)

Similarly, Ghimire’s “life writing,” or what Anzaldua would call “organic writing” comes from a third world nation, her role works as a woman rhetor, “not being a philosopher or a linguist, but being a fiction writer, a poet, and an autobiographer.” (Micciche 174)

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According to Homnath Subedi, that Ghimire is the Nepali Helen Keller. He writes:

Jhamak Ghimire who hails from Nepal and writes using her feet or toes. I haven't seen or met her personally but when I read "Jeewan Kanda ki Phool" and this translation, I felt like I was talking to Nepali Helen Keller of literary world and able to draw live mental picture of her. It is an evidence of her powerful writing.

In the beginning of the novel Ghimire writes, that life as a most beautiful flower of creation, but is in doubt whether it would occur in her life or not, because "truth is extremely bitter and reality is most tasteless" (Ghimire1). Ghimire, being a physically disabled is always taken as a matter of incapable, unable, weak and discriminated by the society. She struggled a lot, but she finds a lot of joy within that bitter reality of her experiences. On her way to experience she lives with the source of creativity and her sufferings provided her ways to carve out her own identity. From her early childhood, she is treated as non-entity and not only discouraged and hated by the society but also with her parents. Her family and others calls her "serpent" because she crawls on the ground. She says: "As they addressed me *Saanpey*, I thought my name must be Sapey. Even my younger siblings had picked up the same attitude; When pleased, they would address me as *Thulee*, the eldest one, and at other times, *Saanpey*." (Ghimire, 21)

The most important event in her life is her unceasing love for words and her struggle to learn them. She learnt words simply by the direct and indirect support from her sister Mina, who bring books from her school library and also from the discarded pages by her sister and when her father teaches her siblings. After reading her accounts, we realize that it is so hard to learn when one is just listening and not speaking. She writes:

Sometimes I used to sit close to my sister when father was away , and I use to give a glance at what she had written and would listen to their pronunciation. I would play in my mind the shapes she produced, the movement of her hand, and the pronunciations of the letters or words from her lips. (Ghimire 25)

Through her own efforts and determination her another exercise of learning is , she writes with a bamboo twigs on the solid earth but it is the superstitious belief of the Nepalese people, that scribbling on earth leads one to incur debt. She writes:

On my part, I would collect the dew drops falling from the eaves of the roof in a crucible, crawl up to a little distance, dip my toes in that crucible and, with the dew, and attempt to scribble some letters at random on a nearby rock stone. When there was no dew collected, I used to break little bamboo twig, make a pencil out of that and try to scrawl letters, using the flat earth as my exercise book. (Ghimire23)

People of Nepal put their faith in religion, customs, traditions shamans or Witchdoctors charm and spells, incantations, witches etc. They hold the belief that they would trouble the people if, anyone fails to pacify them, everyone may have suffer from disease or disability. Shamans and witch doctors would be frequently made to perform their rituals in her house.

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Her parents thought that shamans could cure her daughter and make her a normal person because it is the cultural belief that people are disabled because of supernatural powers but shamans would not cure her disease and even foreign doctors escaped their medical responsibilities by telling her parents that Ghimire is suffering from weak bones.

Ghimire has rejected the existence of God on many terms and openly criticized the dogma of traditional society, it's ills within the culture and the superstitious beliefs of the Eastern psyche, gender discrimination, patriarchal set up etc. She only believes in the religion of humanity and writes that in our religious scriptures if a person has committed a sin in a previous life, one is bound to pay its price by way of suffering punishment in the present life, but she thought that scriptures have imposed several unjust ethics on people born with disabilities and infirmities. She writes: "Our cultures have laid down such tyrannical traditions that show no mercy or sympathy toward those that have been marginalized and discriminated against." (Ghimire 55)

She is challenging these social stigmas by celebrating her sexuality, beauty and disability as sources of creativity, agency and identity in narratives that deconstructs cultural or social models of ability, motherhood and beauty.

After much struggle, Ghimire is finally able to convince her family, that she had started writing alphabets in dewdrops on the stones and waited for her family to recognize her achievement but, they would dry out instantly and no signs left there. She further expresses her joy of learning. She says:

I remember now that at the time I first learnt to write the letters of the alphabet, I could not share the joy with anyone. I had, nevertheless, mastered the art of scrawling letters even if it was on the bare earth and had learnt to pronounce them although only within my mind. The first day I had been able to scribble the first letter of the consonant s (ka), I had sprayed a cloud of dust in the air out of sheer happiness because I had broken innumerable twigs time and again in order to learn writing this letter and I bruised the tender skin rubbing against the oil. (Ghimire,24)

In Nepal, many cultural, religious factors play a crucial role in forming an ideology of ability and beauty such as patriarchy, caste, color, class, and sex and gender discrimination.

Ghimire discusses about the issue of kinship and gender discrimination by addressing her grandmother. She says: "My dear grandmother, why was it wrong to give birth to a daughter? You were sad just because you had no son to start you on your journey to heaven after your death." (Ghimire 35)

The statement clearly defines the gender discrimination in the society and depicts the bitter reality of Hindu tradition, which regards a male-child as a hidden treasure and the woman would not be happy and contented if she fails to lay hands on that treasure.

People have undergone humiliating incidents during their any phase of life but most of them will never have the courage to reveal those incidents in public or write about it, but she

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lays bare those moments and encouraged everyone to share their problems. She had somehow learn to satiate her hunger and quench her thirst besides this, learning the manner by which she could evacuate the system's waste material. She writes:

I used to pull out some leaves or grasses with my toes and rub them hard on the affected parts. In that manner , I also learned to wipe out my feces , but my elders would never let me do it myself as, according to them I soiled all my undergarments in the process – and they used to clean them once again . There are many reminiscences of a time when I was around eight or nine years old. (Ghimire 36)

Her understanding of shame and sexuality is different from the people of her society because society does not give her the value of a potential human being, for her shame and sexuality remains distant. She writes:

To me, I had not a feeling of shame until I turned eleven. I used to wear the same clothes again and again until they would wear out because I had to crawl here and there. I would not care even if the clothes didn't cover my shame because I was not a "fair child." So I should not have to cover that like others, nor should I have to feel any shame. I liked to play naked, so I did not have to worry about my clothes being torn apart. (Ghimire 86)

Ghimire mentions her hardships in performing her bodily functions and had no option but to wear soiled clothes for days, leaving her body exposed, her clothes would wear out because of her crawling, leaving her body exposed. At that time the construction workers from neighboring house would hit her with the balls of mud or stones aiming at her exposed genitals.

She recounts their talk during those moments they comment that she may be beautiful in her youth but no one is going to marry her and such a girl can never have any romantic feelings. But in her autobiography she includes her romantic feelings too and finds herself pretty when she looks at the mirror , also remarked elsewhere that she would love to get married and have children , even though she acknowledges that it may not be possible.

Ghimire stresses upon the inner beauty that lies beyond the outer beauty and writes that society only looked at her outer appearance i.e. fragile body, which meant to some others that she is a lifeless being without any desires or sentiments either and no beauty, people laughed at her and also compares herself with Greek poet Homer, English poet Shelley and Another disabled woman Helen Keller. Thus, she dismantles the idea of beauty and ugly, aberrant and strange.

Ghimire challenges the stereotypes that a disabled do not have any sexual culture. She breaks some assumptions of the society because she is aware of her body and its growth and describes her youth and also about the moments when was locked in the room at the time of menstruation.

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I had everything on me that a female has, such as breasts, buttocks, and vagina, and they were developing. Along with them, my life was being colorful. To be a woman is also to have menstruation, although it is considered impure in our culture. I bloomed like pear and guava plants in full bloom, like the blossoms of rhododendrons and marigolds. My cheeks bloomed with color of youth. My reproductive organ matured. And I menstruated... When I menstruated the first time, my mother shut me in a room, preventing me from seeing my brother because she said I should not see him, touch him, and contaminate him. She didn't let me sleep where I usually sleep. (Ghimire93)

In her article "*Of Poverty and Poems: Jhamak Kumari Ghimire*" Manjushree Thapa writes, "she explores hard political, intellectual, feminist and social issues, without shying away from emotional expressions of love, regret, joy and sadness." (Aug 08, 2002)

Ghimire claims that she does not write under any "isms". Her work itself touches upon many of the current "isms" prevalent in the society. The most prominent is feminism. Patriarchy is the major issue prevalent in Nepal, which makes the situation of women worse esp., disable women.

Ghimire writes about the manner when her father treated her badly and thrashed her whenever she fails to obey him when he would teach her sister. She says:

I was also yearn for learning by sitting near him , but that yearning was never fulfilled, because my father, if he saw me getting closer to him at such times would scold me by shouting , "What's the use of your learning and reading?" How cruel and heartless was that old man? (chap) (Ghimire 22)

On the other occasion of Dashain festival, as her father put the *tika* on her forehead, he must have murmured by way of his good wishes but he wants me to die. He cursed me by saying "May you not live longer than us, for who would look after you after we were gone?" (Ghimire30). Her tender heart was bruised badly after listening such words on the occasion of a great festival.

This statement clearly speaks about people's attitudes toward women with disabilities in contexts where patriarchal culture is more dominant and people often see the death of the disabled as the only solution to the challenges they face. What people think and what they wish for disabled people is an outcome of this ideology of ability that guides human interaction in a society and their perception of disabled people (Siebers 2010).

Siebers points out that the ideology of ability reproduces different feelings toward people with disabilities. One of them, Siebers stresses, is that —it is better to be dead than to be disabled (Siebers, 1993, 10). In that context, Ghimire questions, Is death a solution? By challenging and deconstructing this ideology of ability. She writes:

When I heard people wishing my death, I was too tortured. I was lonely. I had feelings, but I could not speak. Nobody would like to hear me. I could feel the pain inside my heart. I had no words, nor sign or symbols with which I could

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communicate. I had to keep listening to what others kept saying and I had to keep tolerating, and I could not do anything else more than that. I could not understand these people who wished my death sooner rather than later. (Ghimire55-56)

According to Prof. Mohan Sitoula, Though still suffering physically as Jhamak is, I wish her continuous success and her heroic message reach in all the bright souls of struggling hearts as well as the generous ones who want to contribute to such a positive earthly-divine cause ! The message is that every disable has a talent. They do not need any mercy from the capable and the well to-do. But like any marginalized social group they need a dignified and meaningful support as well as encouragement so that they can develop their talent to contribute to the society in anyway possible for them and thus live a life of self-respect progress and satisfaction. Jhamak is a noble soul of a holy soil.

Poet Madhav Prasad Ghimire once wrote “Pipal tree springs out by breaking the corner of a stone;/Creative energy in the world, never fails”

As expressed from the above lines, Ghimire has indeed emerged out of very difficult conditions and, has for herself, established an identity, created a personality and made an image. Ghimire cites these lines by poet Madhav Ghimire in her chapter “Disability in the eyes of the society”. Ghimire is exemplary. She is the new light of hope and inspiration, and indeed, she has been able to give meaning to the meaning of the above stanza by poet Madhav Ghimire Jhamak is a rising star. She is a growing flame of courage, hope and awareness. She has immense capacity and is very passionate, and she simply needs opportunity, encouragement and favorable environment to flourish. (Lekhath Bhandari)

Thus, Ghimire’s novel is very courageous, inspiring and fact-based souvenir for readers. It is of unique value and gives the taste of life and provides positive message to survive. It teaches and encourages one to struggle hard with extreme difficulties. Furthermore, this world is a flower in the eyes of a flower and a thorny bush in the eyes of a thorn.

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