

Elizabeth Enslin. 2014. *While the Gods were Sleeping: A Journey through Love and Rebellion in Nepal*. Berkeley: Seal Press.

All Nepali students of social sciences have had their share of reading writings by foreign scholars about ‘Nepalese/Nepali’ subjects. These dissertation turned into books by foreign scholars dominate the prescribed reading lists of MA level curriculum in the social sciences in Nepal. I used to get this eerie kind of feeling while reading the work of an ‘outsider’ writing about my own society. One could not help but wonder about the personal life histories of the foreign scholars themselves. In particular, I have been curious to know how they decided to come to Nepal to do research. Obviously they were more than just romantic tourists who saw Nepal as some hidden Shangri-La. But very few foreign scholars have delved into their personal life trajectories that brought them to Nepal. Elizabeth Enslin’s book, *While the Gods were Sleeping: A Journey through Love and Rebellion in Nepal* may help us to make sense of many of these curiosities.

The book is divided into three parts each depicting a timeline between 1985 and 1992. In the very first chapter, she situates her experience in Nepal interestingly: “When I finally decided to live in Nepal, I came to carry out a pregnancy and give birth – reasons that would have made little sense even to most devoted Nepalophile” (p. 6). The book takes us through the personal journey of a young American feminist who marries a Nepali man and lives in Nepal. Enslin and Pramod Parajuli fall in love at Stanford University in the USA, fueled by their common interest in global politics. While Pramod is making arrangements for his fieldwork in India, Enslin struggles to find a suitable research topic for fieldwork in Africa. It was when Pramod issues an ultimatum that Enslin reluctantly decides to “follow” (p. 28) him to South Asia. She mentions that the feminist in her struggled to come to terms with herself and writes, “I had fallen into what my addled feminist brain saw as the lowliest category of all: I’d followed a man” (p. 71).

Nepal was not the destination for doctoral dissertation research since the beginning of Enslin’s graduate studies. Both Pramod and Enslin regarded Nepal as a “theoretical backwater” (p. 34). They thought being under an authoritarian monarchical regime, Nepal had little scope for serious research other than those on religion and rituals. This is a bit surprising since many serious theoretically-informed scholarly works on Nepal, focused on a wide variety of themes, had already been published by the time the duo started their graduate training at Stanford in the early 1980s. So, it took an accidental pregnancy to make Enslin start all over in Nepal as a researcher. She rationalizes “being pregnant and giving birth in Nepal while learning another language and finding new research project could be my own test of skill and endurance” (p. 74). Her retrospective autobiography tells us how this reluctant decision turns out to be a blessing in disguise. Enslin not only finds herself in the midst of a local feminist movement but also becomes an important part of it. Enslin’s passionate description of Nari Jagaran Sangh’s struggle for meeting spaces and power politics between high caste and low caste individuals/groups in Gunjanagar, Chitwan is a must read to understand the inequalities within the women’s movement in Nepal.

The most important part of the book is Enslin’s reflections on her position as a Brahman daughter-in-law and an anthropologist in the ‘field.’ These reflections can be important for young researchers to understand how to practice reflexivity in research:

I had to develop and maintain a professional persona: objective anthropologist, open to all ideas. And I was only learning Nepali....And I had to overcome all that I lacked as a non-Brahman, a non-Hindu, and a relative newcomer to South Asian studies by being the best daughter-in-law possible. All that added up to not confronting elderly men, no matter how much they insulted me or our family. I turned my rage inward. There it mixed with habitual shyness and the loneliness of being pregnant in an unfamiliar place without my husband, and then jumbled with the confusion of being an anthropologist with too many opinions. (pp. 111–112)

The book derives its title from the time Enslin arrived in Nepal during the period of *caturmās* (literally meaning four months). It marks the monsoon and the harvest season during which the gods and the goddesses are supposed to be sleeping. While Pramod is away doing his research in India, Enslin decides to stay back in Nepal and restart her halted research for her own dissertation. However thoughts related to her pregnancy continuously disrupt her research. She is disappointed at Nepal's lack of women-centered birthing facilities. At first this seems presumptuous. But on second thought, she is voicing the common concern of middle-class Nepali women who undergo traumatic childbirth experiences in Nepal's hospitals where their nearest loved ones cannot be present. She also wonders whether natural birth at home is a better option for her, as her Nepali sister-in-law tells her that "Babies are like mangoes,....When ripe, they fall. You won't need to go to Kathmandu. Have the baby here at home" (p. 80). Though being best prepared for home birth, circumstances drive Enslin to give birth to her son Amalesh in a hospital in the nearby town of Bharatpur. This traumatizes her for a long time.

Enslin writes about an important universal concern of most women which is less discussed than it should be. She voices her anxieties and concerns about her mothering abilities. In her case, these concerns were more complexly shaped by her identity of being an American woman married to a Nepali man. Enslin felt being questioned about not just her mothering abilities but also on the authenticity of her motherhood. "I stepped out of the jeep with my child. 'This is my son,' I said in Nepali, holding back tears. I gave birth to him in Bharatpur Hospital. His father is a Nepali. Our home is in Chitwan. I breastfeed him and have never needed to give him a bottle" (pp. 144–145). As a woman brought up by a single mother and a disinterested grandmother, Enslin is fascinated by child rearing practices in Nepal. She notes that in Nepal she could count on many others to look after her son while she attended "a meeting or wedding at a moment's notice" (p. 214). Back in the US, she

was “exhausted by parenting” (p. 214) duties. However the comparison she makes between American and Nepali child rearing practices is imbued with romanticism as she offers little analysis of the ways in which Nepali child rearing practices have come into being.

The most important part of the book deals with the relationship that Enslin develops with *Āmā*, her mother-in-law who had renamed herself as Parvati (the book is dedicated to her). *Āmā* is far from the traditional mother-in-law. She wears a big man’s watch in her wrist and does not wear any jewelry. She is a feminist and a political activist. She is a poet who often burns her food while cooking because she is too busy composing her songs. But she does not know how to write. Enslin’s important role as a catalyst came in very handy as she and Pramod start an adult literacy class in their neighborhood (such classes became a major development practice in the following decades).

Being a *videśī*, Enslin is caught in the web of contrasting expectations on the part of her relatives and neighbors. She struggles to make sense of her contradictory dual roles as a Brahman daughter-in-law and as a researcher. On the one hand, people expect her to be “out in fields...working” (p. 119) like traditional daughters-in-law and stop reading and writing too much. On the other hand, villagers also expect her to be their doctor treating women and children who are ill. Although her anthropological training makes her skeptical about development projects, the villagers also expect her to bring *vikās* into the village. These discussions in the book help us to make sense of the experiences and anxieties of foreign scholars and volunteers who live and work in Nepal for long periods of time.

At 292 pages, *While the Gods were Sleeping* tries to accomplish the near impossible task of combining the insights from an academic dissertation with the descriptions expected in a travelogue and a memoir in one single book. Therein perhaps lies the flaw in its execution. There are certain parts of the book which read more like lessons in Nepali history than Enslin’s personal life story. In the end, readers are also left to wonder what happened to Enslin’s life after she submitted her doctoral thesis. Nevertheless this book will be a pleasurable read for academic and non-academic readers alike.

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