

Seika Sato. 2015. *Kanojotachitonokaiwa: Nepāruyurumoshakainio-keruraifu/storīno jinruigaku* (Conversing with the Yolmo Women: An Anthropology of Life/Story in Nepal). Tokyo: Sangensha.

The book under review reports on an ethnographic study of Yolmo women's lives and agency. The author uses the life stories of local women regarding the process of marriage as data to analyze the relationship between women's agency and social forces. The data were collected during fieldwork in Yolmo society and Kathmandu conducted since 1994.

The Introduction considers scholarly discussions of the concepts of "agency" and "life story." The author criticizes the trend (mostly among Japanese anthropologists) of seeking a concept of "agency" for some groups that differs from that of colonial others in which they tend to focus only on individuals' "resistance." She advocates clarifying the vernacular concept of "gender" and writing about "folklore of agency" by positioning individual agency relative to the external social forces that influence the body consciousness, and direct individual behaviors in the contexts of a given society.

Thus, in Chapter I entitled "Un/doing gender," the author describes practices of de/constructing gender in Yolmo society. Yolmo practices that reproduce female inferiority, as observed in the division of labor, use of space inside the home, and religious rituals, are detailed. Chapter II, entitled "I said that I did not want to get married off," analyzes women's agency through the author's observations of mostly middle-aged women's narratives

about their marriages. In the next chapter (III), the author focuses on Yolmo women's reluctance to share their personal experiences of bride kidnapping.

Then, Chapters IV through VI describe three women's lives and present their life stories. Chapter IV describes a woman who fiercely resisted her unwanted marriage, but who ultimately accepted it. The author points out the positive sense of gender identity of Yolmo women in general. Chapter V presents the narratives of an unmarried woman and her negotiations to survive in Yolmo society, where it is believed that women must "get married off." Chapter VI spotlights the only feminist in Yolmo society and the author seeks to assess the possibilities for solidarity between feminists of the North and those of the South.

In the Conclusion, the author reviews the preceding discussions and describes the social forces that influence Yolmo women and their agency. The author concludes that although they have resisted those social forces in sporadic and temporary ways, their resistance has not changed anything in the overall structure of gender relations. However, the author points out that women's education and participation in the labor market are creating a change in the relationship between women's agency and the alignment of social forces. The book closes with an addendum about bride kidnapping.

The author's analysis is based on detailed descriptions of lives and the life stories of Yolmo women. These life stories are examined not only as disclosures of fact; they are analyzed as the women's ways of working out their lives. The material includes descriptions of the contexts of the interviews, the women's social positions, their faces and tones of voice, and so on as well as their statements. Struggling to avoid the trap of the conventional binary divisions between "we [women] who are advancing toward change and becoming free of oppression" and "[those] miserable women in non-Western societies who are locked into traditional societies" (p. 93), the author sincerely listens to the women's life stories and analyzes them.

The author's struggles lead to significant findings, two of which I describe in detail. First, the women deny their personal subjectivities in their narratives about their marriages. Regardless of their actual marital processes, marriages are usually described as ordinary arranged marriage and the women's recollections tend to converge into a master narrative: "I said that I would not be married off—I did not want to get married, but, in the end, I could not do anything else" (p. 109). Thus, the women's normative narratives on

marriage in Yolmo society denies their personal subjectivities. I appreciate the high quality of the fieldwork that made this significant finding possible.

Regrettably, men's narratives are not deeply considered in the analysis. Although his wife tried to hide the fact and report her marriage as an ordinary arranged marriage, one husband disclosed the bride kidnapping by his family and relatives. Based on that instance, husbands' narratives might be different than those of their wives. However, this husband's narrative is lightly dealt with as merely the disclosure of a fact. The structure of husbands' narratives and men's agency are outside the range of the author's concerns. To examine the entire grammatical structure of the narratives and think about a better gender-balanced folklore of agency, husbands' narratives on their marriages should be collected and analyzed.

Second, despite women's deeply embedded social inferiority in Yolmo society, and their denial of their subjectivity regarding marital matters, Yolmo women tend to have a positive sense of their gender identity. Even a woman who had fiercely resisted her unwanted marriage stated, "I am satisfied with what I am" (p. 172) and "I love my husband very much" (p. 183). This intriguing finding leads to the question: How can we understand this paradox?

This volume's exquisite descriptions allow readers to use their imaginations and develop interpretations. The author states that Yolmo women run households in which they can be the central figures (p. 211). That statement suggests that these women gain bargaining power through marriage that they exercise in their roles as wives, mothers, mothers-in-law, husbands' sisters, and employers of household servants. Accordingly, women are not always suppressed by external social forces. Women internalize some of the social forces, which they strategically implement as agents of the social forces that influence others in various contexts. For example, when Yolmo's only feminist woman served tea with saucers to women on an equal footing to the men, it was the other women who resented her actions (p. 250). Even love and care have the Janusian face of controlling human relationships and making women's loved ones happy. The author cites Butler (1989, 1997) to point out that agency constructs society as much as society constructs agency. In addition, there might be also joy or pleasure in everyday marital life, although the author does not detail it. Women experience psychological and physical suffering if their marriages were forced, but they obtain bargaining power and joy or pleasure in their everyday lives from their marriages. It is understandable that the Yolmo women have a positive sense of gender identity.

However, the power enjoyed by married women is conditional. Only women who are virtuous are highly evaluated and can have the bargaining power specific to married women. In this context, “virtuous” means that a young woman’s sexuality is controlled by older men and women. Thus, the woman forced to enter her unwanted marriage was treated well by her in-laws and is permitted to work in Israel unaccompanied, which allows her to achieve her dream of earning money in a city (pp. 181, 202). That is why the women in the study tell stories about the ways that their subjectivities were neglected at the marriage. The author points out that when a woman denies her subjectivity, she is reconstructing herself as a “virtuous Yolmo woman” (p. 133). In this way, the women’s denials of subjectivity in marital matters are part of their deliberate or unintentional strategies.

It is often said that to perceive women just as victims, sufferers, or the oppressed is to deny their agency. Spotlighting women’s strategic agency or clever calculations in their personal niches could be a cornerstone of writing on the folklore of agency. However, this book’s discussion does not develop in that direction. Married women’s power, pleasure, or joy in their everyday lives are paid relatively little attention. The author prefers to find Yolmo women’s agency in their voluntary acceptance of suffering for their loved ones (p. 194). The sense of positive gender identity is also understood as emanating from the women’s renunciation of freedom and rights, this identifies them as suffering and oppressed, but kind, women.

Although my perspective differs somewhat from the author’s, as mentioned above, I recognize that she succeeds in finding a vernacular form of agency not limited to resistance, and her deep insight into women’s agency highly deserves special attention. I hope that this invaluable ethnography will be translated into English in the near future and that it ultimately will be available to readers worldwide.

References

- Butler, Judith 1989. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
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