

Tribhuvan University

Cultural Performance and Construction of Sherpa Cultural Identity in *Ku-sum*

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in English

By

Angnima Sherpa

Symbol No.: 280655

T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-474-2-2015

Admission Year: 2075/076

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

April 2023

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Performance of Sherpa Cultural Identity in *Ku-sum*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, by Angnima Sherpa has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee as the partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Art in English.

Members of the Research Committee:

Prof. Dr Dhruba Karki

Internal Supervisor

Prof. Dr Krishna Chandra Sharma

External Supervisor

Prof. Dr Jib Lal Sapkota

Head

Central Department of English

Date:.....

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Prof. Dr. Dhruva Karki, Lecturer of English at the Central Department of English, for making this work possible. His intellectual guidance, critical comments, and genuine suggestions carried me through the entire stages of writing the paper.

I am extremely grateful to Prof. Dr. Jiblal Sapkota, Head of Central Department of English, for granting me a chance to conduct this research. Additionally, this endeavour would not have been possible without the generous support of Prof. Dr. Krishna Chandra Gautam. Moreover, I extend my deep sense of respect to Asst. Prof. Dr. Taralal Shrestha, lecture Laxman Bhatta and all the lectures and professors of CDE for their valuable guidance and motivation during this research work as well as my academic career.

Words cannot express my gratitude to my parents, Karsang Lama and Nilagi Sherpa, for their immense love and continues support. Without their care, love and support, I would not have been able to arrive at this stage of my academic pursuits. Similarly, my gratitude extends to my brothers, Phurba Chhiring Sherpa and Nima Dorje Sherpa, to my sister-in-law Julie Delaruelle and to the whole family members for their support and encouragement all through my studies. Finally, I would like to thank my fellows, Pradeep B.K. and Dipankar Senehang for their fruitful suggestion and help.

April 2023

Angnima Sherpa

Cultural Performance and Construction of Sherpa Identity in *Ku-Sum*

Abstract

This paper explores cultural performance and the construction of identity in Sagar Subba's directed movie: Ku-Sum, in light of Richard Schechner's performance theory and Stuart Hall's theory of representation. Subba's movie portrays the culture of the Sherpa community through the protagonist, Kusum, and depicts the importance of the culture with a focus on its revival as it is in a state of deterioration. As the culture has been sidelined because of the majoritarian groups who are in power, it can be ameliorated merely through the performance. Cultural performances and rituals are the helping tools to revive Sherpa culture and the necessity of these processes has been answered in the movie with the enactment of the protagonist who heads to the city area from a rural village to educate himself and elevate the Sherpa culture in society. In doing so, the movie itself has become the stage and on that, the Sherpa people are performing certain cultural acts to form their social identity. Through the picturization and performance of Sherpa culture, they have created the Sherpa community's identity and are also resisting the dominant ideologies of society because they are changing as a result of modernity and prevailing culture. Moreover, how cultural identity works as an apparatus to elucidate the uniqueness of the particular community and disassociates 'self' and 'others' is also depicted. Amalgamating these instances, their performance has resisted the submissive ideologies and marked their position among the majoritarian groups in society. Sherpas are noticing several changes in their community; however, there are still several ways through which they can consolidate their position, without being obstructed by extraordinary forces.

Keywords: Sherpa, performance, culture, identity, and difference

The Sherpas are the indigenous group of people from the mountainous region of Nepal. Sherpas, a culturally varied group embedded with certain ritualistic and traditional norms, have been one of the exemplary minorities who are in a continuous junction of global tendencies and tribal values. Their cultural performances and distinctiveness are the defining mechanisms that infallibly enhance their identity and prevail to date. One of the keys that made it happen is the art of performance that Sherpas impartially hold over time. The valuation of cultural aesthetics and the significance of staging the rituals addressed in a specific occasion persistently preserve their cultural root despite withstanding transcendence from global challenges. Sagar Subba, in his movie *Ku-sum*, has significantly highlighted the artistic performance that reflects the cultural identity of Sherpa. Moreover, the film, through cinematic representation, dispels the idea that Sherpa's identity is crucial for the perseverance of Sherpa's culture.

Ku-sum, the cinematography of Sagar Subba in 2014, introduces the customs of the Sherpa community through the representation of Sherpa culture in visual form. It has depicted the customs and traditions of an indigenous group that is deliberate disregard by the people of the present time. The demonstration of Kusum's family lifestyle in the film represents the significance of culture in one's life to develop social identity. Moreover, for the substantial presence of the culture, it obtained the National Film Award as the Best Cultural Film from the government of Nepal in 2014.

Sagar Subba's *Ku-sum* presents the way of living life of the Sherpa people, an indigenous group residing in the Himalayan region of Nepal. The film introduces the life story of Kusum, the protagonist of the movie, with the major highlight on how a Sherpa community lives and the significance of cultural aesthetics and traditions in

their life. The story begins with the picturization of Kusum's mother involved in her household chores at their farmhouse. Besides her, Kusum, with his elder brother: Sonam, and younger brother: Sange, are also portrayed with their engagement in household chores. Meanwhile, Yanjum and the family arrive; and Kusum's family gets down to their home from the hill. The storyline moves to the school where Kusum and Sange study. Kusum and his friend converse about notebooks and the friend who has been absent for a long time. Then the scene is shifted to religious sites where Kusum's family is engaged in prayers. After a while, the mother works in the kitchen garden, and the father teaches three children the prominence of education and skills, language and script, culture and traditions. Moreover, he also makes them comprehend that one must not forget their culture and traditions as it holds the identity of the community to which one belongs. Meanwhile, a neighbor visits the house to invite them to the name-keeping ceremony.

The naming ceremony was at Namgyal's house. Following the tradition of their community, they performed the rituals. Later in the afternoon, Kusum's father consumes wine in a hotel. Even though one of his friends suggests it is hazardous, he replies he cannot be a teetotalter despite his constant effort to be one. He then comes back home with blood on his shirt. The mother, at home, was terrified to see stains of blood on the father's shirt. Away from home, Kusum meets Dolma and helps her to carry loads. The same night, father had a nightmare. He starts to cough and asks for apologies from his wife for drinking despite his wife's refusal to consume alcoholic liquors. Sonam, at the moment, asks his brothers to prepare a basket to take his father to the hospital, but he dies. The family performs funeral rituals. After some days, the elder son takes on the responsibilities and engages himself in farming. Kusum, on the flip side, visits Dolma. She mentions her problems and the reason behind dropping

out of school. She asks Kusum to study and obtain knowledge. Kusum mentions his dream to run a Sherpa school so that deprived one can enlighten them.

The mother at home asks Sonam to get married. Sonam marries a girl, Lami, performing the rituals and traditions of Sherpa. The next day, a teacher visits Kusum's home to congratulate his mother on the occasion of their accomplishment on the examination. Soman plans to send his brothers to college for higher education. The mother rejects the plan, but Soman convinces the mother. Kusum and Sange come to Kathmandu to pursue higher education. Kusum admits him to Bishwa Bhasa (World Language) college so that he can learn about languages, cultures, and religions. He meets a girl, Manika, a non-residence Nepali (NRN) from Canada, who was there to learn the Nepali language, culture, and tradition. However, Sange was more in the mischievous act than the studies. His friends were drug addicts. In the village, Sonam meets his friend working as a trekker. His friend offers him to work as a trekking guide for the Everest expedition. But mother denies it. Soman convinces her by saying Sherpas must not be afraid to climb Everest as it is Sherpa's family deity. Mother agrees and farewells him with blessings. In Kathmandu, being with his drug-addicted friends, Sange also became one. Kusum was helping Manika to learn about Sherpa's culture by taking her to the monasteries. Manika expresses her desire to take Kusum to Canada. Kusum rejects the offer politely. She was furious with his reply. Therefore she questions Kussum about what is here in the country that makes him deny the proposal. He replies that the nation is his identity and his sovereignty lies here.

Kusum happens to know about Sange's drugs addiction. He decides to send her to a rehabilitation center. Far away in the village, the mother has a nightmare. Lami comes to her to console her and sleep well with no second thoughts. The next

day, Sonam returns from the trek. In Kathmandu, Kusum decides to get a job and live independently. He works hard to get a job, and over time he gets one. His works helped the company to earn more profit than they usually used to. Kusum visits the District Education Office for permission to open Sherpa school. He opens the school, and for the inaugural program, he invites his family. The family and Dolma living in the village come to attend the program. They were pleased to witness the aesthetic beauty of the Sherpa community in Kathmandu. The program also reflected the beauty of the Sherpa community. Meanwhile, Sange returned from the rehabilitation center. Kusum's mother ties a knot between Kusum and Dolma in the program.

The movie revolves around the cultural performance of the Sherpa culture and ritual practices. It strives to present how the performance art of the cultural group resonates with cultural identity and how it is significant to preserve. To articulate these instances, the present research adopts Richard Schechner's concept of performance theory. As he claims, "Performance studies' core assertion is that its subject is comprehensive. PS deals with all kinds of performances — in social, political, and economic life; in private life; in sports, popular entertainments, and media; in law, medicine, and other professions; in animal behavior; and in the arts (theatre, dance, music, visual arts, cinema, etc.)" (5). Performances are actions in which the primary focus is on what people do. The activity ranges from rituals, play, performing arts, and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, and class roles. According to him, "Performances are usually subjunctive, liminal, dangerous, and duplicitous they are often hedged in with conventions somewhat safe. In these relatively safe make-believe precincts, actions can be carried to extremes, even for fun" (xix). It deals with artistic expressions that express cultural interactions, communication, and contradictory subjects relating to

the turbulence of the world. Rejecting ideological neutrality, it actively follows social practices inquiring about behavioral patterns and their interactions. Because of this, he states, “Performance is an inclusive term. Theatre is only one node on a continuum that reaches from the ritualizations of animals (including humans) through performances in everyday life – greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles, and so on – through to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and performances of great magnitude (xvii). There is no limitation to what performance includes and what it does not because it highlights different instances of distinct kinds.

Performance provides a lens to view the socio-cultural life of people and comprehends their identities and collective identities. It develops from the axiom that we live where cultural values influence the interaction among people, involving them into wider foundation of performativity. These practical implications vehemently affect consciousness to expound the actors of society in which assessment must be from the performative act. In Richard Schechner’s words: “Performative thinking must be seen as a means of cultural analysis” (5). The social structure based on social aspects of cultural values is more subtly analyzed from performative thinking that potentially scrutinizes the values and finds out the junction of significance and appropriation. Values are the core principle upon which a community exists. They work as a guiding compass in our life and they can also be contagious if we practice them. However, they may be inadvertently inherited but purposely reflected upon following the individuals’ way of life. He says, “in fact, the difference between what is “liberty” and what is “oppression” depends a lot on where you are coming from” (1). Values constitute the process of behavior and the representations of behavior in variant instances. And these behavioral representations of values are socially available

in a form of a ritual. They are rituals that motivate people to actively enroll values in their behavior. He notes:

Ritual is rigidly programmed, as well as the expressing personal's submission to focuses on longer or at least other than oneself. Ritual is showing the reality doctrine and the agreement from the rules and the regulation that are given. Games, sports, theater (dance, music) and to intervene between these extremes. It is in these activities that people can express their social behavior. (15)

Rituals are social practices in which culture, in a social structure, moves from one position to another. It even concretizes cultural ideas developing an intense feeling of togetherness and identity. Simultaneously, rituals, for the performance of actions, bind cultural identity and beliefs. Cultural identities have been discussed by several critics and tried to illustrate their opinion from a particular location. Helena Karjalainen, for instance, writes, “. . . Cultural identities can be understood as an identity of metamorphosis that continually adapts to new situations” (252). Her definition exposes the changing identity of an individual—which is a perpetual process in the course of time—accommodating the phenomenon of society. In this sense, our cultural identity is not a constant adjective of our introduction but rather a transient form that keeps on changing. In this regard, Stuart Hall writes, “. . . our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (69). Hall seems to be opposite to the claim that Helena put forth. But the essence of both thinkers is similar if we try to uproot their inner meanings. Hall, particularly, is focusing on the communal identity of a shared cultural group. He

pretends that although the identity of an individual, perhaps, changes, their cultural code is still the same.

Cultural identity is not a closed form of social behavior but a dynamic aspect that demands different avenues to detect it. As Simon Clake mentions, “[c]ultural identities are marked by a number of factors— ‘race’, ‘ethnicity, gender, and class to name but a few; the very locus of these factors, however, is the notion of difference” (510). These differences are the primary apparatus to illuminate the distinction between “us” and “them” that plays a significant role in detecting the composition of society. The difference is the key element to segregating self and others. And it is the otherness that makes one unique and complete whole in its own limitations, parameters, and regime.

Subba has picked up the daily practices of the Sherpa community to demystify the cultural values and aesthetics that mark them as a different cultural being in Nepali heterogeneous society. To illustrate the embedded essence of cultural realities of the Sherpa culture in the movie, the methodological lens of performance theory and cultural identities works as a significant apparatus. Sherpas, according to Bishnu Prasad Gurung, “. . . are the veteran Mountaineering people of Nepal, who are world renowned for expedition” (119). In the words of Deepak Raj Bhatta, “The Sherpas are a group of Tibetan roots who reside in the high valleys around the base of Mount Everest in northeastern Nepal.” An indigenous cultural group of Nepal, Sherpa, with utmost potency in exemplifying themselves, has its unique sense of identity in the title itself. As Gurung mentions, “In Tibetan language, Sher means the eastern, and Pa means the people. So from this word, the Tibetans have called them the Sherpa. Because of being the similar culture and language with the Tibetan peoples, this

speculation to call them Sherpa seems resembling” (120). In this sense, Sherpas have Tibetan roots and are also defined by their language.

The geographical location of the Sherpa community lies in the Himalayan region of Nepal. As noted in *People's of Nepal: Sherpa*, Pilgrims Pocket Classics: “They reside mainly in the Northern region of the Sagarmatha zone, along the Dudhkosi river and its tributary valleys. They are also found in Helambu and the upper Trisuli valley of Langtang, as well as in the eastern hill district of Nepal” (5). However, “Their main population is concentrated in the districts of Solukhumbu, with some smaller groups in the Eastern districts of Taplejung. (5). The residential structure of the Sherpa people develop their livelihood in a peculiar pattern. To quote Ella Maillart: “In the district around Khumbu, the Khamba is given to recent emigrants from Tibet, poor unkempt creatures who, by dint of working as peasants or itinerant coolies, will become well-to-do Sherpas in a generation or two” (13). Moreover, “Sometimes they drive yaks over the high passes, loaded with the rice, sugar, and paper needed in Tibet. Returning thence, they bring wool, salt, tea and religious books” (13). These foundations of the community conceive a different cultural pattern in the Sherpas. The practice of economic acceleration, the process of celebrating their ancestral rituals, and the transcendence of Nepali cultural diversity camouflage the cultural color of the Sherpa and solidify their cultural uniqueness. The religious piousness and cultural definition of human behavior keep them apart from other cultural foundations. Sherpa observes the material presence of human impurity. And their description of the human soul and the process of being polluted have a different comprehension which is interpreted from the religious point of view. The impact of pollution on the human body is described by Sherry B. Ortner in the following ways:

. . . the immediate effects of pollution upon the individual are upon one's mental/emotional state. In one condition, the polluted person tends to aggression and violence. More common, however, is the other type of polluted state, in which the polluted person is sleepy, dull, lethargic, and lazy; he cannot learn well; his mind is slow and his memory is poor. (52)

Impurity is not an abstract entity of the human body for Sherpas; instead, they believe that it appears as a bodily performance in human society. The impurity is conspicuous in the human body and these impurities are ostensible in behavior and habits. These aspects are also featured in the movie. When the younger brother of Kusum, Sange, falls into the trap of modern society and starts eroding his purity, involving himself in drug-addictive behavior.

There is a subtle distinction between pure and impure bodies and it is the pure body that has the capability to construct reality. Sherpas, in a sense, are similar to that of rational thinkers. Their comprehension of the world defines that the world is guided by human intelligence. In this instance, Robert A. Paul points out:

For the Sherpas, the whole world of appearances is a product of the mind; but this is not simple solipsistic idealism or Berkeleyan reductionism; for the mind in their scheme is not "only" the mind, and hence of a dubious ontological status, as when we say of someone's whimsies that "they are all only in his mind." Rather, the whole cosmos is essentially mind, and our individual minds at their inner core merge with the greater mind of the universe. (131)

Sherpas' comprehension of the mind is different from that of the physiological mind. They do not restrain their understanding of the mind merely within the brain itself, but instead, they conceive the entire cosmos and the human brain is associated or linked with perennial faculties of the universe. The broader acknowledgment of "mind" is

not merely an attribute of Sherpa, it is a mechanism that creates their cultural world with separate philosophies.

However, Sherpas' cultural uniqueness is not yet recognized; they are accused of being an imitator. Sherpa resides in the Himalayans and they are climbing the mountain from the very beginning of their evolution; nevertheless, critics have found them as mimesis of other people. As Vincanne Adams writes, "Sherpas, like Everest, are also contingent on the particular ways they are and have been represented by others. Ethnographers have devoted considerable attention to the problems of "positivist-oriented" analyses in anthropology, sometimes linking them to the problems of cultural essentialism in ethnographic representations" (86). Although Sherpas have been understood in different ways, there are ways that describe them in their own. In reality, how Sherpas' abilities are understood, Vincanne Adams mentions in the following manner:

Their mimesis of foreign images of themselves has compelled Sherpas to climb Himalayan peaks not simply as guides in the employment of foreigners but as self-paying organizers of their own climbs, with the aim of becoming famous. They have been called "Tigers of the Snow," a title given them by British mountaineers. It refers to their role as Himalayan mountain guides capable of great skill, achievement, and loyalty to foreign climbers, dating back to the early 20th century. (91-92)

The prowess of the Sherpas is famous across the world. They have succeeded in representing themselves as the champion of mountaineering. With admiration and eloquent appreciation, they are well known for their quality and ability in the world. These portions of the Sherpa community are also one of the highlighted parts of the movie.

When Sonam, the eldest brother of Kusum, fails to pay the debt, she plans to work as a tourist guide. As soon as his mother refuses his proposal because so many of his friends and his uncle died during mountaineering, Sonam says, “Will it be acceptable for son of Sherpa to be afraid to climb Everest, mother? Who is the first Nepali to scale Mt. Everest? Isn’t it Tenzing Norgay Sherpa? Who is the first woman to scale Mt. Everest? Isn’t it Passang Lhamu Sherpa? Why are they so famous today? Isn’t it because they scaled Everest?” (1:25:40-1:25:56). These dialogues refresh their identity and the process of performances through which they excelled within the limit of social behavior. Moreover, it also resembles how sherpa people are capable of identifying themselves and how they have made their name in the pages of history. As Sonam continues, “. . . Everest is like our family deity, He will protect us” (1:26:04-1:26:09), his words encapsulate the cultural values of Mount Everest. In this sense, mountaineering, for Sherpas, is not merely an influence and a process of being famous but also a cultural behavior or cultural significance. Cultural values and their performances are always enticed by their act of climbing Everest which knots the culture and practice.

The Sherpas are residing in such a fragile location that a minimal thing can remark a tremendous impact. The global phenomena, for instance, global warming, and Nepal’s national politics both are significant facets that are enormously affecting not merely their living style but also hardening their boundaries where they can observe their cultural performances. In this relevance, Pasang Yangjee Sherpa mentions, “Sherpas are noticing significant environmental impacts resulting from climate change and are becoming exposed to different kinds of knowledge from various sources as they themselves are undergoing rapid socioeconomic transformation” (153). These transformations are endangering their cultural practices

which is a matter of deep concern for the Sherpa community. The transformation of Sange in the movie is the metaphoric depiction of cultural metamorphosis. The environment of city life and Sange's association with modern friends with ethically deteriorated and morally disabled friends, implicitly reflect the dangers that are weakening factors of Sherpa's performance.

Sange, a character from the Sherpa community, changes his path and forgets his cultural root, in the movie, which portrays that the Sherpas are being influenced by the global tendencies that are fallibly affecting their cultural foundation. However, the director has not failed to manifest how these ill practices or influences can be healed and revitalized their original essence. In the movie's last scene, when Sange returns from the rehabilitation center, the film essentializes the cultural comeback and its possibility of reviving.

The cultural performances of Sherpa are in flux though they are constantly trying to reposit themselves on their original ground. The structural ground and the grammar of their lives are inflicted by the cultural dominance in Nepal. In the heterogeneous society, Alexander W. Macdonald claims, "The Sherpas live at present within the political limits of Nepal, Hindu kingdom in which they occupy a marginal, geographical and religious position" (139). The social status for their recognition is really significant because the dominant culture prevails to subdue their voices. Sherpas, as a social group, are identified with their own spaces and are visible with their spatiotemporal status. In this relevance, it is more important to acknowledge the social identity of a social group if they have their own cultural stuff to articulate because as Jan E Stets and Peter J. Burke assess:

A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Through a social

comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group. (225)

Stets and Burke are seriously paying attention to a social group and are trying to illuminate the basic formality through which a society creates one and the other. The juxtaposition of cultural nuances is the indicative measure through which the cultural performances of social groups are differentiated. Therefore, this is not merely the process of creating differences between cultures but at the same time creating a hierarchy in society as well. To be more precise, “In the case of minority nations, cultural structures are threatened by unwelcome policies imposed by the broader and more politically powerful society” (Wilcox 567). In this sense, the marginal culture of a nation is doubly effaced. The cultural domination of the state as well as the global tendencies both simultaneously strive to subjugate the marginal culture. These subduing forces compel them to augment their position and oblige them to understand their positionality rather than accepting the prescriptive notion and narration of the state and the globe.

The movie, *Ku-Sum*, depicts the cultural difference and the significance of Sherpa's cultural identity foreshadowing the cultural aesthetics and norms. The film signifies why cultural essence is necessary and what happens if it is destroyed. As Kusum's father suggests to his three sons, Sonam, Kusum, and Sange, “Political science teaches you that, if you want to destroy a community or a race, you should first destroy by their language, script, tradition, and their culture” (15:28-15:38). The cultural entities are the symbol of one's identity and it is unquestionably imperatives for the consolidation of one's identity, therefore, as he further suggests, “Wherever you reach in this world never forget your language, tradition, script, and culture”

(15:43-15:54). From these articulations, the movie magnifies the cultural dominance and hints that it is also a resistive movie engulfed with an invincible effort to solidify Sherpa cultural difference.

The movie dramatizes the events that incontrovertibly corroborate how the Sherpa community performs certain acts which are the elements of their cultural formation. The dramatic presentation of the movie centralizes the performances and highlights the approaches that how they are indulged with their behavior. To recall Schechner, “The drama is the domain of the author, composer, scenarist, shaman; the script is the domain of the teacher, guru, master; the theatre is the domain of the performers; the performance is the domain of the audience” (8). Similarly, the movie accepts the prescriptive factors and amply disseminates the truths they have within. The characters, mostly, are featured in Sherpa cultural dress, they speak the Sherpa language, the characters are dominantly Sherpas, and the location also subtly resolves the original places of Sherpa and most interestingly, these all the cultural performances are performed within the domain of Sherpa culture which is filmed by the movie.

The director has narrated the life story of the Sherpa people through cinematic production. The movie is beyond the romanticization of imagination and the picturization of fantasy. From birth to death, the downfall to elevation, love to disdain, and loss cause to remedy for betterment, all the aspects are depicted in the movie limiting the boundaries within the cultural circumference. In each respect, Sherpas are eccentric and to expose these facets, the director has narrativized them with concise predilection. For instance, Sherpa conducts four types of marriage. According to Gurung, “. . . one is ‘Tichhyang’, at this time they go with wine in a pong; and if the lady is given, the boy gets authority to visit and sleeps at the girl’s

house and later the wedding process is arranged according to their culture” (120). The second process is a bit different from that of the first one. In the next process, “the Demchhyang, in this time the marriage process date is confirmed, and the marriage procession goes from the boy’s side. On the way, the girl’s mother and the other relatives stand to welcome the Demchhyang by taking wine in the Pongs” (120). As this process ends, Surchyang process begins which is described by Gurung as follows:

. . . the spruce (incense) is burnt for the incense. After that, the Chhyang (local beer) is sprinkled by the spruce’s lead there to all, and Khada (greeting muffler) is offered around the neck to the main persons of the group. In front of the procession, two people also march taking Yangshri and Kakal named Pongs (Wine container) and taken them at the girl’s house. Demchhyng is called the marriage procession In this time the marriage groups are feast in both the girl’s and the boy’s house. (120-121)

This longer process is followed by the last process which seems more formal and integrated marital process. The last process is called Pechyang. In this process, “The two side’s parents discuss to do this on the exact date of this ‘Pechyang’, and then the marriage gets completed” (121). Out of these processes, *Ku-Sum* has highlighted the last process more effectively.



Fig 1. Marriage Ceremony

(Source: author’s screenshot from Kusum)

Figure 1 illustrates the Sherpa people's cultural performance with the male and the female fulfilling certain rites. The cultural dress and consumption of something from the kit distinct from what we use in everyday life signals. To add up, the presence of companions holding umbrellas over the head of the male and the female, who is sitting in the center marks the performance of the ritual. Every single person present, in the image, is seen in their cultural attire and this signals that they are in the special ceremony. Moreover, the performance is merely being performed by the two people sitting under the umbrella therefore it is a marriage ceremony. To comprehend more about the picture, in the words of Michael Mühlich: “Both are accompanied by umbrella carriers. Before them stands the lama, who came with groom’s party, and, after speeches (*molla*) have been given by representatives of both sides, he performs the binding ritual” (76). Moreover, “To conduct this ritual the Lama puts butter in the hair above the forehead of bride and groom this is called *kargyen*, “white mark” and offers them cups of *chang*” (76). These cultural practices may be common in other cultural groups; however, the way Sherpa observes and takes its significance has its own definition and peculiar degree of celebration.

The bride and groom perform the rituals as per the instructions of the lama assigned for the ceremony. The lama chants speeches as per the culture and makes the bride and groom perform the rites. Through the presentation of marriage, in the movie, they depict the ritualistic performance of the Sherpa in the form of cinematic expression. The presentation of ritualistic performance instructs about the significance that the community holds. The rituals portray the prominence of a particular performance in the community. As mentioned in an article entitled, *Gaiety of Spirit: The Sherpa People of the Khumbu, Nepal*: "There are several stages to a Sherpa wedding. Sodene is the asking or the engagement. Demchang is the establishment of a

proper agreement. Trichang sets the year and month of the final ceremony; Pechang is the consultation that sets the actual date. Zendi is the final ceremony where the woman comes to live with the man" (np). Within Sherpa society, there are various rites that a couple has to perform to reach the final rite. Zendi is the actual wedding day when the bride comes to the groom's home after the ceremony concludes. To illustrate the picture, the people beside the couple are holding an umbrella and they are consuming something offered to them. Besides, other people are watching the rites being performed.

Another rite that carries the identity of the Sherpa community is the naming ceremony. Even though the rites might collide with other religious groups, it holds the identity of the Sherpa community. The unique features like the presence of lama, wearing of the cultural attire, and the consideration of *chhang* as an auspicious element make the cultural identity, traditions, and rituals distinctive.



Fig. 2. Naming Ceremony

(Source: author's screenshot from Kusum)

Figure 2 portrays the woman accepting something from Lama in vivid detail. The infant on the lady's lap and husband, decked up in the cultural attire, beside her indicate that they are participating in the ritual where the presence of trios is prominent. Similarly, the lamas near them and the lady performing certain actions, as

per the lama's instructions, represent the ritual performance. Moreover, the kit on the table and the one being used by the lama signifies that they are performing a naming ceremony. According to *Sherpa in Nepal: History, Culture, Religion, Language*, "After the birth of a child, they consult a lama, mentioning the time of birth. With this information, the lama determines the child's name and the date for naming the child. On that fixed date, the lama and local relatives are invited and a feast of chhang and roti (oil-fried bread) is provided." The naming ceremony is, indeed, an auspicious and crucial rite in a person's life. The performance of the rites and rituals of the naming ceremony develops an identity even though some actions performed is similar to other groups of the community.

The portrayal of the rites in *Ku-sum* delivers the distinctive value that the Sherpa community has. And it also delivers the beliefs, and values and communicates symbolically about the identity of the community. It also provides ideologies regarding social life and the quality of the community. Similarly, it also expresses creativity and relation between the people through their participation in the community's performances. The engagement of the people in the performances demonstrates the art of living in a particular community. The cultural dance presented in *Ku-sum* elaborates on the enthusiasm and active participation of the people with the strong intention to promote the culture. Furthermore, it helps to form a cultural identity through which a globe recognizes us from the place we belong to. The movie portrays dance as a cultural performance on many occasions, namely, Lhosar and the marriage ceremony. With a vehement articulation of cultural dance, the movie strives to represent the cultural aesthetics and the performances through which the Sherpa people powerfully maintain their cultural solidarity in the social domain. The figure below, for instance, shows how Sherpa performs a cultural dance in the movie.



Fig. 3. Cultural Dance

(Source: author's screenshot from Kusum)

The ladies and the gentlemen standing in their cultural attire in Figure 3 mark the task that represents the Sherpa culture. The movement of the legs, the body, and their hands in the image is distinct from the normal standing posture. Moreover, the involvement of young generations and the performance practiced with a major focus on bodily movement illustrates that they are performing a cultural dance. It is also the cultural identity of Sherpa because it is associated with the existence of the Sherpa tribe. This cultural performance is called *Shyabdo* which is performed during marriage ceremonies and especially in the Losar festival by using the legs of young girls and boys group in a circle round through the use of bodily movement. *Shyabdo* is being threatened by extinction because of modernization and the limited use of the marginalized community.

However, with the burgeoning indigenous awareness in the local and the global context and glorying the performance of the culture and marginalized communities. Literally, 'Shyab' means 'leg', and 'do' means dance. Through the representation of the performance, the movie is trying to signify the cultural

difference, articulating its significance. A ritualistic practice that is being practiced for ages is an apparatus that reflects the cultural identities of Sherpas. As Schechner writes in his book *between Theater and Anthropology*:

Ritual especially is thought to be a necessary prelude to, adjunct of, for production: rituals must be performed or crops won't grow, etc. But this necessary link is not a confusion between the two kinds of activity; rather it is an acting out of the belief that both productive and non-productive activities are essential for human life. Furthermore, these rituals often include dances, dramas, games, sports, and playful activities. (30)

The rituals are like the seed for the community that helps them to foster their identity. Without ritual activities, the belief system won't have an existence in human life. The way we perform activities shapes the identity of the culture. For instance, the way one performs the rituals shapes their identity as it links with variant instances in people's life.



Fig. 4. Death Rituals

(Source: author's screenshot from Kusum)

Through the picturization of Figure 4, it is transparent that the characters are performing a rite. The thing that they are holding is wrapped in a white cloth.

Similarly, the posture of the object seems to be in a sitting position, and also the expression of two people while holding it signifies grief. Through these instances, we can know how Sherpa people perform their death rituals. As in the picture, they are Kusum and Sange holding the corpse of their father for the completion of the rituals. According to Antonio Maria Sacco, "The corpse, placed on the bier in foetal position, is wrapped in a white shroud and in ceremonial white scarves (kha btags). It is also covered with blue, white and red material, probably symbolizing the Bodhisattv Vajrapāṇi, Avalokiteśvara and Mañjusri (26). The covering of the corpse in white color cloth indicates the performance of the death ritual as it is a white cloth that is used majorly for the performance of death rituals. Kusum and Sange hold a corpse, in the image, which seems to be in a sitting position. As Death Ritual of Sherpa Race mentions:

According to religious method, the dead body is bathed with " Dhu " (holy water) and kept in a place where it is decorated with white cloth. If someone dies in Sherpa society, there is a trend of carrying the relatives of the deceased, Dhoop and Chhov (Prasad). On the day of the corpse cremation, all relatives, family and friends get together for and rituals according to religious rules. (np)

The dead body is wrapped in white cloth and is carried to a place where the cremation takes place. In the aforementioned picture, Kusum and Sange are holding the corpse of their father who is in the white cloth, and are walking to perform the funeral rites. Their performance and also the holding of the corpse build their identity and represents their uniqueness. The performance of rituals, in the movie, as per their culture provides the cultural codes through which the Sherpa community can be recognized.

These cultural performances are the elements of the Sherpa culture and these aspects remark the formation of cultural identity. Every necessary element that comprises cultural codes is equally significant for the consolidation of the social community. These representations in the movie symbolize the narration of Sherpa culture where they practice innumerable events through which they transpose their cultural instances from one generation to another. Indeed, “There are important and unimportant, central and peripheral, local and interlocal symbols, depending on how they function in the production, representation, and reproduction of the self-image” (Assmann and Czaplicka 131), the movie is trying to create the necessity of cultural behavior that can solidify their cultural identity.

The global transition and cultural domination are robust obstructions to the recognition of a particular culture because they explicitly or implicitly erase the traces of cultural histories. Imposing popular tendencies and influencing modern propensity, they do not fail to dilute the cultural essence of minorities. In this situation Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker suggest the following ways:

When survival is uncertain, cultural diversity seems threatening. When there isn't "enough to go around," foreigners are seen as dangerous outsiders who may take away one's sustenance. People cling to traditional gender roles and sexual norms, and emphasize absolute rules and familiar norms in an attempt to maximize predictability in an uncertain world. (28)

The famine of survival is the cause of cultural vulnerability. This, with the welcoming of creating permanent otherness, segregates society and problematizes social harmony, bringing several contested issues into the course of debate. However, “Conversely, when survival begins to be taken for granted, ethnic and cultural diversity becomes increasingly acceptable—indeed, beyond a certain point, diversity

is not only tolerated, it may be positively valued because it is interesting and stimulating” (28). These analyses show how the global phenomenon is actively threatening the survival of ethnic communities and how it has become a significant measure through which cultural diversity is being endangered.

The movie, in process of depicting Sherpa's cultural stuff, is also reflecting who they are and how this socio-cultural group sustains its historical value through their performance. Their cultural identity should not be misunderstood as common to another cultural group because their way of observing the same events follows different processes. Every cultural group is unique and has different cultural behavior. Their cultural identity is the index of their recognition. In the words of Tadeusz Paleczny and Bogdan Zieliński: “‘Social,’ cultural identity connects man with the world of group phenomena; not with the cosmos, the self, absolute spirit, instinct, enlightenment, mysticism, or God, but rather with the concrete, real-world of family, work and a structure of human interrelations” (356). Cultural belief and its performance is not merely a process of dealing with the metaphysical but at the same time creating and dealing with the real essence of human life.

Every culture has its origin. The cultural actors perform certain acts prescribed by the cultural prescriptions within its cultural forum, naturalizing the consistent values and norms. As Joane Nagel contends: “Culture is constructed in much the same way as ethnic boundaries are built, by the actions of individuals and groups and their interactions with the larger society. Ethnic boundaries function to determine identity options, membership composition and size, and form of ethnic organization” (162). In this essence, Stuart Hall defines two significant ways of thinking about cultural identity. As he writes: “The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of culture, a sort of collective, 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or

artificially imposed 'selves', which ancestry hold” (36). These two processes are the ways through which people understand their cultural identity. In this relevance, the movie has succeeded in adopting both entities. In depicting the Sherpa culture, the movie shows what the Sherpa people are and simultaneously picturizes how they have been practicing cultural stuff as their parents and ancestry observed.

In this sense, the movie is full of reflecting cultural identity and concretizing their state. In several instances, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall 70). Unquestionably, Sherpa culture has history and they are metamorphosed over time; however, the practices they follow yet are not beyond what their ancestor used to manifest. They have confronted several global and national intrusion which has possibly made either positive or negative changes. As matter of fact, as cultures changes so do their practices. As Stuart hall argues:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a near ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names positioned we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (70)

Identities do not remain constant. It is shaped because of the circumstances around the people. Moreover, it is a playful thing and the past identities of a person keep on changing when one reaches the present. Identity makes an individual unique, however, every people have similar identities in their social group but are distinct if compared to other people. To this, according to Tadeusz Paleczny and Bogdan Zieliński: “Cultural identity is a kind of consciousness of individuals, which is

ordered as a group, on the basis of the common elements of heritage, tradition, symbols, values and common norms. It makes individuals similar to each other, or different from one another, and they are located in the social space closer or further from each other” (356). The identity of a person makes one unique and shapes individual consciousness. And it is a cultural identity that develops consciousness among people on the basis of the traditions, norms, and values they follow. Identity definitely distinct people from one another but if we view it from the lens of the social groups they have similar features.

Identity has essence within it because of which we are recognized on the basis of our identity. And cultural identity is built with the amalgamation of features of identity as well as culture. As he writes, “Cultural identity holds together all the ingredients of identity, imparting to them order and sense. By this token, cultural identity imposes on man a place in the world that is known or unknown, gives him personal characteristics that are comparable, and relativistic to the social context” (356). The process of understanding the self-position solidifies an individual, integrating one into a disintegrated society. These happenstances are conspicuous in the movie and are articulated in such a manner that it seems like performance creates the identity.

To sum up, the movie portrays the culture and tradition of the Sherpa community, beginning from birth to the death of a person. The film picturizes typical Sherpa culture and their affluence aesthetics through the performance of their rites and rituals. Introducing customs, traditions, and the significance of the Sherpa people, the movie centers on the life of Kusum. Through the film, they present the cultural domain of the Sherpa community and the idea that Sherpa’s identity is crucial for the endurance of Sherpa’s culture. The Sherpa community is a subordinated indigenous

group. The voice of the community people is being repeatedly squeezed and unheard. Because of this, identity is in flux. The traditions are on the verge of extinction. The cinematic representation has been the voice to represent the prominence of the community.

The film works as an agency to evoke the importance of the culture of marginalized and deliberately crushed groups. Here, through the picturization and performance of Sherpa's culture, they have created an identity. Even though they are demonstrating the traditions, the impact of modernization and dominant culture is causing them to transform their aura. The essence of originality does not remain now. And today's generation is gradually moving away from the crux. But also, the movie presents how the culture can be protected and preserved from destructive influence. Rituals of the Sherpa, in the movie, are portrayed in the form of performance. Because when someone performs, their actions are the main point of attention. The performance deals with the expression that expresses cultural interaction and cultural identity. It also helps to recreate and resist as it includes acting out the rituals and performances of daily life. It also offers a prism to evaluate people's sociocultural existence to comprehend individual, and group identities are crucial. To sum up, featuring the cultural performance, the movie, *Ku-sum*, is not merely exposing the culture and traditions but rather, preserves, highlights, and gives solutions on how to protect the culture from being eroded.

Works Cited

- Adams, Vincanne. "Dreams of a Final Sherpa." *American Anthropologist*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1997, pp. 85–98. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/682135>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.
- Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique*, no. 65, 1995, pp. 125–33. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/488538>. Accessed 25 Sep. 2022.
- Bhatta, Deepak Raj. "Sherpas of Nepal." *ALTITUDEhimalaya*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.altitudehimalaya.com/blog/sherpas-of-nepal>. Accessed 21st September 2022.
- "Death Ritual of Sherpa Race." *patlesherpa.org*, Patle Sherpa Organization, <https://www.patlesherpa.org/project/death-ritual-of-sherpa-race/>. Accessed 24 September 2022.
- "Gaiety of Spirit: The Sherpa People of the Khumbu, Nepal." *bergadventures*, Berg Adventures International, http://www.bergadventures.com/v3_main/Sherpa-Story3.php. Accessed 24 September 2022.
- Gurung, Bishnu Prasad. *Life-Style in Nepal*. Monterosa treks and Expedition (P) Ltd, September 2009.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36, 1989, pp. 68–81. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111666>. Accessed 25 Sep. 2022.
- Inglehart, Ronald, and Wayne E. Baker. "Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2000, pp. 19–51. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657288>. Accessed 25 Sep. 2022.

KU-SUM – New Historical Film Sherpa Full Movie 2017\2073 | National Film

Award.” *Youtube*. Uploaded by HighlightsNepal, 3 March 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pypyl8LyGYA>.

Macdonald, Alexander W. “The Coming of Buddhism to the Sherpa area of Nepal.”

Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, vol. 34, no. 1/3, 1980,

pp. 139–46. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23682130>. Accessed 20 Aug.

2022.

Mühlich, Michael. “The Waterspirits and the Position of Women among the Sherpa.”

Kailash, vol. 17, no. 1–2, Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1997, pp. 67–80,

<https://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=ak06-020>.

Ortner, Sherry B. “Sherpa Purity.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 75, no. 1, 1973, pp.

49–63. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/672339>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

Paleczny, Tadeusz, and Bogdan Zieliński. “Cultural Identity: A Sociological Analysis

of the Phenomenon.” *Politeja*, no. 10/1, 2008, pp. 353–72. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24919310>. Accessed 25 Sep. 2022.

Paul, Robert A. “The Sherpa Temple as a Model of the Psyche.” *American*

Ethnologist, vol. 3, no. 1, 1976, pp. 131–46. *JSTOR*,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/643670>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

Sacco, Antonio Maria. “Sherpa Funeral Ceremony.” *The Tibet Journal*, vol. 23, no. 1,

1998, pp. 25–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43300675>. Accessed 24

Sep. 2022.

Schechner, Richard. “Drama, Script, Theatre, and Performance.” *The Drama*

Review: TDR, vol. 17, no. 3, 1973, pp. 5–36. *JSTOR*,

<https://doi.org/10.2307/1144841>. Accessed 19 Sep. 2022.

—. “Mainstream Theatre and Performance Studies.” *TDR (1988-)*,

vol. 44, no. 2, 2000, pp. 4–6. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146844>.

Accessed 19 Sep. 2022.

—. “Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach.” *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1988, pp. 4–6. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145899>. Accessed 25 Nov. 2022.

Scott, John P. “Critical Social Theory: An Introduction and Critique.” *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1978, pp. 1–21. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/589216>. Accessed 19 Sep. 2022.

“Sherpa in Nepal: History, Culture, Religion, Language .” *vivanadventure.com*, Vivan Adventure, <https://www.vivaanadventure.com/tag/the-housing-of-sherpa-in-nepal/>. Accessed 24 September 2022.

Sherpa, Pasang Yangjee. “Climate Change, Perceptions, and Social Heterogeneity in Pharak, Mount Everest Region of Nepal.” *Human Organization*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2014, pp. 153–61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44148749>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2022.

Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke. “Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory.” *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2000, pp. 224–37. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>. Accessed 19 Sep. 2022.

Wilcox, Shelley. “Culture, National Identity, and Admission to Citizenship.” *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 559–82. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23559226>. Accessed 19 Sep. 2022.