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Strategic Deployments of 'Sisterhood' and Questions of Solidarity at a Women's Development Project in Janakpur, Nepal

Coralynn V. Davis

Linguistic uses of 'sisterhood' provide a window into disparate understandings of relationality among virtual and actual interlocutors in women's development across vectors of caste, class, ethnicity and nationality. In this essay, I examine the trope of 'sisterhood' as it was employed at a women's development project in Janakpur, Nepal, in the 1990s. I demonstrate that the use of this common signifier of kinship with culturally disparate 'signifieds' created a confusion of meaning, and differential readings of the politics of relationality. In my view, 'sister', as used at this project, was a multivalent, strategically deployed, and divergently interpreted term. In particular,

for the local participants in the project, use of the term 'sister' provided access to a world of status and privileged connection that was part of the very stuff of development, locally construed. The very same signifier was used by local women to negotiate ambiguous relations of trust, dependency, intimacy, hierarchy, and difference—in such a way that their tactical movements and subtle critiques did not put at risk important ties with relatively advantaged others.

Keywords: Maithil, Nepal, development, gender, kinship, tourist art, women's empowerment.

Introduction

An older Brahmin woman sets down her brush and draws you over with a serious look and a commanding flourish of her tattooed arm, jangling with bangles.¹ “Listen,” she says:

When we were at home we could only see within our veils. But now we have lifted our veils and can see the whole world. Earlier it was as if we wore glasses made of potatoes, and we couldn't see clearly. Now it is clear as the view through a pair of binoculars. We all have to die someday. People die and fade away, but our office and the work we have started will never die. Sister will go away some day and another sister will come. The office staff may change. A new system may come. But the office will always remain. Old people like me will go and young people will take over and keep it going.

These comments by Anuragi Jha, one of 50-odd women who worked at the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) in the mid-1990s, were recorded in a 1994 documentary film called *Colors of Change: Janakpur Women Paint the Future*.² For a woman from the U.S. like myself, Anuragi Jha's statement is positively charged in so far as it resonates with Western feminist notions of consciousness-raising and third world women's empowerment. The metaphors of 'sight' and 'unveiling' which Anuragi Jha uses have a long discursive history in Euro-American feminist movements. These tropes are a familiar part of enlightenment discourse and in this case construct the empowered first world woman in juxtaposition to a disempowered third world woman who often has her face covered (Abu-Lughod 2002). Anuragi Jha's reference to potatoes suggests that the appropriate target for empowerment is a simple village woman living close to the earth, a woman so backward that binoculars represent leaps of technology for her. Anuragi's confidence in the longevity of the development project bespeaks a larger movement, a connection with 'sisters' of future times and other places. The particular 'sister' to whom she refers in her speech is Claire Burkert, the founding coordinator of the Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC), an American woman who dedicated more than a decade of her life to this development project. While Anuragi is speaking in the Maithili vernacular, she says the word 'sister' in English.

In this essay, I examine deployments of tropes of sisterhood as they collided, just as do multiply positioned women, at JWDC. Sisterhood acts for my purposes as a focal point to examine the relational politics of what has become known as 'women's development.' A focus

on discursive uses of sisterhood provides a window into disparate understandings of relationality among virtual and actual interlocutors across vectors of caste, class, ethnicity and nationality. I demonstrate that the use of a common signifier of kinship—sisterhood—with culturally disparate 'signifieds' creates a confusion of meaning, and differential readings of the politics of relationality.

I begin this essay with a history of the creation and evolution of the Janakpur Women's Development Center, as well as an overview of my research methods and trajectory. Following this methodological overview, I provide a brief discussion of the discourse of development generally and women's development in particular as it was enacted ideologically and materially in Nepal in the 1990s. JWDC is treated as a case in point, and here I focus on the multifarious ways its founder, craft producers and consumers viewed its purposes and functions especially in light of understandings of and experiences with Maithil gender norms. This necessarily detailed contextualization brings us finally to questions of sororal (dis)identification, which I examine institutionally, ethnographically, and linguistically, drawing especially on my analysis of the portrayal of sisterly relations in Maithil women's folk narratives.

In 1989, with a small grant from a U.S. foundation, Claire Burkert founded JWDC (then the Janakpur Women's Art Project) in order to help preserve the artistic tradition and empower its producers.³ In the decade that followed, the project provided a group of Maithil women living in the vicinity of the town of Janakpur in Nepal's eastern Tarai region with the resources and the space to make paintings on paper and other media for sale. In doing so, they drew on some of the same skills and aesthetics they use to make temporary paintings of Hindu religious and other subjects on the walls of their homes. International development grants and profits from the sale of these craft items in tourist and export markets supported the project over the years.⁴ In the early 1990s, JWDC funders financed the building of an impressive production center located in a village on the outskirts of Janakpur. At this location, it became possible for visitors to see the women painting and making crafts, and to buy what they produced.

In 1993, I received permission from Burkert to undertake an ethnographic study of the Janakpur Women's Development Center. While I was in pursuit of a doctoral degree in anthropology, Burkert hoped that my research might prove useful to the success of the development project.⁵ The research was conducted over several months in 1994 and 1995. At JWDC, I conducted semi-formal

interviews with all of the women then participating in the project, from Burkert herself to the ethnically non-Maithil Nepali managers, to the approximately 50 craft-producers considered to be the beneficiaries of the project. I accumulated field notes from months spent at the Center informally engaged in conversation, observation, and assistance.⁶ I was given access to all of the project's files and documents. In addition, I spent several weeks living and conducting socially stratified interviews in one of the villages near Janakpur, a community that is home to a number of the Maithil women participants. During that 15-month stay in Nepal, I also spent a few months in the capital city of Kathmandu, interviewing development functionaries and volunteering at a national level Nepali women's organization. In Kathmandu, I also conducted a written survey of consumers of Janakpur Art at a number of tourist shops. In 2003-2004, I returned to Janakpur for an extended period to conduct research on Maithil women's storytelling practices. During that period, I audio-recorded approximately 140 stories, primarily 'folktales' but also life stories from each of the storytellers with whom I worked. This essay allows me to draw on the material and insights from both periods of research.

On the fall day in 1994 that I arrived at the Janakpur Women's Development Center, a film team was setting up its equipment in the facility. A documentary was to be made about the Center, located just outside of the town of Janakpur; it would tell a story of how the development project housed there, which had been underwritten by USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women), served at once to empower its members and to preserve and promote the otherwise dwindling traditional practice of 'Janakpur Art.'⁷ At the Center, Maithil women were earning a living making paintings and other items to be sold as tourist art by drawing on skills, aesthetics, and images traditionally used in their homes for occasions of ceremony and festival. On that first day in October, I watched as large microphones and lights were maneuvered by the film crew around the facility. And I observed the women who worked there as they were transformed into character actors, en-actors of their own lives. They performed words and actions that would be sown together in a visual and auditory narrative in which (I would later learn when I viewed the completed film) what was deemed good in their lives (family, ritual, art) was preserved while what was deemed bad (women's subjugation, insularity, poverty) was transformed through what was portrayed as appropriate development and women's empowerment. It was in the course of this filming that Anuragi held forth with

her narrative of unveiling, consciousness raising, and sisters. Perhaps not surprisingly, over the course of my study, I became increasingly interested in processes of objectification whereby the women who worked at JWDC learned to negotiate discourses of development, tourism, and feminism, as they and their families and communities sought to pursue their interests and livelihoods via employment in the project.

Women's Development in Nepal

The historical insertion of women into development rhetoric and practice represented a proliferation of development discourse that contributed to the discourse's "self-creation and autoreferentiality" (Escobar 1995: 210), with an attendant extension of control over knowledge and bodies. At the same time, developers' increased interest in women constituted a reform. The governments of developing countries were pushed by international organizations and donor governments to formulate official policies on women as a deprived class, and such governments thereby sought legitimacy both domestically and in the international sphere. In Nepal, as elsewhere, the governmental and non-governmental agencies created in response to foreign aid for 'women's development' have provided certain kinds of education, employment, health care and other services and opportunities to many women. Even so, they have functioned, in part, to consolidate class-based interests (Tamang 1997) and limit agendas to the level of reform, as opposed to more radical transformation or liberation (Phnuyal 1997).⁸ Institutional emphases regarding women and development have shifted from the enhancement of women's domestic skills and technologies, to the integration of women into 'mainstream' development schemes, to 'empowerment' perspectives (including by the mid-1990s an emphasis on micro-credit and later environmental concerns). Yet, even across this range of orientations, development efforts aimed at women have remained largely within an economically deterministic, capitalist logic.⁹

Just as scholarly critics in the last decade have pointed to the ways that international development has operated as a discourse sanctioning or prescribing oppressive economic, political and epistemological relations on international and sub-international scales (Mueller 1987; Ferguson 1994; Escobar 1995; Des Chene 1996), transnational feminist scholars have examined how these relations have often been mirrored unreflectively in the discourses of some Western-centered international or global feminist orientations (Mohanty 1988; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Alexander

and Mohanty 1997). For instance, Chandra Mohanty argued that Western feminist scholars have constructed a 'Third World woman' Other to a Western white woman 'norm,' whereby ideas of backwardness and tradition (underdevelopment, oppression...) are mapped onto the former, and progressiveness and modernity onto the latter (Mohanty 1988). Such discursive dichotomizations, as Grewal and Kaplan point out, render deeply problematic any effort to do feminist work across cultural divides (1994: 2). In contrast, transnational feminist efforts require serious attention to historical trajectories, as well as local manifestations of and resistances to global forces (Alexander and Mohanty 1997). Much of the Western writing on women in Nepal prior to the 1990s showed a tendency toward what Alexander and Mohanty designate as a "liberal-pluralist understanding of feminism" (1997: xvi), which prioritized gender over other axes of identity and power. This writing emphasizes 'status' comparisons between genders based on notions of individualism and citizenship.¹⁰

In Nepal in the early and mid-1990s, aid for the development of women through the creation of women-run enterprises was in particular abundance. This corresponded at once with the expansion in large development agencies of departments that specialized in women's and gender issues, and also with the banners of privatization and structural adjustment then in ascendency among financially controlling agencies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Agency for International Development. At that time, Nepal also saw a boom in cultural preservation efforts, prominent examples of which included support by multiple INGOs and IGOs of the preservation and rehabilitation of Newar architecture and wood carving in the Kathmandu Valley. This support of cultural preservation was part of a global trend corresponding at once to the destruction of cultures through modernization and development and also to the development of international tourism as a major national income-generating activity. It is no wonder, then, that a project bent on empowering women, generating income through tourist market activity, and preserving cultural material and practice excited the imaginations of primary and secondary development aid institutions, not to mention international tourists.

JWDC followed a women-in-development strategy common in the 1990s, in that it was both economically productivist and oriented toward social empowerment. In the first instance, this means mainstreaming women into national economic development plans while recognizing

differences between men and women as social subjects. In the second instance, this entails seeking to transform the way women are linked to 'productive' activities, so that the equality of their participation is secured. Project planners and managers attempt to effect this second gender intervention by: providing women with income for work; getting women out of the house and village; including women in decision-making; providing a forum for women to share experiences; and providing training in literacy, health, management, leadership, and gender awareness.

In the survey conducted in Kathmandu of people who purchased wares made at JWDC, respondents indicated that they envisioned women's development as a problem characterized by a *lack*—of opportunities, resources, skills, and/or self-esteem/confidence. Such a lack was understood to be remedied by educational progress, development projects, and trainings offered under the auspices of development agencies. Respondents also indicated that they thought the producers had low status vis-à-vis their men folk. In other words, the respondents perceived women's development as a matter of sexual inequality in a culturally homogenous society the status of whose members are unaffected by the (equally distinct) society of the consumers themselves. I designated consumers of JWDC products as 'feminist' insofar as their purchasing was motivated in part by a desire to reduce perceived sexual inequality faced by the producers.

Purchase of the items made at JWDC appeared to be meaningful for consumers in part because they could demonstrate their ideological commitment to development, and women's development in particular, through their purchasing. One respondent called this act 'PC shopping.' Thus, survey respondents forged relations with perceived disempowered 'Others' through the activity of an alienated market transaction. The consumers positioned *themselves* as already empowered and enlightened, ready to help out—through their purchase—women they viewed as oppressed. Ideologically and rhetorically, they located themselves *outside* oppressive structures and cultural formations affecting their third world 'sisters.' They indicated no sense of differential location *within* oppressive systems, failing to examine or articulate the global link between their own purchasing power and desire, on the one hand, and local living conditions of Maithil women, on the other.

As for the craft producers at JWDC, they identified a range of motives for and gains from working at the Center. In addition to the money, participants cited as benefits getting away from more arduous work or conflicts at

home, as well as meeting people of many different types (*rang*, literally colors, and *jāt*, caste or race)—referring both to their coworkers from nearby villages and also to people from other regions and countries. It is evident from my research that JWDC had served the Maithil women who work there in a number of ways. They had expanded their social networks and forged supportive (and sometimes not so supportive) relations with women from different households and different villages. Also, JWDC proved an emboldening instrument for some of the women, particularly for those who had worked there the longest. With one another's encouragement and modeling, the women at JWDC spoke out and spoke up in reaction to old and new injustices. Thus, it would certainly be a mistake to think of these women as actors with purely economic motives or as passive cogs in their households' economic wheels. But it would also be incorrect to identify as a primary motive the forming of a movement of women to change their society or link arms with women across household, village, nation or world. Certainly, the leap of faith with which consumers conjured images of sororal support was not mirrored in Maithil craft producers' stated motivations for their participation in the project.

JWDC: A Women's Development Project

In her first visit to the Janakpur area in the mid-1980s, Burkert was struck at once by the beauty of the artwork displayed in village homes and by the reticence, gendered oppression, and poverty of its producers: women of the conservative Hindu Maithil ethnic group which dominates the region in terms of population and culture. A nationwide study of women's status in Nepal conducted in the 1970s had suggested Maithil women's art in particular as ripe for commercialization (Acharya 1981). This recommendation fit with the global trend wherein 'ethnic' or 'fourth world' groups make themselves, or symbols of themselves, available for consumption in myriad ways, including through objects indexed to their culture, which they produce as souvenirs specifically for sale by street vendors and in craft shops targeting outsiders.

The creation of a craft production center in Janakpur for JWDC participants posed a challenge to the hegemonic Maithil gender system—a system characterized by norms and practices promoting the paramount value of the patriline. The core of the Maithil kinship structure, common to much of the region (Jeffery and Jeffery 1996), is patrilineage, with alliances formed through arranged patrilocal marriages endogamous to caste and exogamous to village. In Mithila, high-caste Hindu males are privileged over others by formal and informal means that are

structured through patriarchal and patrilineal relations and values, as well as through gendered and caste-based discourses of pollution. In essence, Maithil women marry into their husbands' households, which are, ideally, multigenerational units consisting (minimally) of parents, their unmarried children, their married sons, and the wives and children of those sons. Property is held by men in lineages. Women are dependent on men: first on fathers, then on husbands, and finally on grown sons.

Of particular importance to these constructions is the Maithil practice of *pardā* (purdah). As I have noted elsewhere (Davis 2005, 2008), the purdah system in Mithila affects behavior of and toward recently married women and is meant to assure the appropriation of these women's procreative capacities for their husbands' patrilines. In its ideal form, purdah entails the social, spatial, visual, and verbal isolation of in-married women from non-household males who are neither natal nor affinal kin and from men senior in kinship status to the husbands of those women (e.g., husband's elder brother, father or uncle). For young wives, sanctions against tactile and verbal contact with husbands, except in the privacy of their shared room, also apply.

Maithil society, as a patriarchal, socially stratified system, pits married women against each other in particular, structural ways that require one woman to 'lose' when another 'wins.' This is, not surprisingly, a common theme in Maithil women's folktales. In such women's narratives, when one woman loses to another, she loses big: the man on whom both women depend, once enlightened to the mistreatment of one at the hands of the other, frequently ends up slaying the one (most proximately) causing the suffering of the other. For instance, in one tale, a man's mother starves and abuses his young wife, falsely accusing her of adultery. At first the man is convinced and sets about to kill his wife for her trespasses, but he rather accidentally learns of his mother's misbehavior and his wife's innocence, and subsequently chooses to kill his mother instead (Davis 2008, 2009). Such an eventuality in women's tales points to the stakes for women of successfully negotiating the stratified social system in which they are differentially positioned. When visiting her natal home and village, a married Maithil woman generally experiences greater freedom of movement and speech, and she need not cover her head or face (except when, by chance, a male individual defined as affinal to her appears). As daughters and sisters, Maithil women returning to their natal homes are beloved guests. Their brothers' wives are expected to feed and otherwise treat them with deference, and their mothers may dote on them while serving as

sympathetic sounding boards for stories of the trials they may have encountered as wives and daughters-in-law in their marital households. Indeed, the desire of a woman to return to her mother's hearth is highlighted not only in folktales, but in festival stories and song, as well (Davis 2005, forthcoming).

In Maithil women's story and song, when, on rare occasion, women of differing statuses do choose solidarity with each other—as opposed to staking all their solidarity with the men upon whom they are dependent—their suffering may be relieved without full capitulation to the structures that pit them against each other in the first place. Of course, real Maithil women *do* do this frequently in numerous mundane ways, as when the wives of brothers in one household combine their resources, when co-wives amicably share tasks, or when a mother-in-law loves her daughter-in-law like she would her own daughter. But these are sister-in-laws, co-wives and mothers/daughters-in-law; not sisters.

Questions of Solidarity

Project planners, management personnel, trainers and funders expected that the women of the Center would bond together in solidarity as women. They hoped that through participating in workshops, as well as laboring together, the craft producers would learn to put aside their quarrels, to work cooperatively and to care for the JWDC facility as they would their own home. “After all,” said the Nepali managers and trainers, “we are all sisters [*ḍiḍi bahini*] here.” Yet, during the time I spent at JWDC in 1994 and 1995, complaints by producers over salary levels, child-care quality, and limited opportunities for training escalated, significantly impeding production and affecting morale. Some women started talking about leaving the Center to establish their own businesses, where they expected to be able to make more money. A few did leave. Of course, this kind of disruption, which after all required self-assertion, can itself be interpreted as a sign of the craft women's empowerment.

One particularly salient complaint voiced by JWDC producers in those days had to do with the perceived unfair distribution of opportunities to engage in commissioned painting projects, sales-and-supplies-related work, and training outside the Center, particularly in Kathmandu. These activities, which sometimes involved extra pay, maintenance allowance, and travel, were viewed as perks or ‘prizes’ (as they called them, employing the English term) by many of the painting and craft producers at the Center. From their point of view,

these prizes were scarce resources that might improve an individual's (and her household's) chances for economic and social advancement; thus prizes became catalysts for competition and jealousy among the craft-producers. From the management's point of view, in contrast, the outside work was seen as a means to give women opportunities for greater responsibility and independence, and for enhancing the viability of JWDC. The management staff, therefore, usually viewed worker complaints and arguments over these activities as childish and self-centered disruptions to work and peace, an indication of failure to understand their collective interest and a lack of community-mindedness.

I must admit that I myself first viewed such complaints in the same light as did members of the management team. After all that the Center had done for them, I wondered, how could these women be so self-serving, so lacking in loyalty to JWDC and solidarity with one another? As an outsider steeped in Western feminist ideals, the producers' lack of ‘sisterhood’ was at first encounter shocking and disheartening. I wondered what might be the barriers to unity for these women. More broadly, was there any cultural basis for solidarity among Maithil women, in particular a solidarity based on equality, similarity and warmth implied in the Western feminist notion of ‘sisterhood?’

The craftswomen at the Center were all Maithil and married and belonged to a variety of castes, mostly Brahmin, Kayastha, and farming castes. When I was there, the salaries for craft producers were approximately half of what mid-level management was making. Management had tried to instill a sense of ‘membership’ as opposed to ‘employee’ status among the craft producers. As members, producers elected representatives from each of the work sections (e.g. painting, sewing, and ceramics). These representatives sat on a board which, in conjunction with management, made decisions and disseminated information between the other craft producers and management team. All of the board positions required a degree of literacy for record-keeping, so on that basis alone a good number of the craft producers were not eligible. Sense of competition for these positions was strong and sometimes crystallized into flaring tempers and whispered or even loud accusations of favoritism.

The management team at that time consisted of several young post-secondary-educated high caste but non-Maithil women in the roles of storekeeper and assistant storekeeper, accountant, accounting assistant and manager. The first language of the management staff was

Nepali, the national language of Nepal, which is taught in schools; whereas that of the largely illiterate producers was Maithili, the main vernacular of the region. Some of the management staff and some of the Maithil women were bilingual and, in that capacity, acted as informal interpreters for everyday communications among their more monolingual counterparts. Salaries for all of the management posts had been funded by international aid organizations. Until 1995, Claire Burkert held the position of ‘founding coordinator;’ her salary was markedly higher than the rest, although quite low by U.S. standards.

In practice, decision-making at JWDC was sometimes executive, with demands coming from the coordinator or funders or buyers with whom management met. These external agents did not communicate with and therefore were little understood by most of the craft producers, despite efforts by management to share information in monthly all-center meetings. Differences in status were manifest in the physical arrangements of these meetings: the managers sat up front and higher, facing the craft producers, who sat closely together on mats on the ground of the Center courtyard. Craftswomen saw information and prizes, although theoretically divvied out fairly by the board (people of their own class and culture), as scarce commodities doled out from the top: that is, from management (people of a different class and culture).

These perceptions were formed in part by a reluctance on the part of board members to take responsibility for decisions—for fear of being blamed for bad ones—and also through rumor. Further, management alone controlled the project’s finances.¹¹ The process of monetary flow in and out of the Center was largely opaque to the craftswomen, who were sometimes suspicious that the managers, as the local phraseology goes, were ‘eating’ (pocketing) the profit.

Narratives of Kinship

A large literature has developed in the last two decades on South Asian women’s expressive traditions, including song, story, art and ritual. While some of this work focuses primarily on the ways dominant (patriarchal) forms and understandings of femininity are reinforced through women’s ritual and religious lives (e.g., Leslie 1989, 1991; Pearson 1996), much of the current literature stresses that South Asian verbal arts constitute a form of discourse in a field of competing discourses and variety of contexts (e.g., Flueckiger 1996; March 2002; Raheja 2003).¹² Raheja and Gold suggest that we understand women’s expressive practices not as a form of resistance, subversion or inversion, but as evidence of the coexistence

of contradictory perspectives available in differing moral registers (1994; also see Kumar 1994). I am in agreement with this perspective, for I believe that while Maithil women’s gender-specific moral registers and cosmological perspectives may be less known by others—from their own menfolk to outside observers—they are nonetheless central psychological and social organizing principles in Maithil women’s lives that co-exist in complementarity and tension with other such principles. Outsiders, and folklorists in particular, have needed to learn to listen differently to access these perspectives (March 2002). In other words, we have needed to rethink our epistemologies and reshape our methodologies accordingly.

The friction at JWDC described earlier cannot be fully understood by examining the polarized dynamic within the JWDC alone; one must consider relations among these women in terms of the broader cultural milieu, as well. As I was to learn in the course of my 2003-2004 fieldwork, in the region of Mithila where Janakpur lies, a number of well-known stories highlight the relationship among cross-sex siblings, and this relationship is sanctified on ritual occasions practiced throughout Hindu Nepal (*bhāi tika* and *rākhi*) and in Mithila alone (*sāmā chakeva*) (Davis 2005). By custom, a brother is expected to intervene on behalf of his sister in times of crisis during the course of her married life. In contrast, it seems there are very few stories and no rituals that highlight the relationship among sisters, who as adults have little structural capacity to influence one another’s lives. The ties sisters have to one another are the primarily unceremonialized emotional bonds of growing up together and the promise of reacquaintance perhaps once or twice a year at their natal homes.

In the course of my research on Maithil women’s storytelling, I recorded two stories that highlight the relationship, structural and tonal, among sisters. In one story, the Eagle and Jackal Tale (Davis 2014), an impious woman, jealous of her sister for her many sons, arranges to have the sons killed. But the power of her sister’s spiritual purity brings the sons back to life. Then the impious sister complains to the local *panchayat* (community council) that the other is a witch. Through an examination of their past lives (when one was an eagle and the other a jackal), however, the *panchayat* was able to determine that the impious sister was the guilty one. Her culpability having been demonstrated, the impious sister dies of mortification. The Eagle and Jackal Tale highlights some of the basic principles whereby the moral landscape is charted as a series of paired, opposing qualities: devoutness/sinfulness, truth/deceit, wisdom/foolishness, compassion/cruelty, creation/destruction,

fruitfulness/childlessness, generosity/greed, purity/pollution, knowledge/ignorance, and highness/lowness. It is interesting to note that the Eagle and Jackal Tale is a story about two very different sisters whose differences are understood to position them karmically and socially in such a way that they are at mortal odds.

A second story featuring sororal relations is the Dukhiya Sukhiya Tale. In this tale, one sister marries rich and the other poor. The richer sister (Sukhiya, meaning 'fortune'), who is greedy, refuses to help out her poor sibling (Dukhiya, meaning 'suffering'), who, having no food for her children, has pleaded with her sister for support. Rejected by her wealthier sister, the poorer sister goes on a journey in the course of which she meets a tiger who is about to gobble her up, but instead takes pity on the honest and humble woman and blesses her with riches. Upon hearing news of her sister's sudden change of fortune, the greedy sister also goes to visit the tiger, but the tiger tricks her into exposing her greed, and then proceeds to eat her alive.

In the Dukhiya Sukhiya Tale, it is easy to recognize Sukhiya's behavior toward her kin, Dukhiya, as despicable, for a sense of kinship and magnanimity should have ensured that she would treat her sister with kind hospitality in the forms of food and rest.¹³ Also evident is the reversal of fortunes of the characters, another common South Asian theme based on cosmological principles of circularity. Most important for present purposes, one notes that the Dukhiya Sukhiya Tale, as well as the Eagle and Jackal Tale, portray relationships of jealousy and inequality among women, and particularly among sisters. As such, they can help us to make sense of some of the interpersonal dynamics that arose at the Janakpur Women's Development Center. Maithil women are often jealous of one another in specific, relational ways. In these stories, the limited, desired resources which form the basis for jealousy are male progeny and wealth, over neither of which Maithil women traditionally have much control, due to the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal nature of their lives.

Through my description of Maithil sister relations in life and in story, I aim to make three points of relevance to our understanding of the discursive and behavioral dynamics among women at JWDC. The first is that it is not surprising that Maithil women would react with intense jealousy to the distribution of resources at the Center, given local women's expectations about control over limited resources that are procured from outside their sphere of experience, such as through training and salaries. The parallels in the

structure of kin relations and workplace relations among women cultivate a similar emotional (and behavioral) reaction. The second point is that there is little cultural basis for an expectation of solidarity among women based on an employment of tropes of sisterhood. Sisterhood in fact signals just the opposite in Maithil narrative tropes. Just as it is hard to say 'mother-in-law' in Euro-American or South Asian cultures without a flood of associations coming to mind, I am proposing that it may be difficult for Maithil women to say 'sister' without feeling the limits and hierarchies of that relationship-establishing and relationship-affirming term. Third, if little basis for solidarity exists among Maithil women themselves, there is no reason to think, on the basis of cultural resonance alone, that Maithil women would imagine a solidarity with non-local women either, on the basis of shared gender identity alone.

Fictive Kinship, Women's Development, and Disidentification

As is the case in many parts of the world, Maithil people use 'real' and fictive kinship terms much more often than they use names. In this still largely village-based society, almost everyone a person knows may be kin: through birth or through marriage, however distant. This is especially true for women, whose movement and social intercourse are generally more curtailed than that of their male kin. At JWDC, very often women are addressed by the fictive kin term *didī*, which means elder sister. When employing terms of address for sisters in Maithili, one may choose between *didī* and *bahini*, the latter meaning younger sister.¹⁴ Outside of biological kin, the terms of address are chosen primarily on the basis of perceived relative age, but also, where relative age is not so clear, on the basis of status or desired status relation, especially when one wants something, material or otherwise, from the addressee or other listeners. As most JWDC producers were around the same age, life stage and social status, there was greater employment among them of *didī* than *bahini* as a way of showing respect. Relative age, marital status, and dress style combined to make the choice of *bahini* over *didī* for management personnel on the part of the craft producers seem an obvious one. The management personnel, who were generally younger and unmarried (whereas all of the craft producers were married or widowed) were indeed sometimes called *bahini*.

Let us return to the speech of Anuragi Jha with which this essay began. In her speech, Anuragi calls the founder of the development project 'sister,' which, as a move of fictive kinship, is, as noted, the most common way that JWDC

women address and refer to one another. What may seem a bit odd is that Anuragi uses the *English* word ‘sister’ as a kinship title in referring to Claire Burkert. In fact, ‘sister,’ spoken in English, was the term of address and reference used not only for Burkert, but also for myself and other known non-South Asian women, as well as, at times, the four Nepali management staff, three of whom were from Janakpur, but none of whom, as I have said, were Maithil. Of course, ‘sister’ (in English) has a long colonial ontology in South Asia as a term of address for female missionaries and teachers. Its use in this context, then, is not so strange. Another explanation of the selection of this English term is that while the addressees were all relatively young (and thus in local speech would be *bahini*), they were of higher status by the standards of office hierarchy and education. Thus, whereas *didi* was inappropriate in terms of age-status, *bahini* felt awkwardly disrespectful in relation to office and educational status. While ‘sister,’ in English, calls up the right gender category and has the positive meaning of fictive kinship, it nicely circumvents the seniority and status issue. Using this and other English terms was also a way the craft producers might accommodate foreigners while enjoying linguistic play. Finally, as a result of the colonial legacy, the use of English terms is a way of identifying oneself with the developed side in the developed vs. under-developed dichotomy of modernity ideology in an attempt to position oneself to gain social and economic status.¹⁵

In my view, ‘sister,’ as used at JWDC in the 1990s, was a multivalent, strategically deployed, and divergently interpreted term. The closeness, affection, and solicitation implied by the use of kinship terminology are only part of the story. Likewise, the pursuit of status, linguistic play, and establishment of solidarity among women do not provide a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon, despite how these utterances might be interpreted by Western feminists, tourists, and international development personnel. The use of ‘sister’ by the craft producing women at the Center, I would argue, is also a distancing move, a statement of difference among women as much as an indicator of sameness and closeness. Thus, while I think it likely that Anuragi Jha was quite sincere in her appreciation of Claire Burkert and by extension of the development project, she could also sense that the goals of management would not coincide fully with her own perceived needs and desires, and that she was very unlike—and unlikely to be treated like—the project managers or foreigners such as Claire, myself, and international tourists.

In her review of histories of feminist ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran suggested that we “learn to understand gender as not the endpoint of analysis but rather as an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power” and that gender might be “best understood as a heuristic device [that] cannot be understood a priori, apart from particular systems of representation” (1997: 616). She noted further that theories of multiple positioning create subjects of “disidentification” (1997: 613). It is my contention that the gendered discourse of ‘sisterhood’ functions as just such a heuristic device in the enactment of disidentification by Maithil subjects at the Janakpur Women’s Development Center, whose ethnic, class, linguistic and national, as well as gendered, identities make any sort of sisterhood with their non-Maithil interlocutors, as well as with each other, complicated at best. Indeed, globalised contexts with their attendant mobilizations and uneven regulability are ripe for the development of alternative subjectivities that in turn produce novel configurations of desire and intimacy, even as they may also entail new and sometimes brutal forms of restriction (Besnier 2007; Padilla 2007). In this potent context, Maithil women have engaged in a complicated linguistic dance with their differently classed, female Nepali counterparts and well as with foreigners.

Unity among women is a matter of shared interest, which itself is always multiple (intersectional), situational and a matter of perception as well as social structure and institutional location. In the practices of women at JWDC, this fact was demonstrated again and again, not least in the usages of fictive kinship examined in this essay. Linguistic practices of sisterhood at JWDC resonate uneasily with local systems of kinship but also with a global political economy which places some nations and some women in direct and indirect positions of power over others. It is these global relations, ultimately, that enable ‘first world’ feminists to claim (however erroneously) kinship and solidarity with ‘third world’ women. For the women producers at JWDC, using the term ‘sister’ provides access to a world of status and privileged connection that is part of the very stuff of development, locally articulated. The same signifiers are used by local women to negotiate ambiguous relations of trust, dependency, intimacy, hierarchy, and difference—in such a way that their tactical movements and subtle critique do not put at risk those important social ties.

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Endnotes

1. Portions of this article were previously published as "Strategies of 'Sisterhood' and Questions of Solidarity at a Women's Development Project in Nepal" (Davis 1997, used with permission.)

2. I have been unsuccessful in my extensive efforts to track down the full citation for this film, which was directed by Claire Burkert's father, Robert Burkert, and produced by a Nepali film crew in 1994 at the Janakpur Women's Development Center in a village called Kuwa on the outskirts of Janakpur, Nepal. It aired on Easthampton, Massachusetts public access channel in November 2008 <http://ecatprogramguide.blogspot.com/2008_11_01_archive.html> (accessed 4 May 2013).

3. The official JWDC website <<http://jwdconline.com/>>, accessed in July 2007, stated that its mission was to preserve "the rich artistic heritage of women of the Mithila culture" and to help them "to earn income by utilizing their skills in making fine traditional art and crafts." Further, it was formed in 1992 "with the dual aim of preserving/promoting traditional Mithila art and working to empower local women." Elsewhere on the website, the word 'upliftment' was used rather than empowerment and the Center's production of "traditional folk art" was said to be "an important vehicle for women's development."

4. For the purposes of this essay, I have used 'craft' because it is the term most often used to describe JWDC artifacts. In doing so, I recognize that such labeling takes part in a dominating discourse of aesthetic value. The artifacts might also be called art, primitive art, tourist art, handicrafts—all of which resonate somewhat differently in aesthetic discourse.

5. I owe a great debt to Claire Burkert for allowing me to conduct ethnographic research at JWDC and to everyone there for being so welcoming and open with me. None of my analysis in this article should be construed as a criticism of the intentions of any individuals associated with JWDC or of the quality of its material and less tangible impacts.

6. Whenever the opportunity arose, I attempted to help out informally at the Center, by providing verbal and written English translations, by packing items for shipping to Kathmandu, and by undertaking myriad other small tasks. I was not, of course, employed by the Center; and I am quite sure that I have benefited personally and professionally to a much great extent than the Center gained from my presence there.

7. 'Janakpur Art' became the term most commonly used by consumers, promoters, and retailers of the objects (most especially paintings on paper) produced for sale at the Janakpur Women's Development Center. These objects were understood to be a localized form of 'Mithila Art.' While the term 'Janakpur Art' was used to indicate objects made by Maithil women in the Nepal town of Janakpur and especially at the first development project designed for that purpose in that town, the term 'Mithila Art' came into wide circulation following the earlier (mid 20th century) development of a domestic and international market for such paintings originating in the area of Madhubani in the Indian state of Bihar (the same cultural-geographic region in which Janakpur falls) by the Indian government, non-governmental organizations and private parties. The creation and circulation in the early 1990s of the term 'Janakpur Art' signaled to potential consumers of handicrafts that the items were made in Nepal and therefore an appropriate souvenir from there.

8. For an early criticism by Nepali scholars of foreign aid approaches to women and development, see Pradhan and Shrestha (1983).

9. For more on the trajectory of feminist critiques of development, see, for instance, Charlton (1984); Mueller (1987); Sen and Grown (1987); Beneria and Feldman (1992); Moser (1993); Escobar (1995); Marchand and Parpart (1995); Scott (1995).

10. Western feminist anthropology in Nepal in the 1990s compared to earlier such scholarship showed greater sensitivity to and theoretical sophistication concerning

supra-local contexts, issues of agency, and intersecting discourses. In the new millennium to date, a diversifying cadre of Nepali activists, lawyers and journalists have been engaged in questions of women and development, women's rights and gender justice.

11. For a discussion of early struggles over control of the project's finances, see Davis (2003).

12. These works suggest, for instance, that women's songs are a place to voice criticism and bawdiness not articulable in everyday speech or in mixed-sex settings (Srivastava 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994; Skinner, Holland and Adhikari 1994; Ahearn 1998). A number of feminist anthropologists of South Asia have also pointed to such forms of expression as locations for indirect commentary on the singer or teller's own individual life (e.g., Narayan 1997; Wadley 1994; Davis 2014) in contexts where direct speech or other registers of articulation are not possible.

13. The virtues of hospitality and generosity are frequent themes in Maithil women's tales. A common subtheme that also appears in this story is that of a god (or sometimes a relative or animal) who, in disguise, tests a human character's virtue, by seeking from them hospitality in particular. The moral point is that strangers of any status, when they come to your doorstep, should be treated as if they were close kin or gods.

14. In Maithili, the term *bahin* is also an option for both younger and older sister. With this terminology, grammatical and other linguistic features would be used to distinguish seniority.

15. Mark Turin has argued that the borrowed English kinship terminology in modern Nepali (a language closely related to Maithili) provides a "context-free and socially-neutral" means of addressing non-Nepalis (Turin 2001: 280). He notes that such terms are "respectful but natural, affectionate but empty of real kinship meaning and the responsibility that such a role entails" (281).

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