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Review of *Sherpa: Trouble on Everest* by Jennifer Peedom

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introduction to a powerful tantric yogi, a different sort of religious specialist from the scholar-monk who occupies much of the Western imagination.

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Sherpa: Trouble on Everest

Jennifer Peedom. USA. 2016. 96 minutes.

Reviewed by Pasang Yangjee Sherpa*

In June of 2015, I watched *Sherpa: Trouble on Everest*, a Discovery Channel documentary, in my quiet living room in Seattle. I had never experienced anything like it before.

Right afterwards, I felt that it was one of the best portrayals of the Sherpa story on the mountain I had seen. I thought that it captured the sentiment of the Sherpas, and the messiness at the base camp, very well.

It laid out everything for the audience to decide for themselves—what the costs, benefits and motivations of the people involved are. I felt that it was a well-researched, emotional, and beautiful gift that will aid in raising awareness about safety concerns on the mountain and fairness in the Nepali mountaineering industry.

One year later, I have had some time to think about the documentary and watch it a few more times.

The documentary follows Phurba Tashi, who has climbed Mt. Everest twenty-one times. Phurba's next climb will make him a world record holder with the most number of successful Everest ascents. Phurba Tashi's captivating story of going to the mountain, and his family's emotional reaction to it, always leaves me wishing there was a better occupational choice for many like him. The tears that roll on Phurba's wife Karma Doma's face reminds me how cruel reality is for Sherpa women, who wait not knowing what their fate will be.

Going on an Everest expedition is not an easy choice, the documentary shows. Sherpa or not, one has to weigh their decision of going to the mountain against many factors. For Sherpas, sometimes it might mean pretending to their families that there is no risk in what they do. For the mountaineering clients, it might mean investing every single penny to make their dream come true.

Sherpa soars in its presentation of the human story on the mountain. It shows the Sherpa mountain workers moving rocks to set up luxurious camps filled with books, a television set and comfortable chairs. It also shows them singing and laughing, and then shaken and disturbed, following the tragic accident in the Khumbu Icefall, in which sixteen Sherpas died in 2014. The clients are also shown being excited and jovial as they gear up for their ascent. After the tragic accident, the clients are shown being devastated by the loss and also to find out that they will not be climbing that year.

The frustration at the Everest base camp with some never-before-seen clips of a brawl that took place in 2013 is captured in the documentary. It is this part of the film that makes many of my Sherpa friends uncomfortable. A relative told me after a screening in New York that the documentary was good but if only it could leave the scene of the Everest brawl out, it would have been better. At the 2015 Kathmandu Film Festival, a representative from the mountain workers said that the brawl as shown in the film was a biased depiction, which did not show the whole picture of how the Sherpas were mistreated leading up to the incident. So, the brawl can be misinterpreted, and the Sherpas can be misrepresented. This part of the documentary definitely leaves a bitter impression, but one has to wonder how this

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Pasang Yangjee Sherpa on *Fearless in Sherpa: Trouble on Everest*

particular story embedded in the larger mountaineering mess could be told some other way. One has to also understand this is not a film about Sherpa kindness, or about the infamous brawl. This acknowledgement, however, does not come without pain and embarrassment.

The scenes of the brawl, in fact, make the documentary whole. Leaving it out would have been an incomplete portrayal of the Sherpa story. Human emotions are brought full circle—from Karma Doma's tears, the silent sadness of her in-laws, the aspirational imagination of her sons, and her husband's dutiful reckoning to the burst of built up anger and frustration from that season and many before.

Unlike its predecessors, *Sherpa* pays intimate attention to details of Sherpa life that can easily go unnoticed. To recognize these nuances one has to spend hours patiently listening to the Sherpa stories. Only then does the silence of Sherpas become meaningful. That is exactly what Jennifer Peedom, the director, has done. From her years of experience being among the mountaineers on the mountain, she is able to show the heaviness in the silence of Sherpa mountain workers waiting for orders in their camp. In the process of showing the Sherpa side of the story, however, Peedom does not forget about the Western clients. To know about the sacrifices

Western clients have made only to find out that they cannot climb Mount Everest is sobering.

This movie about mountaineering, aptly titled *Sherpa*, changes the narrative of the Sherpas' place within the industry. Director Jennifer Peedom has created a magnificent documentary with an exceptionally well-researched script, and the film successfully raises the issue of fairness and safety on Mount Everest on a global scale.

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