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Autoethnographic Reading of Jamling Tenzing Norgay's *Touching my father's soul*

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Abstract

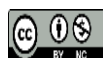
Summitting the high peaks for looking around has historically been one of the most eminent desires of human beings. However, until a couple of centuries ago, mountaineering expeditions were rare due to multiple reasons such as divine cause, fear of danger, and lack of proper technologies, skills and knowledge. After European colonization began and expanded, the Europeans' mountaineering fantasy also intensified significantly. Climbing became a testing mark for their bravery, adventure and perseverance. In the context of Nepal, after mountaineering was opened to visitors in the 1950s, there has been a mushrooming growth of climbers on different eight-thousanders including Everest. Consequently, each year, detrimental results like commodification of mountains, environmental degradation, cultural impacts, and untimely deaths have escalated. In the climbing season of 1996 only, twelve climbers lost their lives, which has widely drawn the media's attention. Till date, more than seventeen books about have been produced about it. Jamling Tenzing Norgay is the only Nepali writer to write about this event from an insider's perspective. This paper reads his *Touching my father's soul* to explore autoethnographic elements. Based on qualitative research design, the paper analyzes and interprets the primary text by engaging relevant critical responses and the concept of autoethnography. Finally, the paper concludes that Jamling's narrative offers his serious concerns about the socio-cultural and economic impacts of mountain tourism in addition to his personal stories. The study will contribute to the understanding of Jamling, Sherpa lifestyle and Sherpas' connection to mountain tourism.

Keywords: Autoethnography, mountaineering, tourism, Sherpa tradition

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Introduction

Since mountaineering was opened to foreigners in the 1950s, mountain tourism has caused both positive and negative impacts in Nepal. It has positively played a significant role in generating national revenue and transforming economic conditions of certain local communities, but simultaneously it has negatively affected the local environment and cultures. In the spring of 1996 only, several mountaineering expeditions both from Nepal and Tibetan's sides attempted Mt. Everest. They were mostly commercial-guided expeditions with profit motive. Commercial motive influenced the governments of Nepal and Tibet as well as the local Sherpas. The governments were after making more revenues whereas the locals after more profits from business. Consequently, undesirous results such as untimely deaths, environmental degradation and cultural clashes began to surface. The infamous 1996 disaster claimed twelve climbers including veteran guides like Bob Hall and Scott Fisher. Many authors have written about this disastrous event including other events. But mostly the authors are non-Sherpas. Jamling Tenzing Norgay is one among a few Sherpa authors like Tenzing Norgay, Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa, and Ang Phurba Sherpa who have written about Everest climbing experiences. This paper scrutinizes Jamling's *Touching my father's soul* (2001) to examine how it encompasses the autoethnographic elements. In other words, it examines how it reflects the author's personal experiences and perspectives towards mountain tourism and its socio-cultural and environmental effects.

There are a few critical responses available on *Touching my father's soul*. Krakauer (2001) introduces the book on two accounts: one, "a story of spiritual evolution" and another, "a story of son's quest to make things right with a father" (p. xvii). Like Krakauer, Thuermer (2008) observes two themes of the book: one, as a book written by a Sherpa "revealing the spiritual aspects of the mountain" that has fascinated the Westerners for long, and another, as a "classic tale of a son trying to measure up to his mythic father" (para 6). Another critic, Peirce (2002) shows that the book involves something more "than climbing stories" that is "the Sherpa history, family history, and climbing history" (p. 56). Similarly, Upadhyay (2024) has viewed it as "a wonderful read" about "the infamous disaster 1996" as well as the Sherpa life, culture, rituals, and faith connected to Everest" written from a Sherpa's perspective (p. 118). As the available critical responses reveal, Norgay's narrative represents not only his climbing experiences and respect to his father but also the Sherpa history, their cultures and life style. But all these reviews are short book reviews, not a research article with in-depth analysis.

Reading Norgay's *Touching my father's soul* along with Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa's *Forty years in the mountains*, Gautam (2021) states that both books "illuminate the mountaineers' personal opinions on Mount Everest and their adventurous achievement" (p. 113). She acknowledges the authors' personal "respect and love to Mt. Everest" (p. 107), as well as their "hardships and thrills" (p. 110) of mountaineering. She examines the books as the celebration of their adventure, which can be good "sources of information and inspiration to those who love Mountain Literature and Mountaineering on Mt. Everest in near future" (p. 115). We argue that Jamling's book (Phuti's book is not our concern here), is, more than an inspiration source, a cautionary book about the impacts of mountain tourism on local culture and environment.

In another study, Upadhyay (2025) has read Jamling's book comparing it with *Into thin air* by Jon Krakauer where he has focused on the juxtaposing perspectives of the authors towards mountain tourism. In that study, he has claimed that both authors are worried about the serious consequences of mountain tourism, and so they point to the development of sustainable mountain tourism. But while Krakauer sees it possible through the formation and implementation of "effective policies," Norgay through the respect of "the Buddhist tradition" (p. 92). This present study, unlike the previous one that made a comparative study focusing on sustainable mountain tourism, rather focuses on the autoethnographic reading of Norgay's personal experiences and perspectives towards mountaineering.

Research Methodology

This study has selected Jamling Tenzing Norgay's *Touching my father's soul* as the primary text since it underpins the author's personal story as well as his concerns towards the socio-cultural and environmental impacts induced by mountain tourism. As qualitative research design, it has employed text-based analytical and interpretive method. For citation techniques, it has followed the *APA 7th* edition. And, for the theoretical base, it has used the concept of autoethnography.

Emerged in the 1970s, the term, autoethnography, has now been one of the widely used methods in doing qualitative research. Comprising the elements of both autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography analyzes authors' personal experiences to understand their views towards their cultural values and practices. Ethnography, originated from *ethno* (people or culture) and *graphy* (writing or describing) means "writing about or describing people or culture" (Ellis, 2004, p. 26). When the prefix, *auto* (self), is attached to ethnography, it means the involvement of the authors in writing or describing about their own personal experiences (autobiography) and cultural practices (ethnography). Adams et al. (2022) discuss that autoethnography "foregrounds the author's personal experiences and reflections [auto]. . . to describe, and sometimes critique, cultural beliefs, values, practices, and identities [*ethno*] . . . [taking] the craft of representation—the *graphy*—seriously" (p. 3). Autoethnography brings forth the authors' personal experiences and reflections about their own socio-cultural practices by crafting in an aesthetic and evocative way.

Ethnography makes a study of people and their cultures from an outsider's perspective whereas auto ethnography does it from an insider's perspective. While writing and describing about the native people and cultures from an outsider's perspective, ethnography often embraces power dynamic, as Appadurai (1988) claims: "there is the power involved in representing the voices of others" (p. 20). Such power dynamic creates binary between the ethnographers and the natives, simultaneously fabricating the authenticity of the representation. Taking ethnographic texts as colonial discourse, Pratt (1992) contends that European colonizers deployed such texts to "represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others" (p. 7). For the colonizers, ethnography worked as a body of knowledge to identify and understand themselves through the colonized others. Contrarily, autoethnographic texts, Pratt clarifies, are constructed by the colonized "to represent themselves . . . in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representation" (p 7). However, such auto ethnographic texts, Pratt further explains, cannot ensure completely authentic and autochthonous representation because of their engagement with the colonizers' terms, they nevertheless unravel "the histories of imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence" (p. 9). Despite relying on the colonizers' terms, autoethnographic texts make an attempt to reverse their gaze to disrupt the existing power relations and unfold the colonized stories.

In the line of Pratt, Stanley (2019) associates the origin of ethnography to the colonial gaze and states that such gaze "described, classified, judged, and reduced the exoticized other in which Western gaze" (p. 1074). Such colonial gaze demotivated ethnographers from representing the other's culture truthfully and objectively despite their claim of doing so. Ethnographers' personal subjectivity and mindset still continue to fabricate the underlying truths of other's culture. Besides, their inability to deeply and fully understand the fundamentals of other's culture hinders them from being truthful and objective. Regarding this, Poulos (2021) clarifies that while ethnographic texts cannot capture and evoke the "richness of cultural lives and life practices of others," autoethnographic texts, on the other hand, capture "deeper, richer, fuller evocations of cultural scenes" as they insert the "researcher as both character and author of a story" (p. 9). The researcher or writer as an insider (both participant and observer) can make comparatively more authentic and autochthonous representations of the cultures than the researcher as an observer or outsider (observer).

As an autoethnographic text written by an insider, Norgay's *Touching my father's soul* unfolds his personal stories connecting to the broader cultural contexts of the Sherpa people. It presents his climbing experiences, family

relations, Sherpas' connection to Mt. Everest, and socio-cultural and economic impacts of mountain tourism on the Sherpa communities.

Findings and Discussion

Jamling Tenzing Norgay, the son of the renowned Tenzing Norgay Sherpa (one of the two members reaching first the peak of Everest on 23 May, 1953), recounts his personal stories in connection with his family relations, mountain tourism and the Sherpa culture in his autoethnographic mountain narrative, *Touching my father's soul*. He recalls his childhood fantasy of climbing, his father's suggestions to him, his mother's religious activities, his relations with relatives, his skepticism of Buddhism at school and college, his meeting with his father at the summit, and many more. The main focus of the whole narrative, however, centers around his ascent to Mt. Everest in the spring of 1996 when a disturbing disaster took place taking away the lives of a dozen of mountaineers into its thin air. The infamous disaster has been the subject of print worldwide. According to Krakauer (2001), Norgay's book "is the seventeenth book to be published about it" (xiii). Norgay looks into the event from the Sherpa perspective aligned with Buddhist traditions. Additionally, he also expresses his serious concerns on the mushrooming growth of mountain tourism and its socio-cultural impacts on the Sherpa communities.

Norgay begins his narrative with his visit to Chatral Rimpoche made for "a divination" for climbing Everest (p. 4). He has received invitation to join as a climbing leader by the American IMAX filming expedition which is planning to make a film at the Everest's summit. The expedition has requested Norgay with an anticipation of acquiring authentic information about "Sherpa, Sherpa beliefs and Buddhism" (p. 28). Norgay readily accepts the request for it would unquestionably be a big opportunity for him to satisfy his childhood fantasy of meeting his father "on the summit" (p. 6), and knowing "what it was that drove him and what it was he had learned" (p. 21). Unfortunately, adverse to Norgay's hope, Rimpoche predicted the season unpropitious for the climb.

Norgay recalls his childhood climbing fantasy. While in the last year at St. Paul's school, he wished to uphold his father's legacy by joining an Indian expedition that was attempting Everest. He asked permission from his father to join the team but, to his despair, he received a contrary answer that he "would need age and experience" (p. 8). Only after years of his father's death, he chances an opportunity to attempt Everest with the IMAX team. But as the prediction of Chatral Rimpoche is unfavorable, he goes to visit another Rimpoche, Geshe Rimpoche in Kathmandu on his wife's advice. Geshe Rimpoche also sees the season unfavorable but "not entirely unfavorable" (p. 22). Rimpoche advises Norgay to have "obstacle-removal rituals done, and make some offerings at the stupa of Boudhanath" (p. 23). This throws the way open for his journey to Everest. Norgay turns into a devout Buddhist from a skeptic, and gains full confidence of sumitting the peak.

Norgay accompanies the IMAX team for Base Camp journey. He sticks to the instructions given by Geshe Rimpoche. As predicted by both the Rimpoches, the weather does not look favorable, so his team waits for better weather. In the meantime, there occurs the infamous disaster that killed twelve mountaineers. Norgay describes his involvement in the rescue operation. Finally, on 23 May, Norgay attains the peak. There he meets his father's soul: "Standing there on the summit, I felt I was touching his [father's] soul, his mind, his destiny, and his dreams" (p. 256). His deep-rooted dream has come true. He feels the mountain coming alive for him changing "from a lifeless, uncaring, and dangerous mound of rock . . . into a warm, friendly, and life-sustaining being, Miyolangsangma" (p. 256). This is the climax of Norgay's "spiritual evolution" as Krakauer writes in the introduction section of *Touching my father's soul* (2001, p. xvii). He places a picture of his parents, a photograph of Dalai Lama, and a *kata* scarf, and a piece of candy as a form of offering. Then he thanks the goddess "Miyolangsangma and the mountain" (p. 257).

Autoethnographic writing delineates both personal and social experiences. In that matter, it is "inclusive of personal and social phenomena" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). Concurrently with his personal stories, Norgay delineates the Sherpa life. He reveals why the Sherpas get involved in the mountaineering expeditions as: "For the Sherpas who

grew up in Everest's shadow, carrying loads up the mountain, is a job, a justifiable necessity. For most foreigners, it is a form of recreation" (p. 21). Actually, Sherpas initially agreed to climb Everest as porters to the British climbers out of the necessity of money: "For many Sherpas, it was an opportunity to make money" (Ginder, 2014, p. 5). Mountain climbing for the native Sherpas is not for joy or pleasure but for financial gain. Common people are happy with this way of life. When Norgay asks them, many of them respond: "We are poor but we are happy. . . we wouldn't trade our lifestyle to anything else" (p. 46). After getting involved in mountain climbing and mountain business, the economic condition of many Sherpas has drastically transformed.

However, mountain tourism has posed serious challenges to the social balance of the Sherpas. The mayor of Namche discloses this reality to Norgay with his skepticism that "tourism and prosperity have been universally good for the Sherpa community because of the social upheaval and divisiveness that accompany them" (p. 47). Due to tourism, social division has popped up in the Sherpa communities. For example, two brothers from the same family may not have the same opportunity while involving in mountaineering with the foreigners. One brother may get scholarship for his children or any valuable present, while the other may receive nothing. In addition, tourism has also engendered imbalance in the socio-economic status among different Sherpa villages. The economies of the villages away from the trek routes have been comparatively worse than that of the villages of the trek routes. Consequently, a number of Sherpas of those villages have been tempted to committing "informal trade between Nepal, Hong Kong, and Singapore" and some of them have even been "imprisoned" (p. 48). An undesirous social situation has popped up on the scene.

Similarly, Norgay illustrates how tourism has influenced the life of the Sherpas: "I can understand why my own people, especially the young, are prepared to abandon their culture and values to chase their dreams in foreign lands" (p. 199). After the tourism was open in the Sherpa vicinity, many people began commercial business and wished to hoard money by hook or crook. Many young Sherpas have been tempted to visit and reside in modern and sophisticated foreign countries. Many people have even converted even into Christians. Because of the tourism boom, the Sherpa community has been divided into rich and poor; educated and uneducated, and Christians and Buddhists.

Mountain tourism has also caused serious challenges to the Everest environment. The number of Everest clients is rising so is the number of expedition agencies. For handling the mushrooming growth of tourists and climbers with food, shelter and warmth, Norgay mentions, "the random and excessive cutting of greenwood in the forests" has occurred (p. 57). Development of physical structures such as hotels and teahouses has been rapidly taking place. These structures have been constructed without any systematic planning. Even "the National Park had been doing little to prevent random, unplanned constructions" complains Norgay (p. 72). Such commercial overdevelopment has not only added to the deforestation process, but also to the pollution of the environment. Heaps of the used canisters, bottles, plastics and many other things including human waste have been piled here and there in Base Camp area.

Despite these adverse consequences, both the governments and commercial expeditions have remained unmindful to them. They allow the inexperienced, unskilled and amateur climbers for lucrative incomes. For commercial expedition, "clients had to cough up \$35000 to \$65000 or more" (p. 78). Big money! As Scott (1997) has argued, "People climb Mount Everest because it—and the money—is there" (para. 3), Everest has turned into a commodified site for the wealthy people to utilize their money. For Nepal government, "\$800,000 a year for Mount Everest alone is not a small sum of money" (p. 78). But despite this big sum of royalty, Norgay complains, "only a nominal portion of these funds have been returned to benefit the local people or used to promote mountain safety and environmental conservation" (p. 78). The case is similar with the Tibetan government.

Autoethnographic writing encapsulates personal experiences connecting them with social and cultural experience as Adams and Herrmann (2020) illustrate: "personal experience must be used intentionally to illuminate and interrogate cultural beliefs, practices, and identities" (p. 2). Norgay reveals not only his personal stories; he also

illuminates cultural beliefs and practices of his ethnicity in relation to mountain and mountain climbing. For Sherpas, Everest is the abode of their mother goddess, Miyolangsangma: “one of the five sister deities” (Norgay, 2004, p. 56). Sherpas avoided Everest climbing for centuries out of their respect. When the British offered them a good pay for portage services, they started to climb it, but without floundering in their respect. Before beginning their ascent, they do *puja* [worship] to appease Everest: “Sherpas won’t climb on the mountain until the *puja* is held . . . as a petitioning of the gods for permission to climb, and for good weather and safe passage” (p. 87). Sherpas want to keep Everest sacred from any defiling and profane activities so as to avoid her wrath upon people. Quoting Rimpoche, Norgay clarifies, “people will suffer hardship as a result of defilement and negative deeds generated in her [goddess Miyolangsangma]” (p. 110). “Sexual abstinence, general modesty, and care with cooking meat” are the taboos in the Everest vicinity (p. 127). These are important elements to take into consideration while climbing so as to avoid possible troubles.

Norgay unravels a strong tie between Buddhist spiritualism, human body and physical environment. For example, when his father died, his body was put on pyre to burn. His skull cracked with a loud pop. In Buddhism, as Norgay explains, the soul which is “consciousness or the life force— is believed to get released from the body in this moment” (p. 298). This released soul resides in an individual as well as in the surrounding natural features. Interestingly, if the released soul enters into the body of a closely bonded one, it can even take away his or her life. For example, “one Sherpa suggested that Scott Fisher’s wandering ghost, his *shrindi*, pulled Lopsang [a Sherpa] off the mountain because the two of them were bonded so closely” (p. 293). Buddhist belief has it that the karma and spirits of the two are intertwined, so are the fate and luck. Additionally, if any unnatural death occurs, it “can cause sickness or trouble” to the relatives or acquaintances (p. 294). According to Buddhism, there is a strong spiritual connection between the soul and the natural world. Norgay illustrates, a person’s “fortune depends on maintaining a healthy body and mind, but also on protecting the health of the local environment” (p. 299). Since it is the dwelling of the soul, the natural environment needs to be kept healthy. Mountaineers have to be mindful of avoiding unnatural deaths so as to prevent further casualties. They have to revere Miyolangsangma in order to acquire prosperity, strength, and health if she is revered with good faith. Norgay refers, “She continually strengthens the longevity, wealth, and power of those who worship her. . . . Faith is what she asks for in return” (p. 220). Otherwise, she pushes them into perils.

Norgay describes such hidden nuances of the Sherpa cultures that would almost be impossible from the pen of a cultural outsider. Adams and Herrmann (2020) argue, “cultural outsiders and other research methods could never provide” the illumination and introspection of the *ethno* components of autoethnography, which are “cultural beliefs, practices, and identities” (p. 2). Norgay discusses about the Sherpa beliefs, practices and values that are intimately intertwined with Everest, Miyolangsangma and the physical environment. Foregrounding the Buddhist traditions, he critiques the adverse impacts induced by mountain tourism. Against this background, he shows the necessity of developing “sustainable tourism” based on the teachings of “Buddhist traditions” as Upadhyay (2025) has argued. Norgay offers a message about the significance of the indigenous knowledge regarding the mountain and mountain climbing, which he thinks, can be helpful in minimizing the number of unexpected dangers.

Autoethnographic expression can be, as Pratt (1992) contends, “important in unraveling the histories of imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence” (p. 9). Although centered on the relations of the colonizers and colonized in the contact zone, Pratt’s view has relevance here in the discussion of mountain tourism which dominantly engages the Western climbers. Norgay’s book unveils the hitherto hidden realities of the Sherpa traditions to the Western audience. The Western world recognizes the Sherpas, by nomenclature, as climbing porters. But Norgay reverses this stereotyping gaze. He establishes himself as a climbing member in the equal status of the Western climbers. He asserts, “On this occasion I was a “member,” not a “Sherpa,” in the term’s specific sense of high-altitude climbing porter” (pp. 27-28). From this position, he critiques the Western mountaineers. For example, he

contends that “fewer people would have died” (p. 187) if the leaders had followed climbing strategies and given priority to guiding their clients.

Norgay dislikes the way most of the non-Sherpa climbers display their hubris and arrogance while climbing. They are physically prepared but mentally not. Norgay discloses, “The climbers must develop mindfulness and most important, approach the mountain without hubris” (pp. 187-188). Mountaineers use the mountain for personal gain without giving back due to which they face troubles. After Hall’s death, some Sherpas guess that “his demise was caused by having taken too much from the mountain without giving back” (p. 189). The motivation for “ego gratification, business, and trophy hunting” (p. 161) has invited misfortunes. Non-Sherpas climbers are normally after things like trophy, business profit, prestige and so on because they are unaware of Buddhist notion of ‘impermanence’ which teaches such things are no more than transitory. Materialistic success is impermanent; it is the source of “restlessness, dissatisfaction, and confusion” which Norgay sees in the American context (p. 198).

Norgay criticizes the way the Western climbers are displaying their ego and individualism. They are not aware of the Sherpa ways of approaching Everest that is through modesty, reverence and awareness. He remarks, “if these foreign climbers had a better understanding of the cultures, history, values, and beliefs of the people who have lived in Everest’s shadow for centuries, they would not encounter so much hardship on the climb” (p. 80). Norgay foregrounds the connectivity of Buddhist beliefs and practices with mountaineering which the outsiders are ignorant of. This is what an autoethnographic writing does as Holman et al. (2013) argue, “Autobiographies can also break silence by addressing understudied, hidden, and/or sensitive topics” (p. 35). Norgay addresses the hitherto understudied and hidden aspects of Buddhist traditions targeting them at the Western audience.

Holman et al. (2013) reveal that autoethnography, based on the insider knowledge, uses “*personal* experience to create nuanced and detailed ‘thick descriptions’ of *cultural* experience in order to facilitate understanding of those experiences” (p. 33). Norgay with his insider knowledge of Buddhist beliefs, practices, and values creates a nuanced and detailed portrayal of their connection to Everest, mountain tourism and environment. In addition to his personal stories and Sherpa life styles, he also depicts the necessity of understanding the indigenous beliefs and practices specially in relation to climbing Everest to the wider audiences both insiders and outsiders. In this sense, his book is autoethnographic.

Conclusion

Jamling Tenzing Norgay’s *Touching my father’s soul* encompasses autoethnographic elements. Autoethnography involves a writer or researcher in creating a narrative out of personal experiences intertwined with cultural experiences. The writer or researcher describes or critiques cultural beliefs, practices and values. As an autoethnographic writer, Norgay narrates his personal stories: his childhood climbing fantasy, his relations with family members and relatives, his journey to Everest, his meeting with his father’s soul, and so on. He also delineates the involvement of the Sherpas in mountaineering and their lifestyle. Besides, he uses insider knowledge to critique the impacts of mountain tourism on the socio-cultural and economic aspects of the Sherpas. The rapid growth of commercial mountain tourism has caused social upheaval and divisiveness, as well as deforestation and pollution. He points out different factors for these impacts such as unhealthy competitions among commercial expeditions, income-guided government policies, hubristic and arrogant climbers, and so on. He dislikes the way the non-Sherpa climbers approach Everest with hubris and arrogance instead of respect, awareness and patience. Against such a despairing situation, he refers to the relevance and understanding of Buddhist cultures which, he expects, can prevent future perils. Finally, this study expects to be useful for those who wish to know about the connection of the Sherpa cultures and Everest climbing from an insider’s perspective.

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