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**Transculturation in Elizabeth Enslin's *While the Gods Were Sleeping*: Complexities and Connections****Toya Nath Upadhyay**

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**Abstract**

This paper analyzes Elizabeth Enslin's *While the Gods Were Sleeping* (2014) from the perspective of transculturation focusing on what transcultural constrictions the author experiences and how she thrashes those constrictions thereby developing transcultural connections. The author, an American PhD scholar in anthropology, falls in love to a Nepali man of a Brahman family with whom she travels a long way to Nepal for the field research for her PhD study. After marriage in a high caste Hindu family, she encounters heaps of cultural differences between her Christian culture and her family's Hindu culture. From the very first greeting by the family to the attitudes towards marriage, pregnancy, menstruation, childbirth, caste and gender, she finds innumerable divergences from her culture. Accustomed to the Christian culture, she faces big challenges to adjust with the Hindu family and the society. However, she ultimately subdues the prevailing transcultural constrictions and builds transformational connections. The study argues that this has been possible due to the author's anthropological knowledge that poignantly motivates her to interact with the host culture by actively involving in the transculturation process. For the analytical purpose, the study applies research concepts from cultural studies particularly focusing on the concept of transculturation as defined by the scholars Mary Louis Pratt and Wolfgang Welsch and others. Finally, the study expects to open a new avenue for the analysis of cultures in the contact zone.

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*Keywords:* transculturation, contact zone, cultural constrictions and connections.

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## Introduction

Elizabeth Enslin's *While the Gods Were Sleeping* (2014) records the process of transculturation acutely. It presents the complexities and connections of transculturation that the author of a Christian background experiences after she marries to a Brahman of Hindu culture. While studying in her university in America, she falls in love with a Nepali man who is also studying in America. As the love progresses, both of them plan to do PhD in India. They travel to India for this but Enslin cannot complete her study there, which takes her to Nepal. While staying for the study in Nepal, she also thinks of conceiving and bearing a baby in the care of her Nepali family. After having pregnancy, the couple comes to Nepal. But as soon as she reaches her husband's home in Gunjanagar of Chitwan, she finds the Nepali culture quite different from the one she is accustomed to. She feels surprised to witness the way the family greet her. People come up with smiling faces except the father in law. She feels uneasy with him since he does not "smile," instead "scrutinized" her with "a stern face" and "barked" in Nepali which she cannot make out (p. 46). Apart from linguistic barrier, she feels discomforts from sitting in a toilet to sleeping in a room above the buffalo shed. Besides, she has to adjust to the strict Brahmanical rules in the family at all times: while eating, dressing, behaving with the in laws and the seniors, and so on. This study explores the transcultural complexities that the author experiences in her Nepali family as well as the ways she builds transcultural connectedness. Analyzing and interpreting the primary text using critical and theoretical insights regarding the transculturation studies as envisioned by the scholars such as Mary Louise Pratt and Wolfgang Iser, this study concludes that the author fights transcultural complexities thereby building transcultural connectedness through her anthropological knowledge and open-mindedness to the adjustment in a new culture. Finally, the study expects to open up a new avenue for the study of Western women's struggle in the transcultural contact zone away from their metropolitan home.

The study is interested in Enslin's *While the Gods Were Sleeping* because, despite being rich in different aspects of Nepali life and Enslin's personal experiences, as of now, it has not received any peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals and Websites such as Project Muse, Jstor and so on. Only a few reviews are available in the websites such as goodreads and amazon, online papers, and personal blogs. They have read the book from different angles but not from the perspective of transculturation. So, this study focuses on the issues of transculturation.

In *Nepali Times*, Sonia Awale (2014) reviews the book as a field trip of Enslin as an anthropology in which she engages her experiences as a Nepali *buhari*. She holds,

“But it is as if her marriage, her life as a Brahman wife, daughter-in-law, and mother are all extensions of an academic field trip, the results of which are documented in her book *While the Gods Were Sleeping*. In the cover page of *While the Gods Were Sleeping*, Manjushree Thapa (2014) writes a blurb commenting that this is an inspiring book for social and political change as it engages the aspects of Nepali life such as politics, gender, caste, ethnicity. Thapa writes: "This finely written memoir transports the reader into a society on the cusp of social and political transformation. This is an inspiring and challenging read for activists, rebels and dreamers everywhere" (p 15). According to Thapa, even after the advent of democracy in Nepal, there are various barriers to gender, caste and class equality. To fight these, this book can be a good source. Neeti Aryal Khanal (2015) views the book as an important guide for the researchers who are working on the field: “[T]he book is Enslin’s reflections on her position as a Brahman daughter in law and an anthropologist in the ‘field.’ These reflections can be important for young researchers to understand how to practice reflexivity in research” (p. 204). Khanal highlights on the methodological part of the book that can be helpful for researchers in anthropology.

As these few reviews reveal that the book has not been researched from the perspective of complexities and connected of cultures at the contact zone, to borrow the term of Pratt (1992), this study analyzes the book exploring what cross-cultural constrictions the author faces and how she tackles them paving way to transformation.

## **Methods**

This paper makes a cultural study of Elizabeth Enslin’s *While the Gods Were Sleeping* using the concept of transculturation as defined by Mary Louis Pratt and Wolfgang Welsch. It explores how the author, Elizabeth Enslin delineates the cultural complexities and constrictions in the process of transculturation and how she triumphs in bringing connectivity between cultures.

Transculturation is a transformational process of different cultures at the contact zone. As commonly witnessed in recent decades, the rapid growth of globalization has brought formerly desperate cultures closer facilitating cultural interactions and sharing, which has consequently developed interconnectedness and linkages. Cultural boundaries are blurred and transmuted in the process of transculturation.

The term transculturation was first introduced by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz to illustrate the Cuban cultural situation. Dismissing other anthropologists’ ideas of acculturation and deculturation about Cuban situation, Ortiz (1947) argued it to be transcultural. He contended:

I have chosen the word *transculturation* to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture. . . . The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermeshed transculturations. (*italics original*, p. 98).

Ortiz uses the term transculturation to investigate the Cuban history that is enriched by the interconnectedness of different cultures especially brought together by the colonial encounters.

Like Ortiz, Mary Louise Pratt (1992) associates the term transculturation to colonialism. She argues that despite the imposition of tremendous European cultural materials, the colonized peoples do make a choice of selecting and absorbing the useful ones only. In the space of cultural exchange, which she terms as the contact zone, there develops a give and take process of cultural sharing though asymmetrical. The colonized or the subjugated peoples, though coerced with the colonized cultures, determine what cultural materials to adopt, use and make meaning of. Pratt exposes, “While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominate culture visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean” (p. 7). Pratt highlights that cultures get involved in the formation of hybrid culture rather than in deculturation or acculturation.

While Pratt discusses the syncretizing process of cultures at the contact zone, Homi K Bhabha (1994) and Arjun Appadurai (1996) expound this process taking place at the “third space” and deterritorialized “scapes” respectively. Bhabha talks about the instability of cultures in the third space as: “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (p. 37). Similarly, Appadurai exposes the destabilizing nature of cultures in different ‘scapes’ as: “Focusing on disjunctures, I have employed a set of terms (*ethnoscape, financescape, technoscape, mediascape, and ideoscape*) to stress different streams or flows along which cultural materials may be seen to be moving across national boundaries.” (pp. 45-46). Using different terms, both the scholars point out the transformative quality of cultures. For them, post-empire migration and media have been playing a vital role in transnational and transcultural interactions and identifications.

Like Bhabha and Appadurai, German Philosopher, Wolfgang Welsch (1995) speaks about the transformative quality of culture in the contemporary globalized world. He delineates, “Cultures *de facto* no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness. They have instead assumed a new form, which is to be called *transcultural* in so far as it *passes through* classical cultural boundaries” (*italics original* p. 197). Altered cultures take new forms which Welsch terms as

transculturality: “The concept of transculturality . . . seeks to articulate this altered cultural constitution” (p. 197). Welsch denies the idea that cultures are inherently permanent, unchanging and stable rather they are ever shifting. Transculturation covers “both global and local, universalistic and particularistic aspects” (p. 205). In the contemporary times of wider global connectivity, cultural practices are even more frequently modified and transformed offering new meanings than in the past. Finally, Welsch reveals the importance of transculturality as: “Then tasks of the future—in political and social, scientific and educational, artistic and design-related respects—ought only to be solvable through a decisive turn towards this transculturality” (p. 205). According to Welsch, transculturality is going to be a panacea for the possible cultural conflicts and clashes.

After all, as these scholars expound, in the contemporary times globalization, distinct cultures come closer in the contact zone or the space of exchange. Cultures meet together influencing and being influenced by each other.

### **From Transcultural Constrictions to Transformational Connectedness**

Elizabeth Enslin's memoir, *While the Gods Were Sleeping*, reflects how the author experiences and fights the complexities in the process of transculturation. As a well grown up and well educated person in the Western metropolis, the author encounters various unexpected constrictions in Nepal after becoming a wife in a Brahman family. However, she prevails over such constrictions and develops a transformative relations between her own Christian culture and her family's Hindu culture through her anthropological knowledge and open-mindedness.

Enslin faces the complexity of the new culture immediately after she enters her husband's house in Gunjanagar, Chitwan, Nepal. The family does not let her in readily since they require to perform a ritual. Although, most of the people look happy to see her, the father in law does not. She cannot infer why he is serious without any smile. She gets nervous to see the way he scrutinizes with “a stern face” and keeps speaking in Nepali that she can by no means understand. She feels feeble and “paranoid. Eyes downcast” (p. 47). She loses heart. She utters, “I had shattered every illusion of myself as mature, sociable, and cross-culturally savvy. I was not fit to be a tourist, let alone an anthropologist” (p. 50). Transcultural complexity rises up. But not much later, the mother in law's love relaxes her. She brings tea, *dal* and *bhat* to her with a smiling face. Moreover, her husband Pramod consoles her saying that the father is not unhappy with her but he is worried thinking “we were already married . . . without telling him” (p. 52). Along with the complexities, cross-cultural adjustment initiates hereby.

Assimilation in the family as a daughter in law (*buhari* in Nepali) turns out to be a big challenge for Enslin. She has read about the Vedic image of a body divided

into castes and so wants to know which caste she belongs to: “Where did a foreigner fit in?” (p. 52). She knows well that the Brahman wifehood is required to be pure sticking sincerely to sexual mores and behavioral rules otherwise it would lower the family status: “I knew that women who deviated from sexual mores—whether by choice or force—could lower the status of an entire Brahman family” (p. 59). Enslin is quite embarrassed to reveal her family history because it lacks the “marks of Brahman wifehood” as her parents “are divorced” and her mother has remarried with another man (p. 58). If she reveals it, she cannot imagine what the family would think of.

As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001) state that a memoir, “directs attention more toward the lives and actions of others than to the narrator” (p. 198), Enslin’s book is a memoir because it focuses more on social aspects than her own. As a female writer, Enslin is more interested in the cultural practices of Nepali females and their plights. She perceives the Nepali women are still living under the clutches of unfavorable traditional rules. Their plights are apparently much worse than that of the Western females who, under the modern system, are freer to choose their careers, partners, jobs and faiths. Majority of the Nepali women are still uneducated depending on the farming profession. They are obliged to accept the partners chosen by the senior relatives. Enslin reckons their plights should change; and this is possible through the modern global system. However, by the global system, she does not mean to entirely avoid native cultures rather to get involved in the transculturation process. Mikhail Epstein’s (2009) idea is useful here, which claims that the transculturation “opens a possibility for globalization not as homogenization but, rather, as further differentiation of cultures and their ‘dissemination’ into transcultural individuals, liberating themselves from their dependence from their native cultures” (p. 328). Enslin wants the Nepali women to adopt global system by liberating themselves from the unfavorable elements of native cultures along with retaining the favorable ones. In other words, she wants to remove the barriers, as Thapa has depicted, “to gender, caste and class equality” that are still impeding Nepal’s quest for political transformation.

Enslin considers it illogical and baseless to treat menstruated women as impure and unclean. During period, girls and women are forbidden from cooking, eating and sitting together with other family members. On the very first day of her arrival, she catches sight of her sister in law in “the buffalo shed” due to her period (p. 46). Some days later, she notices one of her nieces, named Pramila, sent to the buffalo shed after her first period. She will stay in seclusion there for at least four days. In some other families, the period is even longer as Sharmila, another niece, informs her, “For our family, four days. . . . Other families, fifteen days. Sometimes twenty-two” (p. 96). Enslin surprises at such kind of culture and wonders why the myth of menstruation

associated with the sin of Indra (one of the Hindu gods who killed a Brahman and, to erase the sin, threw one part of sins in the menstrual blood of women making them unclean at least for three days) has not been challenged yet. In consonance with Lynn Bennett who is the author of *Dangerous Wives, Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-caste Women in Nepal*, Enslin questions why the menstrual blood is not taken as holy as “the fire, river and mountain that also received the sin” from Indra (p. 98).

Besides in menstruation, a woman is also considered polluted for eleven days after giving birth to a child. She is secluded in a corner of the house. Enslin herself has been obliged to observe this ritual, which she expresses as: “I returned home by Red Cross van the following day. For the next eleven days, I was treated as a *sutkeri*, a woman who has just delivered a baby. Not even Aama [mother], wanted to look at me or come near” (p. 136). The *sutkeri* time is such a time when a female feels terribly weak physically and mentally, and expects love and care from the family members. But it is missing in the Hindu culture. Moreover, unlike in the USA, even the doctors send out the husbands while the women are struggling in the delivery beds. Enslin herself experiences this fact.

Further, Enslin wonders at the ritual of name-giving in her new culture. It is done by a family priest on the eleventh day of delivery. Strangely, the family priest evades the naming ceremony this time allowing Enslin to suspect he “got jittery about officiating for a half-caste boy” (p. 137). In the place of him, the father in law himself fixes a name, Purnendu, by consulting the astrological charts. However Enslin and her husband had already opted a name, Amalesh. But the name has been misunderstood “to be an American name” (p. 137) which makes Enslin feel uneasy.

Enslin feels sorry at her mother in law (whom she calls as Aama) for being humiliated by the old men of neighbouring Brahman families in the Ram temple. When she offers them tea, they do not take it thinking the family has lost the high caste status after accepting Enslin as a *buhari*. In response to Enslin’s query about why the mother is sad, she responds, “But they won’t take it [tea] from my hands. They think I am too lax with Damais and Sarkis around the water pump. And I let foreigners live in my house” (p. 121). These people suspect Enslin has influenced the family with her Christian doctrines. She feels uneasy to observe such kind of baseless and dehumanizing social behavior.

Nevertheless, being from the highly developed cross-cultural and multiracial society of the USA, and having a good anthropological knowledge about different kinds of cultures of different races, Enslin takes constrictions of Nepali culture lightly

paving a way towards transformation. As an anthropologist, she has learned to remove the comfort of her culture and “live as closely as possible in another” (p. 160). She knows quite well that cultures, as Welsch has revealed, “no longer have the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness” rather assume “a new form” (p. 197), will get transformed in their due course of time. She partakes herself in the transcultural process by accepting good elements of the Brahman culture and concurrently urges the other people to be open for transformation. While saying this, however, it does not mean that she provokes for the Christian culture, rather for the modern culture emerged in the West based on scientific achievements. As Welsch has argued, transculturation covers “both global and local, universalistic and particularistic aspects” (p. 205), Enslin wants the Nepalis to engage both the local and global cultures. Her main concern is on the transformation of the traditional outlook towards menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, marriage, gender, caste and so on.

Enslin celebrates Nepali festivals ritually the way a Hindu woman does. At Dashain, she enjoys receiving *tika* (a dab of rice grains mixed with yogurt and red vermilion powder) from the seniors and giving it to the juniors. She explains the celebration as:

Dressed in a green, handspun cotton sari I’d bought in Kathmandu, I took my place to receive tika from Pandit Kedarnath; Aama; Pramod’s brothers, Siddhi and Tirtha, and their wives; and Pramod himself. Then I sat in the superior spot and gave tika to nieces and nephews. (p. 67)

Happily adjusting to the family hierarchy, Enslin observes the Dashain festival.

Like Dashain, Enslin celebrates the Tiji festival merrily. She goes to the river to have a holy bath with other women and then gets ready for singing and dancing. She notes, “We put on our best saris, earrings, glass bangles, and necklaces” (p. 114). She looks as a typical Hindu woman. But she declines to use the *sindhur* (red vermilion powder which is the symbol of a married Hindu woman) into the part of their hair. Unlike Pratt’s definition of subjugated peoples as the colonized peoples, in the context of Enslin, she is the subjugated person because of her marriage to a man of high caste Hindu family where she has to follow strict rules. As Pratt argues, subjugated peoples “do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean” (p. 7), Enslin determines what to absorb and what to deny. She objects to use *sindhur* because she is wearing a marriage necklace and wedding ring she received while marrying in a Christian way. Also, although married in a Christian way, she wishes to get married again in a Hindu way. “During all those festival days, I wondered if the family might arrange a Hindu wedding for Pramod and me” she exposes (p. 68). A perfect example of transcultural connectedness Enslin wants to build can be detected here.



Enslin acknowledges the Tij festival as an occasion for the articulation of female voice against the Hindu based patriarchal society. She writes that, gathering in a place, the village women “sang their troubles, their desires, and their fears . . . complained about their married lives, criticized the cruelty of in-laws, poked fun at the injustices of Hindu society, and warbled about longing for death” (pp. 118-19). Enslin’s Aama has plenty of Tij songs in her memory. Enslin collects many Tij songs in her note copy and uses them for women’s unity for struggle and cultural transformation. Contrarily, some chauvinistic men get infuriated at this and pressurize her family to keep her from reading and writing. They even blame her of “converting women to Christianity” (p. 204). Nonetheless, Enslin keeps going along with her family’s sincere support.

Enslin begins literacy classes to educate the local women. She encourages and motivates them for social, economic and cultural changes. She runs a project of goat raising to uplift economic condition of desperate women. She supports to construct a building of Nari Jagaran Samiti, a non-profit making organization established by the women of Gunjanagar. When Ishwarya repeatedly takes the chair of this organization, runs a monopoly rule, and cannot support women in need, Enslin and her Aama speak boldly against her. Sensing of being challenged, Ishwarya belittles Enslin stating that she knows “nothing of Nepal and our ways here” (p. 268). Enslin gets annoyed for a while. But soon she cools down with a realization that the advent of the multiparty system has allowed people like Ishwarya to “assert their power against the foreigners” (p. 269). Instead of being dismayed, Enslin continues to work for women’s transformation. When a local woman is in labor, Enslin visits her and offers a timely advice not to go to hospital in this stage. The woman agrees and has a baby at home.

Finally, Enslin experiences various cultural barriers after marriage but she faces them patiently through her persona of an “objective anthropologist. Open to all ideas” (p. 111). As Epstein speaks of transculturation as a process of new cultural development “that transcends the borders of traditional cultures (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual, and professional),” Enslin involves in transculturation herself by transcending her cultural boundaries (p. 330). With her open-mindedness, she succeeds in crushing the complexities regarding the unfavorable cultural practices and rituals of her husband’s family and the society. She accepts the positive elements and rejects the adverse ones. She changes herself and motivates others to change. Even the orthodox father in law allows alcohol and chicken in the house and comes in Enslin’s defense when she has been accused of spreading Christianity. She unites the village women to fight against the prevailing cultural and social ills. After all, as Antje Fluchter and Jivanta Schottli (2015) have identified transculturation to be “a modern phenomenon . . . characterizing our modern, globalized world” (p. 2), Enslin

attempts to transform the Nepali society into the modern globalized world with the proper mixture of local and global.

## Conclusion

The paper has analyzed Enslin's *While the Gods Were Sleeping* from the perspective of transculturation. It has concluded that the author, who is from a highly developed Western metropole and becomes a *buhari* of a Brahman family, encounters various transcultural constrictions but she overcomes them with her anthropological knowledge and open-minded nature. As an objective anthropologist, she knows well that there are obviously various cross-cultural complexities that impede easy adjustment and assimilation in new cultures but they are not permanent. In the contemporary globalized world, cultures cannot remain static and stable. They get syncretized, hybridized and transformed into new forms making new meanings. As a Nepali *buhari*, Enslin experiences a lot of cultural inconveniences in her Hindu family but fights them patiently. She respects the Hindu culture equally to the Christian culture. But she protests boldly against bad practices such as seclusion during menstruation, giving birth to children at home, early marriage, domestic violence, and so on. She offers advices to the village women in different aspects and urges them to unitedly fight for transformation. She forms a transcultural identity as an open-minded American daughter and well-assertive Nepali *buhari*. Concurrently, she guides her family and the society towards economic, social and cultural transformation. Finally, as Epstein has shown the need of transculturation in world politics, where factor of fixed cultural identity based on race, ethnos, religion, or ideological commitments turned out to be a source of conflict and violence, Enslin's narrative about transculturation can be a solution to the possible cultural conflicts. Moreover, this study expects to open up a new avenue in the analysis of transcultural barriers and the importance of cultural interconnectedness worldwide.

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