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When the Interference and Guidance in Research Come from Lord Buddha

Abstract

The paper will unfold my personal realisation as a researcher and a traveller on the spiritual path. The background of the paper will be set in a transitional point in my life when my previous research for the legal aid of BRAC, Bangladesh (NGO) and the future plan for a Masters dissertation encountered a question of validity due to my growing interest in Tibetan Buddhism. At this point, my understanding of the words ‘empowerment’ and ‘liberation’ from a Buddhist perspective brought an introspective question: ‘am I working to create more delusions for women by providing a false and transient hope for empowerment and liberation?’ The paper will reveal this paradox in a creative way. I will focus on my recent experience in the Kopan monastery of Nepal, and the inspiration from a highly realised Tibetan monk, who has reincarnated as a Spanish guy. Using an innovative method named ‘ficto criticism’, an in between writing of fiction, critique and auto ethnography, I will try to mediate between my inner conflicts. Through a spiritual journey of a researcher, this endeavour intends to invite a new way of formulating knowledge for the academic world.

Keywords

Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism, ficto-criticism, reincarnation, spirituality, women-empowerment, women’s liberation, feminism

Introduction

Does the only way to produce knowledge for the academic world lie in being specific, objective, rational and maintaining conventional structures? This is the first and foremost question I had to encounter before planning to present a paper for Curtin Postgraduate Humanities Conference 2010. My passion is to let the outer world know how I changed from a operator researcher to an autonomous and passionate researcher. This has involved the far-reaching implications of this transformation in my personal understanding of women's liberation in relation to spirituality imprisoned by the academic world's conventional way of producing knowledge. The academic world appeared before me through the metaphor of the 'emperor symbol of tarot reading card' (Obringer 2011). This metaphor symbolises the dominant trend of the academic world as the archetypal father figure who rules with objectivity and rational specificity, maintaining a structure and strict direction to a particular goal (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006). Here, archetype refers to an image that we inherit from the past and which arises in the mind spontaneously without any judgment (Wilber 1985). I neither had any clash with him, nor did I want to replace him politically. But I was afraid that his method of building truth might take away the healing qualities of my subjective experiences of spirituality (Daniel 1994). In support of this contention, I found that creative writing on personal experiences of life have been used as the most effective tool to shed light on the mystic, mysterious, self-reflected and emotional paths of spiritual quests (Hamilton 2003). In this paper, creative writing's purpose is two-fold: firstly, it becomes a form of feminist resistance against the masculine and patriarchal characteristics of language; and secondly, it allows spirituality to be heard and contemplated through the power of more innovative research methods.

The symbol of empress from tarot reading cards is a good metaphor to reveal the intention of the creative writing more clearly. The empress card symbolises an archetypal mother figure of nurturance and creation, with an adoring attitude of care, as well as the sacred feminine (Obringer 2011). To pave the way for the entrance of the empress into the kingdom of the emperor as an alternative way to produce 'knowledge with pleasure', the ideas of Foucault give strong support (Minh-ha 1991). According to Foucault, power and knowledge are closely related (Jackson 2004). Discourse can be termed as a specific way to produce knowledge and truth. Foucault is of the view that discourse is an act of power which produces truth according to what can be told and what cannot be told. This power is not total

and it can be challenged (Jackson 2004). Foucault's observation has been a useful tool for feminist academics who have revealed how academic discourse is dominated by male forces of patriarchy. According to feminist academics, the academic world's patriarchy lies in producing male power which only enforces a homogenous way of producing knowledge, excluding human passion, subjective experience and any alternative way to form knowledge as 'non-scientific, illegitimate and fiction' (Jackson 2004; Minh-ha 1991). In academia, feminism has resisted patriarchy through the introduction and invention of 'feminine language' (Hintikka and Hintikka 1983; Hornsby 2000). The characteristics of 'feminine language' in making women's bodies and emotions heard in language are poetic and fluid words that blend personal experiences, and express multiple identities, including sexual orientation (Jackson 2004) .

Following a feminist praxis of writing from different identities, I will make my identity as a woman in deep connection with archetypal feminine traits and Vajrayana Buddhism portrayed throughout this paper with Tibetan Buddhist symbols, metaphors and archetypal feminine voices (Jackson 2004). To celebrate the entrance of the empress, the paper will follow a recently practised form of writing called 'ficto-criticism'. Ficto-criticism is an in-between writing process of fiction, critique and auto-ethnography, and a radical challenge to the dominant way of writing for the academic world (Nettelbeck 1998). In taking the reader to a pilgrimage in my kingdom where bliss will be contemplated through the passionate communion between 'the emperor' and 'the empress', I will appear in this paper through three dimensional selves.

The first self will appear as 'Naomi' (the name I use most of the time), who will narrate her personal feelings through mystical, symbolic and fictitious letters to her lover 'Buddha'. The critical second self 'Sharin' (indicating my formal name on my passport) will be appearing in conversation with the third self, a Tibetan Buddhist named feminine divine 'Drolma' (indicating my affiliation with Vajrayana Buddhism). 'Drolma' refers to a famous female Buddha 'Tara' in Tibetan Buddhism who acts as a blissful liberator against delusions, anger, hatred and attachment (Farrer-Halls 2002). According to Tibetan Buddhism, 'Tara' is the swift wind energy of Buddha (Farrer-Halls 2002). In this paper, she will incarnate like a wind within my first self's relation to Buddha and the conversation with the second self. Historically, 'Tara' is known for taking a vow to help all sentient beings in woman's form out

of great compassion and representing the wisdom of Buddha (Mackenzie 1998). In this paper, her presence will furthermore be a feminist resistance against seeing the divine only in a male's form (Nicholson 2009).

Background: Identification of spirituality with Vajrayana Buddhism

According to His Holiness the Dalai lama, two types of spirituality can be identified: one, which has an identity with a particular religion (Buddhism, Hindu, Sufism), and another one which is not associated with any specific religion (Dalai lama Renaissance 2008). In this paper, both types of spirituality will be apparent through my personal identification of spirituality with Vajrayana Buddhism and Wilber's view on spirituality.

For further clarification, it is necessary to explain a little bit about Vajrayana Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism. It is believed that Lord Buddha transmitted his teaching in different ways depending on the various mindsets and needs of sentient beings (Yeshe 2008). Buddhism is like a vast ocean which gets divided into two big rivers called Theravada and Mahayana (the Dalai Lama 2002). Again, the river of Mahayana has many streams. Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism is one of them.

The origin of Vajrayana Buddhism can be traced back to the 8th Century AD and the flow of Buddhism from India to Tibet (the Dalai Lama 2002). Like all other schools of Buddhism, it evolved around Buddha's basic teaching that life is suffering, that the cause of suffering is desire and that the cessation of suffering is attainable through achieving enlightenment (Yeshe 2008). It also embodies the concept of countless lives on the basis of positive and negative actions. The power of compassion and wisdom in understanding the empty nature of reality are worshipped here as a path to Buddhahood: the enlightened consciousness. In Buddhism, it is believed that everyone has the potentiality to be a Buddha or everyone possesses the chance to have an enlightened, eternal and blissful consciousness, free from delusions and attachment through practice (Yeshe 2008).

Besides emphasising meditation, the distinctive features of Tibetan Buddhism include rituals, chanting *mantras* (special prayers) and the personification of the qualities of Buddha, such as emptiness, wisdom and compassion, through different images of deities and metaphors (Mackenzie 1998; Farrer-Halls 2002). It is marked for embedding 'Guru devotion' where a

teacher has be followed as the representative manifestation of Buddha, and the disciple has to pay the utmost respect and homage to him (Mackenzie 1998). In Vajrayana Buddhism, 'wisdom' refers to special insight into the nature of reality that every conditional phenomenon is subject to change and decay, and a blissful non-attachment to any materialistic and conditional things (Yeshe 2008; the Dalai Lama 2002). At the same time, the power of compassion has been emphasised as the mind's infinite freedom to benefit others and as an antidote to the mind's habitual negativities (Rinpoche 2008).

Vajrayana Buddhism believes that because of our delusions, anger and attachment, we are rebirthed again and again in different forms in this imperfect world full of suffering. There are great beings called 'Bodhisattvas' who can enter into enlightenment and never take birth in the suffering realm of '*samsara*' or this imperfect world. But they deliberately choose a birth out of compassion in the imperfect world to help sentient being. His Holiness the Dalai Lama and many Tibetan Buddhist masters are believed to take reincarnations to carry the teaching of *Dharma* (Buddha's teaching). However, as a student of Vajrayana Buddhism, I am not in a position to define it properly and my definition is not without faults. Hereby, I suggest that readers who are interested in Tibetan Buddhism find their own ways to know Vajrayana Buddhism.

The letters

Calling 'Hayagriva', the deity who removes obstacle

Dear Lord Buddha,

I have just come back from the Hayagriva Buddhist Centre in Perth. In Tibetan Buddhism 'Hayagriva' is a deity who takes away all obstacles. You must be wondering why I have started my letter focusing on 'obstacles'. I know you have already guessed: 'my mind is reflecting in my letter'.

This obstacle is not like a disorder in my laptop which can be fixed through some suave technological approach. It is within my mind. Shall I tell you a dream about my obstacle ?

I had a dream that I was sitting in Hayagriva Buddhist Centre, Perth. Lots of butter lamps were offered to your golden statue adorned with precious jewels. The Buddhist books, written by the founding monk of our centre 'Lama Thubten Yeshe', were gently kept in a table in front of me. Suddenly, one of my Australian Buddhist teachers entered the room and asked me, 'Today you have a test on what you have learnt from us, the centre and Lama Yeshe's book'. I bowed down expressing my consent.

He asked me two questions, 'What is freedom and ultimate liberation?' and 'Why people do suffer?'

I replied, 'Venerable, according to Buddhism, freedom means the infinite potential of one's mind to offer love and positive qualities to others. It also means the freedom from negativities of mind. People suffer because of lack of freedom due to negative afflictive emotions, anger, hatred, and attachment. Ultimate liberation comes through conquering all these negativities and achieving Buddhahood. All these are developmental and involve a continuous journey'.

'Ok, Now you tell me what is empowerment'. (Venerable)

'I have not read about empowerment, Venerable. I can't explain what it is. But I feel I can definitely term a person 'empowered' who has achieved a mental level of bliss and found a deeper meaning of life'.

Venerable smiled with content saying 'Good! Now tell how you can use your precious human life with this knowledge?'

I replied, 'In Buddhism, this human birth is precious for using one's fullest potential to reach Buddhahood as true freedom and liberation. I have to cultivate positive qualities of mind including patience, compassion and morality at every moment, and practice it in reality. It is a continuous journey. One lifetime may not be enough. But still contemplating the teaching through spiritual practice, I can move forward and enjoy a deeper meaning of my life'.

With my last reply, venerable disappeared. Suddenly all the butter lamps of the room went out and the room became dark. Amidst this darkness, a mysterious woman entered. I asked 'Who are you?'

The woman's voice replied, 'You don't know me? You worked for me in BRAC for two years. I am your woman beneficiary. For two years, you wrote reports so that I could be empowered and walk towards liberation. You analysed my suffering as a 'case study', took information out of my whole life, and came up with specific recommendations so that I could enjoy freedom, which could fit into your program's objectives and goals'.

I could not help my irritation. 'Why don't you understand that ideas of freedom, liberation, empowerment and suffering are all very different from what I am learning now'?

Suddenly the women lamented in a heart rending voice. 'My husband tortured me for years. I started to tolerate it for the sake of society. Then one day, I came to your legal aid. Your staff was very helpful. They gave me all kinds of support. I realised that I could get rid of my cruel husband. Your staff even came to my house to make my parents understand the need to give me moral support. Your NGO gave me financial support, and I got freedom from poverty. I also got access to health care and sanitation, and I sent my kids to your NGO's school. But still sometimes, I feel I am useless. When I see that other women are so happy

with their husbands and kids, I ask myself 'why I am alone?' Sometimes I see my husband in dream. I feel anger against him and everything around me. In extreme anger and hatred, I wake up. I feel I have poisoned myself'.

I intervened. 'See, you have to find a deeper purpose of your life. In Buddhism, it is said human birth is precious. Don't waste it by crying over these conditional things. You have infinite potential of mind which can be used to benefit others'.

To my surprise, the women replied prudently. 'In Islam also it is said that humans are the best of all creatures and should help others. I know it and heard it but I cannot feel it'. The woman's gloomy voice echoed through the temple. 'Can't feel it, can't feel it' and my dream got broken up.

I woke up with strange feelings. It is true, as a researcher for BRAC, I used 'freedom', 'liberation' and 'empowerment' with different meanings from what I understand now.

Since then, someone is continuously telling inside me, 'you don't do what you believe'.

I am trying to stop this voice saying 'see, when I worked for BRAC, I did not know about Buddhism and spirituality'. But again and again, the voice is humming 'you will not do what you believe now'. This voice is driving me crazy. I am about to start thinking about my Masters dissertation and the topic is, as usual, in the old area of women's liberation. I am really worried! How come I will start my dissertation with this nagging voice inside?

I will continue to pray to Hayagriva so that this obstacle can be removed, and I can listen from within. 'Naomi you have found the way. Start going. You are doing what you believe'.

Meeting your messenger at ‘Mount Meru’

Dear Lord Buddha,

When we offer our whole outer and inner universes to your awakened consciousness in the form of a rosary, we sing ‘at the centre is mount meru, the king of mountains’. I often wonder ‘what does this “Mount Meru” mean’? Vajrayan Buddhism uses different symbols to build your connection with our consciousness through various architectural forms. Some believe ‘Mount Meru’ is the peak of the awakened consciousness, as well as the centre from which you can contemplate the whole universe: both inner and outer.

My continuous prayer to ‘Hayagriva’ made me feel that the removal of my obstacle would be in the deep contemplation of the obstacle. I wished I could go somewhere like ‘Mount Meru’ from where I would be to able to view my mental continuum with a blissful detachment. In response to my wish and prayer, the image that emerged in mind as ‘Mount Meru’ was the centre of the foundation of preservation of the Mahayana tradition: Kopan Monastery in Nepal and their ‘Medicine Buddha’ retreat in full silence.

Following my heart, I reached Kopan. I had a long silent retreat with forty-two people. At first, it was very tough to start days in total silence. But gradually, it became normal; the bliss became habitual. Though we shut our lips, our eyes and hearts were opened. We had more power in mind than ever through meditation and other rituals every day. I could see the universal nature of suffering through the realisation of my spiritual friends from the USA, Australia, UK and Europe. The tear drops of the ladies from the global North, their weeping during times of meditation and their sniffles—arising from envisioning the inevitable end of life in death and impermanence, loss of youth, beloved ones and good times—made me realise how helpless human beings could be despite having economic, social and cultural power. I sometimes wondered, ‘is there any difference between the tear drops of my spiritual friends in Kopan, and the women I met during my field visit in rural Bangladesh?’ In one sense, I can see a superficial difference in terms of their life stories. One group of women are suffering from poverty, torture and oppression; and another group of women are shedding tears in deep realisation of the nature of life that is full of suffering. Is there any difference in an absolute sense? I felt, in reality, we all are crying over and over because of our very

existence in this imperfect world full of suffering. The forms of our suffering may be different, but the pain we get from it are the same, and beyond comparison.

But this is just one part of my realisation. The joy of developing the wish to help others as the best use of this precious human birth, and feeling the divine in mind through cultivating positive qualities in mind, convinced me that true happiness and empowerment of women need to include their connection with this divine identity. 'Medicine Buddha' is believed to be the healing power of Buddha. Honouring his name, this retreat healed my confusion about myself. I felt a profound strength of empowerment, prolific creativity to help others and a blissful non-attachment to the impermanence of life. You must be laughing loudly thinking that I am declaring that I have already achieved Buddhahood. I know this is not enlightenment; it is just a beginning with others along the path. I have initiated a long journey with a deeper realisation, lots of possible ups and downs, and the commitment to invite others in the same journey for their benefits. Just like standing on 'Mount Meru', one can be aware of one's inner and outer universes, foresee the next steps of the journey and identify the lost tracks of previous steps. Through this retreat, I became aware of my strong connection with your path, realised the incompleteness of my past works including research on women's liberation and empowerment, and got a vision to take further steps based on my passionate relationship with you. I wished I could invite others to be in 'Mount Meru'. But I did not want to be a preacher who would be so boastful of his or her religion!

At this stage, I met your messenger. In Vajrayana, we believe our Guru is the carrier of your knowledge and messages for us. We believe the Guru knows how to deliver which message to whom; h/she is a more like a psychologist who is master of the distinctive zigzags of our minds. Historically, you compared your teaching with a raft which someone could use according to a particular situation. How nicely our Guru Lama Yeshe has embodied the essence of your message following your lineage!

After his death as a highly realised Tibetan Monk, Lama Yeshe has chosen his rebirth as a Spanish boy. Though he disrobed earlier in the year, he has kept the unwritten vow to help all sentient beings. As a young Spanish guy 'Osel', he is involved with theatre, and plays drums to spread the same message of compassion and wisdom in a new way. He wants to travel to the heart of people in whose lives he has not travelled, yet as a monk. I just

engraved his two images in my heart with the joy of new direction and started for Dhaka, Bangladesh on my way to reach Perth.

Homage to ‘Tara’, the blissful liberator

Dear Lord Buddha,

If Hayagriva is to be called for removing obstacles, and Medicine Buddha needs to be practised for healing, then Tara is to be worshipped for wisdom and compassion. Her twenty-one manifestations vow to liberate all sentient beings from anger, attachment, delusions and anger. She represents the wisdom of Buddha as the divine archetypal feminine in every woman’s power to help others through compassion and wisdom. It seems, it is time to call on her more as I really need wisdom to map my next plans for research to benefit other women, without any discrimination between women from the global south and women from the wealthy north.

It seems like, she has already started to shower her blessings in response to my calling. In Dhaka, I met one of my bosses. I expressed frankly how I was finding that my previous research on legal aid intervention and women’s empowerment lacked something, which, I believed was ‘spirituality’. His openness to accept my thoughts gave me the courage to express myself: ‘as a researcher, I can’t do what I don’t believe’.

He replied with a very eye-opening phrase – ‘for a woman, empowerment is a journey towards liberation. It starts with freedom from poverty, social seclusion, lack of economic and social power and goes through to continuous empowerment. We just give a woman the beginning which she is unable to start. Is it wrong? Without this beginning, how should she start a spiritual venture?’

What he said, I realised when I was in Kopan, but, I did not have the vocabulary to explain it. If we, all the women of the retreat, did not have economic and social power to arrive in Nepal and attend a fifteen day-long isolated retreat in the uphill, would we be able to taste the bliss and inner strength as well as the inner peace? We need both mental power and economic, social and political power to find our connection with the divine. A woman’s liberation

should not end in attaining economic, social power and freedom of choice, yet at the same time it should not exclude it.

It seems as a researcher, my next steps need lots of blissful wisdom to see reality from many dimensions, just like Tara's twenty-one different manifestations. This observation needs to include deep archetypal feminine character receptive to, and creating connection with, other's opinions through nurturance and care. What about starting this project with my upcoming dissertation ? Oh! This thought is just making me so joyful! I am feeling I will be dancing in you, in your teaching of various colours. Will you dance with me? Will you give me the bliss to reach you through Tara in my research ?

With the prayer that I may liberate other women and myself through initiating a new knowledge on women's liberation and spirituality, I conclude my letters to you for the time being.

With love

Your Drolma

Conversation between Sharin and Drolma

Sharin: I just had a quick look at the foreign aid donor's websites and their requirement for funding projects on women's empowerment in the global south. I did not find any trace of an indication of giving funds to any research projects which will be based on women's spiritual needs (dfid.gov; usaid.gov).

However, BRAC seems to be big enough not to rely completely on donor-driven issues. It is the largest southern NGO working on women empowerment from multifaceted interventions (BRAC 2011). If you take into account feminist approaches to women's empowerment—which is based on women's autonomous agency, challenging the oppression of patriarchy and the status quo as individual and political group, increasing control over resources, economic and social freedom and freedom of choice—BRAC's approach is enough (Sardenberg 2008). I am finding Naomi's ideas completely hopeless.

Drolma: Is it so? Let me remind you that feminism, as a discourse on women's liberation, started with the claim of equal rights of women with men in the public sphere (Voet 1998). With the passage of time, liberation involved women's freedom of choice in private life in connection with sexuality, politics, economy, family and many other things (Voet 1998). Then it got focused into the heterogeneity of women's lives on the basis of sexual orientations, race, class, etc., as the 'third wave' of feminism (Voet 1998). Doesn't this characteristic of the ever-changing nature of feminism according to the changing needs of women bear on the potentiality of inviting spirituality in women's life (Maushart 1995)?

Sharin: Oh! Again this abstract spirituality has come back.

Drolma: Be patient! It has come back, but not in an abstract form. Recent scholarship on spirituality, for example Ken Wilber's integral spirituality, is post-metaphysical (Wilber 2011). Wilber has linked spirituality with transpersonal development and different levels of consciousness (Wilber 2000). He has scientifically explained what the ancient wisdom of mystic texts declared thousands of years ago (Wilber 2000). According to Wilber and many other New Age scholars, we are part of divine or 'the great spirit' (Wilber 2000; Deida 2006; Hartwig 2001). We lose our birth connection with the divine through delusions, cravings, anger, attachment, hatred and all the negativities of mind. As a consequence of this non-separation, we often suffer from unhappiness, loneliness and negativities of mind (Wilber 2000; Hartwig 2001). We try to substitute this suffering through material pleasures and tangible freedoms, but these substitutions cannot work to satisfy our inner self in the long run (Wilber 1995). We can regain our natural connection with the divine through practice of altruistic qualities, like compassion and patience, as well different spiritual practices (Wilber 2000).

Wilber's mapping of a subject within four quadrants is a multidimensional method to link spirituality with science (Wilber 2000) (Figure 1). These four quadrants are dimensions of reality, which is present at every moment (Esbjörn-Hargens 2009). They include interior individual, exterior individual, interior collective and exterior collective (Wilber 2000). The upper left quadrant (I) represents the interior of the individual as a subjective aspect of consciousness, from bodily sensation to mental ideas. The upper left (It) of the objective exterior includes, for example, behavioural aspects. The lower left represents the inside of

the collective (we) – the values, meanings and world views shared by the individual constitute ‘the cultural quadrant’. The lower left is again the exterior of the lower right. They are the embodiment of the cultural quadrants into social systems including material institutions, geo-political formations, and the forces of production (Its) (Wilber 2000, 60-61). Using these four quadrants, a spiritual practitioner’s contemplation in mind can be related with reality (Wilber 2000).

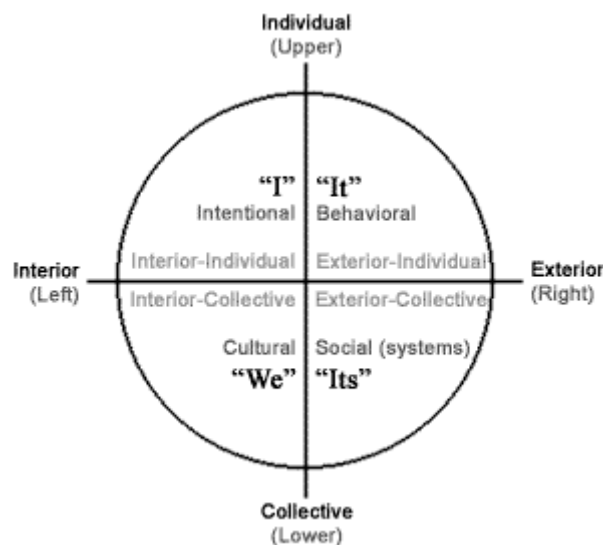


Figure 1: Wilber’s four quadrants (googleimages.com)

According to Wilber, most of the theories of modern times, including feminism, have focused only on the right quadrants and produced an incomplete picture of reality (Wilber 1996; 2000). In response to Wilber’s critique, integral feminists have mapped women within four quadrants. Integral feminists, following the precedent of the ‘Goddess feminist’ approach of using a woman’s body image in the divine and the significance of women’s spiritual needs, has extended women’s subjectivity from the mental continuum to institutional, political and global levels, and has found solidarity with other historical women’s spiritual journeys (Nicholson 2009). In this regard, their position is integral, ‘third wave and beyond’ (Nicholson 2009).

They agree with Wilber about the no-sex, non-dual nature of the ultimate reality, but voice their urge to see ‘woman’ as a category that springs up in interaction with different entities and institutions in political representation and in connection with the other identities within the map (Nicholson 2009). The integral feminist is aware of herself in four quadrants of

experience: the individual interior (private including sensations, thoughts and feelings and the experience of gender); individual exterior (including the reality of one's body to physical, causal and subtle natures as a student of energy); interior of the collective (including sophisticated relationships with culture and history beyond gender relations); and exterior of the collective (including relations with local and global communities including human rights advocacy) (Diaz, Hamilton, and Pearson 2010; Nicholson 2009; Fisher 2008). It integrally includes women's conventionally constructed identities according to liberal second wave feminism, cultural construction as gender, biology as female, psychologically as 'feminine' and social location in relation to systematic relationships. They give ample scope to extend this mapping further with the co-ordination of race, class, and other historical, social and political realities into which a post-modernist feminist approach can delve (Nicholson 2009).

However, I hope you have got my point that women's spirituality is not an abstract notion. Now let's come from theories to Naomi's real life experience. What Naomi has experienced and observed in Kopan, especially the tears in women's eyes who have achieved agency and economic and social freedom, indicates that materialistic ways of assessing a woman's empowerment in terms of her control and agency over resources, political, social and cultural freedom, is not a complete picture of woman's life. A woman bereft of inner peace, which has been symbolised through her dream of a women beneficiary, speaks of the necessity to think over a woman's suffering by going beyond conventional approaches. At that same time, that woman's narration of Naomi's job in BRAC denotes the limitations of action research's trend of working upon specific data with a narrow objective, and sometimes through a mathematical approach (Baskerville 1999).

Drolma: Aha! So it is all about seeing women's suffering within four quadrants including addressing mental peace and strength through spirituality.

Sharin: You are partially right. It is about bringing women's suffering and the process of empowerment within four quadrants to lead them towards both materialistic and spiritual liberation.

Sharin: So, according to you, the dominant trend of this materialistic way of assessing women's empowerment is necessary to a great extent, but not enough. I just want to enrich

my knowledge in this scope. Is this trend linked with the accusation of Western ways of understanding women's empowerment (Mohanty 1988)?

Drolma: I think this is the accusation coming from third wave feminists who believe in women's heterogeneous life style. They termed their predecessors as white women's feminism (Voet 1998; Mohanty 1988; Nicholson 2009).

Interestingly, if you just enquire a little bit about feminist schools, you will find that the feminist schools dealing with women's spirituality are standing apart from dominant feminist schools dealing with women's economic, social and political issues (Fernandez 2003; Alexander 2005). One of the reasons for this isolation of spirituality in feminist discourse is the intimate relationship of spirituality with religion, and the historical oppression of religious institutions on women's body and equal participation (Fernandez 2003; Alexander 2005). As a result, women's development programs, run by NGOs all around the world and supported by the dominant feminist theories on women's economic, social and political power, have never bothered to consider women's spiritual needs (Parpart, Connelly, and Barriteau 2000).

However, times have changed. New Age theories have analysed spirituality going beyond abstraction and religious affiliation (Wilber 2000). The proponents of integral feminism encourage women to find their long self-negated divine self and subjectivity through creativity in dance, yoga, art, meditation, volunteering jobs, seeing and appreciating other women's beauty, along with pursuing economic and social freedom (Diaz, Hamilton, and Pearson 2010; Nicholson 2009; Fisher 2008). Women have been looking for spiritual freedom at home, surrounded by their husbands and kids as a kind of 'Kitchen sink path to enlightenment' (Mackenzie 1998, 194). Though it is still debatable how much spiritual growth a woman can achieve through this path, it is accepted that it is possible to practice awakening to some extent through a householder's life (Mackenzie 1998, 194).

Sharin: Believe me, I was about to be convinced, but another issue has just popped up. I am wondering that whether all these spiritual practices are appropriate to some culturally sensitive societies such as Bangladesh. Especially, she believes 'Tara' is in every woman, which is quite similar like tantric aspects of Buddhism and Hindu religion (Farrer-Halls 1994).

Drolma: Your eyes are so sharp and I adore it! Here comes the importance of perennial philosophy which finds commonalities in the spiritual dimensions of all religions (Wilber 1998; Thackara 1984; Campbell 1972). Lama's Yeshe's reincarnation's inspiration on Naomi's vision to empower women for travelling their own 'Mount Meru' bears the potentiality to explore spirituality according to a particular context, and based on some common values. All these messages are related to the proponents of perennial philosophy. But remember, you just can not directly start a research project on how to address women's spiritual needs in the development programs according to cultural contexts alone. You have to go back to the academic discourse of feminism where lies the significant lack of understanding of the relationship between women's liberation in both the material and spiritual worlds (Maushart 2005).

Sharin: Aha! That is the plan. I am almost convinced. Thanks. Now my last concern is about the methodology and language for this type of research.

Drolma: I am almost tired. If I am here to give answers to all the questions, how will the potentialities of the readers' minds work? Still, I am giving my last response in a simple, rhetoric, poetic and radical way. The emperor has spent a celibate life for a long time and it is time for him to enjoy the bliss of communion with the empress. You may term the empress 'eastern, mystical, poetic, fictive, feminine, artistic', but she needs to be embraced with an open mind. We should be reminded of the changing nature of academic research, and welcome innovative methodologies and languages for their growth. With this last reply, I am leaving.

Sharin: How could you go without proper conclusion. You have to draw a conclusion, which will summarise the whole paper.

Drolma: It seems the emperor is sending a message. Before I leave, here is my reply for him. I have a fictitious program's narration for BRAC women's beneficiaries. I hope that his archetypal male ego will be won over by everything and that he will understand my archetypal feminine intuition and imagination (Deida 2006).

BRAC's Program on spiritual empowerment for rural women

The 'program on spiritual empowerment for rural women' was initiated as a pilot project based on creative research on collecting and narrating women's life stories.

It brought out that, despite multifaceted development interventions, women beneficiaries of BRAC lack significant confidence and suffer from depression, frustration and mental health problems. In response to this finding, BRAC started this new pilot program as an experiment for few months.

Under this program, women beneficiaries in some part of Bangladesh went through some creative spiritual practice under qualified international and national teachers. This practice included discussion with women from different religions and participation in exercise to find out the common positive qualities of mind in all religions; training under women psychologists on the benefits of practising positive qualities, meditation on compassion, interdependence and impermanence, group reading and discussion on different historical ideas about religious women's strength and power; finding out innovative methodologies for how to use these positive qualities in day to day life; and doing some sort of volunteer jobs in a hospital, school or orphanage and sharing the impact of these practices with other women. After the pilot program, the research findings (qualitative, quantitative and other creative ways of narrating women's life stories) showed huge differences on mental health and approach to life between the women beneficiaries under this pilot program and women beneficiaries who were not under this program. After this success, BRAC has started this program all over Bangladesh and brought community leaders and local social groups under its coverage. The program has also allocated more funding on the research to find out creative ways of exercising spirituality in daily life based on indigenous songs, wisdom, folktales and other spiritual practices around the world, along with collecting women's stories through creative writing methodologies.

BRAC's initiative has been appreciated worldwide as a new way to understand women's empowerment. Recently some the programs of the United Nations have officially expressed their wish to implement similar approaches in their development programs and have allocated more funding on creative research methodologies on spirituality and human needs.

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