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FEMALE VOICES IN NEPALI NOVELS

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Abstract

The female characters created by BP Koirala and Pradip Nepal in *Narendra Dai* and *Swapnil Sahar* respectively have been compared and contrasted in this paper. Although Koirala and Nepal represent two poles of the Nepalese political spectrum, with Koirala pursuing democratic socialism doctrine and Nepal following communist ideology, the characters they create in their novels do not completely reflect the political schooling of their creators. The female characters in both the novels share some common traits of characters which most of the women in the Nepalese society, even today, exude, such as compassion, sacrifice, and docility. However, these female characters also display enough courage to rebel against the prevalent patriarchal dominance. The plot of Nepal's novel is considerably politically colored, and thus the female characters in his novel discuss progressive ideas and even act accordingly. Koirala's novel on the other hand deals more with socio-psychological issues and these conditions the dispositions of his characters. Nevertheless, his female characters too display rebellious traits and speak back to the patriarchal hegemony both through words and actions. As compared to Nepal, however, Koirala seems to have better succeeded in creating well-rounded female characters that not only abide by the then societal norms and values but also display mutiny against unjust treatment.

Keywords: Political; Socio-Psychological; Revolt; Compassion; Patriarchy; Dominance.

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1. Introduction

The female characters in BP Koirala's *Narendra Dai* and Pradip Nepal's *Swapnil Sahar* can be compared and contrasted on a number of grounds. To begin with the similarities, in both the novels women characters by and large have been reverentially treated though it would be wrong to assume that all of them have been indiscriminately lauded. The women characters, like male characters, have been judged on account of their merits and demerits. This judgement however is through the male lens since both the novels heavily rest on patriarchal foundation. Both the novels have lady characters that have displayed notable sacrifice on their part. For example, Gauri in *Narendra Dai* and Anita in *Swapnil Sahar* have lived a considerable portion of their lives devoid of their husbands' company. But there is a contrast in their situation. With Anita, it was a matter of choice,

but Gauri was imposed with the pain of separation. Anita and Ananta loved each other unconditionally despite the geographical distance that stood between them, but it was Gauri's one sighted love that glued her to Narendra. From Narendra's side, it was both geographical and emotional distancing put into effect. Female characters in both the works have surpassed male characters in terms of assertiveness they exuded in their younger days. Critical race theory and feminism might provide tools for us to effectively analyze a novel from a minority perspective. As Ashok Bhusal suggests, in his "The Rhetoric of Racism and Anti-Miscegenation Laws in the United States," that "what is necessary at this point is, with the tools offered in critical race theory, is to complete a deeper study of minorities and bring their stories, their voices, into academic scholarship" (p. 88). It means it is high time we brought issues of minorities and talk about their stories. Ashok Bhusal in his article "The Rhetoric of Racism in Society" explains how many minority writers such as Walter Dean Myers, Sherman Alexie, and Gene Luen demonstrate that "the racist attitudes and behaviors have caused many problems for the marginalized" (p. 114). While critical race theory is concerned with all minorities, feminism is related to the conditions of females in our society and ways of improving their status. By bringing female voices to the novel, both Pradip Nepal and BP Koirala present females not only as docile but also revolutionary characters.

It is important that we bring female characters or female rhetors into the limelight so other females in our society feel encouraged to contribute to rhetorical study. As Ashok Bhusal in his article "Emphasizing the Suppression of Feminist Voices" states that "women rhetors are getting recognition for their long overlooked rhetorical skills. The effects of years of marginalization or suppression are being rectified as interest and scholarly studies are illuminating their impressive literary and rhetorical gifts" (p. 56). It means woman writers and women characters are no longer totally ignored in our society. Our society has started to recognize their abilities and skills. Bhusal predicts that "in the twenty-first century, [women's] influence will be a continuing presence in rhetorical study" (p. 56).

The narrator, and Sannani in BP Koirala's *Narendra Dai*, and Anita and Ananta can be taken as male-female pairs who have similar traits exhibited in their younger days. However, the difference is that Ananta and Anita were lovers in the making and that the narrator and Sannani were not only friends but also close relatives. The difference also lies in the age gap between the pairs. Sannani and the narrator were much younger for "they would bathe together, naked" (*Swapnil Sahar*, p. 45) as compared to Anita and Ananta when they first met. The mother characters and their relations to their sons can be sharply contrasted as well. Narendra's relationship with his mother seems very strained, whereas that between Ananta and his mother is very affectionate and close-knit. Ananta's mother helps keep the family intact and integrated whereas it is Narendra's heated argument with his mother that in a way triggers instability in the family and leads to its disintegration as Narendra walks out of the family owing to his differences with his mother. However, the actual and latent reason for his abandoning the family may be different. Gauri's devotion to family can be analogous to Anita's serving in the family though in terms of perceptions, these characters are poles apart. This may be attributed to the difference in the periods in which these plots were set.

Narendra Dai dates back to the Rana times whereas *Swapnil Sahar* was set fairly recently in the Panchayat era some forty years ago. Munria's outspokenness can be compared to that of Anita's. However, Munria and Anita have fundamental differences in terms of their education and finance.

Anita is a well-educated woman from a well to do background--her father was a police officer, and thus can be induced- and an only child to her parents, whereas Munria represents a deprived girl devoid of education but who learns the lessons of life through experiences. Munria can be compared to Pabitra, a character from *Seto Dharti*, a Madan Puraskar winning novel by a renowned writer, Amar Neupane. Munria too, like Pabitra, undergoes similar experiences in Benares and engages in entertaining men and succeeds in upgrading her life to a certain extent in addition to understanding the world better. Both of these characters bear some resemblance with a character created by Rajendra Thapa in *Khilauna*.

Khilauna is set in the modern times in which Asmita, the protagonist female character, too employs her female charms and says, "I too have taken a vow that I will use males as toys just the way they used and dumped me" (p. 169). Although this is clearly not mentioned of Munria clearly, it can still be inferred that on being exploited by men around her after Narendra's departure, she too must have changed her tactics and played games by the rules set by men and finally succeeded in wooing the jeweler, who she eventually went on to marry. Experiences that are a fusion of both sufferings and accomplishments help people become mature. Both remain unflinchingly loyal to men of their hearts-though in the end, Munria succumbs to the vortex of the situation- and fight the socio-cultural constraints to ensure unison with their loved ones though comparatively things were much easier for Anita. Anita's love sails on smooth waters without much obstruction but Munria has to undergo excruciatingly painful times and in the end is compelled to part with her beloved. And against the calling of her heart, Munria resigns to the adversities that paralyze her life after Narendra falls ill. Left helpless in a foreign land, Munria upon parting with Narendra is desperately on the lookout for some "respite" and finally settles down with a goldsmith. Thus, reborn is a completely new person in Munria's guise for when the narrator called her by her name, she replies, "Munria is already dead! I am his (jeweler's) wife" (*Narendra Dai*, p. 64). Munria in a way gives a safe landing to her almost crumbled life. Whether she does achieve some real peace of mind and satisfaction is left to the interpretations of the readers but Koirala gives enough hints that point that her outwardly happy exterior in fact enveloped a frustratingly unsuccessful lover inside. Whatever it be, she gives herself a second chance and commences a fresh start of a new journey of life.

The female characters in both the novels seem to be conditioned by socio-cultural environments and traditional beliefs that pass from one generation to the other. In *Narendra Dai*, for example, there are plenty of instances that posit the influence of society and culture on female characters. Gauri though much despised by her husband does not ever think of abandoning him and has herself totally devoted to him though that was not reciprocated by Narendra. From one angle, it may appear to be the epitome of platonic love on the part of Gauri but disregarding social obligation of those times, that a married lady remain committed to only her husband, would be unfair for the interpretation. The situation of Gauri can be in a way compared to a daughter-in-law in *Champa*, a novel written by Laxmi Prasad Devkota, who is blamed by her in laws after her husband abandons her and the family. In *Narendra Dai* too it is Narendra, the husband character who leaves the family and though not openly expressed Gauri is taken to be one of the reasons for she fails to hold him by her charms and that in pursuit of fulfilling his passion. The opposite, however, in *Champa*, the husband leaves home because he fears that if he goes close to his "tempting" wife his life may be at risk, whereas in *Narendra Dai*, Narendra leaves home as his wife fails to entice him physically. The traditionally preferential treatment which males enjoy in the Nepalese society is

something that merits a strong rethinking. Suresh Lohani in *Scholars' Social Studies and Creative Arts* asserts that cultures “are transformed from one generation to the other. All the rituals and cultural practices that we follow are not good and that we need to reform the bad ones” (p. 14). Thus, the positioning of males as superior to females in the Hindu culture has to be discouraged.

Both the novels seem to take women empowerment as one of their key missions, though that is only subtly felt. For instance, in the decision-making process, it is the women that have the upper hand. Whether it is Ananta's mother or Narendra's mother, they are the ones in charge of the household chores. It is, for example, Ananta's mother who decides to send him to Kathmandu for further education and only upon her initiation and approval that Anita and Ananta are married. Similarly, Pranchanda and Rajani's tie the knot only with her consent. In *Narendra Dai* too, it is women who decide what is to be done in the house. Likewise, Gauri and Mother seem to be highly understanding of people they love. Similarly, in both the novels males have been dominating over females openly or subtly. Narendra, for example, has had the privilege of rejecting and accepting his wife Gauri and she was just a passive participant with no say on the matter. And even in *Swarnil Sahar* it is Ananta and Prachanda who are the decision makers and the women characters abide by the guidelines set by the male characters.

The next similarity that can be seen in both the novels is that women characters-most of them-grow intellectually as they move from the rustic settings to the urban ones. For instance, as Munria leaves the village and goes to Kathmandu and Benares, she becomes more polished in terms of her thoughts and perceptions and her views eventually become impressive enough to impact the narrator's percepts about her. This can be witnessed as the narrator “became perplexed by Munria's words and realized that there wasn't anything black or white as such; it was all a matter of perception (*Narendra Dai*, p. 50). Similarly, even Rajani becomes more understanding and judgmental once she enters Kathmandu and enjoys a good deal of urban exposure. Even Anita's assertiveness over Ananta can, perhaps, be attributed to her on and off travels to different locations, such as Biratnagar, accompanying her father as he is subject to constant transfers. Other lady characters, since they do not venture out from their rustic locations, do not really improve on their personality and remain static in terms of scholarly growth. Gauri is one such example.

The novels in portrayal of women characters, however, have more differences than similarities. A case in a point is the attitude of mothers. Narendra's mother strongly challenges Narendra's views and engages herself in rigorous argument with her only son and does so quite openly and objectively; although indirectly employed in the process are her emotional ingredients. But if we look at Ananta's mother, we find that she enjoys a very warm relation with her son and identifies her happiness with her children's. She is a very open-minded lady who seems to be far ahead of other lady characters of her era in terms of scholarly endeavors.

Although there is no mention of her academic attainment, it can, however, be inferred that she probably never went to school. Nonetheless, she still exhibits a high level of academic disposition. This goes in opposition with Narendra's mother who seems less understanding towards her son and is stubbornly persistent with her views. Similarly, the women characters in *Narendra Dai* seem quite unaffected by political scenario of those times or that there is no direct mention of politics tampering with their mentality. On a subtler level though, the shadow of Rana regime may reflect upon Narendra's attitude at the beginning and Gauri may represent the oppressed Nepalese. Even

the names of some female characters such as Juntunani and Maharani make a reader suspect whether the family had any connections with the Ranas. However, it can be largely understood as a novel unearthing psychoanalytic threads against the socio-cultural backdrop of the Rana regime. *Swapnil Sahar*, on the other hand, has its direct political color permeated in the female characters. The female characters have directly embodied “progressive” doctrine and it is openly manifested in their dialogues and actions. Majhi’s case and Anita’s expressions and Ananta’s mother’s views, all seem to be advocating communist doctrine.

Next, the number of female characters in *Swapnil Sahar* is fewer than that in *Narendra Dai*. The plot of *Narendra Dai* heavily rests on its female characters, whereas in *Swapnil Sahar*, women characters are heavily dwarfed. *Narendra Dai* has Munria and Gauri who inject life into the novel and if these characters are removed from the novel, it will be no fabrication to mention that the novel will simply cease to exist. Whereas in *Swapnil Sahar*, even if the female characters are excluded, the plot will not experience much damage because the biggest space in the novel is occupied by male characters who basically drive the plot forward and women appear more like insignificant sidekicks. Similarly, in *Narendra Dai* females mature through experience and hardships of life whereas in *Swapnil Sahar* it is the education and exposure that basically empower women, with of course some exceptions of elderly characters, such as Ananta’s mother.

Narendra Dai primarily focuses on women with regard to their sexuality whereas in *Swapnil Sahar* this aspect is largely discarded except on one or two occasions. However, *Narendra Dai* is heavily reliant on the differences of physical features between Gauri and Munria and their ramifications on Narendra’s married life although it would be unjust to say that Platonic love is marginalized altogether. However, what is true is, love in *Narendra Dai* instigates through looks and eventually reaches a transcendental level. A case in a point is, initially frustrated by Gauri’s physical features Narendra might have been infatuated to Munria but soon it evolves into a full-fledged love. Whereas in *Swapnil Sahar*, the love stories of the characters are mainly conditioned by their political philosophies and physical attractions are far less subservient to ideological affinities.

The next difference between these two novels is that in *Swapnil Sahar* none of the lady characters meet tragic ends but in *Narendra Dai* whether it is Gauri or Munria, they suffer either physical or mental deprivation. And one may even argue that the female characters in *Swapnil Sahar* are not like conventional female characters for whether it is Anita or Mother or Rajani, all seem to entail “male assertiveness” blurring the gender line that the society has drawn between males and females. And according to a prominent feminist Judith Butler “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (p. 527). Thus, by this token, the gendered boundary roles and rules have been defied to an extent by the characters in *Swapnil Sahar* by their acts.

Even for Gauri the company of her husband towards the end is short lived and Munria has to part with Narendra forever. In *Narendra Dai* women have basically been conditioned by socio-cultural environments which they have imperceptibly internalized and therefore conformed to the patriarchal designs. Whereas in *Swapnil Sahar*, the female characters have with some determination defied the prevalent practices and openly embraced change and empowered themselves. For example, an inter-caste marriage takes place with the approval from the female characters themselves. The socio-cultural settings have made the female characters in *Narendra*

Dai pay quite a heavy price whereas most of the lady characters-there are some exceptions, such as Kaka's sister in law and in a way his wife as well- in *Swapnil Sahar* have been, to a large extent, spared by the socio-cultural settings.

Although both the novels have been penned by political figures *Swapnil Sahar* is a more like a politically motivated document, whereas, *Narendra Dai* does not incorporate in it visible traces of political upheaval of the times in which it was set. However, the overall sense of confinement and suffocation prevail in the novel showing the readers the reflection of the clutches of the Rana times that translate in the words and actions of the characters, especially with the female characters. On the whole, however, it is largely a work of fiction with a special dig into human psychoanalysis. And Sigmund Freud puts it as:

- that behavior is determined by the unconscious mind, a repository of repressed impulses and desires, of which the waking mind is completely unaware, but determine the way we think, feel, and act. (Encyclopedia 2011).

Nothing beyond the ordinary has been colored of the female characters and their actions have been based on impulse and largely moderated by social norms and values. In *Swapnil Sahar*, though female characters, on balance, have been presented from a more revolutionary elevation. This seems to be the case in other novels, such as *Nandiata* and *Ekkasau Satabdiki Sumnima*, written by Pradip Nepal. For example, in *Ekkasau Satabdiki Sumnima*, there is a woman figure who discloses the protagonist, a female character, says "I actively worked in party politics for a number of years and invested my energy but when I realized that the party was not open to change I liberated myself from its bondage and became free...." (p. 8). Similarly in *Nandita*, a young college girl, Ramola, goes to the principal and says, "Until our demands are met, we will keep this college padlocked" (p. 79). Therefore, what can be inferred after analyzing these female characters is that diversity amongst the characters prevails, whether in males or females, and no law of the land or religion can act as a homogenizing factor. Suresh Lohani in "LGBTI in NEPAL, Pakistan, and India: Law, Religion, and Individuals" says that "the law of any country and religion of any community can never be identical reflection of the individuals who are positioned under these spaces" (p. 65). This can be clearly seen in the portrayal of characters such as Gauri, Munria, and Juntunani in *Narendra Dai* for despite sharing the same spatio-temporal setting, they cannot be kept in the same basket.

Next, in terms of compassion, sense of commitment and perseverance, females have exhibited extra ounce of caliber and fared better than their male counterparts in both the novels.

A comparative study of portrayal of women characters has thus shown that despite the time interval of many years that partitions these two novels, the condition of women has not much changed for the better and that it is still, by and large, male characters that enjoy more space and prominence in the novels. A male perspective of the female characters, notwithstanding spatio-temporal variations and differing political orientations of the writers, still adopts a subserviently one-dimensional vision that keeps them beneath the males. Many women characters in fact swing to and fro between male dominions, and by and large, give in to male authority. However, it would be unfair if no credit is given to these writers who have both openly and tacitly attempted to bolster women spirits-it may not have been sufficient, that is another story- and affirmatively carved their characters as exemplified by Anita, Ananta's mother, Munria and Gauri to name some.

Genre theory provides a framework for analyzing novels in a creative and critical way. Genre theory scholar, Ashok Bhusal, in his “Genre Awareness in the Writing Center,” offers some guidelines on how to read a text from a genre theory perspective. He posits, “instructors have to encourage students to find out the audience and write their assignments according to audience expectations” (p. 15). The success of any novel depends on audience awareness. Both Pradip Nepal’s *Swapnil Shahar* and BP Koirala’s *Narendra Dai* are successful in terms of fulfilling audience expectations. As Bhusal writes, in the context of teaching, “instructors have to encourage students to find out the reasons of their writing, the subject they are talking about, and the participants in these interactions to make them aware of the genre expectations” (p.15-16). Similarly, in the context of teaching, Ashok Bhusal and others’ (2018) *Multilingual students in writing classes: A guide for teaching and learning* is a rich resource, which provides many guidelines for teaching multilingual students using an asset-based approach.

To sum up, the female characters in these novels are a fusion of pain, struggle, happiness and perseverance. But more than that it, can be rightfully argued that they are also emblems of resistance, defiance and transformation. On the whole, they are a new woman in the making, however, without shunning the feminine virtues they hold or bestowed onto them by patriarchy. That said, however, these women characters constantly have to challenge patriarchy in some way. Suresh Lohani (2019) in “Constructing nontraditional rhetoric: Critical study on.

Gloria Anzaldua and Suresh Canagarajah” states that “whether it is the males dominating the females or the believers of heterosexual normativity looking down upon the peoples of different gender orientations, there is a constant tension between the practitioners of homogeneity and diversity” (p. 118). This in particular holds true in the case of female characters in *Narendra Dai* as some male characters try to subdue the female voice that in some way fails to homogenize with patriarchal order, and reinforce male superiority. Even female members in *Swapnil Shahar* are walking alongside their male counterparts most of times in place of shouldering the plot equitably. On the whole, despite the authors’ sincere attempts to do justice to the female characters, it still seems that they are placed beneath the male characters for which though it would be hard to blame the novelists. That said, however, despite sharing many traits of character and exuding differences in so many regards, the female characters in both the novels significantly contribute in enlivening the plot and adding prominence to the scholarly value of these writers.

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