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Fusion of the Local and the Global in Parijat: Reading *Blue Mimosa*

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Abstract

This paper assesses how Parijat in her masterpiece *Blue Mimosa* deals with the issues of Nepal's global encounters. Primarily through one of the protagonists of the novel Suyogbir, Parijat weaves a story of a Nepali lahure who, in course of fighting the World War, interacts with the people abroad and brings in global experiences to his native country as he narrates the saga of his experiences with the female protagonist Sakambari. Significantly departing from her predecessors and also from her contemporaries primarily because of her serious concern with the global issues that no more affected only the people of her origin but those throughout the globe, Parijat in the novel caters to the new subjects to her readers. Her fascination with novel and experimental forms that rigorously redrew the boundaries of the traditional categories and her serious effort in familiarizing her readers with the global issues led her to the path of transcending her local experiences and thus acquiring a transnational stature. Applying Paul Jay's ideas on transnational literature, this paper analyzes how Parijat in the novel blends the local and the global experiences with craft and imbricates those diverse experiences to constitute a beautiful structure. Her unique mixture of characters representing various cultural milieus, selection of settings and philosophical depth in subject matter blur the boundaries of 'national' category of writing and thus create an ambience where the local and the global intersect.

Keywords: *fiction, experiment, global, encounter, national, transnational, literature, boundaries*

Parijat: An Experimental Novelist

Born in Darjeeling as Bishnu Kumari Waiba who later on headed to Kathamandu, seeking higher education and choosing Nepal as her permanent home, Parijat is one of the most read and discussed Nepali literati both in Nepal and India. She, an extensive reader herself, had an exposure to a host of thinkers and writers who left an indelible effect on her literary career. Primarily a poet, she later took interest in expressing herself through stories and essays, eventually culminating in novels. Unlike many of her contemporaries who took pride on exploiting 'local' experiences and subjects in their writings, Parijat, deriving impetus from the experimental writers and radical thinkers like Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Franz Kafka, Emile Zola, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett dared expand the horizon of Nepali literature not only eliciting insights from the outer experiences but also executing their fundamental beliefs and styles in dealing with local experiences. Arun Gupto argues, "The purpose of engaging in such a reading was mainly to decouple overused association of the fiction with existentialism prevalent in Nepali criticism" as "such criticisms delimit the quality of a work of art" (*Understanding Literary Theory* 50). So, reading Parijat, putting existentialist thinkers like Nietzsche and Sartre side by side is not to reiterate that *Blue Mimosa* is an existentialist novel or Parijat is an Existentialist, but to bring into focus the fact that how Parijat, a Nepali writer, going beyond the limits of national borders, familiarizes her (Nepali) readers with the trends and movements of the west. So, I have attempted to read *Blue Mimosa* in the light of transnationalism.

An experimentalist writer herself, Parijat ventured to work on a novel that, very few writers and readers of her day believed, would draw so much of attention and controversy in the history of Nepali literature. *Blue Mimosa* (*Sirishko phool*) published in 2022 BS that also won her *Madan Puraskar* in the same year is one of the very few examples in Nepali literature that has both pleased and tantalized the readers and critics alike. Both eulogized and condemned—eulogized for her ornate style and choice of diction as Shankar Lamichhane in his preface says, "The book is incredibly beautiful. If the writer allows, I'd call it a verse-novel, not only a novel. There is an unnoticeable entry of prose at times though. . . . What a flow of language and choice of diction!" (n. pag.) and condemned for deriving impetus from the western thinkers and writers as Govinda Bhatta says, "These days, only those writers and readers, being hypnotized by some western anarchist artists who are contaminated and are anti-social and ironically taking pride on being their off springs, and thus detaching themselves from their national culture and tradition . . . experiencing the emptiness of their heart and suffering from a sense of loneliness only can identify themselves with a character like Suyogbir" (*Parijat smriti grantha* 115). Yet *Blue Mimosa* is an epitome of a text that amalgamates the local and the global and thus achieves the status of being transnational. Rather than contemplating the issue of eulogy or condemnation, it is worth-discussing

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nihilism—existential nihilism—in *Blue Mimosa* so as to gauge the influence of the school of thought as such in the novel.

Nihilism, simply speaking, emphasizes the belief that all values—moral, ethical, spiritual and the rest—are baseless and that nothing can be known or communicated. Nietzsche defines nihilism as the situation which obtains when “everything is permitted.” If everything is permitted, then it makes no difference what we do, and so nothing is worth anything (Stanley Rosen xiii). And nihilism that is usually associated with extreme skepticism and relativism, in the 20th century, has been associated with meaninglessness of life. Existential nihilism fundamentally sticks to the notion that the world is without meaning or purpose. If so, then, existence itself is ultimately meaningless. Parijat’s Suyogbir in *Blue Mimosa* resembles the fundamental belief of existential nihilism when he says, “I’m empty in sum total. Did you hear me, why I don’t feel lazy about life is because I’ve come here to spend the rest of my life on my own way, spending each day as it comes. I returned empty” (7). If existential nihilism urges one to realize the fact that your existence is nothing then Suyogbir rightly says, “From now on I don’t have to run away from life” (7). His realization that what has been left with him is nothing gives him courage to live.

Parijat’s central characters—Suyogbir and Sakambari—are not degenerate beings as Govinda Bhatta claims. Rather they are existentialist characters who strive to affirm life. Existentialism or nihilism (as they are sometimes interchangeably used) is not, as some like Bhatta think, “an hysterical symptom of the irrationalism associated with the violence and disintegration of our time: it is a contemporary renewal of one of the necessary phases of human experience in a conflict of ideals which history has not yet resolved” (*Six Existential Thinkers* vi). As Harold John Blackham here argues, existentialism is much more than a mere reaction to irrationalism and violence of a particular period, the post WWII west, for instance. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre argues “that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself” (20). In the novel, responding to Suyogbir’s search for meaning in flowers, Sakambari says, If a flower buds for itself and opens for itself and, as if accepting some compulsion, falls whether it fights the black-bee or not, then why should it fall suffering the sting of the black-bee. It falls only for itself. It falls by its own will.” (*Blue Mimosa* 14). In this retort, Sakambari displays a great sense of individualism and autonomy. She, like Sartre, believes that we come to the world for our own sake, live here for our own sake and die for our own sake; we are responsible for what we do and how we live.

Blue Mimosa: A Transnational Novel

Paul Jay argues, “During the last few decades, both literary production and its study have moved beyond the traditional confines of the nation” (1). He further states, “Where only a few years ago Western literature seemed monolithic, with its study routinely divided according to national borders, literature written by authors from formerly marginalized or ignored regions of the world . . . has exploded in popularity, both inside and outside the academy” (1). *Blue Mimosa* framed in the canvas with the WWII in the backdrop and ingrained in existential philosophy, critiques the annihilating effect of the war and thus advocates humanity. Sakambari, a nihilist, via her sharp repartee, relegates a robust ex-British soldier Suyogbir to the level of a brute, forcing him to internalize the fact that war is itself a crime. Sakambari argues, “War is a crime, Shiva. The war we fight in someone’s name, under someone’s orders, is merely a crime committed by one individual against another. Every killer ought to write his crime on his forehead. It isn’t always apparent on the surface” (27). Suyogbir who used to reckon himself a brave Gurkha soldier is shattered to hear Sakambari’s expression: “You too are a criminal” (27). Here, Parijat is displaying her universal character. Condemning war, she has positioned herself as an advocate of peace.

Parijat, like Sartre, is an atheist. She has no faith on god and reflecting on Nietzsche’s ‘declaration of death of God’ she believes that God’s death is not necessarily the end of the world. She argues that the death of humanity can make difference to regulation of the world. Her belief is quite reflective of Sartre’s ideas: “Atheistic existentialism, of which I am a representative, declares with greater consistency that if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality” (Existentialism is a Humanism 20). Sartre is clear in his stance that it is human who comes to the world before any of his probable definition, that is, existence precedes essence. So, for him, human existence is exempt from any fetters of the society and every individual is responsible for what he is. Thus, human is the only reality. So does Parijat in arguing that death of humanity, and not the death of the God, can make difference to the world.

Parijat’s Sakambari says, “After committing a crime I wouldn’t try to wash it away like that Suyogji? To wash away a crime how laughable it is!” (*Blue Mimosa* 37). If one intends to seek relief from the burden of crime, then it is better s/he do it through interaction with another individual, and not to the God. And defying the belief of some of the religions in the world that sins can be washed away, she believes that once you commit sin you have to carry its burden throughout and the one who commits sin has to be entirely responsible for his crime. Parijat was so influenced by existentialist thinkers, particularly Sartre, that she once said:

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. . . I seek more freedom and get hopeless. . . . My life is solely mine; nobody can have authority over it. I'm a rational woman and I very well know what morality for me is. Whether choose a right or a wrong path of life is my own choice and I'm free to choose either of them. As a vain woman, I go ahead adamantly sticking to this very existential belief. (qtd. in Nayana Pradhan 65)

Parijat, since her adolescence, was strong enough to make her own choice and in the meantime she developed a habit of introspection that led her to envision life through her own lenses. She was quite clear about her philosophy of life: "My philosophy is nihilist philosophy. . . . Our age has brought onto our life uncertainty and doubt and its effect is so rampant that I cannot be an exception. Life is fraught with absurdity. . . . In a sense human can live and die even in the absence of any meaning" (qtd. in Pradhan 66).

Sakambari is so reckless and indifferent that even her loving brother Shiva and infatuated ex-British soldier Suyogbir feel intensive embarrassment to talk to her. In response to her brother's birthday wish, she says, "What's the use of living? Why live to be old? Shiva! You don't know how to bless. You should say, 'Die in time.' What is there that's really worth living for" (*Blue Mimosa* 26). Sakambari clearly states that she has no intention to live longer just for the sake of living. She articulates her ideas so powerfully that the two men—machos—are absolutely speechless and cannot help nodding at her expressions. Suyogbir, a stern ex-army, also gradually internalizes the reality of his life: "There was nothing for me when I was not in love and I will have nothing even when I'm in love. What is my worth? What is the worth of my love?" (31). Sakambari overpowers a stubborn macho man, eventually making him realize the fact that nothingness is only reality of life. Parijat's Sakambari resembles Sartre again: "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (*Existentialism is a Humanism* 20). Suyogbir further says:

Absurd love and absurd people often go hand in hand. The existence of love is an absurdity and I too was hugging an absurd love in my breast. I was finding out that I had to endure life in a cobweb of pain, that I had to suffer. How difficult it was to get through this life. It passes in loss and emptiness, in getting nothing. . . . (*Blue Mimosa* 48).

It is in this expression that Suyogbir realizes that the only reality of his life is nothing and what he is striving for is nothing itself. He also realizes that consciousness always yields pain in our life and says, "Ignorance is bliss" (33). The more he thinks of Sakambari the more he actualizes his emptiness: "Sakambari! Am I not a desert in myself? Am I not a mortuary in myself?" (46).

Parijat, being one of the few Nepali writers who had access to the writers abroad, not only loads her writings with philosophical jargons, but also skillfully plays with the

amalgamation of the local and the global and *Blue Mimosa* is one of the best examples of that kind. She has heavily drawn resources from the existential thinkers as far as her belief about life is concerned. But she has not relegated her text to the mere mimicry of the philosophical jargons. The presence of the philosophical insights rather elevates her to a position through which she can capture a wider range of the landscape that transcends the narrow local experiences. In *Blue Mimosa*, Parijat has been able to achieve a success that very few of her contemporaries could claim, that is, bringing in a glimpse of the WWII vis-à-vis a Nepali national working as a British soldier who fights for the British expansionist and eventually returns to native land just to realize that what has been left for him in his life is nothing. Parijat switches to a war scenario from tedious Suyogbir-Sakambari conversation and shifts her focus from a very personal level of defining life to a broader canvas where multiple elements representing geographies and cultures intersect with one another. Following is the description of a scenario as such:

The face of a Chin girl appeared before me and, turning her eyes, passed away. . . . She did not know poor thing, that men were everywhere. That at midnight in this vast jungle she was not alone. This was the encampment of the Gurkha regiment. Today or tomorrow the Japanese might be here, there might be a bombardment; many of the soldiers were hiding here in the bushes to kill or be killed. . . . (52)

In the quote above is the description of a unique scene where Parijat, through her narrator, describes a Chin girl, Burmese jungle, Gurkha regiment (the narrator himself being a Nepali) and the Japanese soldiers, all at a time.

Interesting is the elaboration on the Chin tribe: “. . . at the invitation of your head-hunter father, I sat, together with your dog, and ate the rice you had set on the mat and the garnished thigh of a wild buffalo you passed around” (53). Parijat tries to present a cultural rubric of a tribe that lives in the western part of Burma. Head-hunter father, rice, mat, whisky and wild buffalo are a part and parcel of the Chin tribe. More interesting is the comparison between the Chin girl and Nepali Kirat women: “Looking at you I thought of the Kirat women of our hills, but between your father and theirs, there was a great difference” (53). Suyogbir sees ‘his’ Kirat women through the Chin girl and, in the meantime, traces the difference between Kirat men and Chin men. Suyogbir talks about the universal nature of soldiers in particular and humans in general. He, on the one hand, says, “. . . but what did we soldiers want or need with such feelings?” (53) and, on the other, says, “If I am to die in the hands of the Japanese, that is death, too. There is nothing special about our death. If you die at my hands, that also is only death” (55). For him, being a Nepali and a Gurkha soldier or Chin girl makes no difference; he is a sexually inflamed man and she is just a site of exploitation.

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Talking about a universal appeal in *Blue Mimosa*, Margaret Sands says, “. . . Several of my students chose to write about their experience of reading *Blue Mimosa* and about the issues Parijat raises in the text. Jennifer Smith, a graduating senior expressed the feelings of all of us in her essay when she said, “. . . here is a voice that needs to be heard not only in Nepal, but the world over”” (*Parijat smriti grantha* 165). It was this universal, and not only Nepali, appeal of the novel to the readers abroad that Sands decided to take *Blue Mimosa* to Maryland University and incorporate it to the syllabus. Being transnational is therefore not necessarily being a part of the ‘centre’ (either Europe or America), but that stature can also be achieved writing from ‘nowhere’ and Parijat achieves that feat writing from Nepal.

Parijat, with a view to further elaborating on the effect of war, gives her narrator these expressions: “This was her end, the daughter of a head-hunter’s, an end submerged in the ambition of Hitler, an end as a sacrifice on the altar of British imperialism, an innocent end” (56). Parijat sheds light on the devastating effect of the war on the innocent humans like the Chin girl and in doing so she unravels the dark side of the war that is usually overlooked. Parijat further creates a scene that reminds us the horror of the war. Suyogbir says:

. . . First Seventh Gurkha Rifles battalion order: Companies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, long march from Makhring; platoon commander Suyog Bir Singh.” I tried to see my face in my sparking boots. I bade farewell to Makhring and its forest. Bodies bloody from bayonet plunges, stomachs burst by grenades, with their intestines pushed out, vultures hovering over corpse on the top of corpse, foxes circling who has done more, who less? What is death? With his pockets full of the fingers of those who had committed *harakiri*, carrying the fingers of corpses, a Japanese soldier was surviving on the thin hope of reaching his home. How absurd! I thought, what kind of people are they that the fingers in their pockets do not haunt them? What should we take home, the head of our enemies? (60)

The expression here discusses Gurkha rifles, Makhring, Kachin tribe inhabiting the Kachin Hills in northern Burma, and the burst human bodies scattered all around. It also talks about a Japanese soldier struggling for life and the Japanese ritual form of suicide, by slashing the abdomen, and commanded by the government in the cases of disgraced officials.

Similarly, Parijat incorporates Suyogbir’s involvement with yet another Burmese girl in the forest of Pidaung. Matinchi, the girl, is described as: “With a quavering tune, like an English soprano, a marvelous face comes into view. Wrapped in her lungi and blouse, she is like the orchids that bloom in the Burmese forest” (61). The reference of English soprano (a sweet singing female voice), British colonel Stephen, different brands of whisky and cigarettes and Khwannion Pan are some of other references Parijat has brought in the novel.

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The recurrent and one of most significant images Parijat has deployed in *Blue Mimosa* is Death Valley. Known for its highest temperature and nature of engulfing a number of humans, Death Valley here stands as a metaphor. Suyogbir says: “Death Valley. Death Valley. This is what it means to carry the burden of life. This is the life to which a living corpse came, completely emptied. . . . Now there is nothing left in me, nothing left in my body, which survived the life of ragged pants and khaki shirts, the malaria of the equatorial forest. My sins . . . were washed away by Death Valley” (66). Parijat first takes away to the darkness of Death Valley and immediately takes us back home. Suyogbir says, “Assuredly I survived and got to come home” (66). Then she takes us to Death Valley again. He says, “. . . my mind travelled back to Death Valley . . . Why go on living? How to get out alive? . . . Humanity has washed its hands of them” (66). Parijat has talked about British soldiers, Hebrew soldiers, Sikhs, Japanese soldiers, Burmese and others on the one hand and brings us back to our own experiences in Nepal on the other. In doing so, Parijat makes her character Suyogbir swing like a pendulum. He is the vehicle through whom Parijat shows us the scenes both in home and abroad, sometimes feeling the burden of existentialist philosophy and sometimes being terrified by the horrible images of war.

Conclusion

In this way, Parijat, more inclined to the philosophy of the existential thinkers, dramatizes the absurdities of the society more than any other writer till the date. In *Blue Mimosa* discussed here, her primary purpose is to excavate hypocrisy that masquerades the reality of the society and her invective hinges on the sadist nature of human being. She, as a transnational thinker, elaborates on her familiarity with the western world, its cultural spectrum, its way of representing that diversity, and indeed its portrayal of fluidity of human identity. In *Blue Mimosa*, she blends the local and the global experiences with craft, and imbricates those diverse experiences to constitute a beautiful structure. Her unique mixture of characters representing various cultural milieus, selection of settings and philosophical depth in subject matter blur the boundaries of ‘national’ category of writing and thus create an ambience where the local and the global intersect. Besides, her internalization of the tenets of existential philosophy sprouts from the ideology her characters usually carry on their back. Her novel amply exemplifies her belief that issues, incidents and experiences are no longer confined to the location of their origin and therefore attract the attention of the people irrespective of their culture and geography.

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