

Thus ‘the Writer’s Wife’ Writes? A Critical Conversation on Pragati Rai’s Bildungsroman¹

Tara Lal Shrestha & Bidhya Shrestha

Abstract

This research explores Pragati Rai’s life history from a naïve village girl to becoming an assertive author. It examines how her life stories intersect gender issues with politico-cultural contexts revealing resistance consciousness that counter deep-rooted hegemonic social order. Her husband Rajan Mukarung, a well-established Nepali writer, supports her bildungsroman. However, she revolts to the end embracing independence through an unofficial separation from her husband. Alike her female protagonists of the novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* (The Author’s Wife) and *Thangra* (The Stake) and the poetic persona of her collection of poems Baadee Bigyapti (Statement of the Badi Women), she appears seeking the subaltern publics of her own to actualize her voice. As theoretical notions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Naila Kabeer, and Nancy Frazer propose alternative public spheres for the existence of the subaltern women, the critical conversation on rebellious writer Pragati Rai’s bildungsroman story demands deeper level of discourses on the position of women in Nepali literary context.

Keywords: Gender normativity, subaltern publics, women empowerment

Introduction

This research explores how Pragati Rai’s bildungsroman - as a village girl, the author’s wife, a migrant worker, and an assertive author - creates space among subaltern

¹ Cite this article as: Shrestha, T. L. & Shrestha, B. (2025). *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, vol. 8 (2), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/craiaj.v8i2.86458>

Tara Lal Shrestha, PhD, teaches at Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4874-3001>; & Bidhya Shrestha, PhD, teaches at Central Department of Population Studies, Tribhuvan University, Nepal, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6701-6355>.
Email: shresthatara.tu@gmail.com

Article history: Received on September 18, 2025; Accepted October 31; Published November 20, 2025.
Peer reviewed under the authority of CRAIAJ, academic journal of Ghodaghodi Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal, with ISSN 2717-4611 (Print) and ISSN 2717-462X (Online).

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Full text can be downloaded: <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/craiaj> & <http://www.craiaj.info/>

publics in Nepali literature. Born on 25 April 1977 as the fifth child of Mahal Singh Rai and Manshila Rai, she joined local school in Sakela village, Khotang district, Diktel with her three sisters and two brothers. An indigenous girl from Rai family, she had freedom to move around village exploring things. She was active in participating cultural programs during the transitional period in Nepal. Resistance against *nirdaliya* (party-less) Panchayat political system was rising with underground politico-cultural programs. She would participate in various programs, recite poems, and frequently win awards.

Pragati Rai would go for the shopping up to the Headquarter of Khotang, walking a whole day. She met Rajan Mukarung on the way. His village was over the hill in four hours walking distance. In her words, Rajan Mukarung was deeply heartbroken; his girlfriend had been married off to someone else, a *lahure* (Gurung, 2021). To cope up with his depression, his family wanted to find him a girl. With a friend she stayed in his house for *khaja* (snacks) in the late afternoon. His mother persuaded Pragati Rai explaining that theirs was a family of writers and artists with good connections, and she could get access to art, literature, and higher education (personal communication, March 25, 2025; Gurung, 2021). She agreed to stay without formal marriage ceremony. She became a daughter-in-law of Mukarung family. She joined Annapurna Secondary School in Bhojpur upgrading in class eight, where her husband was in grade nine. Due to early pregnancy and childbirth, she had to stop her study. Her husband completed school, moved to Kathmandu, and transformed him into an activist author. She joined school again, took classes of major subjects only, and completed school education (personal communication, March 25, 2025).

Following her husband's footsteps, Pragati Rai moved to Kathmandu. She joined Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus. Her husband preferred collective culture. Cohorts of poets, writers, artists, and activists would assemble at their residence. She would mix up with them, listen their discussions, and participate in the critical debates. Rajan Mukarung, Hangyug Agyat and Upendra Subba had initiated a literary movement called Srijanshil Arajakata (Anarchist Creation Movement). It was a counter-hegemonic literary movement. Along with a cohort of politico-culturally conscious poets and writers, Pragati Rai continued writing poems, participating the contests, and winning awards in poetry recitation programs in Kathmandu.

Pragati Rai published her first book, the collection of poems, *Baadee Bigyapti* (Declaration of Badi Women) in 2009. She worked in a school as a teacher and

administrator, where she started drafting a novel titled *Saya* that never published because the manuscript was deleted from the school's computer. She went to Korea as a migrant worker in 2010. She completed her dream of becoming a novelist preparing a draft of her first novel from aboard while working as a migrant worker. She published her first novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* (The Author's Wife) in 2013. Though she calls it a novel that needs a serious revision, but *Lekhaka ki Swasni* established her in the subaltern public sphere. Her other novels *Birsiye ko Mrityu* (Forgotten Death 2018) and *Thangra* (The Stake 2021) substantiated her autonomy and power as a novelist.

In her first novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni*, Pragati Rai actualized gender issues, as a writer's wife, in Nepali fiction (Smriti, 2013). Her husband would often encourage her to keep on writing. Recalling those days she expresses, "Rajan would often say to me, 'you should keep on writing poems, which will help you to write novel later,' editing my creations" (personal communication, May 12, 2025; Gurung, 2021, p. 11). She had choices. She made a decision to go Korea as a migrant worker. Her husband did not interrupt her decision. Rather he helped her to edit and publish her collection of poems *Baadee Bigyapti* and her first novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni*. That sort of support discontinued after she separated from her husband. She wanted a moment to prove herself an independent author. People used to think that her husband was the backbone of her writing. Next, she found his extra-marital relationship because, in her words, "Writers are obsessive creature...and also more open than other people..." (personal communication, May 12, 2025; Gurung, 2021, p. 11). As she often openly explains, "I would always know about my husband's extra marital affairs because he would honestly inform me about his new relationship. Nor he tried to oppose my decision" (personal communication, May 12, 2025; Gurung, 2021, p. 11). In her words, he created environment to separate and she did not lament either to live together or separate. She preferred to love alone, separate, not breaking the relationship (personal communication, October 28, 2025).

After living separate from her husband, Pragati Rai published two more novels. She wanted to show her nonalignment with her husband in her writing, editing and publication process. People would charge her saying that her success in writing was depended on her husband's support. She wanted to show that she could write without his support, too. In such juncture, we both researchers met Pragati Rai multiple times for the interviews in 2025. She looked busy writing and editing books. We found her proud at

the mid-stage of her writing career among the subaltern public sphere repeating her self-declaration, “I feel I was born to write” (Rai, 2024; personal communication, May 12, 2025). But sometimes she lamented with a sense of failure within pride, “I have been writing for more than two decades but never thought I can get good award” (Rai, 2024; personal communication, May 12, 2025). She confessed, “When I was with Rajan Mukarung, honestly speaking, I would be surrounded by books, multiple manuscripts, and authors. We would have series of critical discussions. I could know politics of publishing; now I’m cut off with all these” (personal communication, July 26, 2025). But, she said, “I am lucky: I’ve children and grand children; I’m free, too, as if I’m unmarried” (personal communication, October 26, 2025).

We met Pragati Rai in the juncture of her mid writing career living with writing and editing books in 2025, separate from her husband. Formally she had husband, near her residence in Lalitpur. They were not legally separate. But, they were separate. She said, “I’m still ‘a wife of the author’ Rajan Mukarung; but we are living separate for years” (personal communication, October 26, 2025). In her words, to live with or separate both moments were memorable: “Author uses sharp, super short, sweet words even in the moment of dispute” ((personal communication, October 26, 2025). The following sections analyses Rai further life history, her bildungsroman, and transformation as a rebellious writer from the perspective of gender subaltern and women empowerment as a critical conversation.

Methodology

This study investigates the life history of Pragati Rai and her writings from ‘gender subaltern’ approach based on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Nancy Fraser blending with Naila Kabeer’s notion of ‘woman empowerment’. Spivak’s thought provoking notion about the existence of ‘gender subaltern voice’ from her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” has been applied to interpret and analyze Rai’s life history with reference to her writings. Nancy Fraser’s idea of creating subaltern public spheres of the oppressed looks relevant to locate Rai’s space of speaking. Kabeer’s concept of ‘woman empowerment’ helps to explore how Rai uses ‘resources’ to create ‘agency’, and gain ‘achievement’ as an author.

According to Kabeer, a woman needs ‘resources’, i.e. mentors, trainings, orientations, practices, exposures, family and collective supports. These resources, in the words of Kabeer, support a woman with choices to gain agency, increase ability in

decision-making, and transform life to the wellbeing. Kabeer calls it 'achievement', that means an accomplishment, or empowerment. Kabeer's conceptual framework of 'resources', 'agency', and 'achievements' fits to reflect Rai's life history as 'the writer's wife' that transforms into an independent writer.

At the same time Spivak's rhetorical question echoes, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" while accessing Rai's bildungsroman. How does she speak? What is the existence of her speaking? How is the foundation of her resistance and existence? These questions demand deeper level of understanding about agency. In such case, when the bourgeoisie public sphere appears exclusionary, as Fraser insists on the need of creating subaltern public spheres rather than depending on a single bourgeoisie public sphere, Rai forms subaltern publics to resist and rise.

The first and second both researchers being a writer cum researcher have deeper understanding on how structural dividend help male, upper-caste and elite community to exist in the bourgeoisie public sphere cornering the subaltern class, especially gender subaltern. Apart from auto-ethnographic experience of the both researchers, this study also incorporates personal interviews based on Rai's life history to substantiate how she used writing to transform her from a naïve girl to an assertive writer.

Analysis

An author seeking subaltern publics

Gender subaltern approach comprehends the history of the oppressed people, who are "rendered without agency" (Young, 2001, p. 345). For Gramsci (1992), subalterns or the working class people are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class, whose history is fragmented and episodic (p. 52-54). Explaining the nature of traditional and organic intellectuals, Gramsci envisions the new intellectual group as constructor, organizer, and 'permanent persuader', not just a simple orator (ibid., p. 10). In this regards, subaltern women cannot appear in public sphere, as Gramsci believes, with a true role of an intellectual by social function (ibid., p. 3). Spivak (1988) claims that the ideological construction of the elite keeps the patriarchy dominant, and in the absence of their history the subaltern cannot speak, "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (p. 287). In her revised version of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak (2013) further laments that with the growth of multinational capitalist and consumerist world the former colonies have shifted the structure of hegemony producing the new subaltern in the new world order, where women are doubly effaced (p. 525). Dominant politico-cultural and

economic strategies of the multinational consumerist society render the freedom of choice of the oppressed communities and disempowered women (Spivak, 1988, p. 277). In these contexts the subaltern cannot only speak in bourgeoisie public sphere but they also cannot know their position. To understand their position they need subaltern consciousness, “the subaltern publics” (Fraser, 1992). This critical discussion section further explores how Pragati Rai utilizes the ‘resources’ available around her to acquire ‘agency’, and ‘achievements’ from Kabeer’s ‘woman empowerment’, Spivak’s ‘gender subaltern’, and Fraser’s ‘subaltern publics’ approaches to actualize her dream of becoming a writer.

Resources of Pragati Rai

Jurgen Habermas when coined the idea of a “public sphere” in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962 (translated from German into English in 1989) it was imagined a single public sphere. This notion remained dominant in academia for some decades. Countering single bourgeoisie public sphere, Fraser (1992) proposed subaltern publics advocating multiple subaltern public spheres. In her view the oppressed communities need their own subaltern public spheres. Pragati Rai’s access to resources for becoming a writer appears interestingly significant to discuss about the process of her empowerment from the subaltern publics. For Fraser subaltern counter publics are discursive space where members of the oppressed groups articulate alternative identities against exclusion. Rai’s resources to becoming a writer include her family-relatives’ supports, husband and his cohorts, extended family members and relatives, friends within and outside the country. They have played role offering ‘resources’ to transform her life as Naila Kabeer calls it the first step of empowerment to a woman.

Born in 1977, in the era of Panchayat, Pragati Rai grew up in her village participating in counter-hegemonic political activities from the time when she was studying in primary level (personal communication, March 25, 2025). She would, however, speak eloquently. Her mother scolded her not to be a *fatyauri* (chatterbox). She kept on standing amidst the subaltern public spheres. She collected consciousness against caste-based discrimination. The early marriage events, and normative gender roles disturbed her child psychology. For instance, she had a good friend. They had naively planned to get married with the same male. But her friend eloped and that news shocked her. Her father took care of her when she was sick. Since she was born late, she was a

good friend of her father. She was angry with her friend. After six month she found her friend back to home with completely different get up, as a typical daughter-in-law. They cried bitterly when they met. She writes, “When love ends we hate; when hate ends love sprouts” (Rai, 2025). Young girl Pragati Rai realized how vulnerable a life of a daughter is in her society. She began to ask herself: Why a girl is not happy after marriage? Why Timma, her one of the spinster relatives, is getting married too late for *chulho* (getting space to spirit) that ones get only after marriage? She began to think critically about the role of women (Rai, 2025).

Pragati Rai learnt *Swosthani* recitation culture from her friend’s family that touched her heart when she heard a girl should get married before puberty with senior male no matter how aged the male is. Her father crafted a small *doko* fit to her body. She would go for collecting grass and firewood with her father. Her father taught her how to sing, write/compose songs, and perform. She began to write songs but they were influenced with *Swosthani* celebrating male supremacy. Once her father said, “You wrote Bahun songs *khushya* (youngest daughter); write Kirant songs” (Rai, 2025). She asked her father, “What a Kirant song looks like? How to write a Kirant song?” (Rai, 2025). With long thought her father said, “In Kirant songs all things are equal; all have equal rights to live; like three stones of a *chulho* support equally to cook, everything of the chain of ecosystem is equally important” (Rai, 2025). Her father taught her the essence of *Mundhum*, saying, “We should love to everything with equal care” (Rai, 2025).

Confessional expressions that Pragati Rai dares to write narrate her first time mensuration, too. Wild lice would be normal in her village, Mabu. She saw blood in her clothes and legs. She tried to find out the lice but the blood was flowing like urine. She called her mother with fear. Her mother said, “Oh, you have been blossomed now; you’re grown up; save yourself from *logne manche* (male), otherwise, you may be pregnant” (Rai, 2025). Who are *logne manche*? How to be safe from them? Whether her school friends (boys) were *logne manche*? She began to think. In such confusion she became daughter-in-law at the age of 14. In an interview Pragati Rai expressed the story of her marriage. Early marriage was common in her village. Her one of the relatives motivated her to visit the next village where her going to be husband was waiting (Limbu Podcast, 2025; personal communication, March 25, 2025). She stayed in his house in the evening. Her going to be mother-in-law persuaded her whole night to get married to his son, Rajan Mukarung, who was studying in grade nine. Pragati Rai was told that the family would

support her to pursue better career whatever she liked since Mukarung family had renowned artists, literary figures, and professionals. The family had relationships with wider public that could give her access to stay in the Capital City Kathmandu. The resources a naïve village girl saw in Mukarung family impressed her. She did not return back to her parents' home. She became a daughter-in-law of Mukarung family. The Great Grandfather of Mukarung family had nine wives, whose children were in better positions and posts including the principals and teachers. They motivated her to continue her study. She joined school again. She won prizes in poetry recitation or cultural programs (personal communication, March 25, 2025).

After pregnancy she could not continue her study. She gave birth to two sons. She rejoined school. She said, "The minor subjects I could understand through self-study" (personal communication, March 25, 2025). She had denied to get married with *Lahure* that offended her father throughout his life. But she realized *lahures* worked even after they were retired; she began to work in a school in Kathmandu. She dared to go abroad (Korea). With an implicit understanding she informally separated with her husband. She said, "I did not know how to love; I found myself loving to him who did not love me. Love is temporary, formless, and transitory. We cannot guard our love always, everywhere" (Rai, 2025; personal communication, July 26, 2025).

Nevertheless, Rajan Mukarung's cohort appeared politico-cultural-literary museum for her writing. She could read contemporary books and their manuscript, participate in the discourses, and engage in critical debates. There were no restrictions to expressions and participation in the cohort of author Mukarung (personal communication, July 26, 2025). He preferred a collective culture by crossing the boundaries between personal and public. Poets, authors, artists, critics, and activists disturbed Pragati Rai during her exam. But, very disturbing kinds of gatherings turned into the solid materials to her writings. She confessed during personal interviews, "I need not to visit library or book stores to read recent books. Rajan would bring home books, manuscripts, writers, and critics. I could understand the texts and contexts listening critical discussions happening in our apartment" (personal communication, July 26, 2025). She further confessed, "Participating in such discussions, I learnt how to write, and incorporate our indigenous aesthetics – our cultural myths, symbols, and images in writings. I also knew strengths and limitations of the so-called established authors" (personal communication, July 26, 2025).

Agency of Pragati Rai

Pragati Rai had public sphere that was politico-cultural-literary programs from her early teens. She agreed to become the young daughter-in-law of Mukarung family. She was the sole decision maker. A true indigenous girl, she chose her husband dramatically, struggled to study after the birth of her two sons, and moved to Kathmandu. She observed poets/writers' world closely. Hot debates and discussions would keep on till mid-night in her apartment. She decided to work in a school that helped to support her economic autonomy. She learnt Korean language, worked as language instructor, and ultimately went to Korea as a migrant worker. She said, "I informed to my husband that I was leaving the country" (personal communication, May 12, 2025). In her words, her husband would not deny her decision. She was free to choose her way of life. She further said, "My husband knew I would not change my decision. So he would not oppose my decision" (personal communication, July 26, 2025).

Pragati Rai wanted to write novel. She was writing a novel titled *Saya* while she was working at school in Kathmandu but, as she often said, the manuscript was deleted from school's computer. In Korea, working hard as a migrant worker, she dared to lead literary organization, and prepared a draft of her novel, *Lekhaka ki Swasni*, as "a saga of an working class woman Numa; the male protagonist Shushanta as an author appears as if he was Rai's husband, Rajan Mukarung" (Adhikari, 2013). Presenting her husband-looking protagonist as an antihero blending fact and fiction Rai prepares a platform to express gender subaltern voice. Through the contestations and compromise, she creates subaltern public sphere.

The most serious decision she made was letting her husband go away of her life to live with his girlfriend. She did not like to divorce formally. Nor did she create any hindrance between the families. She chose to live with her two sons. She dared to live by writing, editing, and publishing books that look almost impossible in Nepal. The researchers found her hopeful to sustain her writing career expanding her relationship with the subaltern publics. Alike Ambedkar (2019), who advocates the mantra "educate, agitate, and organize" to uplift the oppressed community, Pragati Rai emphasizes the need of awakening, though she looked naïve about Ambedkar's political motive. Dalit women's voice she blends with indigenous community in her writings echoes Ambedkar - "educate, agitate, and organize" (Ambedkar, 2017). She presents female protagonists as

strong advocates of equality in *Lekhaka ki Swasni* and *Thangra* including her first book, the collection of poems, *Baadee Vigyapti*.

In an interview with Biswa Limbu Podcast Ep 413, Pragati Rai expresses her life stories as a woman, and a writer saying, “Marriage is still being organized when someone is not clear about the meaning of the marriage” (00:07:25-00:07:50). In her view, marriage is not only being together; moreover, to have children is one of the most pleasant moments in life. To be a mother is one of the most precious gifts to a woman. But, as her writings show, to be a wife, mother, and writer looks a tough job to a woman. She feels, she failed to balance family, work, and writing. However, as she claims, she used writing as a therapy, like a tool of empowerment.

Bildungsroman of Pragati Rai

Pragati Rai used available resources whatever she could get from her early teens, and developed her agency to becoming an author. She had opportunity to read books, participate in gatherings within and outside her residence, and express her thoughts. She began to appear more confidently in the public stages in Kathmandu. She would be around larger groups of poets, authors, artists, and activists. Her husband, Rajan Mukarung, would edit her writings and add insights. She expressed once, “My husband never discouraged me regarding my writings; he would rather encourage me to keep on writing. He helped to publish her first and second book. She firstly published an anthology of her nineteen poems, titled *Baadee Bigyapti* (Declaration of the Badi Women) in October 2009. She writes on her concern of her understanding about poetry,

The oppressed communities, the refugees, dominated by their own state power like to explore their history more significant than landing on the moon and when they choose arm revolution instead of peace then they look cruel castist. Naturally, they act to free chains of their hands and legs rather than reaching far out of future prosperity. And, if someone is suffering by something that thing for them is the enemy. I knew the power of the poem this way. (Rai, 2009)

As Gurung (2021) writes, “although she is widely known for her first novel, *Lekhaka ki Swasni* Rai burst onto the Nepali literary scene with a slim collection of powerful poems *Badee Bigyapti*” (p. 11). The poem was written after she witnessed the naked Badi women protest outside Singh Darbar demanding their right to citizenship in 2007. The Badi women’s protest had drawn wider public attention then. It was the high transitional

period in Nepal when the country was in the process of restructuring. All the oppressed communities were seeking space in the mainstream. Rai witnessed naked Badi women's protest outside Singh Darbar demanding citizenship just after People's Revolution in Kathmandu that motivated her to write the titular poem of her poetry collection *Baadee Bigyapti*,

My name is naked
My people are naked
Where I stand, there
the ground is seen as naked, today...
If you do not want to make me like you, Sir
I will most certainly make you like me (Gurung, 2021, p. 11)

Rai extended her voices of resistance dedicated to the marginalized women in her second book, widely acclaimed novel, *Lekhaka ki Swasni* (The Author's Wife) published in 2014. She has set the novel in semi-autobiographic plot. Most of the readers, including established writers, read *Lekhaka ki Swasni* as her autobiography. In "Afno Kura" (Author's Words), in the first page of the novel, Rai writes,

वास्तविक जीवनमा पनि म 'लेखकको स्वास्नी' नै हँ । त्यसो हुँदा यो उपन्यासमा लेखिएको कथा जीवनी लाग्न सक्छ । तर, यस्तो कदापि होइन । म जहिल्यै लेखकहरूको माहौलहरूमा बाँचे । तिनै माहौलहरूलाई लिएर उपन्यास बनाउने ध्येय हो मेरो । यो कुनै दिल्लगी होइन, बरु सम्मान गन चाहेको हँ । यति हो, अहिलेसम्म पुरुषले व्याख्या गन महिलाको मुद्दालाई अझ उजिल्याउने प्रयास मात्रै हो 'लेखकको स्वास्नी' ।

I'm 'a wife of the author' in actual life, too. Therefore, the story of the novel may sound as a biography but that is not true. I always lived with authors. I aimed to write a novel with the atmosphere that I lived with. It is not a joke, rather a respect. The fact is that I tried to raise women issues in *Lekhaka ki Swasni* taking the burden of the male writers. (p. i)

Pragati Rai dedicates the novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* to all the authors. The male protagonist Sushanta resembles with Rajan Mukarung regarding the issue he raises of caste, class and ethnicity. The female protagonist Numa appears as Pragati Rai. The school life, love affair in school, poetry recitation programs, struggle of the author, seeking opportunity as migrant worker, their dreams and destinies echo with their real life despite Rai claims the plot of her novel merely a fiction.

Her husband Rajan Mukarung loved collective culture in and outside the house and Pragati Rai as a wife has different approach to look that atmosphere. Rajan loved to live in collective culture of gathering and discussion that helped to sharpen critical lenses of the author. Pragati Rai was free to take part in such occasions (Rajan Mukarung, personal communication, July 17, 2025). An indigenous woman is often obviously more expressive and free to decide. Pragati Rai appears a subversive woman as a wife of the author. Through the story of the novel she expresses her view on male, her husband, and her friends:

हल्ला त सायद त्यतिबेला मात्र हन्छ जतिबेला अर्को जात प्रवेश गछ, त्यो हो पुरुष । यो जात नभई पनि नहने, हँदा पनि साह्रै उदण्ड...यिनका उदण्डताहरूले संसार यति त्रासमय भइसक्यो कि जन्मने नयाँ बच्चा पनि यो दुनियाँलाई दिउँ कि नदिउँ हन्छ...मालिकले बफादार कुकुर पाल्न परेजस्तै उदण्डताबाट सुरक्षित हुनाका लागि नै होला छोरा अनिवाय भएको...वास्तवमा असल पुरुषको निमाण कसरी गन ? असल पुरुषको खोजीमा मात्रै लाग्नु नै महिला आफू असुरक्षित हुनु हो ।

A home is noisy when the next male appears. Males are essential but their wild manners have produced so much terror that ones hesitate to produce new baby to this world. We need son to protect ourselves from bad males.... In fact how to generate good male? Females remain unsafe because they just run after gentle males. (p. 41)

The protagonist of the novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* Sushant (the activist author) comes to his rented room with authors and activists ignoring the paucity of food, shelter, and essentials at home. He has tobacco and cigarettes taking habit that the female protagonist Numa (the author's wife) dislikes. It was not first time. He frequently brings authors, artists, and activists home without consulting family members. Once, after spending nights and days outside, Sushanta comes home with three other friends. They had planned to have launch but the gas cylinder was empty while preparing launch. They went out to eat at a hotel leaving two daughters and Numa with empty glasses and plates that Numa served to them. Numa narrates the absurd scene:

हामीसँग कोठामा चियाका रित्तो गिलासहरू अनि खाइसकेर किचिमिची पारिएका चुरोटका ठुटाहरू....म चरक्कै भएँ । एउटा नमिठो प्रश्नले घोच्यो: के यस्तै रित्तो र किचिमिची पारिएको जिनिस हँ म ?....म एउटी लेखकको स्वास्नी मात्र रहिनँ अब । दुई सन्तानको आमा पनि हँ....म जरूर विदेश जान्छु ।

In our room, there were empty tea glasses and remains of the used cigarettes seared and smeared....I broke with a bitter question: am I an 'object' like these empty glasses and smeared cigarettes?....I'm not only a wife of the author but also a mother of two children....I must go abroad. (p. 54)

Pragati Rai tactfully twists the plot changing the caste, class, and region of her husband with the protagonist Sushanta keeping more similar of Numa with her own. Further, she has applied anti-normative gender role through female characters. Her love-hate relationship appears openly expressed through the female characters. In various talks, interviews and writings Pragati Rai has expressed the context of becoming a poet, novelist, and the author's wife. The context of her thought of writing the first novel *Saya* also sounds autobiographical that was never published; As Pragati Rai often tells the story, in *Saya* there was a context where the author's wife is waiting the author husband for the dinner together. She reworked and *Saya* transformed into *Lekhaka ki Swasni*. Echoing the context of *Saya*, one of the characters in the novel asks satirically to Numa,

अनि चारचार दिनसम्म लोभे हराउँदा पनि तपाईं नखोजिकन बस्नु हन्छ ?...अवश्य बाहिर केटी होला... अनि लोभे घर नहँदा तपाईंलाई खल्लो लाग्दैन ?

When husband disappears for four days, why don't you make inquiry of his where about?....He surely has a girl outside....When husband is out, don't you feel empty? (p. 138)

The female protagonist Numa compromises as she has a high respect on author. She treats her husband as an author of the nation, a property of the people. She performs split personality type of actions time and again. She looks helpless about how to handle her relationship with her husband, who is careless towards family. Numa plays confused role about whether she could continue her relationship with him or not. These expressions of the Numa obviously resembles with the inner psyche of Pragati Rai:

....मलाई थाहा छ...ऊ त एउटा लेखक हो । समाजको कुनै हिस्सा हो, देशको कुनै एक असल नागरिक हो । सम्बन्ध यति छ, ऊसँग मिलेर मैले दुई छोरी जन्माएँ...वास्तवमा ऊ मेरो लोभे होइन, एउटा स्वतन्त्र लेखकलाई म आफ्नो जीवनीको भार बोकाउन पटकपटक प्रयास गर्छु र बिफल हुन्छु...ऊसँग बाह्र महिनामा काँब तीन महिना त सँगै हुन्छु...पराया मान्छेले माया गर्न सक्छ नगन पनि सक्छ । माया गर्नु भन्ने गवको कुरा हो, गरेन भन्ने पनि फरक पदन । मलाई गव लाग्थ्यो कुनै लेखक मेरो छेउमा छ, ऊ मेरो परिवारमा आएर बसेको छ । ऊ देशको लागि साहित्य गर्छ, ऊ त देशको गहना हो र पनि मेरो यो दुःखी परिवारमा यसरी बसिरहेछ । मैले उसलाई माया गर्नुपर्छ । ऊसँग म आभारी हुनुपर्छ । उसको कहिलेकाहीँको सहयोगको लागि म धेरै ऋणी छु...।

I know he is an author – nation property. My relation is that I gave birth to two daughters living together with him.... In fact, he is not my husband; I frequently fail to carry my burden to a free author. I live with him three months in a year....Such an alien man may

or may not love me. If he loves me it is a great thing; if he does not love it is not a big thing. I am proud of him because an author is near me, living with my family. He is dedicated in literature for the nation; he is the beauty of the nation; such a great personality is living with my poor family. I should love him, proud of him. I am obliged with his occasional support. (pp. 167-68)

These expressions uttered via female protagonist Numa looks connected to the inner psyche of Pragati Rai as a wife of the author. She has given birth to two children living together with her author husband. The author is her husband but it looks as if he was not her husband or partial husband, who stays out more often in the name of preparing manuscript. She fails to keep on the burden of domesticity time and again. He more often disappears and appears occasionally. Such an alien-looking husband may love her or may not love her. She feels lucky that such a great writer is living with her and her family, at least, occasionally. She is proud of him whether he cares her or not because he works for the nation, contributing to national literature. She feels that he is the property of the nation. She has to love him, care him, and proud of him. Such thoughts of Numa clearly resemble the past and present thoughts of Pragati Rai. She lives separate with her husband Rajan Mukarung in actual life. He is still her husband legally but the relation looks pending in-between belong or not belong to as the protagonist Numa speaks about her relationship with her husband in relation to their children. Blending fact and fiction, she writes:

तिमेरको बाउ त लेखक हो, देशको गहना हो । समय बच्यो भने ऊ तिमेरको बाउ हो, मेरो लोभे हो...वास्तवमा ऊ तिमेरको बाउ होइन, ऊ मेरो लोभे होइन । वास्तवमा हामी एकलै छौं । हाम्रा समस्याहरू हामी आफैँले सुल्झाउनुपर्छ (१६९) । ...मैले किन लोभेको, ए सरी, यो लेखकको गोडा ढोम्पुन (१७४) । साच्चै भन्ने हो भने छोरीको बाउ, दुबै छोरी जन्मँदा तिमी थिएनौ । अस्पताल आफै गएको हँ, औषधि मूलो आफै गरेका हँ । तिमी नभए पनि घरव्यवहार चलाएकै छु (१८०) ।

Your father is an author, the beauty of the nation. If time allows he is your father, my husband.... In fact, his is not your father, not my husband. In fact, we are lonely. We have to solve our problems ourselves....(p.169) Why do I bow to my husband, oh sorry, to this author's feet.... (p. 174). In your absence too, I gave birth to children and have run the family (p. 180).

As in the novel *Lakhaka ki Swasni* the degree of autonomy of the female characters rise with resistance consciousness. The author plans to disappear to write for months. Numa says, "You go away and write freely; I cannot stop you and disturb your

writing passion” (p. 213). When he feels lonely, he calls her. She is like a doll to him. At the same time she is free to decide. She looks a representative indigenous woman married to a struggling writer, who does not care about the livelihood of the family members. Numa is determined to leave the country seeking opportunity at abroad as migrant worker. She says,

मैले सुशान्तलाई हेर्ने । ऊ मेरो छातीमा अडेसिएर रौंलाउँ गरिरहेको रहेछ । मलाई लाम्यो, यो लोमे भन्ने जात कहिल्यै नहकिने बच्चा रहेछ । मैले पनि उसको हातलाई दहो गरी समाएँ । भने, तिमी सबभन्दा सफल लेखक बन् । परेको म बेहोरौंला ।

I looked at Sushanta's eyes. He was going to cry leaning on my chest. I thought, the *logne* (husband) is such a child that never grows up. I caught his hand strongly and said, “You become the best author, my promise, I manage hindrances. (p. 225)

Reading ending part of the novel recalls the dream of the real author, Rajan Mukarung. The dream of the protagonist author to write the best novel and win the established award connects with the dream of the real author in his struggling phase. The male protagonist gives good news to the female protagonist that he has completed the manuscript of his novel when she was leaving the country. It was pathetic moment. She replies saying, “Congratulations” (p. 226). In real life, too, as the protagonist of the novel, Pragati Rai goes abroad as a migrant worker seeking economic base to her family, when her husband Rajan Mukarung was struggling as a rising author, earning fame and awards in Nepal.

Rai's fourth book - her third novel - *Thangra* (The Stake) appeared after her second novel *Birsiyeko Mrityu* (The Forgotten Death) as the sequel of her first novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* (The Author's Wife). In *Thangra* Rai expresses her deep concern on woman empowerment with equal emphasis on resistance and solidarity. She advocates lineage rights to the daughter as a son and for that she highlights the role of male and other stakeholders as the 'stake'. The novel begins with the scene of stake, need of the stake for vegetable plants to sustain. People compare daughters with broken stakes. But the author looks active to prove daughter equal to son to hold pedigree of the family, countering 'a broken stake' image. The novel revolves around the quest of equal rights to the women. Rai seeks as Spivak and Fraser indicate 'gender subaltern position' and resistance for 'subaltern publics'. She is in search of the solidarity for establishing lineage

rights to daughters as equal as son. She opposes the dominance of patriarchy. In her third novel *Thangra Rai* writes,

लहरालाई थाङ्ग्राको सहारा चाहिए जस्तो मानिसलाई पनि सन्तानको सहारा आवश्यक हन्छ...तर 'छोरीको जहान'
र 'सुकेको थाङ्ग्रा'को कुनै भरोसा नलामे संस्कारलाई यहाँ उल्टाइएको छ (७) ।

Plant needs the stake as human needs children...but the family from the daughter's clan is taken like 'a broken stake' and this notion has been deconstructed here. (p. 7)

Pragati Rai's bildungsroman transformed her from a naïve village girl to a rebellious writer – from a poet to a novelist. She had resistance consciousness from her early stage of writing. She expressed her resistance consciousness through writing poems. Her poem "Chori Janmauchhu" (I Give Birth to Daughter) is one of the examples, which has been incorporated in her first book, the collection of her poems, *Baadee Vigyapti*. She keeps on demanding not only equal rights to the women; she further claims pedigree rights to the daughter that comes to have been elaborated in her novel *Thangra* (The Stalk). She writes,

प्रत्येक देशले	Each country
प्रत्येक मिनेटमा	Each minute
एउटा नयाँ नागरिक जन्माउँछ	gives birth to a new citizen
म छोरी जन्माउँछु ।...	I give birth to daughter...
सह-अस्तित्वको युद्ध	We've to sign the law
सह-वंशाधिकारको कानुन	Of co-existence
सह-संघर्षको नीतिमाथि गनु छ – हस्ताक्षर ।	Equal pedigree rights
	And have to sign on the culture
	Of co-resistance (p.66)

The poem celebrates the birth of daughter opposing male-centric culture that has established patriarchal hegemony. The poetic persona not only wants to move beyond her mother's dream of liberation or her lived experience as a daughter but she also demands full rights to the daughter to carry on the pedigree of the family. As Gautam (2024) points out, "Rai resists discrimination between son and daughter, and demands the rights of equity with pedigree right to the daughter as of son in the family" (p. 59).

By the mid-stage of her writing career, when we met her in her late forties, Pragati Rai has not only published four books in her two decades of writing career, she appeared as an active actor in socio-cultural activism. She has served as the chairperson of two organizations namely Mulbato Foundation and Nepal-Korea Culture Star, and the Vice-chairperson of Kirant Writers' Association. She achieved prizes namely Bimal

Full text can be downloaded: <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/craiaj> & <http://www.craiaj.info/>

Smriti (2003), Nationwide Poetry Festival (2008), Online Srijana Pratiyogita (2009), Abhitthan Pratibha Puraskar (2011), Pahichan Puraskar (2024). Furthermore, her novel *Thangra* was shortlisted for Madan Puraskar.

Conclusion

Pragati Rai transformed her life from a naïve village girl to an assertive but compromising author. She utilized resources to agency formation as Naila Kabeer indicates to ‘women empowerment’ and established her in subaltern public sphere as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Nancy Fraser advocate. She, alike her female protagonists of the novel *Lekhaka ki Swasni* (The Author’s Wife) and *Thangra* (The Stake) in particular and the poetic persona of her collection of poems *Baadee Bigyapti* (Statement of the Badi Women), keeps on countering hegemonic social order with care. For instance, she chose sami-separation from her husband. We found her, like her female protagonists, lingering in limbo of emancipation. Spivak argues that the most marginalized women (poor, rural, Dalit, Indigenous – in particular women) are systematically silenced by dominant power structures, i.e. feudal, colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist hegemony. In her view even well-intentioned organizations or academics often speak for them rather than creating space for their voices imposing ‘empowerment’ policies and programs without consulting local women and community. To break elitist hegemony and epistemic violence, Spivak highlights the need of strategic essentialism for politico-cultural solidarity. Pragati Rai’s writings demand such solidarity to decolonizing or defeudalizing the common sense on gender role as Kabeer defines woman empowerment with the matrix of three interrelated dimensions: resources (material, social or human), agency (decision-making power or voice), and achievements (realized outcomes). But, she rejects radical path of resistance. Like Spivak, who highlights ethical responsibility of researchers/activists to learn from below listening to subaltern women without romanticizing or speaking for them, Kabeer critiques simplistic economic measures emphasizing structural barriers and need of critical engagement on social relation approaches. Fraser further suggests to creating multiple subaltern public spheres to the oppressed since bourgeoisie public sphere exclude them. The bildungsroman of Rai as an author like the characters of her novels *Lekhaka ki Swasni* and *Thangra* or poetic persona of her collection of poems *Baadee Vigyapti* presents the subtle life history of gender subaltern’s psychological, moral, and intellectual growth. Her lived experience resembles with the journey of young female protagonists, who

come across self-discovery, identity formation, and personal struggle navigating societal expectations, overcoming the conflict between politico-cultural norms and individual desires. Rai's lived experience and her writings appear as a dialogue between individual and society intersecting the issues of class, caste, gender, ethnicity, culture, and nationality of contemporary Nepal. She looks living a life in-between the loss and gain of her semi-separation from her husband. Her writings reflect her positionality as an author's wife seeking agency of her own. Her bildungsroman demands further deeper discourses regarding women position in Nepali politico-cultural-literary context.

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