

Causes, Effects and Consequences of Cultural Differences: Reading Nepali Migrants' Literature in West Asia *

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Abstract

This exploratory study deals with the depiction of causes, effects and consequences of cultural differences between the Nepali transnational migrants in West Asia and the citizens of the nations in this locale as seen in the literary creations of Nepali migrant writers. About a million Nepali migrants work in the Middle East. In the three decades of this migration, they have undergone many experiences of awe and shock caused by their cultural differences with the host land societies. Mainly caused by the differences in terms of religion, social management and law, the Nepali migrants feel difficult to adjust in the respective societies and they bear the consequent discomforts. These experiences have been the base of the Nepali literary creations in that transnational locale. The authors have expressed these realities in their poems, novels, stories, essays and memoirs. This article shows how these writings have portrayed the impact of closed Islamic society unlike the open society in Nepal; occupation based social hierarchy unlike the caste based one in Nepal; differences in culinary items and chance of personal freedom; distance between male and female; the traditional concept about the housemaids and workers; and other socio-cultural discriminations on the migrants in West Asia. The texts under analysis show that whatever is the social background back in Nepal, all Nepali migrants have the same culture, i.e. Nepali; and so they try to save it for their solace in the hostland.

Keywords: Cultural differences, literature, transnational locale, Nepali migrants, West Asia.

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Trends of Nepali Migration to West Asia

The West Asian countries that are also known as the Middle East, from Euro-American perspective, are the major destinations for Nepali labour migrants for last three decades. The report of the Government of Nepal (2018) mentions that, in the last thirty years, the trend of Nepali transnational migration has taken a paradigm shift. Up to AD1981, the major destination for such migration was India amounting to 93.1 percentages. By AD2011 it dropped to 37.6 percentages (7). The new trend of Nepali migration is to move to Malaysia (29.88%), Qatar (21.57%), Saudi Arabia (20.37%), UAE (10.62%), Kuwait (2.54%), South Korea (1.32%), Bahrain (0.86%) and Oman (0.63%) (11). The data show that the recent Nepali migration to West Asia is growing.

Different researches have established that the transnational migration is one of the vital socio-economic aspects of contemporary Nepal. In this regard, the report of International Labour Organization (ILO) on the condition of Nepali transnational migration states:

Over the years, labour migration for foreign employment has been a vital livelihood option for the Nepali population. While seasonal migration to India especially from certain areas of Nepal has had a long history, the liberalized economy and political environment of the nation after the 1990s formalized labour migration as an opportunity for employment. (Foreword)

Nepali migrants took the growing opportunity for South Asian people to reach to and work in West Asia that started with the 1973 oil crisis which “saw a massive demand for labour created in the Middle East where the new oil revenues funded large-scale infrastructure projects” (Hugo 394). The largest number of such migrants are involved as “mainly unskilled and semi-skilled workers who are employed in low paid, low status, so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) jobs that are eschewed by local workers in fast growing, labour-short nations of . . . the Middle East” (400). Similarly, Prem Bhandari discusses the reasons of Nepali migration to the area and concludes that “relatively deprived households are more likely to send away their member(s) for work reasons than from relatively less deprived (or relatively well-off) households” (496). Thus, the migration of the Nepali people to West Asia is for the need and benefit of both the sending and receiving countries.

Statement of Problem and Objectives

Cultural differences between the migrant’s homeland and host land exert impacts on the way they live in the new land. And the way they live casts an effect on the emotion that is expressed in and through literary creations. As the cultures of the Nepali people in which they grew up is different from both the Islamic and the Jewish cultures of West Asia, there appears the impact on the life, emotion and creativity of the Nepali writers who live in that locale. So

the problematic of this study is whether this is the case in reality or not. To find out the answer to this basic problem the following research questions are used:

- What is the impact of the home and host cultural differences on the Nepali migrants in West Asia?
- How are these impacts reflected in the transnational Nepali literary creations?

The objectives of this study are to find the impacts of cultural differences on the life of the Nepali migrants to West Asia as reflected in literary creations; and to exhibit how the reflection of such life is seen on their emotions and consequent creations.

Basic Tenets of Cultural Differences and their Effects: A Review of Literature cum Methodology

Researches have shown the reasons behind Nepali migration to West Asia. *Migrant Labors in the Gulf: Summary Report* (2008) published by Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS), Georgetown University, Qatar summarises the history of the relationship between the citizen and the migrant in the Gulf. It has traditionally been centered around the question of labor: “Connections between the Gulf and other parts of the world were built around the pearling industry, trade, kinship relations and religion”. It further states that migrant labor is “usually depicted as a transient activity”. As a result, “although many laborers in the GCC are indeed short-term employees, this masks the long-term and more culturally and socially-integrated forms of labor that exist in the Gulf”. Similarly, as the GCC states “strive toward knowledge based economies, long-term development is regarded as the responsibility of the national workforce” (Abstract). Nepali labours are also part of the same short-term work force.

The report also highlights the fact that non-citizens are “a significant part of the Gulf states’ population— ranging from 25% in Saudi Arabia to 66% in Kuwait, to over 90% in the UAE and Qatar” because “unlike transnational migrants and diasporic groups in other parts of the world, in the Gulf they are unlikely to ever become naturalized citizens”; the national policies ensure the non-assimilation of the migrants in the society; and so they conceive of foreign residents as “temporary labor migrants” or “guest workers,” and “the working conditions of this population are considered to be determinant of their experiences in the Gulf”. The report concludes: “Anchored by the *kefala* or sponsorship system, this assemblage both constructs and disciplines foreign residents into “temporary labor migrants” (3). Such a system has effects on the nature of migration and the attitude of the migrants to the citizens and vice versa. The report highlights that “[t]he culture, behaviors, and values of migrants can also influence the native populations” (12). But mostly, the migrants are affected and influenced by the society of the destination.

Such mutual influence and effect are the result of the cultural differences between the immigrants and the nationals of a particular nation. Myron Weiner concludes that migrants are generally perceived as a threat to the cultural identity of the nationals ("Security" 110). The scholars of migration and culture have mainly discussed the three basic reasons for such differences and their effects: religion, social management and law.

Differences in the religions are the primary causes of the cultural and emotional distinctions between the Nepali migrants and the native people in West Asia. Religion is a strong base of people's thoughts and consequent life styles. As most of the Nepalis living and working in West Asia are non-Islamic, primarily the Hindus; and the nationals there are Islamic except in the Israel, the contrasts in their religions have a great impact on their relations. So, it is useful to refer to Marc Gaborieau who discusses how the Hindus and the Islam take each other's community as opposite in many aspects of their life:

The members of each community see the other's religion as diametrically opposed to their own, as an inverted religion, [*ultra dharmā*]. Actual features of each religion or even made up symbols are arbitrarily picked up to show that no conciliation is possible: the main example is the opposite privileged direction of worship, East for the Hindus, West for the Muslims. (8)

Like this idiom of opposition, Gaborieau talks about the idiom of superiority, idiom of confrontation, the ritual of hostile relations, ritual of segregation, and their treatments of cow. He finds that "each community sees his own as superior, the other as inferior". As a result they have "traditionally nurtured sentiments of hostility" that "are not only expressed in a well codified idiom" but also are "acted out in stereotyped behaviours with an intense religious content". It has given the space for the "ritual of segregation" (9). As the most of the countries in West Asia are Islamic states and Islamic culture works "as the dominant unifying factor" (Culcasi 591), "Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Easterners are today subjected to derogatory and racist stereotypes that would be considered unacceptable for other groups, such as Asians, blacks, Jews, or Hispanics" (594). These differences create problems in the relation between the nationals and the Nepali immigrants there.

Along with the religious differences, the differences in social managements also create problems. Nepali people are habitual to work in democratic and open society. But it is not the case of the counties in West Asia. To raise one's voice for the human rights is a common practice in Nepal. But "there are still fewer trade union rights in this region [West Asia] than anywhere else in the world." For example, in Saudi Arabia "although a new labour code came into force in 2005, trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes" were "still banned" up to 2007 (Molinari 17). Despite this condition, the South Asian migrants work there because "they can send remittances and make a better life for themselves back home" (Ali 27). The

companies claim that although “Nepali workers are not very strong, they are sometimes small,” they hire them because “they are not very expensive” (Iskander 236). So, from the time of hiring itself, Nepali workers are discriminated.

As a result, the condition of Nepali migrants is not very good in West Asia. Tom O’Neill reports the cases of Nepali young girls being sold in Qatar. Devendra Bhattarai also reports the cases of many Nepali house keepers in Qatar complaining about their master’s threat that they have been purchased and so the masters have every right to use them the way he likes (65). Antonio Donini, too, claims that “some 400,000 unskilled and prevalently male Nepali labourers work in Qatar”. He further stresses on the fact that the “pyramid and the myriad forms of exploitation and discrimination . . . [that] go with it are functional to Qatar’s development agenda” (178). These conditions have special impact on the life and psychology of the Nepali labours there.

Just like the social systems, the laws in most of the nations in West Asia are of unexpected type for the Nepali workers there. It is because these laws are based on the religion of Islam and their consequent ideology and culture. The first of them is the provision of a short-term visa for the immigrant workers there unlike in “the U.S., U.K., France, and Germany” (Ali 27). Their dependence on *kefala* or sponsorship system adds troubles to the life of the expatriates there. At the same time “their passports are confiscated upon arrival, their wages are often withheld for months at a time to prevent them from quitting (a practice the government tolerates), and unions and strikes are illegal” (28). Thus, their status is just that of guest workers and outsiders.

Nepali migrants are prone to human rights abuses there. Staci Strobl claims that “domestic workers, housemaids (*khaddamah*), who have migrated from their primarily South Asian home countries for work have become increasingly vulnerable to human rights abuses, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their employers” there. He stresses that in “the Arabian Gulf particular, the situation is exacerbated by the lack of labour laws protecting these workers, as well as popular attitudes that reinforce this legal imbalance” (165). At the same time, “if the sponsor decides to break the contract, the employee immediately loses his or her residence permit and is obliged to return home”. So, most migrant workers are “prepared to endure considerable hardship rather than to shorten their contract period and return home empty-handed” (Moors and de Regt 160). These provisions and the consequent condition of existence play crucial roles in the life and emotions of the Nepali migrant workers there.

Depiction of Cultural Differences in the Selected Texts

Literary creations by the Nepali transnational migrants in the West Asian countries have given the picture of their life in those destinations. Such creations are found in Qatar, Saudi

Arabia, Israel, Kuwait, Baharain, Cyprus, United Arab Emirates and Oman (Subedi et al 7). The great numbers of such creations are found in Qatar and Israel. For this analysis, I have chosen the Nepali migrants' writings from the same two countries that represent two different cultures and social systems in the area. The differences of cultures can be seen in terms of the religious practices, social mentality and laws.

The religious differences cause both the awe and shock on the immigrants. Minraj Basant mentions some religious practices in Qatar those are strange for the Nepali migrants. The first among them is the reading of *namaj* for five times a day (87). Similarly, the practice of five people eating from the same plate in the mosque during the *Ramjan* is strange and unbearable in case the Nepali people have to participate (88). Dipak Bhetwal mentions the extent of religious practices in Qatar. He reports how the people of non-Islamic religion are discriminated there. He feels it like a religious empire (in Rai, Bhetwal and Paradeshi 51). Basant mentions an incident in this connection: A *mudir* [manager] wants to give tips to the labours as they work very hard. He takes out some riyal and asks whether they are Muslim. When they say they are not, he simply puts the money back in his purse and drives away (140). It shocks the Nepali workers.

The Jews in Israel have their own religious practices that are different in many ways from that of the Nepalis who migrate there as workers, especially care givers. Uma Subedi in her novel *Toda* mentions such differences and the consequences. Because of the lack of cultural knowledge, the main character of the novel Parbati purchases bread (*pauroti*) as her food during the Pesakh when such a food made of wheat is forbidden in Jewish households. It causes the shock on her employer and the same happens back to her (47). Similarly, the religion does not permit the married Jews to look at the body of women in the street (132). These are strange practices for the Nepali migrants, and so they have negative impacts on their experiences and emotions.

The social system and the consequent mentality have a great impact on the immigrants' life. James E. Rauch and Scott Kostyshak report that "Arab countries have a reputation for high levels of discrimination against girls and women" (179). At the same time, the abuse of "the sponsorship system is assumed to be rampant; and unsafe work environments, inadequate accommodation, wage disputes, and general human rights' and workers rights' violations are said to exist in many different sectors" (CIRS 1). Among the women immigrants "the large majority . . . is migrant domestic workers" (Moors and de Regt 151). As a result, "young women who are in domestic work are often victim of physical and sexual abuse" (Molinari 18). Nepali people do not expect it, and so they are shocked in experiencing such maltreatments.

Weiner has the similar findings. He notes: "Migration and refugee policies raise moral issues because directly or indirectly they involve the exercise of coercion" and so the people

who are born in a poor, autocratic country and those who have particular beliefs or belong to poor communities are treated badly (172). As a result, the status of women domestic workers is “vulnerable to downward social mobility, discrimination, and abuse including sexual exploitation” (Donini 181). Bhattarai mentions some cases in which Nepali women are suppressed and discriminated. The maid owners behave as if these women are some type of modern day slaves. One such master threatened one Nepali maid saying that he had purchased her in four thousand riyal; so she cannot leave his home without paying back that sum (65). It is a shocking experience to the migrants. She is there to sell her labour, not her body. She fears that such an atmosphere may lead her to sell her purity and respect. So, she further feels that the situation is demeaning her self-esteem.

The Nepali migrants in Qatar find its social system strange. Basant, in his novel *Mudir*, depicts these strange practices and their consequences on the mentality and life of the migrants. The main character of the novel finds the shiny city of Doha very strange and better managed than any city in Nepal. At the same time, he is awe struck seeing the beauty of the city and the concentration of people on their works (65). These are positive aspects that inspire the Nepali migrant workers there. But he is surprised when he sees the women there put on the black dresses and cover the whole body except the eyes. Even the dress up of the males is strange for him (55). The complete white dress and beard makes their dresses strange for him (59). He is shocked when he cannot talk to the people because of language barrier (57-58). These aspects put their life in difficulty.

The social management in Israel, too, is different from that of Nepal. The writers have mentioned these differences and their effects on their life. Israel is a female dominant country and so the social system and laws are made in the same way (Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 62). The culture of living together is new for many Nepali migrants to Israel. Similarly, the cases of exposed relation including the sex in front of the care givers have been mentioned in their memoirs. Such practices shock the Nepali migrants. Subedi’s novel *Toda* has mentioned such other practices. There a Nepali care giver is asked how she can live at her twenty-two without a boyfriend. Her landlady advises her that one should not live alone after the age of twenty (27). Even because of dress up, the main character of *Toda* is shocked. The clothes her employer gives her looks not like clothes but small pieces of cloth for her (46). She does not feel comfortable to put them on. These situations are awkward for the Nepali women migrants.

Nepali people who reach Israel find the language strange. They feel dizzy while listening to others and trying to find things and ways in the market. Similarly, it is not allowed there to carry the babies in open hands and make them sleep with the mother (Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 3). These are strange practices for them. It is normal for the Israelis to taste the food while cooking it; but it is forbidden in Nepal. As a result many care givers have reported that

they remained hungry for many days in the beginning of their jobs there (5). Some report that they nearly left their job in love of rice and pulse (*dal-bhat*) back in Nepal (152). The next strange experience for the Nepalis is that of death ritual in the Jewish community. Even on the day of their parent's death, they eat what they want to; there is no restriction. As a result, the Nepali migrants feel odd. The dead body is taken to the cemetery directly from the hospital (11). After that they do not operate the radio and television; and sleep on the bare floor for seven days (12). These practices seem odd for the Nepali migrants.

In Israeli culture, sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, and all the extended family members gather in the festivals and celebrate together unlike in Nepal (Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 12). Similarly, everybody is laborious there (35). They do not discriminate work as high or low level ones (188). They do not misuse even a very short time (239). Seniority in job is not very much emphasized. But the Nepali migrants themselves use this discrimination among them (192). Israeli reading culture is also a matter of awe for the Nepali people. Unlike the showcases full of empty pots in almost each Nepali home, the Israeli showcases are filled with books; and so they utilize time reading and learning new things (103). Moreover, the clothes the people of different generations wear are similar (13). There is no age-wise dress code unlike we have here in Nepal. Because of the nature of work Nepali women there cannot wear the sari (112) and they do not feel comfortable to wear the clothes the women in Israel put on. This dressing sense put them in trouble.

The next aspect of difference depicted in transnational Nepali literature created in West Asia is related to the laws enforced both in the Islamic countries and the Jewish Israel. The laws are strict in Qatar. Basant mentions how the police fine the drivers for breaking the traffic rules, especially the need to park only in the parking lot (99). The main character of the novel finds the implementation of law effective there. Everything that is not mentioned in the law is illegal; and nobody dares to cross the legal boundary unlike in Nepal (111). No one is allowed to point to a woman with his finger as in Nepal (159). Bhattarai reports that passport is necessary to get treatment in a hospital in Qatar. If it is not found, after the treatment, one has to go to jail (19). Nepalis find the law and order in Israel, too, very strict and reliable unlike back in Nepal (Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 7). They create both awe and shock in the Nepali migrants there.

In sum, the condition of Nepali migrants in West Asia is very paradoxical. It is just like what Donini summarises in terms of all types of transnational migration: "One of the paradoxes of migration, whether internal or international, is that it offers both freedom and unfreedom" (181). Such strange life is a base of their unusual emotions and thoughts. The same are expressed in Nepali literature created there.

Impact on the Migrants' Emotions

The migrants feel awe and shock, happiness and pain once they have to experience the differences. They have expressed their feelings regarding the food they have to take in Israel. The food there cannot satisfy them because the Nepali cuisine is completely absent there (Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 45). The characters in Subedi's *Toda* have the same experience. They gather in a group in Israel to enjoy the Nepali cuisine at the weekend being tired of eating the bread (*paauroti*). The practices of kissing in the public and exposed sexual relations have shocked Parbati, the main character of *Toda*. When she finds her middle-aged landlady kissing her boyfriend in front of her and leads him to the bed room, she feels insulted (28). As a result, she instantly packs her suitcase and leaves the job (31). In the next home, she feels shy after wearing shorts that exposes her fair thighs, and the t-shirt that exposes her cleavages. Hurriedly, she puts on the trousers and feels fine (46). The same novel mentions the practice of living together among Nepali migrants as influenced by the Israeli social practices (156). Both the shock and acculturation are the results of such cultural differences.

The Nepali migrants feel worried to learn new language and culture. Once they remember home and homeland, the first effect is voluntary tears in their eyes (Subedi 47). Once they are in pain in the foreign land, they feel bad even in the memory of the nation and the reasons that compelled them to emigrate. Rai, Bhetwal and Paradeshi express such a mentality and the related emotions. They remember how, back in Nepal, they could not get respectable jobs. But once they are in Qatar, they find their life full of tear, ignorance and disrespect to themselves despite some economic achievements (3). Some Nepali migrants cannot get the chance to return Nepal even to take part in their parents' death rituals (Bhattarai 45). It gives them a deep cultural shock.

The nature of work puts them on high stress. Laxmi Anuragi is one such care giver in Israel. She recounts her experience in a memoir. She accepts that writing works as a means of releasing her trauma. Pen and paper are her friends in the time of loneliness and mental hazard (in Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 170). Subedi details out similar experiences of Nepali migrants and their writings in Qatar. Once they feel sad and lonely they use the moonlight to create the visuals of their emotions there (5). Poet Dipak Bhetwal expresses his emotion through the following lines:

Why did you come to this town?
Here, all dreams get awakened without any sleep.
Every dream we have here
Flies away once we try to catch it.
It flies away
And gets lost beyond the horizon. (in Rai, Bhetwal and Paradeshi 69)

Churchit Dhungel has expressed the feeling of shock and deep pain of the time he remembers the Nepali festivals and cannot celebrate them in Qatar. He thinks that all his dreams die without any recognition there (in Rai, Bhetwal and Paradeshi 80). So the migrants cannot feel the desert as a good land for them. It is, for them, a symbol of pain and torture. Dilip Abiral Rai depicts the owners of the factory, the company and the managers there as black cobras that sting the workers throughout the year (in Rai, Bhetwal and Paradeshi 117). The main character of Basant's novel feels that Qatar has given him the tsunami of pains and the earthquake of memories (64). Another creative writer, Innocent Rajan Basnet, feels very bad about his life in Qatar:

Suppose, office is the crematorium
 The first sip of coffee— a failed plan!!
 Fume of branded cigarette— the same old life!!
 And these incomplete files cash vouchers
 That I have filled to sell myself!!! (in Giri, Udas, Pokharel and Mukarung 43)

Such writings work as the medium of the immigrants' emotional expressions. Krishnapaksha, in his memoir about the life in Israel, accepts that they wait for any possible occasion for the gathering of Nepali people there. It is the occasion for sharing their pains of work and feeling happy though for a short while (in Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 24). Subedi further highlights the value of such creations: The main subject of these writings is the depiction of the pain and achievement of immigration. They are the reflection of the spirit of Nepali hearts in a foreign land (7). These writings reflect the emotional aspects of the Nepali migrants in the Middle East. Their basic causes are the differences between the Nepali and the Middle East cultures.

Resultant Creation of Common Nepali Culture

All the pains in the host land compel every Nepali migrant to come together and feel as a community and share the feeling of oneness. The diverse cultural background back in the homeland dissolves into the common national culture there. Donini summarises such a trait and concludes that once the Nepali people leave their nation, they leave the differences among them back and just feel they are the Nepali nationals (180). The experiences of the Nepalis in Israel and Qatar have shown it.

Nepali migrants in Israel have displayed the feeling of community and sense of belongingness to a great extent in their writings. Laxmi Anuragi writes that once in Israel every Nepali represents Nepal. The foreign land knows the nation, not a person, she claims. As a result the Nepalis there forget their castes and become just the Nepali by all means (in Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 181). Next care giver in Israel, Subhadra Bhandari, feels that every time she remembers her relatives she is gripped with the Nepali identity (265). Krishnapaksha and

Navaraj Khadka, too, feel the same. As a result, even in the time Nepal was experiencing a high time of communal politics, the Nepalis in Israel felt that all of them were just the Nepalis. Bije Bidrohi Rai summarises this emotion: In this foreign land, there is no distinction among the people from the Terai or the hills or the mountains or east or west or north or south. Everybody is Nepali. They celebrate all the festivals that are celebrated in Nepal. Israel seems to be a mini-Nepal in such occasions (in Basnet, Anuragi and Khadka 99). They feel that they are the Nepalis.

Basant also mentions the common Nepaliness among the Nepali workers in Qatar. In every Jumma celebration many of them gather together and celebrate both the festival and Nepaliness (158). Bhattarai, too, finds the same in Qatar. The Nepali community there is a good example of inclusive Nepal, he argues. People of all castes, religion and regions use the same kettle to prepare tea for all of them (55). They all feel the ‘Nepaliness’, nothing else.

Conclusion

Transnational Nepali creative writers living and working in West Asia have given expression to their emotions created with the effect of cultural differences between Nepal and the host lands. The basic cultural traits of both of the Jewish Israel and other countries with the domination of Islamic culture differ from that of Nepal. Basically, the areas of differences are guided by the differences in religion, social management and law. In both of the Jewish and the Islamic nations, the laws are strict, social system is law driven and religious faiths are strong. These aspects of life have determined the way the people in those places think and behave.

The new Nepali entrants in this area, at first, feel awe struck in the observation of the high level of development. Slowly, they feel strange about entirely different language and cultural activities. Once they begin to understand the effects of cultural differences, many of them get shocked. In Israel, only the differences in religious practices baffle the Nepalis. But in the Islamic countries such as Qatar, the discriminations in works and payment pinch them the most. The pitiable fate of Nepali housemaids in Islamic households shocks not only the maids, but even the readers who come across the reports on their plights. The life of other manual workers is not less difficult. Literary creations depict all these realities of Nepali transnational migrants in West Asia. This article has traced the effects and consequences of cultural differences in Nepali migrants’ literature there. Future researchers may explore the depiction of gender based violence of Nepali women expressed in such writings.

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