



Nepal Academy's Journal

JOURNAL OF NEPALESE STUDIES

Vol. 16, No. 1: 64-73, November, 2024

ISSN No: 2705-442X

Transition of indigenous culture: Reading Mann Gurung's "Lost in Transition # 6"

Kumari Lama¹

Corresponding author: klama54@gmail.com

Received date: 26 Feb. 2024 – Accepted date: 10 July. 2024

ABSTRACT

The paper explores and analyzes the multiple realities underneath the remittance culture in the post-1990 Nepal in Mann Gurung's painting "Lost in Transition # 6." Several facets of ambivalence and pain; separation and insecurity; dilemma and loneliness; and dependency and cultural decline are comprehensively portrayed in the paintings exhibited under the title Lost in Transition (2019). Moreover, it highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. When the people of rural Nepali villages are exposed to the global labor market in 1990s, there started an influx of capital. Most of the villagers, who used to produce numerous cash crops and cereals themselves, started buying food and vegetable while totally depending upon market imports along with the flow of remittance. The chosen painting exposes the pervasive remittance culture through the image of a Gurung woman whose traditional attire has been haloed by the bright logos of remittance companies. The indigenous-ethnic community in Khorla village of Gorkha district remains torn between tradition and modernity not necessarily because of their choice but an immensely increasing globalization of the market products. To critically analyze the widespread influence of the global corporate world upon the indigenous people in developing countries like Nepal, I have employed Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's ideas and strategies of visual semiotics and the concept of Nicholas Mirzoeff related to the visual rhetoric and visual culture.

Keywords: Gurung community, remittance culture, indigenous people, transition, visual semiotics

1 Lama is an Assistant Professor at Padma Kanya Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University.



(Lost in Transition # 6)

INTRODUCTION

Mann Gurung's latest paintings exhibited under the title *Lost in Transition* (2019) portray the present realities of the Gurung community of remote Khorla village of Gorkha district, who has been highly influenced by the global labor market and remittance culture. The indigenous community of Gorkha before 1990s had maintained their cultural identity through distinctive lifestyle, unique culture and traditional values. By then, the locals of Khorla had never migrated in large number to the urban areas. They were suddenly exposed to the global labor market in the 1990s after the restoration of democracy in Nepal. They got opportunities to travel abroad for earning. There onwards, people started sending money for their families back home in the rural villages. Everything was quite new and unexpected for the Nepali society. Sudden flows of money encouraged people to pursue easy life in the nearby towns. Gradually they started leaving their villages, which affected their farming and producing capacity. In a long run, they turned to be mere inactive consumers.

Gurung's paintings portray the predicament related to dependency and flourishing remittance culture. Moreover, they visualize recent happening and the changing faces of our villages. They narrate the story of dependency and dislocation; separation and pain; and dilemma and insecurity, which have become powerful and novel phenomenon of modern era. Against this backdrop, the paper

critically analyzes multiple realities underneath the remittance culture in Nepal. I have chosen Mann Gurung's painting, "Lost in Transition # 6" from *Lost in Transition* series as a primary text for the analysis. The major objectives of this paper are to shed light upon the increasing tension between tradition and modernity in relation to remittance culture and to analyze its consequences on the Gurung community from Khorla village, Gorkha in the post 1990s era.

The chosen painting portrays a traditional Gurung woman, who is surrounded by uncountable bright logos of popular remittance companies. She has still put on her traditional attire, however her lifestyle has been changed. Instead of working in the field, she has been waiting at the doors of remittance agencies. She looks uncomfortable, confused, dependent and lonely while she is haloed by numerous commercial trademarks. The painting has aptly visualized the market invaded present situation of the Khorla villagers, who are in the clutch of remittance culture. For the theoretical backing, I have employed the ideas and strategies related to visual semiotics of Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2006) and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2010).

Contemporary visual artists and researchers have started focusing on indigenous people, culture and their present predicaments. While reviewing the existing literature, I found that some social researchers such as Dhakal (2018) has highlighted the issue of migration and its impact in general, whereas Pade (2061 BS) has revealed the independent status of indigenous community in the past. Art critics Subedi (1992) and Sharma (2018) have analyzed the nature of contemporary arts and shed light upon the portrayal of changing social scenario, increasing ambivalence and dilemma in modern paintings. The existing literatures have not sufficiently researched on visual arts that unveil the present reality of the Gurung community. The motivation of this study is based on that gap. The study is proceeded further to explore and analyze the underneath realities which have changed the socio-economic and cultural scenario of the Gurung community in Khorla village.

Voices of Visual Semiotics

Visual semiotics has become an essential part of today's global world, which has shifted the previous world view and the understanding of reality. Each global citizen encounters innumerable visual images from dawn to dusk. Mostly, metropolitan city dwellers watch television; walk alongside the billboards and watch theatrical performances; they read books and see paintings. All of the activities inculcate specific meaning to their day to day life. Visual culture has entered pervasively into human life and intensified their experiences. Mirzoeff (2010) exhibits human experiences in relation to overpowering visual culture and postulates, "Human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body" (p. 2). Science and technological development have materialized every wildest

imagination of human beings. Consequently, satellite images and x-rayed image of internal human body parts no-more surprise us. Visual culture has impacted today's world that no one could escape from its aura. Mirzoeff's (2010) emphasis on our engagement in the business of looking (p. 31) appropriates with the ongoing realities, since uncountable visual images swirl just in front of us that we could not help looking. Numerous novel socio-cultural phenomenon slides in a form of visual images for each and every spectator. This way, powerful visual semiotics and burgeoning visual culture unveil changing modes of present socio-cultural reality.

The visual semiotics communicates through layers of hidden meanings just like the texts or languages. Either it be a religio-cultural totem such as, cross or *lungdar* (colorful flag) or television commercials, all explicitly manifest the denotative as well as connotative meanings. Moreover, a sign, symbol and even cultural representation of particular places and persons could comprehensibly narrate the socio-cultural and historical aspects. In this regards, Van Leeuwen's (2008) perspective clarifies the idea as he claims, "It can come out either through the cultural associations which cling to the represented people, places and things, or through specific 'connotators', specific aspects of the ways in which they are represented" (p. 97). Even attires and a piece of jewelry could speak a lot about the person's socio-cultural and economic position. An image of a person not only exhibits the phenotypical cue, but also penetrates the connotative meanings attached with socio-economic condition via quality and types of dress the person has put on. There lies the immensity and the power of connotative meaning of visual images. Apparently, a visual image either be a concrete object or just a sign or symbol that floats around us could persistently transfer meanings of different levels and resonances.

Visual art incorporates different language to express and articulate its meaning. For instance, a painting speaks through shapes, lines, colors, tones and textures. Many art theorist and critics have spoken about the language of art. Subedi (1992) explains painting as "language in the canvases" (p. 9), whereas, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2008) define it as "language of colour" (p. 227). Their ideas highlight the fact that a piece of art inherits its own unique language. Mainly, canvas becomes a space for artists to express their idea through the use of different colors. Art connoisseurs immediately grasp the meanings and intentions of the colors and its tones in the paintings. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) perspective about color and its meaning seem more appropriate, as they claim, "...colour clearly can be used to denote people, places and things as well as classes of people, places and things, and more general ideas" (p. 229). Their opinion validates the importance of color choice since it not only denotes the physicality of the people or places, but also concentrates on the deeper meaning associated with them. In some cases visual images communicate better than the spoken languages as they play an important role for the transmission of intended message and meaning to the wider audiences.

Concentrating on the vivacity of visual semiotics and its communicative potentiality, I have chosen Gurung's (2019) "Lost in Transition # 6" for the critical analysis. The chosen painting has highlighted the transition of indigenous culture through the image of a Gurung woman, who is hard pressed between tradition and global capitalistic remittance culture.

Generation Lost in Transition

The indigenous communities inculcate unique cultural identity through language, tradition and distinct way of their life. Among them, the Gurungs own and embrace rich socio-cultural values. They are the main residents of Kaski, Lamjung and Gorkha, the western hilly districts of Nepal. Mostly, the Gurung community was involved in farming and animal husbandry for their livelihood in the past. In the pre-1990s Nepal, most of the villagers used to work in the field and produce the necessary crops, fruits and vegetables. Khorla village of Gorkha was also independent for food, produced by traditional farming. However, when the global labor market opened its door for Nepali youth in the late nineteen nineties that gradually changed the existing socio-cultural scenario of Nepal. The Khorla villagers started getting remittance every month. The most distinct thing was sudden and unexpected overflow of money into the rural villages. There onward, people started buying every necessary things from the market rather than producing their own. An economic influx initiated consumer culture when the self-sufficient farmers started buying even groceries from the market. Consequently, global capitalism implanted consumer culture, ambivalence and dependency into Nepali society. Gurung's latest paintings visualize the changing faces of remote Khorla village, which came under the grip of remittance culture. He captures the indigenous Gurung community, whose life is squeezed between tradition and modernity.

Globalization and capitalistic economic phenomenon pervasively impacted every country including Nepal in the post-1990s. It was the time when Nepali people had reestablished democratic system overthrowing monarchy and King Mahendra's panchayat system. The newly gained freedom and hope as well as the new opportunities in the global labor market highly influenced Nepali society. There was the excessive flow of people as well as money. Appadurai emphasizes, "flows and disjuncture" (Appadurai, 2000, p. 6) as inherent characteristics of globalization. While analyzing the global capitalistic society, we could easily relate with the thrust of his idea, since we have not only witnessed the overflow of money, but also the huge mass of youth moving from villages to the bigger cities, to become a part of capitalistic consumer world. Once they step into the complicated capitalistic society, mostly they are arrested by isolation, loneliness and disjunctive feelings as Appadurai has pointed out. However, the similar feelings and situations could emerge among the members of family who are left behind. In fact, today's

global capitalistic system has made people helpless, vulnerable and lonely. The painting, I have chosen for analysis has vividly portrayed the adverse effect of global capitalism through an image of a Gurung woman, who has been surrounded by the shiny logos of remittance companies.

Remittance has changed the productive villagers to the passive dependents. When the Nepali youth were suddenly exposed to the global market, there started the influx of capital in the remote villages. Along with the flow of money, the villagers left their traditional works and started migrating to the nearby towns. In this context, Dhakal (2018) envisions the bitter reality of contemporary time and opines that migration has become a choice for them who are able to do so (p. xv). The people with better socio-economic status had already chosen cities for their settlement rather than staying in the villages with full of difficulties. Later, when the common villagers started getting regular remittance, they also started migrating in the nearby towns. Remittance has impacted on the traditional and social life of people even without their notice, as they moved from their original places leaving lots of things behind. Most importantly, they have lost their traditional skills, productivity and their organic lifestyle. They are far away from farming, craftsmanship and their indigenous organic knowledge. As a result, remittance has snatched away their independence and entangled them within the lethal capitalistic system, which has transformed them into mere consumers.

Paintings are powerful visual semiotics that depicts the reality through lines, colors, symbols and images. Such visual images are useful for investigating the representational and symbolic meaning of the people, place and things (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 117). Numerous underneath realities of remittance culture has been symbolically presented in Gurung's painting. The Gurung woman in the above painting embodies symbolic meaning. Her attire, facial expression, gesture and the logos of remit companies have added more meanings on it. It visualizes the present situation of the Gurung community of Khorla village, who are caught between their traditional life and present difficulties. The woman has put on her traditional dress—*lungi*, blouse and *ghalek* (shawl) and earring. Nevertheless, she is surrounded by the bright logos of remit agencies, which explicate her unique circumstances. Her facial expression and the shiny logos of economic agents narrate the story of an individual as well as of her community. Apparently, it points towards the increasing dependency of self-regulating indigenous people. The situation is rather peculiar since she waits for remittance wearing her traditional Gurung attire and jewelry. She has already lost her previous independence, when she started waiting at the door of capitalist agents rather than working in the field. Her present situation articulates the major side effect of remittance culture.

The indigenous community used to involve into agriculture and produce daily needed things through their traditional knowledge and craftsmanship. Most of the women were skillful enough to weave necessary cloths for the whole family.

They were hardworking, skillful, empowered and independent. In this regard, Pade (2061 BS) sheds light on the skills of indigenous women and describes, "... Newarni and Gurungni's *khasro kapada* (hand-loomed clothes) used to get consumed in the villages" (p. 17). It means, they used to weave clothes not only for their family, but also to sell in their local areas. They used to produce everything for their daily consumption through their farming, weaving and medicinal knowledges. Nevertheless, they have lost every native qualities and surrendered in front of capitalistic market and its products. In the present context, the previous producers and provider have transformed to mere consumers.

Nepali society had witnessed some economic flow brought by *lahures* (someone who works in foreign country) long back. Young men from the indigenous communities were recruited for foreign employment as courageous Gurkha soldiers. They brought huge amount of money when they came back home on their holidays. Their money initiated for the establishment of new cultures in the remote villages of Nepal in those days. Pade (2061 BS) depicts the changing scenario, "Women in villages learnt to smoke cigarette, light match and kiss like westerners from *lahures*" (p. 82). It points out that the *lahures* were one of the first groups to bring consumer cultures in the remote villages of Nepal. Most of the villagers used to grow tobacco for their personal use and had own ways of expressing love before the new culture entered into their life. Mainly, Rai, Limbu and Gurungs were recruited for foreign employment in those days. Rests of the other people were not exposed to the foreign land and foreign money. Nevertheless, along with the socio-political changes, international labor market became accessible to everyone. In the post 1990s era lots of Nepali youths left their villages for the first time and became international labourers. They started sending money to their family, which in long run has affected the socio-cultural life of remote Nepali villages. Today, every village is familiar with new economic notion known as remittance culture along with its shortcomings. Gurung's painting has depicted the conflict between different realities that emerged as the consequences of capitalistic global market and remittance culture.

The indigenous woman in the painting seems to be squeezed between the traditional life and modern day ambivalence. Through her image, Gurung has visualized the proper juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. On the one hand, the painting portrays a traditional Gurung woman with her indigenous physical appearance, whereas, on the other hand, she is surrounded by the logos of remit companies. These days, such agencies provide quick and easy services for the withdrawal of money even in the remote villages of Nepal. The villagers, who had never heard or entered into the bank, now have become their regular customers. However, such abrupt changes and latest complicated system and technology have confused them. The artist has painted confused facial expression of the woman, who is waiting for money. It looks as if she is completely dependent on the money send

either by her husband, daughter or son from abroad. Possibly, it has become her monthly routine to wait at the doors of remit companies for money. As a result, her skill, freedom and independence have been substituted by insecurity, dilemma and uncertainties.

The people from Gurung community lived simple, vivacious, independent and happy life in their ancestral villages. However, when they moved in the new places, different situations have entered into their life. Basically, they are gripped by the internal conflict and tension, which became more intense along with their migration. In fact, today's world is full of conflict that each and every individual experience unrest and internal dilemmas. Contemporary artists have internalized the ongoing dire socio-cultural scenario and expressed it in their creative works. Mirtzoeff (2010) sounds absolutely convincing when he emphasizes that visual culture visualizes "conflict" (p. 6), which could be stimulated by different lifestyle, new places, or by the latest strange technologies. Normally, people could not easily cope up with new things and get stressed that instigates internal conflicts. Gurung's painting visualizes the similar tension-laden expression of a Gurung woman. The people from Khorla village, including the woman are astounded by new technologies and social notions. In such context, anybody could enter into different psychological states. They may have lot of pain in their heart due to family separation and also get intimidated by new environment in the migrated places. Moreover, they are also highly influenced by unexpected flow of money, which has unknowingly changed their lifestyle. Amid such indifferent social circumstances, it is obvious for innocent villagers to feel more vulnerable. Gurung has fore-fronted intense vulnerability, confusion and ambivalence on the face of the woman.

Proliferating global market and booming capitalism have induced strangeness and uncertainty to the Globe. People are more inclined towards market and consumer culture instead of producing their own local products. The Khorla villagers are also in transitional phase of their life since they have lost their independence when they moved to the towns and started relying on capitalistic market products. They buy basic needs using remittance money, which they receive regularly from abroad. Their physical realities are changed; however, some traditional things are still with them. For instance, the woman is not ready to throw away her cultural attire yet. Such situation implants more confusion and dilemma in people. Sharma (2018) finds the exhibition of troublesome time in contemporary art as he states, "Globalization has facilitated the creative flow of ideas and events in the domain of Nepali art. The artworks have depicted the concept like cultural encounter, ambivalence, in-between-ness and appropriation due to the effect of globalization" (p. 70). His views appropriates with the situation of the woman, who is surrounded by colorful logos of remit companies. Moreover, it symbolizes her entrapment and explicates the situation that the whole generation is lost in transition. They are hard-pressed in between the past hangover and the modern

time. They seem to be engulfed by confusion and uneasiness of new reality unfolded in front of them. Happy and satisfied villagers have become gloomy city dwellers bantered by the pain of family separation and unprecedented moments.

The color choice of artist plays vital role for the portrayal of major ideas in paintings. Like the way, choice of words properly explicate the proposed meaning in writing, choice of colors intensify the idea of artists in paintings. Gurung has highlighted the Khorla villagers' loneliness, gloom and pain through dark and grey colors. The excessive use of grey and dusky colors in this painting has penetrated the internal gloom and ambivalence of the woman. Art curator Sangeeta Thapa (2019) describes the color and theme of this painting as such, "A lone sepia portrait of woman against the colored logos of remittance firms brings into focus multiple realities: of poverty... separation ... struggling in absence of a husband, father or son" (np). Gurung has used bright and dim color contrast to shed light on serious impact of burgeoning remittance culture and global capitalism on the Gurung community. Furthermore, just contrary to the monochromatic color used for woman's portrait, he uses bright colors for the logos of remittance companies. The color contrast presents irony as most of the Gurung people from Khorla village have been controlled and manipulated by remittance. They are in the clutch of capitalistic market product, which has instigated their lonesomeness, confusion and uncertainty.

Gurung's "Lost in Transition # 6" is a visual semiotics, which comprises 'layers of meaning' (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 94). It could be interpreted through the physical image and expression of the woman in the painting. Her facial expression exhibits her helplessness, dilemma and isolation amidst global capitalistic phenomenon. She is surrounded by bright logos of remit firms but she looks gloomy, lonely and lost. Artist Gurung has used the specific dark color sheds to shed light upon her confusion, uncertainty and internal conflicts. He highlights her sufferings and in-between-ness through her facial expression, posture and the bright emblems that surround her.

CONCLUSION

When the door of international labor market opened for Nepalese in the post 1990s, lots of young and energetic people from remote villages of Nepal started going abroad for the foreign employment. After some time, they began to send money to their family, which initiated for the establishment of remittance culture in Nepal. Sudden flow of money in a farm based traditional Nepali society brought several consequences. In this background, the paper has examined and analyzed the hidden realities behind the proliferating remittance culture. I have used Mann Gurung's painting "Lost in Transition # 6" as a primary text for analysis and employed the visual concepts of Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006) and Mirzoeff (2010) for theoretical support.

In-depth study of Gurung's painting has revealed several impacts of remittance cultural upon the indigenous Gurung community from Khorla village. The sudden flow of money has motivated them to leave their traditional works behind and search for easy life in the towns. Gradually, it has changed the self-sufficient villagers to the mere consumers of capitalistic market products. The Gurung woman presented in the painting has been caught between her traditional culture and the modern remittance reality. She is surrounded by the shiny logos of remittance firms, however, she still puts on her traditional attire. Her facial expression has captured her internal pain, dilemma and loneliness. Artist Gurung has used dark and dusky colors to highlight her present predicaments. The woman is a representative character of the contemporary Nepali society, where each and every person is affected by capitalistic remittance culture. Consequently, they have been transformed to the generation, lost in transition.

The paper has attempted to analyze some consequences related to the burgeoning remittance culture. There remains lots of potential issues for the interested researchers to explore further.

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (2000). Grassroots globalization and research imagination. *Public Culture*, 12(1), 1-19.
- Barry, J. (1999). *Art, culture, and the semiotics of meaning*. St. Martin's Press.
- Dhakal, S. (2018). Niyati dukha dekhi dukhasamma ek purbakathan. Preface. In Sapkota, J., *Dukhadekhi dukhasamma*, (pp. ix-xxii). Himal Kitab.
- Gurung, M. (2019). Lost in transition # 6. *Lost in Transition*.
- Jacobus, L., A., & Martin, F., D. (2015). *The Humanities through the Arts* (9th ed.). McGraw- Hill Education.
- Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2010). *An Introduction to visual culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Pade, B., B. (2061BS). *Tyas bakhatko Nepal- Ranakalin akhira tin dasak* (4th ed). Bhim Bahadur Pade.
- Sharma, Y., P. (2018). Contemporary Nepali arts. *SIRJANĀ – A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, 5(1), 2018, 64-73.
- Sharma, Y., P. (2019). Dynamics of contemporary Nepali paintings. *SIRJANĀ – A Journal on Arts and Art Education*, 6(1), 78-87.
- Subedi, A. (January 1992). Modern Nepalese poems and paintings: Canons and contexts. *Nepalese Studies*, 19(1), 6-20.
- Thapa, S. (2019). Introduction. In Mann Gurung's *Lost in Transition*.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). Semiotics and iconography. In Van Leeuwen, T. & Jewitt, C. (Eds.), *A Handbook of visual analysis* (92-118). Sage.
- Van Leeuwen, T. & Jewitt, C. (2008). *A Handbook of visual analysis*. Sage.