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Nepal in the Vortex of Modernity: A Study of Lain Singh Bangdel's *Muluk Bahira*

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Abstract

This article explores how Lain Singh Bangdel's *Muluk Bahira* (1963) portrays Nepali modernity through the experiences of migrant characters, with a view to probing into the tensions between tradition and modernity in early twentieth-century Nepal. It aims to observe how migration to modern Indian cities shapes Nepali identity, focusing on how modernity is both an opportunity and a source of alienation. Primarily, applying a literary analysis framework, this study derives impetus from Anthony Giddens' concept of modernity as "a post-traditional order", Arjun Appadurai's notion of migration creating "imaginaries of modernity", Michael Hutt's observation of Nepali modernity as "a tragic oscillation between aspiration and loss", and Pratyoush Onta's view of Nepali modernity as a "contested space where global influences intersect with local practices". Through close reading of the novel supported by the theoretical ideas, this article assesses the activities of the main characters Rane, Myauchi, Mahila Bhujel, and Dal Bahadur in modern cities like Darjeeling, and analyzes their transnational mobility, and interactions with diverse global communities. On the basis of the analysis, the article reaches the conclusion that Bangdel in *Muluk Bahira* illustrates modernity as a vortex, where aspirations for prosperity are intercepted by separation, loss, and cultural dislocation. This study contributes to understanding Nepali literature's engagement with modernity, highlighting how *Muluk Bahira* captures the socio-cultural dynamics of early twentieth-century Nepali migration. Future research could explore deeper analyses of *Muluk Bahira* and other Nepali literary texts to see how they encapsulate the themes of migration and modernity, portraying the characters that navigate transnational locations.

Keywords: Alienation, irony, loss, modernity, opportunity, tradition

Introduction

Lain Singh Bangdel's *Muluk Bahira* offers a poignant exploration of Nepali society's encounter with modernity through the lens of migration, economic hardship, and transnational experiences in the early 20th century. Set against the backdrop of pre-World War I Nepal and the allure of *muglan* (British India, particularly Darjeeling), the novel captures the socio-historical realities of Nepali migrant workers who leave their homeland in search of better livelihoods. This migration exposes them to modernity—characterized by urban infrastructure, technological advancements, and global interactions—while highlighting their struggles with cultural dislocation and identity. By integrating scholarly perspectives on modernity in general and Nepali modernity in particular, this essay examines how *Muluk Bahira* portrays the transformative yet often destabilizing impact of modernity on Nepali migrants, revealing a complex interplay between aspiration, alienation, and the persistence of traditional values.

Modernity: A Global and Nepali Framework

Modernity, as a global phenomenon, is defined by sweeping changes in social, economic, and cultural structures driven by industrialization, urbanization, and technological progress. Giddens (1991) describes modernity as "a post-traditional order" where "social relations are disembedded from local contexts of interaction and restructured across indefinite spans of time-space" (p. 21). This disembedding is evident in *Muluk Bahira* as Nepali characters leave their rural hill communities for Darjeeling, encountering modern elements like railways and urban landscapes. For instance, Bangdel (1963) writes, "Myauchi was overjoyed to see mansions and smooth roads in *muglan*. She was amazed to see rail and motor for the first time in life" (p. 4). This moment captures the awe and disorientation of modernity, as traditional rural life is juxtaposed with the technological and urban advancements of *muglan*.

In the Nepali context, modernity is a fragmented and ambivalent experience, shaped by the tension between traditional social structures and the pull of modern opportunities. Onta (1996) argues that Nepali modernity is "not a seamless adoption of Western models but a contested space where global influences intersect with local practices, often leading to cultural dislocation" (p. 278). In *Muluk Bahira*, this ambivalence is evident in the characters' simultaneous fascination with and alienation from modern life. Myauchi's euphoria—"How much desire she has to see Dorling in *muglan*!" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 4)—reflects the allure of modernity, but her rural innocence underscores the cultural gap she must navigate. Similarly, Rane's transformation after exposure to modern systems—"The way he thinks and talks has massively changed" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 44)—illustrates how Nepali modernity involves a negotiation between traditional identities and modern influences, often leaving individuals in a state of "inbetweenness" (Bhabha, 1994).

Migration and the Encounter with Modernity

Muluk Bahira is engrained in the social and historical facts of the then Nepali society. The pre-WWI Nepal had very little access to education and sources of income. Many Nepalis could hardly manage food for their family despite

working throughout the year. Not being able to sustain the family on the year-long farming, they used to cross the border and enter British India. Beautiful as well as lucrative Darjeeling, once the Nepali land, had been lost to British India at the Sugauli Treaty. Yet, most of the inhabitants were Nepalis. Darjeeling had been a preferred destination for many British rulers because of its favorable climatic condition. Since it could offer possibilities of earning, many Nepalis living in the eastern hills used to visit Darjeeling particularly in winter. Bangdel (1963) describes:

> The winter has arrived. Now many people from the hills have started entering *muglan* again. They come to *muglan* like every year. They usually get involved in wood cutting and its transportation. Working this way throughout the winter, they return home after earning some money…After reaching Darjeeling, some would start cutting wood and transporting planks, whereas some would enter Madhesh and some others would go to Assam and start working at coal mines. (p. 1)

Bangdel sets the tone of the narrative through the description of the Nepalis' customary entry to Darjeeling and its surrounding. He informs the readers about the desire and passion of the Nepalis living in the eastern hills to go to *muglan* with an aspiration to make some earning and return home so as to sustain the livelihood.

This migration is driven by economic necessity, but it also introduces characters to modernity's material and cultural dimensions. Appadurai (1996) highlights how migration creates "imaginaries of modernity" that shape aspirations for a better life (p. 31). Myauchi's reaction to Darjeeling–"It was natural for Myauchi, a rural girl … to be euphoric to see rail, motor and mansions" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 4), embodies this imaginary, as the city's modern infrastructure evokes a fairy-tale-like wonder akin to "Indrapuri." However, Habermas (1987) warns that modernity often fragments social life, creating "a differentiation of spheres" that alienates individuals from their traditional communities (p. 112). The migrant workers in *Muluk Bahira* remain on the margins of this modern world, as Bangdel (1963) notes: "They, however, are untouched by the modern life in Darjeeling… there is simple, pure, honest and untarnished environment among these illiterate innocent beings" (p. 5). This suggests that while modernity is physically accessible, its cultural and social benefits remain elusive, reinforcing their outsider status.

Like many Nepalis, Rane, the protagonist, also enters *muglan*. He works with fellow country people, makes some money and returns home. He has now become a trope of this home-*muglan* journey and thus a fascination for many youths of his village. Myauchi, Mahila Bhujel, and Kanchha Rai all follow Rane and work with him. Yet, Rane has a special connection with Myauchi, an 18-year-old innocent girl, who is emotionally attached with him. Like everyone who visited Darjeeling for the first time, she is over excited. "How much desire she has to see Dorling in *muglan*!" that she does not feel tired even after walking for days (Bangdel, 1963, p. 4). Bangdel (1963) further informs:

After passing through many hills, forests and rivers, they reached Darjeeling via

Sukebazaar and Ghum (Railway) Station. Myauchi was overjoyed to see mansions and smooth roads in *muglan*. She was amazed to see rail and motor for the first time in life. Rane also walked her to as many places as he was familiar with. He took her to Darjeeling city, to a fair and all nooks and corners of Gundribazaar. It was natural for Myauchi, a rural girl who had to graze cattle along the forest across the Arun River, to be euphoric to see rail, motor and mansions. Myauchi was reminded of the fairytale about Indrapuri by the ostentatious lighting of the city. (p. 4)

Myauchi feels overjoyed to see modern life in Darjeeling and gets tempted by the new environment in *muglan*. It is like reaching a fairy-land (Indrapuri) that she could just dream of. Her reaction exemplifies the common temptation of the Nepalis for *muglan*.

The Inbetweenness of Nepali Modernity

The concept of "inbetweenness" is central to the Nepali migrant experience, as characters navigate the tension between their traditional roots and the modern world. Bhabha (1994) describes this as a "third space" where individuals grapple with conflicting cultural identities, leading to both opportunity and alienation (p. 36). Rane and Myauchi embody this liminality, as Bangdel (1963) writes, "Rane and Myauchi, at times, recollect their memories of the village and feel missing the purity of their day to day activities in the past. Yet, they throw at each other's arms and cherish the present, keeping the past aside" (p. 11). Their romantic relationship temporarily mitigates this tension, but their inability to fully integrate into modern life or shed their traditional mindset leads to tragedy. Hutt (2002) notes that Nepali modernity often involves "a tragic oscillation between aspiration and loss," where the pursuit of modern opportunities disrupts cultural continuity (p. 145). Rane's murder of Myauchi—"Rane took his white handkerchief out of his waist and tied her hands . . . and then lifted her and threw her into the water (Teesta)" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 25)—and his subsequent suicide reflect this tragic oscillation, as modernity amplifies his guilt and alienation.

Rane, Myauchi, Mahila Bhujel, Khaling Budho and Kanchha Rai started living near Teesta Bridge. They, however, are untouched by the modern life in Darjeeling as getting up early in the morning, felling big trees, cutting wood, making planks and transporting them to Teesta Bridge is a routine. They return to the residence in the evening tired, yet optimistic. Bangdel (1963) describes their life as:

> . . . They used to make fire; some used to cook rice; some used to warm their bodies sitting around the fireplace; some used to play murchunga and some binayo. Rane used to share funny stories and sing melodious songs. Some used to weave doko, nanglo and thunse from bamboo strips. Joy and excitement of their puberty prevails among youthful boys and girls. Love, affection, violence, aura and avarice flows through the veins of boys and girls in their prime youth. Yet, despite living far away from civilization, culture and courtesy, there is simple, pure, honest and untarnished environment among these illiterate innocent beings. (p. 5)

Bangdel here tries to sketch the normal life of the migrant workers in Darjeeling.

He presents a realistic picture of the workers who cherish a simple, honest and pure life despite coming into contact with urban life. Ignorant and innocent they may be, but they are clean in their deeds and words.

The immigrant workers in *Muluk Bahira* also suffer from the inbetweenness, that is, torn between the past in the home country and the present in *muglan*. Rane and Myauchi, at times, recollect their memories of the village and feel missing the purity of their day to day activities in the past. Yet, they throw at each other's arms and cherish the present, keeping the past aside. "While talking, Rane smelt Myauchi's hair that gently touched his nose, lips and neck … his mind and body got filled with the pleasure of her warm caress and then he stared at her eyes, nose, lips and cheeks" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 11). As lovers, they are oblivious to both their past and present as they get immersed in each other's affection.

Though their early life in *muglan* looks pretty beautiful as all the workers, particularly Rane and Myauchi, cherish each other's company, its dark side gradually starts unfurling. Miles away from home they might have moved, but they have carried the mindset of their place of birth. Rane and Myauchi, though have started living as a couple, start distrusting each other, resulting in Myauchi's murder by Rane. "Rane took his white handkerchief out of his waist and tied her hands . . . and then lifted her and threw her into the water (Teesta)" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 25). End of their relationship after her murder opens up dismal path for Rane and his serene and beautiful life with Myauchi becomes a myth. This incident changes the entire course of Rane's life in *muglan*.

Gorkha Soldiers and the Transnational Encounters

The novel's depiction of Nepali youths joining the British Indian Army during World War I further illustrates the transnational dimensions of Nepali modernity. Bangdel (1963) writes, "In that 1914-war, a significant number of Gorkhalis went to Diphu and started joining the Gorkha Platoon" (p. 29). This participation exposes them to modern military structures and global battlefields, reshaping their identities. Gellner (2007) describes the Gorkha identity as a "modern martial identity" that blends traditional Nepali valor with the discipline of modern military systems, creating a unique form of Nepali modernity (p. 203). Rane's transformation after joining the army—"He has learnt to dress up, eat, sit and talk properly. He has learnt how to behave with people" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 44)—reflects this modern martial identity, as exposure to global systems refines his behavior but distances him from his rural origins.

However, this modernity is fraught with irony, as the Gorkhas' valor serves foreign interests. Bangdel (1963) notes, "Ironically, the Gorkhalis, who started fighting for others in the First World War, have been continuing to do so since then" (p. 30). Chatterjee's (1993) concept of "colonial modernity" is relevant here, as it describes how colonial institutions integrate subaltern groups into modern systems while reinforcing their subordination (p. 14). The Gorkhas' gallantry, while earning them fame, comes at the cost of autonomy, highlighting the exploitative nature of their modern experience.

In 1914, as the First World War had

just burst out, the fever of the war had touched the shores of all countries. Nepal, not being exception, has the history of sending hundreds of youths in the war. "In that 1914-war, a significant number of Gorkhalis went to Diphu and started joining the Gorkha Platoon" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 29). After joining the army, they sang "Have to go to Germans' invasion" and were enthusiastic to go to the battlefield. They were steered by a strong desire to travel to many parts of the world. They were also ready to either earn fame or get killed in the war. According to information uploaded by The Gorkha Brigade Association, during the First World War (1914–18), more than 90,000 Gorkhas served in the Indian Army, suffering approximately 20,000 casualties, and receiving almost 2,000 gallantry awards (Chappell, 1993). Gurkhas fought on the Western Front, Gallipoli, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia and on the North West Frontier.

The number of Gorkha recruits represented a quarter of the total male population of the ethnic groups involved. They were recruited in many of the most difficult of operations and at the forefront of the battle and, as a result, suffered disproportionally high casualties. Quite identical with this historical fact, Bangdel's *Muluk Bahira* captures a realistic picture of the involvement of the Nepalis in the war. Rane, after murdering Myauchi, flees to Diphu and joins the Indian Army as Rana Bahadur. After joining the army, he along with other Gorkha soldiers goes to the battlefield. Bangdel (1963) reports:

> Nepalis earned fame in this 1914-war. The Gorkha Platoon fought in France! Again in Bagdad, Gallipoli, Afghanistan and elsewhere, they fought against enemies, staking their lives. At that time, the brave warriors like Karna Bahadur Thapa and Kulbir Thapa won the Victoria Cross. The military tribe fought that way, though for others and left an emblem of its gallantry. Brave Gorkhalis made their names immortal in the world. (p. 30)

With the war coming to an end in 1918, many soldiers including Rane (Rana Bahadur) prepare to return home. After fighting for four years, the soldiers have all been fed up and dejected and thus have strong desire to reunite with family. "Some of them had strong will to see their spouse and children, some had desire to see their parents, but some had passion to reunite with their beloved" (Bangdel, 1963, pp. 30-31). They also had strong will to share "the experiences gained abroad and the stories of their gallantry in the war, assault on the enemy, life at the barrack, and a soldier's life" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 31). Unfortunately for the ones who lost life in the battlefield, it is all over.

Rane, like many other war survivors, returns home with Dal Bahadur, a wounded Gorkha soldier he had met at the seventh Gorkha Platoon at the Quetta Barrack before they were deployed to the battlefield. Very close friends since then, the two, however, were separated after being sent to Afghanistan and Bagdad respectively. And now, after the war has come to an end, they have reunited and are returning home together. Bangdel (1963) describes:

> At war, Dal Bahadur sustained shotgun injury to his arm. But his fate was strong and survived. After keeping at a resting camp for few days, he was taken to a military hospital in

> Punjab. He lay unconscious for many days. He knew nothing about where he was taken and what actually happened to him. Later, only after arriving at the hospital, he recollected the memories of the war. By then, the news about the end of the war spread in the lightning speed all over the world. The war really stopped—all the Gorkha platoon at war went on leave. (p. 33)

Unconscious Dal Bahadur, like many wounded soldiers, gets admitted to hospital and feels all alone once he regains consciousness. His fear intensifies as he gradually recollects the memories of the war. Because of the injury, his anxiety increases as he feels he cannot return home. To his great surprise, however, Rane visits the hospital and tries to pacify his anxiety. Dal Bahadur feels pretty pleased to see his comrade after a long time. "He got immense support at the moment of peril and thus his heart was jubilant" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 34). Rane looks after Dal Bahadur at the hospital and returns to Darjeeling with him.

Rane feels excited to revisit the place he had left four years back. His heart is filled with joy to see the house he lived in, the village, the land, the hills, the creeks and the falls he used to roam around again. "Puffing smoke, the same Darjeeling rail is returning" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 34). Rane recalls the moments with his friends while leaving Diphu for the war four year back. "Many were the friends who went to the war then, but, today, how many of them died, and how many dispersed to various places!" ponders Rane. He further murmurs, "This life has no guarantee, today here, tomorrow somewhere, and the day after …?" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 34). On the train, Rane passes some philosophical thoughts on human life which he believes is pretty unstable.

After reaching the Ghum Station, both Rane and Dal Bahadur get off the train and walk towards the latter's. On the way back home, Dal Bahadur learns from Serba Budho that the villagers had lost hope for his return as they had heard about his death in the war. He hurries home to see his ageing mother who had also been informed about her son's casualty in the war. Finally, he along with Rane reaches home and meets his mother after four years. Dal Bahadur acknowledges Rane's service to him: "Mother! He saved and brought me home from abroad" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 41). The mother is also grateful to Rane's selfless service: "Dear Lad! You saved and brought my son from abroad; we owe you; may you always gain in life!" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 41). Rane feels his heart filled with motherly affection after hearing compliments from her. Dal Bahadur and his mother's gratefulness to his service makes Rane feel comfortable to live with the family. His time with Dal Bahadur functions as a healing force in the aftermath of the war. They cherish each other's company to a great deal. Bangdel (1963) mentions:

> Dal Bahadur's wound gradually healed. Fresh elation and excitement had been flowing though his body since last one month. Dal Bahadur and Rana Bahadur (Rane) roamed sometimes around Kharsang and sometimes around Sukebazar. After long, they have emerged out of the struggling days of the war. The two being have made up their minds to pass some days, cool and relaxed. (p. 42)

Seeking some solace from the atrocities

of the war, Rane and Dal Bahadur roam around the marketplaces and try to live peacefully.

The Lahure and Transnational Modernity

The figure of the lahure, exemplified by Rane, encapsulates the transnational nature of Nepali modernity. Dehindan (2010) defines the lahure as a figure who "does not leave his country with the aim of settling in another country, but tends to stay mobile in order to maintain or improve his quality of life" (p. 51). Rane's journey from a rural migrant to a Gorkha soldier reflects this mobility, as he navigates modern urban spaces and global battlefields. However, his guilt over Myauchi's murder—"Kanchhi! Kanchhi! I'll share with you the agony of my heart one day in loneliness, alright?" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 54)—and eventual suicide highlight the psychological toll of this transnational existence. Thapa (2018) argues that the lahure's identity is shaped by "cultural narratives of ethnic, gender, and national identities [that] often cross borders," necessitating a transnational perspective to understand their experiences (p. 5).

Rane, instead of looking for some work, decides to live on what he has saved during the four years of military service. Despite Dal Bahadur's resistance and suggestion, he regularly visits the station and passes days with other men playing cards. He takes Dal Bahadur's suggestion pretty lightly as he believes that one has to try to live as joyfully as possible since there is nothing one has to take after death and one's life has no guarantee either. As he reads his life in retrospection, he feels it has been a historical narrative itself. Bangdel (1963) explains:

> What a condition he had when he entered *muglan* from the hills! He had no good clothes to put on. He had no idea about how to dress up, eat, sit and talk. Unaffected by civilization and culture, he was a pretty innocent being. But, thanks to his luck, he has returned after traveling abroad. The way he thinks and talks has massively changed. The free environment of *muglan* has greatly affected him. He has learnt to dress up, eat, sit and talk properly. He has learnt how to behave with people—how to interact with seniors and juniors. He has also learnt how to keep the body agile, thanks to his training at the platoon. (p. 44)

Contrasting Rane's life in Nepal with that in India, Bangdel has shown the gap between home and abroad. He hints at the changes one undergoes after getting in touch with foreign culture and civilization. The way Rane thinks and behaves after returning from the war is a way different from that he used do earlier as an innocent boy from the village.

As Rane roams around Darjeeling, he meets Mahila Bhujel and Masini, Myauchi's sister. He describes all his days after joining the platoon and takes them to Dal Bahadur's. He feels excited to meet them, but feels uncomfortable while Masini asks him about her sister. He has no answer to her query: "Brother-in-law, where is sister by the way?" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 49). Confused Rane replies, "Kanchhi, your sister passed away long back…while working in Teesta, she died of heart pain, and, because of that tragedy, I moved to platoon" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 50). His restlessness further grows as Masini reminds him of the crime that he had committed years back.

Rane can hardly suppress the incident as he says, "Kanchhi! Kanchhi! I'll share with you the agony of my heart one day in loneliness, alright? (Bangdel, 1963, p. 54). He continues, "Who should I share this agony with? Even in the war, I used to burst into tears reminiscing about this incident … Kanchhi, where in the world should I go to? …What will I do going back home? My heart cries wherever I go. My criminal mind . . ." (Bangdel, 1963, p. 55). His expression echoes his guilt consciousness.

Though not really interested, Rane, after talking to Mahila Bhujel, feels like returning home. When Dal Bahadur asks him what tempts him to go back, he responds, "Not really, I love *muglan*" and "I don't have any interest to return home, but Mahila Bhujel has been insisting" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 56). Dal Bahadur, a second-generation Nepali Indian, whose father had come to *muglan* in search of some work and never returned, suggests Rane to find some work there only and give up the idea of going back to the home country. Rane does not really intend to go back as he does not seem to be missing anything or anyone back home and thus gets convinced with Dal Bahadur's idea.

What bother Rane the most, however, are Myauchi's memories as he cannot get rid of the crime no matter how much he tries to. Her sister Masini constantly reminds him of the incident. "Brother-in-law, how long did sister suffer before she passed away?" she asks (Bangdel, 1963, p. 57). His feels pretty upset to face her queries and just gives reply for the sake of reply. "Just for a day" he replies (Bangdel, 1963, p. 57). She intensifies his agony by showing him hand-loomed apparel Myauchi had given her the year she had left home for *muglan*. She further adds that as her sister was fated to pass away in *muglan*, she had given her that apparel. Besides, Mahila Bhujel further agonizes Rane by asking, "Where had you two really been to after leaving the Teesta inhabitation that night?" and before Rane can reply he continues, "You had not been to the other inhabitation near the workplace" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 58). Rane is speechless as he has no answer to their queries. He is overwhelmed by the sin he has committed and realizes that he has no escape from it. After finding no alternative, he eventually commits suicide by hanging himself to death with the same apparel Myauchi had gifted Masini. And this is the end of a Nepali who had left his home country with a view to securing a comfortable livelihood.

Economic and Cultural Alienation

The novel also explores the economic and cultural alienation that accompanies modernity. Mahila Bhujel's decision to stay in *muglan*—"What will we gain after returning to the hills?… We'll have to live a pathetic life in a corner of the hills" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 86)—reflects a pragmatic embrace of modern economic opportunities over the hardships of rural Nepal. However, his later experiences in Burma, where he indulges in alcohol and gambling, highlight the degenerative aspects of modernity. Gurung (2019) notes that Nepali migrants in Burma often "deviate from their mission" of earning and returning home, succumbing to modern freedoms that erode their cultural identity (p. 112). Bangdel (1963) writes, "Uncontrolled in a distant country, these Nepalis were ignoring their inborn civilization, culture and behavior day by day" (p.

169), illustrating how modernity's lack of traditional constraints can lead to moral and cultural decline.

After Rane's suicide, Mahila Bhujel and Masini once again discuss returning home as they do not feel comfortable to live at Dal Bahadur's now. They neither have wage-earning work, nor do they have any savings. Life in *muglan* has become increasingly tough to handle as the aftermath of the war has caused price hike of all essential goods. Scarcity and famine prevail everywhere. As *muglan*-life gets tougher, many Nepalis start returning home and Mahila Bhujel and Masini also feel the pressure. Mahila Bhujel, therefore, decides to talk to Dal Bahadur about their plan. Compassionate Dal Bahadur, however, does not let them do that. He rather suggests him to stay for few more years and return to Nepal only after earning some money. He offers, "I'll buy you a couple of dairy cows" so that "you can make some money after selling it to the market" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 78). Mahila extends his gratefulness towards Dal Bahadur as he hardly feels the gap between home and *muglan* because of his selfless service. Unlike the stories of exploitation and deception on the outsiders in *muglan* he had heard about, Mahila is disillusioned by Dal Bahadur's compassion towards them.

Mahila Bhujel and Masini, through their hard work, establish themselves in *muglan* as their business of milk and cow thrives. They gradually give up the idea of returning home. "What will we gain after returning to the hills?" Mahila once replies to his cousin brother who insists him to return home (Bangdel, 1963, p. 86). He adds:

> . . .We'll have to live a pathetic life in a corner of the hills—will have to live a pauper's life—cultivation is just for its own sake—one cannot survive if one does not plough throughout the year. Will have to go to Bhota to fetch salt—it takes complete 14 days to cross the steep trails—what will we do returning to that famine-infested land? (Bangdel, 1963, p. 86)

This expression clarifies Mahila Bhujel's mentality about deeply rooted he has been in *muglan* life. He retains his hard times before entering *muglan* and feels satiated to have secured meals and clothes. He asserts that life in *muglan* is much easier than that in the hills so there is no meaning going back home and suffer again. He reflects on the common mentality of the Nepalis who hope for easier life abroad than the one fraught with hardships and scarcity.

Besides Rane and Mahila Bhujel, Dal Bahadur provides an interesting example of what it is to be a transnational. Leaving his household on a outsider's responsibility, he, after recovering from the gunshot injury sustained during the war, decides to go abroad. "Being born as a son, we've to go abroad, we've do all types of work" he says to Mahila Bhujel (Bangdel, 1963, p. 87). Despite his mother's resistance and Mahila and Masini's request, he leaves home for some 'business'. His departure exemplifies the fascination for work and life abroad and, in the meantime, ignorance to home conditions. Dal Bahadur does not only hurt his ageing mother, but also saddens Mahila and Masini, outsiders who have now been a part of his family.

By the time Dal Bahadur returns home after his more than a year-long-stay away, almost everything has changed.

Hardworking Mahila has deserted home after a serious misunderstanding with Masini and she has been carrying the burden since then; their smoothly running business has significantly gone down; and Mahila's departure without any reason has deeply affected Masini. He feels sorry for what has happened to the couple and tries to soothe Masini. He has new responsibility, that is, searching Mahila and bringing him back. Dal Bahadur visits Darjeeling, Siliguri and Calcutta but fails to find Mahila and thus gives up the idea of following him. He starts looking after the cows and decides to take the responsibility on his own. He even deviates from his determination of remaining a celibate and gets married.

As things gradually get normal, the world enters into yet another disaster—the Second World War. "With the advent of the year 1939, the winds of the war started spreading all over the world" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 161). The war first breaks in Europe and then spreads to other parts of the world. In this context, Bangdel (1963) explains:

> The year 1939 broke. As soon as the year 39 [1939] began, the wave of the war touched the soars of the wold. The war intensified in Europe—the world got shuddered by the war. After the war broke, there was call for recruitment again. Youths from the hill settlements started visiting Diphu to enroll their names. Now, the war broke—in this worldwide Great War, our youths were deployed to the foray. In this war too, our youths displayed their gallantry—the valor of the military race once again earned immortality. (p. 161)

Bangdel presents yet another historical incident and discusses the involvement of the Nepali youths in the Second World War. Like that in the First World War, many Nepalis are recruited in the British Indian army and are deployed to various parts of the world and many of them dead and injured.

The War gradually spreads to Asia from Europe and annihilates Japan, Singapore and Burma. "After the fall of Singapore, the war approached Burma" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 161). The enemies destroy pagoda, houses and hospitals. The Japanese attacked Burma by air from 23 December 1941, the land invasion commencing in force after the fall of Singapore on 16 February 1942. The Japanese forces would take three more months to reach the mountains separating Burma from India. Those who had the most to fear from Japanese occupation, including white metropolitans, Indians, Chinese, and Burmese officials and soldiers who remained loyal to the British, fled the colony, moving north by boat, train, automobile, plane, and on foot. Thousands died or disappeared in the process and many were simply abandoned to the enemy. According to sources, British Empire forces peaked at around 1,000,000 land and air forces, and were drawn primarily from British India, with British Army forces (equivalent to 8 regular infantry divisions and 6 tank regiments), 100,000 East and West African colonial troops, and smaller numbers of land and air forces from several other Dominions and Colonies (Operations in Burma and North East India 16th November 1943 to 22nd June 1944). As a result, the Burmese started running away. Bangdel (1963) reports:

> There were people living from generations. Through cattle herding,

> cultivation and business, many of them had been living as locals. After the war broke, they too started running away so as to save their life. No one could ever think of the property. In a hurry, no one ever loved the property—one had love only for life. (pp. 161-162)

After the Japanese forces invade Burma, the Burmese run away to safe places like Assam, Darjeeling, Bengal, and Nepal. They leave everything behind and just think of saving life. Many of them even leave their children and old parents.

According to historians, immediately after the Treaty of Sugauli, Nepali youths were recruited to the Gurkha Brigade of the East India Company and were deployed to Burma during the Anglo-Burmese Wars. According to Morch (2018):

> The first large scale migration of Nepalis to Burma came alongside the British East India Company. Following the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, the Gurkha Brigade of the East India Company was formed. This Brigade first entered Burma during the First and Second Anglo-Burmese Wars of 1824-6 to 1852-3, before again playing a role in the expulsion of King Thibaw from Mandalay, at the end of the third and final Anglo-Burmese war of 1886. (para. 3)

Morch here presents the historical account of the inclusion of the Nepalis in the Gurkha Brigade of the East India Company and their entry to Burma. In this way, the first Nepalis to enter Burma were the Gorkha soldiers who went on the British mission to occupy the land.

Following the Gorkha soldiers serving first for the British East India Company, and later for British India, many civilians also went to Burma in search of work. Gorkha historian and researcher Tim Gurung discusses how Nepali civilians entered Burma. According to him:

> From 1824 onwards Nepali laborers were introduced to Burma by the East India Company to work at the Heindar mine in Tennarserim, in south east Burma, and then later fanned out across the country. Farmers followed, moving to Kachin and Chin States in search of good agricultural land. They came according to Tim as "Burma offered more hope for them." This migration would continue for decades. Many settled permanently in Burma. With Burma until 1937 being a part of the Bengal Presidency which then bordered Nepal, travel to Burma was relatively easy and documentation not a problem. At the time with trade, business and resource extraction booming, and military service in Gorkha regiments, money was far easier made in British India than in Nepal. Gorkha settlements swiftly flourished across the country. (Gurung, 2019, p. 112)

According to Morch (2018), as of 1942, there were reportedly 200,000 Gorkhas residing across Burma. The final migration came in World War II. During the war, many Gurkhas entered Burma, alongside other British forces to end the Japanese occupation of Burma. The campaign for the Burma Road was fiercely fought, with the 4th Gurkha Rifles Battalion playing a vital role. Yet as the war finished, while many returned to Nepal, just like before, others stayed on. Talking about the miseries of hundreds of thousands of Nepalis who had been

living in Burma since many generations, Bangdel (1963) describes:

> The homeless who had fled from Burma during the war were seen massively suffering around Siliguri, Kharsang, Ghum Hills, and Darjeeling station. What on earth could they do after deserting home, just saving life! Seeing their pathetic condition, people in Darjeeling helped them in many ways. In many places, the volunteers helped them reside in the camps. . . (p. 163)

Just like Morch's historical account, Bangdel's description sketches the actual sufferings of the Burmese of Nepali origin during and after the war. It is quite ironical on the part of the immigrants that despite being well settled through their hard work, they, after all, remain outsiders and thus are compelled to return 'home'. Many in the group of these refugees are the ones who had long left Nepal searching for some work in India and then in Burma.

Surprisingly, Mahila Bhujel, after living in Burma for more than 18 years, returns to India with other evictees. An old man now, he had been to Burma with two Gorkha soldiers he met in Shillong. Before leaving for Burma, he had tried his luck in Madhesh, Calcutta, Assam, Guwahati, and Shillong. Eventually, making up his mind to find some work and earn some money in a new country, he had been to Rangoon where he worked as "a doorkeeper in a large Burmah-Shell Oil Company" and met "many Gorkhalis from western Nepal also working as doorkeepers" (Bangdel, 1963, p. 169). Because of his acquaintance with the Nepalis living in Burma across generations, Mahila Bhujel got to know so many things about their ways of living. He explains:

> Men work as doorkeepers throughout the day—women produce alcohol in every household—Gorkhalis gather in the evening—drink alcohol and involve in gambling as well as playing cards. Uncontrolled in a distant country, these Nepalis were ignoring their inborn civilization, culture and behavior day by day. The environment there was like that. But, despite being in touch with many other foreigners, those Gorkhalis never attempted to elevate their status (Bangdel, 1963, p. 169).

Through Mahila, Bangdel describes the Nepalis' ways of living in Burma. Most of them deviate from their mission, that is, work hard abroad, make money and return to the home country to live comfortably. Like many degenerated Nepalis in Burma, Mahila also had indulged himself in alcohol and gambling and ruined his life completely. He had occasionally remembered his home and family but never felt like going back.

Now in India, Mahila has nothing except the memories of forgettable life in Burma. As he unravels his story to a young girl Rupa, his own daughter he had left years back, he expresses his remorse time and again. He acknowledges his blunder and wishes he never suspected his wife and left home. Like Rane, he suffers from guilt consciousness and eventually dies before he can ask for forgiveness from Masini. This is how yet another Nepali, in search of comfortable life in *muglan*, bows down to death without really being able to materialize his dream.

Conclusion

Muluk Bahira portrays Nepali modernity as an irony that both lures and repels its characters, drawing them into modern urban locations, economic opportunities, and global encounters while pushing them to the situations of alienation, loss and tragedy. Through the experiences of main characters Rane, Myauchi, Mahila Bhujel, and Dal Bahadur, Bangdel narrates the fascinations of modernity through modern Darjeeling, its market and transportation facilities including railway, Nepalis' entrance to the Gorkha regiment, the Gorkha soldiers' global encounters, cross-cultural interactions and implicit and explicit influences. Apparent economic opportunities, however, collide with fragmentation and alienation in these migrants' lives. Nepali modernity, therefore, sprang from interactions with modern urban locations beyond the border, but at the cost of loss and alienation of the mobile subjects. In this way, Bangdel narrates the vortex of Nepali modernity that is split between hope and despair at the same time.

Since this is a tiny effort to explore the nascent stage of Nepali modernity in the early 20th century through one of the fictional narratives of the time, this article can just open avenues for further research on the issue. Nepali modernity is indeed a bone of contention among researchers and scholars as it cannot be discussed in absolute terms. Many researchers in the days to come can excavate new dimensions of Nepali modernity, and, this article can have some relevance to new researches and discussions.

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