

Indigenous Identity Formation in Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bhir*

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Abstract

Background: Indigenous texts in Nepal have been analysed largely through sociological, postcolonial and feminine lenses, however, lived socio-cultural practices and experiences, ethical values and communal roles have not been adequately explored. This study attempts to examine how Rajan Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* articulates identity formation of the Rai community, focusing on the indigenous aesthetic systems of collective activism and adaptive capability to sustain.

Methods: Employing a qualitative research design based on indigenous aesthetic methodology and theoretical knowledge of American scholar Steven Leuthold, the research makes textual analysis to identify various aesthetic qualities which vitalize the text for exposing indigenous integrity and identity.

Results: The analysis demonstrates that indigenous aesthetics differs from the Western concepts of aesthetics and that the indigenous aesthetic phenomena deep-rooted in the text foreground resistance, relationality, kinship, memory, and judicious negotiation between tradition and modernity.

Conclusion: Overall, the findings suggest that indigenous aesthetic systems rather than Western aesthetic phenomena function in the text for the formation of indigenous identity.

Novelty: Based on indigenous aesthetic systems as a theoretical framework, the study might contribute to the genre of indigenous literature and criticism as it is opting for using indigenous aesthetic approaches in the interpretation of a contemporary literary text.

Keywords: Indigenous aesthetics, collective activism, tradition and modernity, identity formation, relationality

Introduction

Rajan Mukarung from the Rai community in the eastern hills of Nepal produced the novel *Damini Bhir* meaning *Damini Cliff* in English which won the Madan Prize in 2012, the year of its publication. He along with other two friends named Upendra Subba and Hangyug Agyat in the late 1990s campaigned a literary movement called “*Srijanshil Arajakata* [Creative Anarchism”) emphasizing the inclusion of ethnic consciousness and integrity into the mainstream literature of the country. The novel has been written in Nepali, and in this article, the Nepali expressions cited from the novel are translated into English and in some places only for clarity, both Roman and English versions are given.

Damini Bhir portrays the real picture of people living in eastern hills of Nepal. It depicts the problems, struggles, hopes, disillusionments and socio-cultural performances of mainly Rai community. It reveals the ancestry, memory, spirituality and storytelling of the people in the community. It stipulates the differences in lifestyles in both rural and urban settings, presenting some modern traits emerging even in the village. It highlights the integrity and pride of the Rai lineage and also indicates how the Rai predecessors entertained polygamy and patriarchal nature only after they came closer to rulers. It emphasizes the role of place for confidence and identity formation. It also conveys a message that any discrimination in the society hinders progress and development. In *The Kathmandu Post*, Anish Ghimire reporting the play adapted from *Damini Bhir* writes, “As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that the director’s vision focuses on the caste system’s stark disparities, highlighting a society far from progress” ([19 Sept. 2023](#)).

Damini Bhir refers to historical, socio-cultural and political context of the Rai community deep-rooted in indigenous aesthetics. This research attempts to interpret *Damini Bhir* through the lens of indigenous aesthetics developed by Steven Leuthold. Indigenous aesthetics refers to indigenous values and emblems associated with culture and ancestry. Indigenous people develop these values and emblems to create and interpret indigenous art and literature. Leuthold’s concept of a “systems” approach to aesthetics signifies aesthetics such as the domains of politics, law and economy which emerge as sets of social behaviours and practices. Aesthetics can be cross-culturally viewed as social behaviours are embedded in every culture. The aesthetic systems are systems of ethics and values which focus not only aesthetic phenomena but also lived experiences and practices in various social systems. [Leuthold \(1998\)](#) asserts, “In the context of indigenous aesthetics, a conceptual explanation of a belief or value system may not be the only source of discovering aesthetic ideas; rather beliefs and values are lived and embedded in social relationships” ([p. 6](#)).

The novel largely embraces indigenous aesthetic systems for ethnic identity formation but the existing critical scholarships ignoring indigenous aesthetic values mainly focuses on the suffering and marginalization of the people in the Rai community through the concepts of nationalism, feminism, power and knowledge. The researcher accepts ideas from available criticisms and also departs from them to enrich the present study in connection with the

indigenous aesthetic insights, and helps disseminate the novel as a testimony that reveals indigenous aesthetic systems.

The study attempts to answer the research questions: What indigenous aesthetic systems are relevant to *Damini Bhir*? In what ways do indigenous aesthetics emerge as different from Western concepts of aesthetics? How do indigenous aesthetic systems contribute to shaping indigenous identity formation in the novel? The general objective of the study is to examine how the primary text looks through the lens of indigenous aesthetics. The specific objective is to identify the indigenous aesthetic systems which enrich the primary text and expose how indigenous aesthetic systems are related to Rai community's identity formation in the primary text.

The scope of the study lies in indigenous epistemologies. The study is limited to the analysis of the primary text through Leuthold's indigenous aesthetic insights, and to the ideas based on the data employed in it. This study matters in the sense it emerges as a new trajectory to comprehend indigenous works of art. It examines how *Damini Bhir* embraces indigenous aesthetics for identity formation.

Review of Literature

The research reviews the existing scholarships on the primary text for the purpose of identifying the departure to locate the research in a new trajectory of indigenous aesthetics. The review based upon methodological, theoretical, conceptual and empirical dimensions underpin the significance of the primary text and signal the need for further research. Ramesh Kumar Limbu applying mainly the postcolonial perspective contends that the marginalized voice and consciousness were ignored in the mainstream Nepali literature but the contemporary Nepali narratives reveal the phenomena of the lived experiences which promote a sense of belonging that forms different perspectives of identity. Highlighting ethnic identity and marginalized voices inherent in different Nepali texts including *Damini Bhir*, he asserts, "Through poetic storytelling and political insight, Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* gives voice to Nepal's indigenous communities, calling for a more inclusive national identity" ([Limbu, Dec. 2025, p. 47](#)). This criticism signals the emergence of new trends of inclusive literature in Nepal and inspires for lived expressions and experiences.

In a similar vein as stated above, emphasizing the lived experiences, yet employing indigenous knowledges, Kul Bahadur Khadka presents Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* and Upendra Subba's [Lato Pahad](#) meaning *The Dumb Mountain* as testimonies advocating for the indigenous voice for justice and identity. The study points to the pan-indigenous phenomena the Rai and Limbu communities embrace, and emphasizes indigenous insights of kinship and relationality for the comprehension of oneness. [Khadka \(Dec. 2025\)](#) is of the opinion that *Damini Bhir* helps promote the voice of the hill people in eastern Nepal through activism and lived practices ([p. 61](#)). Likewise, Gobinda Prasad Dulal analyses *Damini Bhir* through a sociological perspective and points to the novelist's goal of raising the voice of Dalit and marginalized communities. He argues, "Historical and contemporary realities have been

expressed in Mukarung's *Damini Bhir*" ([Dulal, 2015, p. 2](#)). In this light, *Damini Bhir* can be traced as a novel of quest for a new trajectory of representing multiple ways of seeking identity and recognition.

Ramji Timalina highlights the value of ethnic culture inherent in ethnic literary creations, mainly in Mukarung's poems, that the poet's all types of writings need further studies through cultural resistance perspectives as developed by Michel Foucault, Chris Barker and Stuart Hall, and his (the poet's) space should be explored in Nepali literature on the basis of the new trends of concepts, practices and styles ([Dec. 2019, p. 78](#)). This critic is inclined towards new trends and styles in literature and criticism but it fails to employ adequate aesthetic insights of Leuthold

Indira Acharya Mishra focused on Mukarung's poetry characters shows resemblance in the characters of *Damini Bhir* in the context of their marginalization. On the grounds of multicultural feminist perspectives, she states that women suffer from gender, class and caste discriminations ([Dec. 2019, p. 51](#)). She attributes marginalization to socio-political discriminations. Corresponding with a similar thematic pattern of Dalit women's suffering and silence, Gyanu B. K. in her thesis on *Damini Bhir*, employing postcolonial insights, stipulates the lack of Dalit women characters' agency. She points out the silences of Dalit women experiencing dual types of dominations based on caste and gender. As to Dalit women's suffering [B. K. \(2021\)](#) asserts, "They are portrayed as voiceless, helpless, and identity-less. Throughout the novel, there are examples of victimization of Dalit female characters due to the lack of their agency" ([p. 4](#)). The portrayal of the female characters arises relevant and admirable; however, the study could include some aesthetic values of such characters including the ethnic women as depicted in the novel. B. K. points to the need for women's agency for their justice and parity.

The critical sources available on *Damini Bhir* reveal that the novel gives voice to the ethnic and marginalized people. Limbu and Khadka point out that the novel voices the voiceless. The former focuses on the inclusive national identity and the latter foregrounds lived indigenous expressions as indigenous voices for identity. Dulal also opines that the novel serves as a mirror of the past and present realities of the society. Timalina in a similar line thinks that Mukarung's works reflect new trends and practices in Nepali literature. Acharya Mishra's opinion of marginalization in Mukarung's works, mainly in his poems, is primarily associated with women while B. K. analyses mainly Dalit female characters' marginalization in *Damini Bhir*.

The literature review reveals that the existing critical scholarships share similar themes and patterns in the analysis of *Damini Bhir*. Despite some proximity, the given theoretical perspectives to more extent vary. The scholarships disseminate the novel to a wide range of readership and help enrich this study, however, most of the critics have analysed the novel through postcolonial, sociological, cultural resistance and feminist perspectives, and Khadka largely emphasizes indigenous insights more epistemological than aesthetic, though these distinct phenomena are interlinked. None of the critics has focused on Leuthold's insights of indigenous aesthetics. Based on a new way of seeing *Damini Bhir*, this research uses

Leuthold's indigenous aesthetic perspectives and analyses the text to see how ethnic expressions and experiences contribute to identity formation.

Methods and Materials

The researcher employs the qualitative research design, using the evidences from the primary text and from various secondary data. It identifies the indigenous aesthetic systems in the novel and interprets their role for the ethnic identity formation, mainly of the Rai community. It connects these systems with the novel and helps to disseminate the meaning of the lived practices as seen in the text.

This study analyses Mukarung's *Damini Bhir* through indigenous aesthetics in the domain of indigenous literary study. The researcher selected this novel as a primary text on the grounds of the lived expressions and experiences as it delivers. Exploring the indigenous aesthetic systems inherent in the novel becomes the major subject matter of the analysis. The study further observes the ways indigenous aesthetics differs from aesthetics in general as defined in the mainstream line. Through the indigenous aesthetic insights, it highlights how ethnic identity formation occurs. The indigenous aesthetic systems are the realities embedded in the context of the Rai community. The study uses the aesthetics for textual analysis through the lens of Leuthold's aesthetic concepts.

Concerning secondary data, the researcher employed available books, research journals, dissertations, online sources and previous studies related to the research. The article writer has consulted libraries, scholars' guidance and instructions in order to enrich the study. He thinks that the aesthetic aspects and the narratives of experiences inherent in the novel might resemble the experiences and feelings of people belonging to any community. Moreover, the text appeals for parity, identity and humanity. The insights inherent in the text refer to all humans, not ethnic people alone.

As light mediates the eyes to see, a theory matters to see a work of art, identify the inadequacies of the existing critical scholarships and determine a different research trajectory. Traditional mainstream Western aesthetic theories underscore outer beauty, form and individuation, and ignore indigenous aesthetics of lived expressions, experiences, ethical responsibility, relationality and collectivity. Indigenous scholars strongly emphasize indigenous aesthetics and knowledges as theories to read indigenous texts. Penelope Myrtle Kelsey, a Native American theorist, recommends tribal knowledge as a theoretical lens for analysing native or indigenous texts. She relates a theory to culture and stresses the role of a native theory to accurately read a native text. She argues, "Theory is so deeply entwined with culture that a failure to engage it in the reading of literary texts closes off any sort of narrative about how we understand it as literature" ([2008, p. 12](#)). In this study, the researcher has employed indigenous aesthetic knowledge as a theoretical and conceptual framework for the analysis of *Damini Bhir*. He has analyzed the novel through indigenous aesthetic insights embedded in the book *Indigenous Aesthetics: Native Art, Media and Identity* by non-Native American Steven Leuthold.

Damini Bhir, a rich text for imparting indigenous aesthetics, might challenge the autonomous form of aesthetics while celebrating the relational dimensions of beauty. In this context, Leuthold's aesthetic approach looks relevant in the interpretations of the novel. His indigenous aesthetics are based on indigenous epistemologies. His aesthetic principles highlight the indigenous cultural symbols and values, memory and identity. His aesthetic lens can reveal what *Damini Bhir* aesthetically shows or why it matters. This interpretive lens focuses on the significance of the political, socio-cultural and ethical functions the novel performs. Through indigenous aesthetic approach, the novel can be viewed as a space of the Rai community's cultural knowledge, solidarity, and resistant and resilient nature.

Leuthold thinks that indigenous aesthetic view differs from an autonomist view of art which might take art only as a commodity and separate it from its relational and spiritual function. Whereas, from an indigenous aesthetic perspective, a work of art is judged on the grounds of social rules and guidelines, and community orientation. [Leuthold \(1998\)](#) argues, "... art is both useful and beautiful (its functioning is a part of beauty)" ([p. 7](#)). Expression and experience are important aspects to understand aesthetic systems. Viewing a work of art should be systems-oriented rather than object-oriented. Indigenous aesthetics primarily stresses the organization of knowledge and meaning system. A systems approach to aesthetics reveals that an aesthetic expression, social and collective in nature, embraces multiple meanings. He contends how indigenous aesthetics matters in an intercultural context of today's globalized world. Different cultures come into contact and negotiate by virtue of aesthetic expressions.

Leuthold contends that indigenous aesthetic expressions can communicate cross-cultural significance, that is, they function with a "representational" role ([p. 8](#)). In a similar vein, Chadwick Allen, an indigenous scholar, opines that indigenous aesthetic systems of different communities, when juxtaposed, communicate indigenous solidarity and shared identity. He asserts, "Indigenous juxtapositions place diverse texts close together across genre and media, aesthetic systems and worldviews..." ([Allen, 2012, p. xviii](#)).

The existing readings of the novel heavily embrace the postcolonial and feminist interpretations which cannot portray the indigenous aesthetic dimensions of the text. An indigenous aesthetic reading can communicate how identity gets constructed and sustained through memory and lived practices.

Textual Analysis

Political Activism and Indigenous Identity Formation

The research reveals that collective activism, lived cultural practices and adaptation capability as indigenous aesthetic systems are relevant tools to analyse *Damini Bhir*. Indigenous aesthetic systems are deep-rooted in indigenous cultures, histories and worldviews. The aesthetic systems reveal indigenous integrity and pride, and promotes identity. A text imparting such systems emphasizes indigenous independence and pride. The aesthetic significance of an indigenous work lies in the live and practical aspects of the communities the work imparts. Ethnicity alone cannot define collective identity and responsibility. Someone

ethnic, only embracing indigenous aesthetic values, deserves collective identity. Indigenous aesthetic systems which are rule-bound and rooted in practices and lived experiences form identity. Collective identity emerges as a continuous cultural process of connecting the past with the present.

Resistance is an indigenous aesthetic phenomenon. Indigenous or ethnic people culturally, politically and socially challenge the domination and oppression of the colonial force in the global context but in the national context it suggests the mainstream power. They sometimes embrace overt resistance of activism, protests and demonstrations, and sometimes the subtle forms of resistance which include rituals, feasts, storytelling and so on. Indigenous aesthetics are collective, relational, ethical and place-based. They function as systems of kinship, knowledge and oneness. Mukarung emphasizes not only ethnicity and indigeneity but also indigenous aesthetics which inspire cultural continuity, construct the ways of seeing, and shape and sustain identity.

In *Damini Bhir*, the villagers including both ethnic and non-ethnic embrace a collective responsibility for their right and identity. The term “indigenous” broadly refers to marginalized and dominated people in the neo-colonial political context. Leuthold argues that the concept of “indigenous” has changed in course of time. It originally referred to people and things native to a place. After the 1990s, it has deserved a political meaning, that is, it signifies the growing ethnic consciousness as a collective, decolonial role. [Leuthold \(1998\)](#) asserts, “Currently, “indigenous” refers to people who are minorities in their own homeland, ...who view their political situation in the context of neocolonialism” ([p. 3](#)).

The villagers in the novel actively participate in political activism, raising their demand for identity. Most of them expect lots of change from the Maoist movement. Characters like Namdeng, Hangdima, Dhaule Kanchho, Lachchhi and Nisam are politically conscious and they become disappointed when they hear the news that their movement is withdrawn. Likewise, later Namdeng commands a Kathmandu-based movement of “*Adivasi janajati* [indigenous ethnicities]”, demanding federalism with identity and constitution with federalism. This movement gets twisted saying that it is caste-based. [Mukarung \(2023\)](#) states, “It is identity demanded by those oppressed till date. It is wrongly conversed, stating identity as caste-based” ([p. 264](#)). The novel ends with the slogan “Long live federalism with identity” ([p. 285](#)). The characters’ activism as an indigenous aesthetic system reveals the collective responsibility and identity of the marginalized community as stated in the novel. This indigenous movement emerges as an ongoing campaign for identity, which is a phenomenon of indigenous identity formation. This finding aligns with the previous studies done by Limbu and Khadka that the novel through political insight and activism embraces indigenous voice for identity. This study extends their ideas, situating the present argument in a different framework of indigenous aesthetics. Leuthold’s insights of communal responsibility as an indigenous aesthetic system, to more extent, resonate with critic Jace Weaver’s insights of communitism. Weaver uses the term as a combination of community and activism, emphasizing a vital role of a communal effort for identity and self-determination. He argues, “This is a work about community. Ultimately, no Native scholarship can be produced in isolation. It must be a communal effort”

[\(Weaver, 1997, p. xiv\)](#). The present study through Leuthold's aesthetic insights of communal activism reveals ethics, solidarity and continuity of possibilities of indigenous people as portrayed in *Damini Bhir*.

Kinship Relationships and Modernity-Adaptive Response

The study shows that *Damini Bhir* embedded in lived cultural practices embraces the indigenous aesthetic markers of cultural expressions and experiences. The beauty of the novel lies in the socio-cultural significance of the Rai community rather than in the structural beauty of the novel. The text shares the story of ancestry with the youngsters who will judge the history, values, emblems and generations. Its aesthetic role is to reveal what it does. Music and dance are very importantly connected to the locus of aesthetics. They help promote intertribal unity. Concerning a Native American dance staging, [Leuthold \(1998\)](#) argues, "Rather, it affirms that dance is a source of generational, spiritual and communal connection that continues to unite Native Americans" [\(p. 171\)](#). The primary text highlights ancestral, spiritual and cultural practices of the villagers. The small store house of Deuman, a character in the novel, is on fire. All the neighbors and villagers extinguish the fire. They help him with materials and labor. In a week, the shed or store house stands with a new roof. The people celebrate, remember deities, and perform a ritual in honor of *mimang*, a God of fire [\(Damini Bhir, p. 105\)](#). This cultural practice signifies an indigenous worldview of maintaining kinship, spiritual bond and ancestral acknowledgement. Songs and dances in *Damini Bhir* are not merely cultural facets but they speak of ancestry, survival, continuity and identity of the indigenous community. The people enjoy songs and dances in different rituals, carnivals and market occasions. They perform "*Sakewa* [a main festival of Kirat Rais]" dance which signifies the reverence for land or nature. People from different castes participate in it, emulating the opinion that a ritual is individualistic or specific but a culture is collective or common [\(p. 82\)](#). The cultural role in shaping indigenous identity is also explicitly highlighted in the existing sources of Khadka and Timalisina, however, the present study via indigenous aesthetic framework strengthens the significance of the cultural continuity of the indigenous people as portrayed in the novel.

The cultural continuity promotes Leuthold's concept of collective identity. He asserts, "Collective identity is a significant part of the experience of all people: We are social animals by nature and desire community identity" [\(p. 34\)](#). He emphasizes the healing role of dance and ceremony which express cultural pride and provide a sense of continuity with the past [\(p. 98\)](#). Collective identity being communal and relational is deep-rooted in ancestry, inheritance and lived expressions and experiences. It is embedded in memory, spirituality, kinship, storytelling and so on. It connects generations passed, passing and to pass. Being a Rai is not to reveal a particular tag or caste but it serves as a web of responsibilities and relationships. Stories and lived practices reveal collective identity. This idea in general resembles the kinship concept of Native American theorist Daniel Heath Justice who opines that kinship as a multifaceted term can be about cultural and community relationships and spiritual and ceremonial processes that bind people into meaningful affiliation [\(2018, p. 75\)](#). The study through Leuthold's concept of aesthetic expressions like dance, music and occasional events foregrounds the cultural continuity for indigenous identity formation in *Damini Bhir*.

Damini Bhir, despite its focus on tradition and ancestry, uses modernity by virtue of its adaptive quality of aesthetics. Indigenous aesthetics as dynamic and adaptive in nature challenge myths and stereotypes about indigenous people. The novel through Leuthold's indigenous aesthetic perspective emerges as an aesthetic text based on modernity-adaptive response and intercultural adaptation. Indigenous aesthetics are negotiating and adaptive rather than hostile against modernity. They negotiate between tradition and modernity, forming and sustaining indigenous identity. Indigenous resilience refers to the endurance capacity of indigenous people. Indigenous communities with zeal and zest, by virtue of their aesthetic art and culture, endure marginalization and domination, and stop to adapt, survive, and continue for reenergization and revitalization. They emerge capable of adapting to modern contexts of media and technologies. Leuthold opines that contemporary indigenous artists also emulate tradition and inspire it to sustain, conversing in the increasing influence of modern trends, for indigenous identity. Popular culture like mass media, film and online media seems to undermine indigenous people, portraying them as primitive people, yet hopefully indigenous artists seem to have used popular culture as indigenous people's space for disseminating their identity and aesthetic systems.

Damini Bhir, a work of indigenous aesthetics, reveals indigenous people's adaptive behaviour with the modern traits and trends. Indigenous aesthetics preserve, heal, inspire and heighten indigenous communities and form shared identity. They show how indigenous people respond to change and contemporary art and media, preserving their culture and identity. In the primary text, politically drastic changes occur; financially real estate business, cooperatives and loan systems emerge and foreign employment is accessible; culturally "dohori [duet]" song and bar/hotel events increase and Christian influence is traced, and in development the *damini* cliff is destroyed and a road construction takes place. In media, Facebook becomes popular. These changes and trends with explicit and implicit significance influence the villagers who filter them and adopt them so that their identity gets preserved. The text adores development, democracy and progress whereas it tends to sense possible negative effects of "dhukuti [an informal practice of finance transaction among a certain group of individuals]" and Christian faith in the integrity of indigenous people. Ramva due to her *dhukuti* concentration seems not to properly care her son Ridum who is studying in a junior Grade in a boarding school. Her spouse Namdeng points to the possible legal risk of the *dhukuti* involvement ([Damini Bhir, p. 69](#)). Ethics matters in aesthetics. Namdeng finds the Bible in a cupboard rack, hidden by his wife. With their house owner woman, she is going to Church. Infuriated, he asserts, "It is not right to convert religion tempted with money. Instead, it is right to comprehend thought and philosophy" ([p. 68](#)). She apologizes with him. This tussle between the couple implies an intercultural tussle or a conflict between tradition and modernity, and ultimately it is negotiated for a solution to preserve identity.

Likewise, *Damini Bhir* presents some people's behaviour of changing traditional practices and showing pretence and fake gullibility. The novel states how Ratne Kami makes profit in the village and becomes Ratna Bishwokarma after shifting to the headquarters, and how his son Chandra Bishwokarma runs a gold shop at New Road in Kathmandu, and earning

status and opulence, is identified as Chandra Lamichhane ([p. 55](#)). This is an impact of modernity but it is deep-rooted in the relationship between caste hierarchy and social status prevailed in Nepal since long back. This phenomenon of changing a caste can hinder identity, but the aesthetic function of the text can be a persuasive appeal for parity and justice in the society. Namdeng recalls how Nara Jung, an Indian army pensioner from eastern hills in Nepal, settles in Kathmandu, and he compares him to Kedar Luintel, a youth from a poor family in a village, who after returning on leave as an Indian Lahure, apparently asked his mother if millet grows in a tree ([p. 205](#)). More probably, it is also Mukarung's persuasive appeal not to hide place and reality.

Moreover, the novel shows the mobile phone and Facebook influences and cautiously signals to be alert for its possible harms. In Kathmandu, Namdeng reads a stranger's love, romantic messages for his wife in her mobile set. He beats and scolds her and consequently she jilts him forever. He with his son returns to his village ([Damini Bhir, p. 73](#)). Once Namdeng likes the status of Sumnima Rai living in Korea, who has compared Facebook to a cliff: "Even Facebook turns out to be like a cliff so fearsome. Converting the cliff, the time has made the wall with the name of technology ... and man, it seems, dies falling off this very cliff" ([p. 270](#)). Namdeng's wife messages him not to send her a friend request. In response, he replies that all the life stories were just on the desktop, not saved; the life-computer was formatted and they were gone and the relation was deleted. He logged out his computer, maybe he logged out one relation ([p. 271](#)). The cliff is called *damini* cliff after a *damai*-caste woman having been abused by an elite lender in the village commits suicide falling off the cliff. The aesthetic skill of the author comparing between a cliff and Facebook might represent tradition and modernity which are both lived witnesses of man's strengths, flaws and compulsions. The *damini* cliff with traditional and historical significance is largely destroyed, however, its remaining stone with an identity slogan inscribed on it might help form and sustain indigenous identity even in the era of contemporary media and technology. These revelations resonate with the existing scholarships by Dulal, Acharya Mishra and B. K. who highlight historical and contemporary realities, marginalization of the characters and the lack of Dalit female agency respectively, however, their scholarships can't adequately recommend indigenous aesthetic dimensions which help strengthen modernity-adaptive environment.

Traditionally, indigenous people internalized modernity as Leuthold's mention of Canadian native artist Loretta Todd's opinion "Modernism has its origins in a culture based on exclusion and hierarchy" ([Leuthold, 1998, p. 51](#)). The modernity-adaptive response of contemporary indigenous artists and writers like Mukarung balances tradition and modernity without disturbing indigenous identity. In this context, Leuthold's insights of indigenous adaptation in the intercultural and modern trends might resemble the transcultural insights of Māori scholar Michaela Moura-Kocoglu who opines that transcultural phenomena are emerging in contemporary Māori literatures and "literary interpretations of indigeneity foreground a blend of cultural traditions adapted to a transformed social context" ([Moura-Kocoglu, 2011, p. xxxi](#)). In the context of the globalized multicultural world, cultural

intervention and blending might occur but indigenous aesthetics can inspire negotiations for win-win situations.

Ethics and Aesthetics as Relational Concepts

The study further shows that indigenous aesthetics differ from Western or mainstream modern aesthetic concepts on the ground of beauty, spirituality, community and ethical responsibility which *Damini Bhir* emphasizes. Leuthold is of the opinion that Western mainstream modern aesthetics ignore spiritual significance and communal responsibilities. He prioritizes indigenous aesthetics by virtue of their ethical roles and responsibilities toward culture, community and generation connection. An indigenous story, dance, song or any ritual as an aesthetic imparts a special meaning which reveals what it does, that is, it instructs, resists, appeals, remembers or strengthens identity. What the art looks like, or its form, does not arise more important but its content or function matters. [Leuthold \(1998\)](#) contends, “In Navajo thought beauty is found in activities, not in products: not in things, but in the relationships among things. Beauty is balance” (p. 60). He argues that in many indigenous cultures, aesthetics and ethics are interlinked. He thinks that the modern Western aesthetic thought tends to conceptualize aesthetics as autonomous from spiritual and ethical dimensions but the traditional aesthetic systems embrace the qualities of spirituality and ethics. This inclusive framework sees a work of art in indigenous aesthetics (p. 63). Indigenous aesthetics stress collective identity rather than individual role and expression. *Damini Bhir* as an indigenous aesthetic work tremendously adheres to collective endeavour, lived cultural practices and political and ethical roles for identity formation. It inspires contemporary Nepali literatures to be inclusive as well as diverse identity-forming.

The meaning of *Damini Bhir* emerges in connection with the aesthetic concepts of relationality, kinship and identity formation. The text clearly shows political activism, lived cultural expressions and experiences, and adaptive role to media and technology. It underscores collective identity which is relational and communal rather than isolated and individualistic. The indigenous aesthetic systems inherent in the text define Rai people’s identity. In this way, the identity of Rai people is ancestrally continued, culturally embedded, politically resisted and technologically adapted.

Toward Indigenous Aesthetic Vision

This study analyses *Damini Bhir* with the focus on identity formation through Leuthold’s concepts of indigenous aesthetic systems of collective activism, communal responsibility, lived expressions and experiences, and adaptation to media and technology. It demonstrates the characters’ collective efforts based on kinship and ethics for parity and identity. The indigenous aesthetic practices embedded in the Rai community are clearly depicted in the primary text which balances tradition and modernity in a relational and adaptive process. The research juxtaposing the indigenous and Western concepts of aesthetics, foregrounds indigenous aesthetics as more reciprocal, ethical and communal. The existing scholarships often embracing postcolonial and feminine approaches emphasize the themes of marginalization and gender disparity, whereas, the present study slightly extending the previous insights departs to the indigenous aesthetic vision as a lens to see how identity formation

continues in the primary text.

The findings might be useful to the existing scholarships on *Damini Bhir* for rethinking the socio-cultural and political implications of the people's suffering, activism and lived occasions not only from viewpoints of binary and gender oppositions but also from the perspectives of aesthetic insights developed by Steven Leuthold. The study anticipates that concerned authorities might pay their attention to the preservation of indigenous cultures in correspondence with tradition and modernity, without triggering a cultural loss but with a recognition of every culture and identity. This qualitative research analyses only one text on the basis of the culture and identity formation of the Rai community, however, it resonates with broader indigenous phenomena prevalent in different indigenous communities. In coming days, scholars might study how indigenous aesthetic approaches help balance tradition and contemporary trends in literatures and instigate indigenous identity formation and sustaining.

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