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THEORETICAL/CRITICAL ESSAY ARTICLE

## Rethinking Social Realism in Gopal Prasad Rimal's *Masan*

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### Abstract

*This paper exposes the issues of urban middle class society of Nepal during the late Rana period in Gopal Prasad Rimal's play Masan (Cremation Ground). The use of social realism in literature like in this play provides the actual social events and issues to expose within the same society and to other society. The research approach adopted includes social realism as a theoretical approach, textual analysis as a research method and note-taking as a research tool for verbal-data collection from the text. The findings provide evidence that the author portrays the real setting (Krishna's ordinary room) of educated middle class actual family and social values of patriarchal society (Helen wishes bearing a child to run Krishna's family line and open the heaven's gate), real native tongue by the characters Krishna, Helen, Bhotu, Bride, maid of the play. This study explored tensions and struggles of man Krishna and woman Helen in real society; the exploitation of Helen's body as a sex toy by preventing her bearing a child and the practice of polygamy are considered as social realistic issues in Nepali society. Helen determines to revolt against the sexist domination by separating her way from Krishna's. The paper concludes that the author realistically portrays the reality of social life of Nepal before 2007B.S. in the play. This paper has shown the application of social realism in a Nepali play, and it presents how social realism theory can be applied in realistic literature, and understood the particular society.*

**Keywords:** Family value, reality, representation, revolt, social realism

### Introduction

This research aims to explore the issue of real social representation of Nepali society during the late Rana regime in Gopal Prasad Rimal's play *Masan* from the perspective of social realism. Rimal has depicted the socio-cultural and religious agitation in the play, and present social vices against females in the traditional patriarchal Nepali society. Literature consists of human emotions and thoughts as we really observe and experience in our life, and is the representation of actual life. Although there is not

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exact replica of real society in literature, there is believable representation for audience. Literature depicts the real society as writers observe and experienced, and construct the 'slice of life' in the accepted tradition of the literary genre. Writers present the human world of reality in literature. It records what is seen and experienced in our real life. Literature mirrors how people live and think about life. There are problems of life in society; so do in literature. Literature is a record of the social life in which the writer lives. The realistic literature is an artistic reflection of real life, but not a history recording bare facts of life of the past times. Realistic literary works present real events and behaviours in particular traditions as we see and observe in our real society. Every work reflects the time of the writers. Literature consists of the picture of ordinary persons struggling, suffering and achieving the particular goal under the social forces of the time. Rimal's play *Masan* meticulously presents ordinary people, events and behaviours; people are from middle-class family of the late Rana period of Nepal. The issues of the play are maternal bond, patriarchal norms and values, exploitation of female, value of son in Hindu family, family love, etc. The play mostly sets in a family room of a house. These things provoke me to expose social realism in Rimal's *Masan*. Therefore, the major purpose of the research study is to analyse the representation of real life in *Masan* from the perspective of social realism.

This paper is a qualitative interpretative research. "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell and Creswell 3). It collects and analyses non-numerical data or information like texts, pictures to explore experiences, opinions or concepts of individuals and society; in literary research, individuals are characters and where the characters belong or are placed is the society. "A text or an author is studied here with reference to certain theory of literature or literary criticism. That means in interpretative research a theory is applied to a text" (Deshpande 19). This research article has used the textual analysis method. "Textual analysis as a research method involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions" and it "focuses on text, or seeks to understand the inscription of culture in its artefacts" (Belsey 160). A text consists of information and/data for analysis. This article has used primary source, Rimal's *Masan (Cremation Ground* translated by Sangita Rayamajhi), and secondary sources, that are, books and articles concerned with Realism and Rimal. In literary research, text notes or note-taking is a research tool that "provides facts for future reference" (Sinha 13). The note-taking was used as a tool for data collection from the play *Masan*. Social realism as a theoretical approach has been used to analyse the information collected from the text; social realism as a theory provides a lens for the inquiry in the text *Masan*.

### **Social Realism in Literature**

Realism consists of the representation of real life everyday experience i.e. reality, but excludes ideal or romantic subjectivity. Realism is the portrayal of a real-life in literature as it truly is. It consists of ordinary people and everyday events, activities and experiences. Realism in literature was initially introduced in France by the novelists Gustave Flaubert and Honore de Balzac. George Eliot put realism forward into England, William Dean Howells into United States. Realism in the theatre was practised in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially by Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw. Realism tells real-life stories of people and places; it depicts characters from middle and lower classes of society. "[Realism] can be applied to the accurate depiction in any literary work of the everyday life of a place or period" (Murfin and Ray 328).

Among different types of realism, social realism is discussed here to analyse the play *Masan*.

Realism is a literary approach that reveals the depiction of everyday concrete occurrences on a particular subject matter of middle and lower class lives. Realism in literature discusses “accurate representation without idealization of everyday life” (Scholes 206). Realism focuses on realistic understanding of different social real problems based on real facts and figures. It includes people and society with their practices and tells openly real stories, social and moral humanistic problems. According to Galsworthy, realism in literature reveals “the actual spirit of life, character and thought with a view to enlighten” audience. Realism is “to represent life as it really is” (Abrams 269). Realism exposes the social problems like gender, cultural, and religious tensions.

Realism describes the accurate depiction of reality in literature. Coles in *Dictionary of Literary Terms* mentions, “Realism, in literature, is a manner and method of picturing life as it really is, untouched by idealism or romanticism. As a manner of writing, realism relies on the use of specific details to interpret life faithfully and objectively” (163). ‘Accurate’ means “believable” to audience. Audience lose themselves in events happening in a story and accept the events as may actually be happening in their real life. They focus on objectivity, lucid and detachment from idealization of life, and show great attention to detail of everyday life, even to trivial subject matter of real life. Realism indicates real life as it is with both beautiful and ugly aspects, and describes the aspects of life through the senses. Realistic literature is for

The effect that it represents life and social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things might well happen. [...] to achieve such effects, [...] realists may or may not be selective in subject matter [...] but they must render their materials in ways that make them seem to their readers the very stuff of ordinary experience. (Abrams 269-270)

Social realism depicts independent characters, life and human relationships. Writers present a faithful account of people and things and portray a ‘truth-telling’ in literary texts as they have observed in the real society.

Social realism explores real behavioural and philosophical aspects of real life in literature. “It usually refers more specifically to a writer’s accuracy in portraying the speech and behaviour of a character or characters from a low socioeconomic class”, and focuses on “an objective presentation of details and events” (Murfin and Ray 329). It seeks changing the existing social real problems. It also represents injustice and oppression in real social life, and seeks freedom from social injustice. Literary critics apply realism to “designate a recurrent mode ... of representing human life and experience in literature” (Abrams 269). Realists comprise detailed realistic and factual description, and account for representation of events and social conditions as they actually are, without idealization. “[Realist] descriptions give the impression of an accurate or factual account of a real scene; to do this, they fix the account to a particularized place and situation” (Hughes 65). The details in literature provides readers “an impression of social depth and historical scope” (Hughes 141). Realists recreate real-life society in literature. They depict seen and unseen human nature in people’s ordinary unchecked manners. Realist writers represent the same thing in literature as it truly is in real society. They “includes ‘real people’ who ... are already known to us- whose voices we have heard” and “do not name the original” (Mullan 97) of real people in literature. They focus on ordinary activities and experiences as it truly is but not as it should ideally be in real society.

Social realism exposes the true psychology of people in a society, the true picture of a society along with a particular social purpose in literature. "Characters in modern realistic plays ... speak dialogue that we might hear in our daily lives. [They] are not larger than life but representative of it; they seem to speak the way we do rather than in highly poetic language, formal declarations, asides, or soliloquies" (Meyer 1708). They talk about everyday life and family matters. "Conflicts in realistic plays are likely to reflect problems in our lives" (1709). Playwrights use middle and lower class characters to present life as it actually lived in the real society. They emphasize on "controversial issues of the day and focus on people who fail on pray to indifferent societal institutions" (1709). Ordinary characters in realistic plays wish for family happiness but suffer from their sensibilities, everyday circumstances, and social conventions and situations. Strong ordinary characters challenge the existing social values, conventions and attitudes towards marriage and family life in realistic plays. Realism as a style "attempts to depict life on stage as it is actually lived by the members of the audience. It shows us so-called everyday events happening to people like us who live in a world like ours and tells its story in a way that makes it appear logical and believable" (Rush 191). Realists use believable and logical time, place and action representing real life events and behaviours that are happening in our everyday life.

What Social Realist Critics observe:

1. Realist critics look for ordinary people, places, activities, things and everyday material world in the text and identify the real settings and locations that they are familiar with. They feel the subject matter of the text as they have experienced and observed in the real society.
2. They encounter ordinary characters (people) especially from middle and lower classes with everyday mother tongue. The main characters develop through the story and seek to adjust with socially acceptable goals (e.g. married life, maturity, freedom, responsibility) based on the class, age, gender, religion and culture.
3. They seek social conflicts (social class, culture, gender, social norms and values) and character psychology in social setting and interaction in the text.
4. They find male characters giving important to moral life, hardworking, honourable, courteous, rational, independent, chivalrous, humanity) in the represented real society in literature. Female characters are expected as chaste, loving, loyal, kind, domestic, virtuous, practical, moral, self-helping, sober, etc.
5. They see meticulous detailed descriptions for reality effect in the text, and find a long period of time to expose the characters, and linear time in the text. They find the difference between speaking and doing of few characters.

### **Social Issues in *Masan***

*Masan (Cremation Ground)* written by Nepali playwright Gopal Prasad Rimal (1918-1973) is a Nepali play; it is translated by Prof Dr Sangaita Rayamajhi into English. Rimal, born in middle-class Brahman family in Kathmandu, is described as "revolutionary" and "influential writer" (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*: 73) in Nepali literature. He has portrayed social and political issues in his literary works; he longed for consciousness raising in people against social and political injustice. "Realism sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are apparently the most ordinary and uninteresting, in order to extract from these their full value and true meaning" (Tadjibayev, et al. 146). Rimal takes subjects and characters from middle and low class family and social environment during the late Rana period of Nepal. In the play *Masan*, Rimal has realistically portrayed the themes of social and family values and gender issue;

that refers to social realism. He depicts social realism and also human problems in his plays (Acharya 64). Realism in literature is a movement started in nineteenth century that emerged as a reaction of romanticism and idealism. The main character Helen (Young Woman) who is the first wife of Krishna (an educated urban man) is seeking pleasure of having their own baby in their life. It is initially understood that there is a problematic relation between Helen and Krishna- Krishna says to Bhotu, "That's not your mother, that's Helen." Here, Krishna's psychology is exposed that he does not accept Helen as his life-partner and a mother. He indifferently says to Helen "Whose [marriage]?" Krishna and Helen do not have their own children, and bring up their nephew Bhotu (a son of Krishna's sister). Helen has internalized the patriarchal norms, values (a son to continue the family line) and Hindu religious beliefs that the door at heaven does not be open for married couple if they do not have their own son. Krishna does not show much interest of bearing a son. This problem brings forth actual social issues in *Masan*.

The setting plays an important role to provide the meaning of a play. The realistic play *Masan* uses a middle class society, especially family rooms. The setting and environment of a person introduce and develop the character of the person. As realist plays, Rimal furnishes the ordinary actual setting and locations that are familiar to the readers. Rimal depicts ordinary real places, things, activities and everyday materials as the real setting in the play. The place and time in which characters are put have 'the psychological effect' on them. The setting of *Masan* looks like a middle class educated person's room in the late Rana Regime of Nepal. Upadhyaya mentions that there are few places and almost no change in places as setting in realistic plays (*Nepali Natak* 23). The realistic play *Masan* describes setting in detail. In act one scene one, the setting is Krishna's bedroom, a low desk, a mattress, a child's quilt, children book, envelope, etc. This setting shows a middle class educated society:

Krishna's bedroom. Krishna is writing a letter at a low desk while sitting on a mattress. On his right a little boy four or five years, Bhotu, wrapped in a child's quilt, is staring down with great interest at a picture in a book. Krishna finishes writing his letter, puts it in an envelope, seals it and with a smile on his face. (1)

The place, things, activities and persons presented in this setting of the play are ordinary and simple as we are familiar with, observe and experience them in real middle class society.

In scene two, the setting is "A small veranda outside the storeroom. There is a big lock on the door of storeroom. In the background is heard the wedding band. Two maids enter carrying the accessories of the wedding rituals" (9). "A small veranda", "storeroom", and "wedding rituals" also indicate an actual middle class society. In scene three, the setting is "Krishna's room. Krishna is stretched out on his bed." In Nepal, a middle class society does not generally have more rooms at home; it is the actual setting- Krishna is lying and reading on bed. "The bride and the maid are cutting vegetables" sitting on a mattress is the setting in scene four. The middle class readers are familiar with such ordinary activities in a real-life society. In act two scene one, the setting is "Krishna's room. He is fast asleep. The maid enters. She goes to his bed and looks at him for a long time. She begins to speak but throws up her hands in irritation. Young Woman enters." People, activities, things are very ordinary and minutely described in the realistic play. Act two scene two has the setting as "The bride's room. She is not well and is lying in bed. In comparison to Krishna and the Young Woman's bedroom, this room is like that of a recluse", and scene three has almost the same setting as act one scene one except his mother leaning against a table. Act four scene four sets in the bride's room and scene five in Krishna's room. The whole play sets in Krishna's room and bride's

room; there are ordinary beds, tables, mattress, cups, foods and clothes which are familiar with to the readers that represent real society.

There are ordinary characters like Krishna, Helen, Bhotu, maid and mother from middle class society developed through the story; they represent actual society. Rimal has not presented characters as protagonists and antagonists clearly in the play, and characterized people on the bases of having good and evil nature in every individuals (Acharya 65). In a realistic play, characters “operate from psychological motives and instincts that are like ours whether they speak in prose or blank verse” (Rush 199). Upadhyaya argues that realistic plays has few real characters and short in length (*Nepali Natak* 23). In the play *Masan*, characters are the same; they move forward with particular ‘psychological motives and instincts’ as we readers have. The realistic characters carry one of the three key Aristotelian elements in the play: goal, at stake and strategies. In the play *Masan*, the main character Helen wants a goal to achieve in the family, that is, she wants Krishna must have a son to achieve “an ocean of love” of having own son and Hindu religious rescue to heaven. But Krishna takes Helen as a beautiful object that he does not want to lose in his life. Therefore, he stops her having children giving medicine secretly to her. A main character Krishna is evil character from middle class society. Helen, Krishna and Bride seek to adjust with socially acceptable goals based on class, gender, religion and culture. They provide the life-values and perspectives of the contemporary society of Nepal and he dominant character Helen’s character is psychologically developed in the play (Koirala 119). Krishna, an educated urban man from middle class, has married Helen. They attempt to run their married life socially acceptable. They try to perform socially acceptable fidelity, maturity, freedom and responsibility in their family life as we experience it in ours. They follow middle class ordinary norms and values. Helen and others have internalized the patriarchal and Hindu religious norms and values; she wants to be a good wife in the family and society. She focuses more on the family respect than her own respect and freedom in her life; she gives more important on her domestic, practical, virtuous, moral, loyal, kind, loving, self-helping, sober qualities etc. in front of her husband Krishna, Bhotu and other family members. These are considered as the real qualities that are followed by a good real middle-class married woman in the society.

The playwright Rimal has focused more on the characters who are affected by a particular issue to show how they are changed and developed; so *Masan* is a character-driven play; characters interest audience in the play. Rimal focuses more on the role of characters than the subject matter and this is one of the characteristics of realistic drama (Acharya 65). Rimal picks real characters from middle class society to show actual facts and issue to audience. Objectivity in realistic literature is believable and relative but not absolute. In *Masan*, Helen is unable to give birth a son to continue the family line and to open the heaven’s get for themselves that is necessary for a patriarchal Hindu family in Nepal. Helen persuades her husband Krishna to marry the next girl so that the second wife can bear a son and Helen can psychologically express her maternal love to the child. For Nepali audience, it is realistic event because they observe or experience the familiar practice of polygamy in the Nepali society. But for European audience, it may be unrealistic, unfamiliar and exotic. Therefore, social realism in literature should be believable and relative.

As a realist playwright, interest and sympathy are gradually transferred to one character Krishna over another characters Bride and Helen in *Masan*. In the first half part of the play, Rimal introduces the feeling and experiences of maternal bond, family and social problem. Audience sympathize Krishna because he is not interested to marry another girl as proposed by Helen, but later audience sympathize to Bride and Helen

because it is disclosed that Krishna exploits females Helen and Bride as commodities, and he accepts and loves Helen as a life-partner in his life but exploits her as an object or device used for sexual stimulation or to enhance sexual pleasure. For that, he stops Helen to bear children. Krishna confesses to Helen, “You don’t know it but you could not conceive because of me. Without letting you know, I fed you medicine that prevented you from conceiving. Now you understand that I wanted to keep you all to myself.” Krishna does not lose her beautiful body sooner by childbearing, and controls over her body as a sex toy. This behaviour makes Helen to change her thoughts having a child to run Krishna’s family line and open the heaven’s gate to enter heaven after their death; she revolts with the strong determination against patriarchal society. The major characters in Nepali social realistic play who know the patriarchal exploitation and injustice do not directly fight against the injustice but they choose the separate ways from the males (Acharya 65). Helen in *Masan* opposes her husband Krishna, “If you really say you will not let me go, then take my dead body and live with it. In a way I have never been a wife to you, but an object of your desire, your mistress. You have made my life meaningless.” She sees her home as a cremation place and leaves her home and husband Krishna. This refers to the pain and struggle of females in a patriarchal Hindu family in Nepal. Upadhyaya comments on *Masan* that Helen leaves home as a revolt of Krishna’s injustice and exploitation (*Nepali Natak* 23). In the second half of the play, Bride (the second wife of Krishna) asks with Helen and Krishna for rights and justice of having a wife of Krishna and mother of the child but nor kind and sympathy. These real behaviours and events are familiar practices to Nepali audience in patriarchal Hindu society. Rimal presents the purpose of social changes in the contemporary society of the late Rana period.

In *Masan*, “the world is a completely comprehensible phenomenon” as in realistic plays. Characters and events in the play are objectively presented as audience observe and experience in their real life, so they can easily comprehend. As realistic plays, the plot of *Masan* follows in chronological, natural, direct and linear events; it follows the law of cause and effect in events and changes in characters. The childless event causes the adaptation of Bhotu, the second marriage, then home leave of Helen to happen in the play. There is the psychological effect of real events on the characters Helen, Bhotu, Bride in the play. The child Bhotu is taken away from Krishna’s home because the psychological effect of having next baby has on Bhotu’s parents. The behaviour of Krishna has a psychological effect on Helen; that makes Helen leave home to get free from patriarchal attitude to female. Helen’s event leaving home has been a strong revolt psychological determinant of female in the play *Masan*. Professor and playwright Abhi Subedi comments that Nepali dramas concern “in the individuality of the character whose main conflict is with the society and also with various impulses within his or her own mind” (cited in Davis 41). In *Masan*, the main character Helen has the conflict with the patriarchal Hindu society that demands a son to run a family line and open the heaven’s gate after the death of parents; she struggles also with her own mind because she has (un)knowingly conceived the patriarchal norms and values and religious beliefs in her mind that shapes her activities and behaviours. Krishna also focuses on his own “individuality” that creates the conflict with the traditional Nepali culture because he thinks he does not want her to lose her beautiful body and enjoys with her beautiful longer. Therefore, he “prevented [her] from conceiving.” His focus on his own individuality creates the conflict with Helen. Rimal raises the issue of female with realistic nature in the play (Acharya 64). Here is the description of the pain and struggle of females like Helen and Brides in the patriarchal Hindu family that is the representation of Nepali Society of the late Rana periods.

As in his poem *Aamako Sapana (Mother's Dream)*, “the theme of waiting for a new birth recurs ... with political overtones” (Hutt, *Modern*: 19) even in *Masan*. “A new birth” may refer to a new political system democracy in Nepal. People longed for democracy in Nepal but Rana rulers deceived as Krishna deceives Helen (a mother) to give birth ‘a baby’ in the play. Rimal was active in politics against Rana rulers in Nepal and jailed for some months. Rimal would expect people had to revolt against political injustice of the Rana ruler as Helen does revolt against patriarchal and social injustice in the play.

As realistic plays, characters in *Masan* represents the larger middle-class society of real world. They concern about their survival (town life and interest on own child), love, courtship, sex and cultural beliefs. Rimal exposes a time of changes, a spirit of revolution of people of the real society during Rana Regime in Nepal. People like Helen seek freedom from conservative rigid social norms and values like patriarchal rules to females. As realistic playwrights, Rimal uses informal, ordinary, everyday, slang and colloquial language; characters speak in the relatively real native tongue. Dialogues or conversations of characters in *Masan* are simple ordinary prose to represent real-life conversations of people of Nepali society. They use natural everyday language in the play (Acharya 66). Here, Helen, Bhotu, mother and maid use every day Nepali language, but Krishna, an educated man, realistically uses language differently to seduce and impress Helen and others. There is the difference between appearance and reality, and speaking and doing of Krishna in the play. Dialogues are set down as the situational products, the characters’ personality and conditions, relative to subjects and contexts demand, but not ideal philosophy requires (Koirala 120). Such uses of dialogues make more believable as realism.

It takes a long period of time to expose Krishna and Helen in the text. Krishna plays truly a patriarchal role in Nepali society. Helen has also internalized patriarchal values and Hindu religious beliefs prescribed for female but later she revolts against the exploitation by Krishna. In the preface to her translation of *Masan*, Sangita Rayamajhi writes, “Helen of *Masan* leave[s] home to break the sexist domination”, and carries the “theme of female oppression.” She psychologically prepares herself to leave home for freedom from patriarchal society. There are the internal psychological conflicts in the characters; the conflicts strongly affect the characters and development of the plot of the play.

As all realistic plays, *Masan* is truly representational play of Nepali society during the late Rana Regime. *Masan* dramatically present the social real life of Nepal before 2007 B.S.; it portrays the reality of social life based on maternal bond and family context. It sheds light on Nepali social lifestyle, relations of man and woman and woman’s position in the patriarchal Nepali society (Upadyaya, *Rimal: Byaktitwa* 174). We audience from distance observe the characters and events of the play. Audience see the natural laws of cause and effect in the plot, comprehend easily because the play is woven in natural order, logic and rationality as we observe and experience in our actual world. It portrays difficulties and tensions encountered by females in a patriarchal society, and demonstrates the psyche, emotion and guilt of urban middle class people. This play brings a rebellious woman in Nepali drama. Rimal realistically presents a middle class family and social values and tensions, and portrays familial bond, social and political consciousness in the play. Thus, *Masan* is a social realistic play in Nepali literature.



## Conclusion

*Masan* written by Nepali writer Gopal Prasad Rimal objectively exposes familial and social realism. Its main theme is the problem of maternal bond in the play. Subject matters are simply woven and events are mysterious and inquisitiveness in the play. Realism in literature is believable to audience and relative but not absolute. Rimal chooses and picks real characters from actual society of the late Rana regime of Nepal in the play. He mostly sets the plot in Krishna's room and Bride's room; the setting objectively represents middle-class society. Rimal meticulously describes characters, events, behaviours and settings in the play. He portrays conflicts and tensions of a man Krishna and a woman Helen. *Masan* presents a typical male character Krishna representing urban educated middle class people who focus on their individuality and uses beautiful female bodies as sex toys. Helen initially represents a good housewife recognized by patriarchal society, but later revolts with strong determination against the exploitation of Krishna as a sex toy. Rimal has expected women to break the gender exploitation and domination in Nepali Society. Rimal realistically portrays the true real setting, events, activities and behaviours of middle class family that represents largely the urban middle class society of Nepal. The play is not loaded of the dominant of subject matters but character-dominant; there is mainly the thought-dominant based on the characters' inner conflicts in social issues. Rimal's *Masan* is an important social realistic play in Nepal literature. This research paper contributes by providing this textual analysis to knowledge of Nepali literature in literature and literary criticism in English. It will expose Nepali literature to English speaking readers.

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