



Reflection on Humanity in Crises: Consumption and World War in Nepali Literature

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Abstract

Humanity has undergone multiple crises across time and place along with the evolution of organized human settlement. Generally, human assumptions are supposed to take a rational course of action in society as we carry out various transactions in our quotidian life. However, fissures emerge as errors in human imagination about polity and organized society in the form of wars, leading to larger scale unresolved issues. On the other hand, human beings also face natural microorganisms like bacteria or virus leading to global crises. Humanity has confronted such tension, resulting from such disasters. Such concerns of crises have turned into the subject of contemplation for Nepali literary geniuses in the 1960s. This paper concentrates on two major literary texts from the time: Parijat's *Shirishko Phool* (1964) and B. P. Koirala's *Narendra Dai* (1970). Textually analyzing the data, this paper examines the mode of reflection on human crises in Nepali literature by analyzing the impacts of consumption as pandemic in Koirala and the World War as the cause of human misery in Parijat. In fact, Koirala's novella stands as a literary response to pandemic of consumption in his time. This study places Koirala first in the chronology, for his novella, *Narendra Dai* covers the time span beginning from the end of the World War I (1918) to the great earthquake (1934) in Nepal. Furthermore, Parijat's *Shirishko Phool* primarily presents Nepali social world after the World War II. The critical conditions have resulted in miserable state of life at the time. Human beings suffer in both conditions; still, they display high courage and sense of moral integrity to fight against the critical situations in their life.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Nepali Fiction, Consumption, World War, Humanity in Crises, Victory*

Introduction

Pandemics have never remained a very novel things in the process of historical development as humanity has firmly resisted myriad of such challenges in past. As they have repeatedly occurred in history in all the societies, the prime questions concerning pandemic rest on human capability to reflect on and respond to such phenomena. For one thing, the investment of creative energy on such questions helps inform the future generation the ways adopted to cope up with the threatening situations. Alternatively, the posterity realizes the stoic nature of humanity that emerges embedded with suffering as its necessary condition. Modern Nepali fictions have taken up the issues as early as the 1960s when general contemplation was centered on human existence. The spread of bacteria had caused tuberculosis and the War had resulted from the tensions among the states. The global impact of both phenomena further exacerbated the experience of life to the people. The first half of the twentieth century witnessed two World Wars and the spread of consumption which are treated as the issues of prime concern in modern Nepali fictions.

This study centers on the two forces as the cause of humanity in crises by analyzing two Nepali novels from the 1960s: B. P. Koirala's 1964 *Narendra Dai* (first published in 1970) and Parijat's 1964 novel *Shirishko Phool* (Jacaranda Flower). Generally read as existential literature from Nepal, both the texts deal with human predicament amid the multiple challenges in the 1950s and the 1960s. The literary texts treat that pandemics caused by microorganisms are as old as humanity and they have always found one form or the other for their manifestation. In various jolts of history, bacteria or viruses have troubled humanity on and off. Similarly, errors in political imaginations have resulted in wars. Two great wars of the twentieth century present before the quick example of its devastation. Koirala and Parijat have invested adequate creative

energy to reflect on the issues critical phases that human beings had to go through because of bacterial infections like tuberculosis and world war respectively.

Reading Gender and Existence in Koirala and Parijat

Both B. P. Koirala and Parijat are often viewed as primarily focused on the nature of human existence. Contemporary scholarship has approached them from these two basic modes of reading their texts. However, there are critics who have also explored the issues of psychological reality or gender as the themes of their reflections in both of them. Generally, Koirala's exploration of psychological reality and Parijat's contemplation on grim nature of human existence have surfaced in the major contemporary readings of the texts. Still, this brief review presents some of the studies conducted on the novels under study in this paper to see how the issues of existence and gender are treated in the critical response to the texts.

B. P. Koirala holds a multidimensional personality in literature and politics. He has explored various aspects of humanity in his literary works that have drawn adequate attention of critical scholarship. His novella, *Narendra Dai* has been approached from the multiple standpoints of gender and existence. Critics Keshav Raj Chalise and Ashok Thapa scrutinize the text from the angle of gender and the themes associated around the discourse. On the other hand Abhi Subedi, Kul Prasad Koirala, Nimagna Ghimire, and Rena Thapa explore the existential tenets in the presentation of the subject matter and the treatment of the characters in the work.

Koirala's women suffer from the rigidity of the social structure. In other words, he explores the fate of suffering women as such in *Narendra Dai*. Gauri and Munariya appear as two opposite ends of the same spectrum of suffering. For instance, Keshav

Raj Chalise finds such women fighting against the society largely dominated by men. He implies that patriarchy promotes both inequalities and suffering on the part of women (315). Similarly Ashok Thapa joins the line of argument when he picks the issues of women in Koirala's writings. Approaching *Narendra Dai* from the perspective of gender, he writes:

She even wins respect from Munria who, on account of her relations with Narendra, should have still taken her a big threat for it was with Gauri that she still shared Narendra. The amount of respect that Gauri wins is so voluminous that Munria strongly suggests Narendra that he go back to her because only Gauri now could take care of him. (628)

Such critics have explored the position of women characters in Koirala's texts set in the larger patriarchal order in which they struggle to realize themselves. The critics hold patriarchal values responsible for the miserable conditions of the women. The success and failure of such attempts are linked to the power relations existing in the society.

Like the reading of the text from the critical perspective of gender, existentialist analysis appears as the very significant aspect in *Narendra Dai*. Moving beyond the concerns of gender, Abhi Subedi finds the issue of sexual exploitation in *Narendra Dai* in which Narendra's victim rises to speak against it (49). Subedi's concern rests on the transcendence of women to a different height as he sees the rise of the suffering women to her political height. Similarly, Kul Prasad Koirala explores the issues of overconsumption in *Narendra Dai* as he views that Narendra suffers the consequences of excessive consumption after choosing Munariya (16). Both Subedi and Koirala agree that the novella raises the issues of existential significance as such. On the other hand, Nimagna Ghimire sees the absurdity of life being explored in Koirala's novella as she argues that "Life and death are beyond the control of human beings and amid all the absurdities, humans try to cope up with the emergent circumstances" (110). Ghimire points out that human life is governed by the forces lying beyond the control of human beings. In line with Ghimire, Rena Thapa also explores the issues of existence in *Narendra Dai* when she sees angst among the characters in the work. She moves beyond the absurdities of the world to see existential angst as the prime drive in the characters (28). Implicitly, Narendra and Gauri undergo similar angst about life as they understand the same absurdity of living from two opposing ends of life. Such readings have taken into consideration the larger context of the 1960s in which the west witnessed profuse growth of existential philosophy. The hangover of the World War II also added impetus to existentialist mode of interpretation of social reality.

Like Koirala's *Narendra Dai*, Parijat's *Shirishko Phool* has drawn critical attention of the critics from the perspectives of gender and existentialism. Giving cultural critique of the novel, Saroj Dawadi states that Parijat presents her nihilist philosophy in the novel that grows out of the absurdity of quotidian life of the time (103). The preface to the novella also elaborates the nihilistic nature of human life which provides a ground for such interpretation. Similarly, Hari Jung Shah explores the tension between women and patriarchy as the major concern in *Shirishko Phool*. He analyzes that Sakambari directly challenges the patriarchal mores of the society by rejecting its ways (n. pag.): she does not accept the colors of the

world except the colors of the blue flower. In her early twenties, she understands the transitory nature of human life and sticks to her perception till the end. Jennifer Smith also agrees to what Shah argues in his analysis. Smith sees the revolt of women against patriarchy in the novel. She finds the tension between women and patriarchy as the foundation to build tension in the novel.

Similarly, Indira Mishra Acharya also studies the issues concerning women's body in *Shirishko Phool*. Woman's body turns attractive in the imagination of the men and draws them to it. With the darkest of the fancies, Suyogbir approaches Sakambari and victimizes her. Mishra sees violence inflicted in women's body in patriarchal order as the outcome of men's quest for pleasure. She argues:

Set against the background of patriarchal society, the novel *Blue Mimosa* is told from the perspective of men. But in the portrayal of its protagonist, Suyogbir the novelist maintains an ironical distance from the narrator. The protagonist treats women as sexual objects and believes that men can have sex with them any time they like. He has internalized the traditional gender roles about men and women and behaves accordingly. In patriarchy, men are groomed to be dominating and adventurous. (34)

Mishra critically points out the contradiction of patriarchal order that prepares men as the perpetrator of violence. Like the issues of gender, the questions of existence appear as the primary concern for Parijat. Critics have spent much energy studying the novel from this perspective. For instance, Jung B. Chauhan reads that Parijat captures the absurdities of her own life and society in *Shirishko Phool* when he writes, "In utter hopelessness, she began to see darkness everywhere and perceive the absurd underlying human existence. This state of despair and restlessness gave birth to her famous novel *Shirishko Phool (Blue Mimosa)*" (50). Chauhan sets her own life narrative as the background to read the novel and relates how the issues of her own existential limitations have contributed to seeing the world the way she has presented in the novel.

Setting New Direction: Consumption and War

The present study builds itself on the gap that the existing studies have not been able to address so far. The contemporary readings have focused on the key concerns of the political agendas of the society as lived by the characters. This study sets the development of the plot in Parijat after Koirala's *Narendra Dai* in which everything ends in 1934. Parijat writes *Shirishko Phool* in the backdrop of the World War II. Two major issues of consumption and war emerge as the forces of posing serious threat to humanity in the time. In this sense, modern Nepali literature has adequately reflected on the critical concerns of humanity right from the beginning. This study examines the ways Nepali novels serve as a vehicle of reflection on humanity in crisis.

Methodology

This study critically gives close reading to B. P. Koirala's *Narendra Dai* and Parijat's *Shirishko Phool* in order to see the development of plot in each novel in the backdrop of history. Implicitly, the power relations of the society are considered as the prime focus in such analysis of the texts. Deriving the

critical insights from Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt's theories, the present study analyzes the impact of larger issues like the spread of disease and war to push humanity to crisis. New historicism provides with a lens to investigate the ignored in history and spotlight the secrets hitherto pushed to the margin. Jan R. Veenstra argues, "New Historicists renegotiate, as it were, the thrill of discovering the Secret as well as the sense of mystery that lurks in all dark corner" (192). This study brings the literary works that have invested adequate attention to the issues of pandemic and war under the lens of scrutiny to explore the social and cultural milieu of time. Nepali fictions have adequately addressed pandemic and war so as to understand the fate of human beings amid such circumstances.

Consumption and War: Contemplation on Human Predicament

Modern Nepali novelists, B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) and Parijat (1937-1993) reflect on the crises of humanity through the pandemic and war of their times. Koirala weaves a narrative around the pandemic of consumption in *Narendra Dai*, while Parijat explores the darkest of the corners in humanity emerging as the outcome of the World War. Koirala's story covers the time span between 1918 and 1934 in which the characters undergo the severe effects of consumption and the great earthquake in Nepal. On the other hand, Parijat's novella explores the impact of the World War II and consumption to paint the inner picture of the self. Modern Nepali fictions reflect on the crises that humanity that result from pandemic and disasters.

The first democratically elected Prime Minister, Koirala travels back in the lanes of his memory in order to explore the suffering fate of the people when he was put in prison in Sudarjil in 1960. In his most pensive years of imprisonment, he wrote *Narendra Dai* as reflection on human fate at the hand of external forces like political whims, bacteria, or earthquake. He goes back to his childhood to narrate the triangular love between/among Narendra and Munariya, Gauri and Narendra, and then Gauri, Munariya and Narendra. Educated in liberal values in Kolkota, Narendra comes home and fights with the rigid feudal order and its values. The children are afraid of him (5). At this point, it is relevant to claim the narrator, Sanobabu is B.P. Koirala himself because the author accepts that the narrative itself is semiautobiographical. The young Koirala runs away from Narendra because the child shares the opinion of the society about Narendra.

Koirala seeks to present stoic characters who suffer from their own crises in life. Narendra does not have any good relationship with his wife, Gauri because she has underdeveloped body. As the author writes, "Juntunani says, 'What can Narendra get from Gauri? She does not even have breast full of a pinch, while Munariya has a handful of breast.' Then Juntu giggled" (11). Narendra is influenced by the reformation program of Gandhi: he does not observe the barrier of caste as such. He always wears a Khadi shawl (63), implying his devotion to Gandhian way of life and philosophy.

The 1920s comprises the pandemic of consumption in the Subcontinent. Though Narendra and Munariya tend to enjoy life, fleeing from the eastern Terai to Kathmandu and then to Banaras, he fall prey of bacteria as the invisible enemy that enforces crises in his life. He abandons Munariya in the middle

of the journey in Banaras; still, she silently accepts the plight she has to undergo without him. Koirala narrates:

One day, she answered, "I don't accuse Narendra for leaving me. The doctor told us that he had phthisis and then I said to him, "Now we can't have a proper life together." I insisted that he should go to the village. He would say, "How can I go to the village?" Even though I tried very hard, he didn't accept to it. Then he said, "As I am a man, it won't be so hard for me to return to the village. But you have lost your way to the village forever. So, I can't go home, leaving you alone here." (42-43)

Consumption catches Narendra, leading to victimization of Munariya: the couple leave everything behind in their village weaving a beautiful fabric of a life ahead together in their life. The liberal headed Narendra cannot fight against the germs in his lungs: he vomits blood on and off. In such state of health, he loses his vision of happiness, his love and his life on the whole.

On the other hand, Parijat treats the war as the most dehumanizing machine of all times. Her protagonist, Suyogbir Singh believes that he knows about women. The haunting memories of the Burmese girls shape his perceptions of all women in the world. He treats the girls like objects for his pleasure: he uses them and throws them off (91). He keeps running away from them after inflicting violence in them in the Burmese forest. The exploration of the darkest aspects of the man's mind helps Parijat comment on the critical state of humanity after the World War II. Her critique of human predicament builds the absurdist mode of reflection on Nepali society in the 1950s.

Also, Parijat deals with the issue of consumption in *Shirishko Phool*. The street vendor's wife catches tuberculosis and the husband vanishes for two hours leaving her in the shop (47). Another street vendor takes the opportunity to satisfy himself. Both Koirala and Parijat present hedonist men who are spiritually at loss in that they cannot realize the deeper meaning of life. Instead, they run after the carnal desire and ever aspire to satisfy their body. Narendra loses everything of his dream after phthisis sucks his lung like a punctured balloon, while Suyogbir has emptied himself in the War. Koirala's Gauri never realizes the conjugal love seems to enjoy life in the end when Narendra returns home (53). There is striking parallelism between Narendra and Suyogbir in that both of them come back home empty: the crises of humanity lie at this point. Suyog Bir understands life differently: he has been used in the war as soldier. He seeks utility in everything. He wants Sakambari. One day, he praises her hair. Next day, she shaves hair of her head like a Buddhist nun. The tension between Suyog and Sakambari reaches the climax when she completely rejects her skin/body after Suyog kisses her. Finally, she commits suicide. The disease and the war do not allow them to stand firmly as human beings who have choices to assert in the society: the challenges of modern life limit human aspiration for successful life, pleasure, and bliss.

After the mother and the son have serious misunderstanding, he leaves the house. They stay in Kathmandu for a couple of years and then move to Banaras. Now, he develops consumption. Narendra finds himself in the most pathetic condition. He has to leave Banaras and Munariya behind to come back to his village in Biratnagar. The love

between Munariya and Narendra could fully materialize in the form of a family or home because of serious disease like consumption. The silent victim of the whole destiny is Gauri who gets almost dead husband. He is at the end of his life. Parijat's stoic character, Sakambari has physical disability that she never accepts as her weakness: still, it limits her activities (30). In fact, Sakambari can be read as another version of Gauri whom the life denies the conventional bliss: Sakambari negates the world as it appears to her, whereas Gauri adopts devotional way of life in the conformist society.

Koirala and Parijat treat pandemic and war as the major obstacles that human beings have always faced in different points in history. As a prisoner in King Mahendra's utopian state, Koirala begins in *Narendra Dai* his search for the suffering of other people whom he had encountered as a child. He meets Narendra, Gauri, and Munariya down the lane of memory to develop their narrative in tuberculosis and earthquake appear as the major forces leading to the critical condition of human beings. Similarly, *Shirishko Phool* present two strongly opposing characters, namely Sakambari and Suyogbir face to face –each challenging the other. Suyogbir has lost all his inner essence of being a human at the War: he has come to Kathmandu, empty of any humane qualities. Madly in love with Sakambari, he wants to possess her: a practitioner of nihilist approach to life, she rejects everything that he touches. She kills herself because he kisses her. In fact, the suffering in the world of Parijat emanates from deformed self that grows out of the war. Both Koirala and Parijat reflect on the impact of pandemic and war as the source of human misery: both the novelist contemplate on the bleak state of humanity resulting from the circumstances beyond the control of human beings.

Humanity in Crises

Koirala's *Narendra Dai* takes place between 1918 and 1934 as the novelist contemplates on his childhood during his stay in Sundarijal Jail in the 1960s. After Narendra dies of consumption, Gauri leaves Biratnagar and moves to her parents' place, Birjung where she dies in the great earthquake of 1934. All the characters move around the disasters in the novel fighting against them and losing their life. Their choices of life and society are blocked because of the advent of such pandemic or natural disaster. The freewill of human being has to shrink down to a smaller size because of such disaster.

Parijat's 1964 novel *Shirishko Phool* tells the story of a war veteran from the World War II. Suyog Bir has fought in the war in Burma where he has used women like any objects of physical gratification. Enjoying their body and kicking them in the end are both normal and regular in his life while in Burma. He comes to Kathmandu and befriends Shivaraj. As a friend, he visits Shiva's house where his sister Sakambari draws his attention. The novelist contemplates on the spiritual plague that has gnawed humanity from within and seems to argue that human crises have resulted from the World War II. Sakambari is determined to live a pure life because she understands that life is transitory by nature –just like the blue jacaranda flowers that have bloomed in this season in Kathmandu. They are beautiful and short lived.

Modern Nepali fictions have provided due space to the critical issues of pandemic and war which have always hindered in the exercise of free will. Such treatment of pandemic and disasters in modern Nepali narratives normalizes the impact of

pandemic by stating that such things have occurred in past as well. Modern Nepali fictions have addressed the issues with utmost sensitivity to deal with the self, ever aspiring to exercise free will in search of bliss of human life. The human crises brought about by pandemic and war reveal the helpless state of human beings who attempt to overcome such situations through their conscious efforts.

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