



Silencing and Breaking the Silence: Resisting Patriarchy in Brajaki's "Annapurna's Feast" and Thakuri's "War"

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse Manu Brajaki's story "Annapurna's Feast" and Maya Thakuri's "War," using the resistance theory. It explores the nature of resistance and its significance presented in the stories. The paper argues that both female protagonists of the stories resist injustice happened in their life due to their gendered identity as women, but the way they resist is different: one directly shows the courage and declares to fight against it whereas another silently inherits all the patriarchal value although her silence speaks out loud and gives agency to her voice. To elucidate this statement, Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner's concepts on resistance is used. Both stories depict the life of the housewives who are victimized due to existing patriarchal values. The female protagonist of Brajaki seems so resilient whereas Thakuri's protagonist directly speaks out for the injustice. Both stories present the female protagonists' silence and courage to speak out as their ways to resist and expose their difficulties to speak out.

Keywords: Silence, agency, resistance, patriarchy, gender values

Introduction

The concept of resistance is quite new for the academic disciplines although resistance has been an integral part of human life for ages. Hollander and Einwohner define it as a fashionable topic. Even though they define it as a fashionable thing, it has more to do with society and social transformation. In addition, it has to do with opposition and social inquiry. If someone opposes the current reality and value system, it regards as resistance. However, we hardly imagine both silence and courage to break the silence that becomes a tool to fight against the domination. Manu Bajraki's "Annapurna's Feast" and Maya Thakuri's "War" demonstrate that both silence and courage to break the silence can be the ways to resist patriarchal injustice. Both the stories deal with the life of a housewife. Brajaki's protagonist Annapurna seems very demure and silent. Unlike Brajaki's protagonist, Thakuri's protagonist speaks loud and declares war against her own husband. One resists with silence whereas another with

courage and the common thing is silence and courage become a medium to resist. So both portray the female protagonists' silence and courage to speak out as their ways to resist and expose their difficulties to speak out because of their gendered identity as a woman.

The husband of Thakuri's protagonist seems more traditional and regressive than the husband of Brajaki's protagonist, Annapurna's husband seems more loyal and politically conscious. Also, he works as a political leader. Even though both the protagonists' position seems similar but they have a different kind of nature. Brajaki's protagonist seems demurer and quiet. She behaves like an obedient housewife. Her husband brings four kilograms of fish for the feast by borrowing money. She hardly raises questions over his husband's decision. She obediently prepares the dishes for the feast. Even though she doesn't have a new dress to wear, she remains silent. When her husband's friend comes for a feast, she serves them fish curry without arguing a single word. Her silence overpowers other characters' opinions throughout the story. At the end of the story, her husband realizes that her voice is unheard of. Throughout the story, the husband and his friends talk about the position of women in the new constitution, but the woman near to them is quiet and living life so different than other women. They never observe her. Indeed, her voice finds agency through silence. Thakuri's protagonist seems more confident and opinionated than Brajaki's. In the early days of her marriage, she behaves like a silent and reserved housewife. Eventually, their married life runs badly because they cannot have children. It becomes the major reason for their dissatisfaction. The husband pressurizes to have children knowing the fact that he himself is impotent. He forces her to meet sadhu to have a child. Sadhu treats her badly as he touches her body with ill intentions. When she shares her encounter with the sadhu with her husband, he ignores it and tells her to sleep with the stranger to have a baby. It becomes a turning point in her life. She leaves the home just by writing a letter. In the letter, she mentions all the bad and ill-treatment that happened to her and she confesses to fight for justice.

Literature Review

Both Bajraki's and Thakuri's stories have received some critical acclaims and interpretations mostly from national scholars. Among the received critical reflections, most of the critics have examined them from the feminist and psychological perspectives.

Both writers deal with the issue of contemporary Nepali society in their stories. Mostly they raise the issue of women and the underprivileged in their narratives. Mahesh Paudyal introduces Brajaki as a modernist and experimental writer. He states, "Her works basically criticize the hypocrisy in the contemporary Nepali society, and celebrates equality of gender and classes" (236). Similarly, he introduces Thakuri, considering her as one of the most revered woman story writers of Nepal. He further elucidates, "Her stories deal with personal and familiar issues and are deep in their implications" (237). Paudyal considers both of them as the experimental and gender issue conscious writers of Nepal.

Thakuri emerged as a writer from a very diverse situation, facing all the bitter experiences of prejudices, injustice and domination. Swasti Gautam regards her as bold and courageous. She quotes Thakuri's opinion in this way, "No one is going to hold your hand and ask you to rise. You have to fight for yourself and defend yourself." It shows Thakuri's rebellious attitude, which is clearly reflected in her works. Swasti also introduces Thakuri's opinion regarding her reason to write, "She says that she wants her pen and her words to be the voice of the unheard and a catalyst for change as well she also encourages many women like her to raise their voice and not to be scared of the

society and its preconceived notion.” It demonstrates that her writing is just a replica of what she believes for women and the underprivileged.

Most of the critical receptions see Thakuri’s “War” as a depiction of the domination of women in contemporary society. Sadananda Abhagi puts his opinion in a similar manner. He focuses more on the husband-wife relationship and conflict. He notes, “We can take it as the story that deals with sexuality, to have a good married life husband and wife should have a good relationship. If they do not believe in equality and mutual respect, the relationship cannot go further” (my translation). He gives more emphasis on their relationship and declares that their sex life is the major reason for their bad relationship.

Bibek Adhikari also emphasizes the husband-wife relationship and declares that their sex life becomes the major cause for their spoiled relationship. He explains:

For a century, Nepali writers have been writing about the poor. Stories such as Ramesh Bikal’s “The Magnificent Buffalo,” Shiva Kumar Rai’s “The Price of Fish,” and Parashu Pradhan’s “An Empty Apartment” show how in the hands of the rich the poor become mere puppets. On the other hand, Nepali writers have also been writing about human relations. BP Koirala’s “Toward Madhes,” Madhav Bhandari’s “Parental Home,” and Manu Brajaki’s “Annapurna’s Feast” portray the workings of a complex human psyche, keeping the idea of gender as well as class conflict in their backdrop. (2)

According to him, Brajaki’s story “Annapurna’s Feast” depicts the complex human relation, which unfolds the role of gender consciousness in the relationship of the couple. Thus, he highlights more on the psychological complexities of the characters in relation to gender consciousness.

Like Bibek Adhikari, Dipak Adhikari interprets Bajraki’s story as the exploration of psychology and contradiction of modern Nepali family as he views, “In “Annapurna’s Feast” Bajraki creates a new pillar of understanding about the psychology and hypocrisy of the modern Nepali society” (my translation). Dipak Adhikari considers it as Brajaki’s way of showing the political and social contradiction of Nepali society. In fact, Dipak Adhikari focuses more on the psychological aspects of the story and contradiction of the Nepali family.

Unlike above mentioned opinions, Rajendra Parajuli examines Bajraki’s story from the feminist approach. He regards the story as a benchmark of modern Nepali literature. He asserts, “The story “Annapurna’s feast raises the issue of women’s right and question about the opinion of a women” (my translation). He also argues that Brajaki’s way of characterization of women characters in the story shows women’s lower position in the society. Although he explores the issue of women and their position in the society, considering the story as he fails to see the connection of it with resistance.

As discussed above, most of them explicate these narratives through the feminist and psychological points of view. For instance, Rajendra Parajuli, Bibek Adhikari, Sadananda Abhagi and Dipak Abhagi have interpreted the stories mostly as an exploration of complex human psychology and depiction of women’s condition in the contemporary patriarchal society. However, they oversight the stories through the perspective of resistance. Therefore, this paper tries to fill up this gap. Thus, this paper explores the lives of both the female protagonists of the stories and attempts to find out the reason for their silence and courage. In addition, the paper tries to anticipate that both the protagonists resist against injustice that happened in their life but the way they resist is different: one directly shows courage and declares to fight against it whereas another silently inherits all the patriarchal values, eventually that silent speaks out loud to the people around her and gives the agency to her voice.

Methodology

Hollander and Einwohner define resistance as a fashionable topic. According to them, when someone opposes to existing system and values it is considered resistance. However, different scholars define it differently. Another scholar Weitz writes, “the term resistance remains loosely defined allowing some scholarship see almost everywhere and others almost nowhere” (qtd. in Hollander and Einwohner 534). Weitz’s definition makes an important point to understand because it shows a wider variety of resistance and its existence in every corner of the world. It attempts to show its universality. Many scholars have defined it differently, but the important role of it is the sociological inquiry that has more to do with power, inequality and social change. Largely, it deals with the social structure and the issue of agency. In this paper, thus, Hollander and Einwohner’s idea of resistance have been used. Similarly, Dalia Rodriguez and Heather Savigny’s thought on silence as speech will also be considered useful while analyzing the texts.

Bajraki and Thakuri: The Protagonists in Common

When someone’s voice is unheard then sometimes people tend to go with silence. Silence does not mean they do not have a voice although some scholars define it as the opposite idea to liberation. Dalia Rodriguez makes a similar point. He says, “Silence has been conceptualized as antithetical to the liberation of oppressed groups” (111). Although people largely take it as an antithesis to liberation sometimes it helps for liberation or it makes a way to liberation. In the life of Annapurna, silence becomes a great weapon than voice. She inherits all the patriarchal values silently and the same thing helps to give agency to her voice. At last, her husband realizes that women’s position in the newly promulgated constitution has nothing to do with Annapurna. Bajraki picturizes that condition in this way, “For a change of taste when Annapurna licked the fringe of the cooking work for the little forth- curry attached to it, his mind was stuck by a question as sharp as spine, Are the opinion of our wives safe?” (188). It demonstrates how her silence gets agency. However, silence all the time doesn’t consider a weapon to resist. Many times speech is discouraged in women, so they remained to be silent. Regarding the issue, Dalia Rodriguez mentions, “Speech, assertiveness, and even confidence are discouraged in women during the process of socialization because such qualities are assumed to be unfeminine and therefore threatening to the status quo” (114). In Annapurna’s case, she remains silent even in those cases where she needs to speak. For example, at the end of the story, she doesn’t get to eat fish curry even though she is busy cooking and serving it the whole day. But she remains silent and eats chiurra with pickle. As Dalia Rodriguez explores in the process of socialization, women are discouraged to be vocal so they go with silence to resist and that applies in the case of Annapurna.

Contrarily, women’s vocal nature has not been considered feminine, but Thakuri’s protagonist breaks that status quo and fights for the patriarchal injustice. She openly opposes her husband’s opinion. Time and again she says her husband that she disagrees with his opinion. Children become a kind of obsession for her husband. Once she says, “I don’t consider myself sterile, what if others think me one! Such a bogus thing hasn’t bothered me to the slightest measure, and can never do” (220). It shows that she can contradict with his husband’s opinion. Similarly, she says, “There are numerous people in the world who cannot have children. Yet they are living and carrying on their duties. You have no reason to worry” (222). She finds herself okay without having a child, which is totally against her husband’s opinion. She breaks that conditioned silence because society hardly believes that the wife can have a different opinion than her

husband. Mostly, the society generalizes that a wife should be silent and needs to give company to her husband even though she has a different opinion. Heather Savigny gives a similar opinion to the politics of silence. She states, "The writing of women out of history does not more than normalizing the universal truth of patriarchy, it also serves to not just silence women but to create the assumption, the hegemonic normalization, that women should be silent" (85). That normalization we do not see here. The protagonist speaks out loudly in the story and challenges the structure of patriarchy by telling her husband that she will fight for justice.

Although their ways of resistance are subtle and individual, but the issue they resist is for a collective reason. Both of them resist against the existing patriarchal values and injustice happened in their life. Their issue for resistance seems very personal; however, it depicts the condition of many women out there who are living similar kind of life. For instance, in Bajraki's story, all the characters except the protagonist are well-known intellectuals of Nepal. The story deals with the promulgation of the new constitution. All the characters are really fascinated to talk about the political scenario and the new constitution of the country. Even they talk about the women's condition, but they do not think about Annapurna who is just serving fish curry to them. However, they just ask them once, "Whom you are going to vote, Bhauju?" (185). This statement makes the issue more collective because it shows the hypocrisy of Nepali intellectuals.

The Act of Resistance: Silencing or Speaking Out

Both the protagonists' actions deal with injustice, which define the act of resistance although they manifest on an individual level. Their act is resistance because both the protagonists go beyond the normalization of silence and speak out. Basically, we take the formation of the organization, protest, strikes, marches, or social movement as resistance, but both the protagonists do not do these things. They protest at an individual level and their way to resist is very subtle. Hollander and Einwohner talk about it in this way:

Resistance is more readily thought to refer to social movement and "contentious politics" therefore, many of these phenomena, such as marches, picketing, and the formation of the organization, fall into this category. Other acts of physical resistance include behaviors as subtle as working slowly, foraging sickness, wearing particular types of clothing, or stealing from one's employer. (535-36)

Both the protagonists resist in a subtle manner. The protagonist of "Annapurna's Feast" resists just being silent whereas the protagonist of "War" resists just avoiding the patriarchal values and leaving the home. Both the protagonists' resistance appears in a subtler manner.

In "War," the protagonist declares her war with her husband. But that war is symbolic. That war symbolizes the war against the existing patriarchal values of the society that considers women just child-giving machines. Her life depicts the condition of all women who are forced to have children is to prove their husband's masculinity. Her voice is the representative voice of all the educated women. Once she declares herself an educated and opinionated woman in this way, "Maybe you had imagined that enchanted by your seductive words, I would allow myself to be tangled in your snares, but I am not a fool, you know. I am an educated woman" (225). Here, how she explains, she cannot be a fool, demonstrates that educated women cannot be a fool and are easily moved by others' opinions. So, on a superficial level, it sounds like their resistance is more personal and individual, but it carries the voice of many women like them

Not only their issues are collective also they challenge the power structure of patriarchy. Patriarchy maintains the power structure of the society and it always assumes

that men are on top of it. In the stories, both the protagonists question that power structure. Thakuri's protagonist directly questions it. For instance, the protagonist of "War" once writes to her husband:

I know as my husband, you have the social license to use your wife as you will, but in reality, you are a psychopath infected by a complex of superiority as a man. You foisted your will upon me and wanted to use me like yoked bulls to follow all your instructions. But then, you should have considered that I am not a beast, but a human being- a living one. (223)

Here, she explicitly states that those husbands who think they have a legal license to use their wives as their will are psychopaths and she refuses to tolerate that. She considers herself a human being. It indicates that being a woman means being a human so treat all the women as human beings.

In "Annapurna's feast," through silence, the protagonist questions the power structure of the society whereas in "War" the protagonist breaks the silence and challenges the power structure of the society. For example, in "War," the protagonist declares her own husband a disgrace in the name of a man in this way, "The disgraceful thing you were prepared to do with your own wife is enough to show how low you can drag yourself. Fine on you! You are a disgrace in the name of a man" (229). Here, she is telling 'disgrace' to her husband because he was planning to force her to sleep with another man for children. The husband's decision shatters her, so she leaves home and writes the letter including these things. Her decision and act of leaving home have a symbolic meaning. It connotes not only leaving home but it also questions the power structure of patriarchy. In fact, the protagonist of Thakuri breaks the structure of patriarchy: firstly, breaking the silence of injustice and secondly declaring war for justice.

The role of the intellectuals seems quite flat in Brjraki's narrative and that is the politics of the writer to show the hypocrisy of Nepali intellectuals. In the story, apart from the protagonist of the story and her husband, all other characters are well-known intellectuals of Nepal, but they do not care about Annapurna. In the meantime, they talk about the position of women in the new constitution. They say, "The present constitution has given the women full rights. Every party is required to have at least five percent of their member as women" (185). Their responsibility as an intellectual seems zero there. The conscious effort of the writer shows the hypocrisy of Nepali intellectuals. Once they ask Annapurna to whom she is going to vote apart from that they do not ask anything more to her. In the middle of that conversation, Bajraki writes, "Having no consciousness, contemplation, and opinion of one's own is like not even being a human being. Is being a wife 'inhuman' to that extent?" (186). This extract shows that Brajaki wants to give the agency of Annapurna's voice and mocks the role of Nepali intellectuals through an authorial agency.

We cannot ignore the fact that the role of intellectuals is an important asset, but apart from that, the target is also an important element of resistance. In "War," the protagonist has targets to fight against the patriarchal value; however, in "Annapurna's Feast," Annapurna doesn't have targets but her voice gets agency through her husband. Regarding targets, Hollander and Einwohner write, "The targets of resistance also vary, from individuals (as when a woman resists a would-be rapist) to groups and organizations (as when workers resist their employers' attempts at control) to institution and social structures" (536). In these texts, the target seems different at a surface level, but at large both the protagonists' target is the same. Because both of them either being vocal or silent their aim is to go against the patriarchal structure or to challenge the patriarchal power structure.

Both the writers give agency to the voice of women and depict the hypocrisy of Nepali society. As writers, their techniques are also unique because both of them intentionally choose women as their leading characters. Both the leading characters are those women who are very common who can be the women of next door. Making them very common and raising their issue make the texts more authentic. They also choose two different extremes to show resistance. For example, Thakuri's protagonist is very opinionated as she time and again speaks for her rights, but at the end, she declares war. However, Brajaki's protagonist never speaks anything but that silence speaks larger than the voice. In this manner, both fictions make the issue more universal and authentic.

Conclusion

To sum up, Manu Brajaki's "Annapurna's Feast" and Thakuri's "War" explore the condition of women in the contemporary society and their ways to resist the injustice that happened in their life. The protagonists of the stories resist through silencing and breaking the silence. Both the texts stand on the same platform because they raise the issues of the women and their struggle to find the agency of their voice. In addition, both the writers explore why normalized silence in women and the courage to break that silence can be the ways of resistance. Similarly, their subject matter picturizes the hypocrisy of Nepali intellectuals, especially in Brajaki's story. Both narratives demonstrate the condition of women even in an educated family and beautifully acknowledge their voices through an authorial agency. Thus, both the texts give a new avenue regarding the forms of resistance because these stories are a beautiful example to elucidate both silencing and breaking the silence that can be the ways to resist against the patriarchal subjugation.

In general, resistance is taken as the act of opposition towards the existing systems and values. In the process of socialization, the patriarchal value normalizes the silence of women as Heather Savigny argues. However, Brajaki's protagonist resists through the same silence whereas Thakuri's protagonist breaks that normalization and speaks against injustice, which works as resistance. As we know, silence and courage have semantically taken as opposite to each other. Hardly, they get the same platform as a discourse. However, Brajaki's story and Thakuri's story make people assure that both can be the medium to resist and to break the normative value of both silence and courage. Thus, Brajaki and Thakuri's fictional texts add a new dimension in the discourse of resistance, suggesting that both silencing and breaking the silence can work as powerful forms of resistance.

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