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Research Article

## Unbodying and Rebodying the Self in BP Koirala's *Sumnima*

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### Abstract

The self can realize its presence only through the material body that physically grounds the self in the world. However, the stoic understanding of life negates the existence of body since it is the source and goal of pleasure. In the East, the Vedic knowledge implies that one arrives at the awakening of critical rationality through the negation of materiality of the existence, thereby reaching the depth of meaning in human existence. In other words, the self attains the enlightenment through continual denial of the body to the soul. BP Koirala's *Sumnima* (1969) argues against the stoic claims of the Brahministic scriptures of the Orient by depicting troublesome conjugal life of a renowned Vedic scholar and practitioner. Still searching for the remedies of childless conjugal life in the Vedic rituals, Somdatta and Puloma simply pass their days in their futile attempt to have a child. The indigenous Kirat people have a solution to such a situation that requires the person to value the body. Learning from *Sumnima*, Somdatta rebodies his unbodyed self and embraces the pleasures of life as the basic ingredient and impetus as such. Koirala aesthetically synthesizes both the Brahministic and indigenous ways of approaching the body in quest of equilibrium between the masculine and the feminine impulses of unbodying and rebodilying the self respectively. This study employs Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection to read the novel and explores Koirala's vision of the golden mean.

**Keywords:** Self, abjection, unbodying, rebodilying, feminine impulse

### Introduction

Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala (1914-1982), popularly known as BP Koirala, had completed writing his novel *Sumnima* (1969) during his imprisonment in Sundarjal Jail. The novel presents Koirala's contemplation on the divide between masculine and feminine impulses. It documents the inner transformation that the repressive culture experiences in the journey towards self-realization. This study centers on the interaction between Somdatta and *Sumnima* as the representatives of two cultures: the Aryan and

the Kirat. Koirala has designed Somdatta as the evolving personality who undergoes from inadequate circumstances to adequate ones with the help of *Sumnima*. The paper does not claim that one particular culture does not merge into the other; instead, it firmly asserts that two ways of life synthesize their cultural values, enriching both the cultures. Since the novelist presents the journey of Somdatta as the subject undergoing transformation as such, this paper seeks to explore the ways in which Somdatta realizes the meaning of life by transcending the limitations imposed on him from his own cultural boundaries.

Different critics have approached Koirala's *Sumnima* from many different perspectives. The novel is often read as one of the assimilationist texts written with the goal of reconciliation of two cultures. Bhanubhakta Sharma Kandel has presented the same line of argument in at least four of his studies. He views the novel as the text of cultural reconciliation between the Aryan and the Kirats in the eastern part of Nepal. Bhanubhakta Sharma Kandel argues:

Koirala's *Sumnima* is one of the best reservoirs of ethnic consciousness with tolerance among the people living in the same geographical territory. He has implicitly and explicitly discussed the ethnic consciousness of the people through different characters in different circumstances. On the surface, the novel reads like a document that has meant to create ethnic conflict, domination and disharmony among the ethnic nationalities living at Varahakshetra but the main motif of the novel is that 'divided we stand'. ("Ethnic Consciousness" 30)

In another study, Sharma Kandel talks about harmony as the goal of the text as he asserts, "If mind is the objective or goal of living, body is its medium or tool and one cannot have one's mind act properly in the achievement of the salvation of soul without proper nourishment of body" ("Ethnic Harmony" 115). The critic also views language as the primary component in making of cultural identity as the different characters exercise power through the use of language ("Language as Identity Marker" 70). Sharma Kandel's argument further explores the ways in which the text has deconstructed the prevalent cultural hegemony of the people through the text. As he argues, Somdatta finds a remedy to his problems at the advice of the people whom he always looked down for being less cultured than he is ("Deconstruction of Cultural Hegemony" 17). In all his studies, Sharma Kandel makes a fundamental claim that Koirala aspires to highlight the need for reconciliation between two cultures in the novel.

On the other hand, Michael Hutt argues that both Somdatta and *Sumnima* are two "extreme archetypes" (135) in that each of them avoids a direct encounter with the other. There are other critics who have moved away from convergent claims and approached the text to examine the ways that the novelist has transcended beyond the existing reality of the moment. Such studies claim that the author moves beyond quotidian reality in quest of higher values. For instance, Kul Prasad Koirala concludes that the primary goal of Koirala's *Sumnima* lies in the exploration of positive traits in both the Kirat and the Aryan cultures. The novelist does not favor one over the other; rather, he shows the significance of all the cultures to his people (17). Following the same line of argument, Min Nepali reads Koirala's *novel* to explore the issues of common concern between two cultures. Nepali concludes that Koirala upholds humanity in the novel by asserting the need to transcend beyond the concerns of daily life as he argues:

The novelist has demonstrated his view towards spiritual and physical aspects of life through them. He has expressed the humanistic attitude, attitude of sex, and love clearly. There are other characters too, but their role in the novel is just to fulfill the main characters' desire. The novelist has given lively presentation and

vivid insights of all possible aspects of social realities through these characters from two different communities i.e., Aryan community and Kiranti community. (43)

Despite the assimilationist undertone in Nepali's argument, the study attempts to move beyond Sharma Kandel's line of thought by highlighting humanity. In line with the above, Ganga Ram Paudyal's comparative reading of Koirala and R.K. Narayan shows that they end up, depicting the people taking up different journeys in life. Koirala's protagonist finally realizes that the Aryan values are inadequate to obtain a happy state of life, while R.K. Narayan's Krishna realizes his true self by following the Aryan ways of life (41). All the three studies build their argument from the limitations of the existing reality that Koirala visualizes as inadequate to serve the purpose of life.

However, gender and body have always remained the primary themes of the critics in the study of Koirala's texts. The novel has drawn attention of Indira Acharya Mishra, Sadhana Panta and Ram Kumar Rai to explore the dynamics of gender in the text. For instance, Indira Acharya Mishra approaches the novel from the point of view of gender and nature, applying the ecofeminist lens to analyze it. She treats Somdatta as a vehicle of Aryan values, imposing all sorts of exploitation on women like Sumnima and nature. As she argues, "Somdatta abuses Sumnima on the ground of language. Feminist critics like Helen Cixous believe that the patriarchal language is "phallogocentric and it dominates women and the other who are not cultured from the patriarchal perspective" (135). Acharya Mishra's concerns show that women and ecology suffer at the hands of men, which is the primary subject matter of Koirala's novel. In the same line of argument, Sadhana Panta explores the presence of patriarchal values in the novel (165). The Aryan values and patriarchal repression help intensify the sufferings of the female characters in the novel. Furthermore, Ram Kumar Rai reads *the novel* from the perspective of women who are victimized in society. Koirala presents that Puloma suffers from a sense of sin for bringing the Villa youth into her mind during copulation (111). Rai finds that women are not treated in proper ways since the novel upholds patriarchal Aryan values as such. Such studies have explored tensions in gender relations against the background of Aryan and patriarchal values.

Similarly, the issues of treatment of matter and body have gained the primary attention of the critics to the text in recent days. For instance, Rajendra Chapagae reads the novel in light of materialism versus spiritualism and body versus soul. He declares that Sumnima embodies the attributes of materials and body, while Somdatta is an evident actor of spiritual practice and soul. In this case, Chapagae contends:

It is perhaps the third culture that avoids the caste, colour and cultural discrimination. In a multicultural society, no culture can be found untouched and unaffected by another. Nobody is great and small by birth, colour, caste and culture. All have to come in an open ground of brotherhood and sisterhood with tolerance which can bring eternal peace and security in society. The issues raised in the novel are as contextual as they were before. Spiritualism though guided by religious philosophy is not empirical and practical in daily life. It creates a world of dream and imagination. Koirala appeals us to face the bitter reality of physical world of reality shaking off the belief of dreamy world of spiritualism. (83)

Chapagae's reading moves close to Nepali or Sharma Kandel in their treatment of the assimilationist goal. In a comparative study of Koirala and Parijat, Mani Bhadra Gautam examines the issues of body and beauty in *Sumnima* and *Shirish ko Phool*. He argues that Somdatta cannot appreciate Sumnima's robust body in the novel, resulting in the formation of tension. Accordingly, he notes: "Unlike Puloma and other women characters Sumnima challenges the traditional practices of the society about the covered

and uncovered condition of the body" (184). Gautam has found it noteworthy to discuss a display of body in the novel as an issue requiring critical attention from the point of view of aesthetics.

Myths and spirituality appear as yet another issue in reading Koirala's novel in the contemporary scholarship. Bindu Paudyal's study establishes her point of view on myths and explores both Hindu and Kirat myths in the novel. She claims that the use of Kirat myth has aroused and attracted the interest of the readers to the novel. She argues that *Sumnima* is the equivalent of Paruhang in the Kirat culture (95), meaning that the novelist explores the multifarious dimensions of the myths from the Kirat culture. She concludes that the central myth in the novel comes from the Kirat culture and Koirala reworks upon the same myth. Besides, Anil Adhikari reads Koirala's work in order to explore the mythical allusions that serve as the window to the contemporary reality. Koirala's novelty lies in recreating the myth to comprehend the newer reality and interpreting such myths to find out a meaning of life at present (268). Furthermore, another critic Hari Prasad Silwal argues that Koirala's novel presents both the tensions among cultures and the need for unity in them (275). He further explores a common ground for all cultures to assimilate into each other to better serve human life in general. Kumar Prasad Koirala very aptly telescopes the Marxist readings of Koirala's works: he identifies communal, cultural, and gender tension in *Sumnima* (57). He seems to run after the convergent claims of the critics who read the text through Koirala's policy of national reconciliation. Unlike Paudyal and Adhikari, Silwal places himself very close to an assimilationist reading of Koirala.

The existing readings of Koirala's novel discussed above show that it has been approached from four basic points of view: firstly, convergent /assimilationist approach, existing reality as inadequate social-political circumstances for the people to get the fruit of life, gender and body, and finally myth. Though this paper has studied the novel from the perspective of body, it has taken a completely new turn in that it seeks to posit body as the embodiment of cultural values. In other words, this study has explored the different approaches of the Kirat and the Aryan people to look at body. The understanding of body makes a huge difference in the way people treat it.

### **The Concept of Abjection and Unbodying the Self**

The paper derives the concepts of "unbodying" and "rebodying" as present in the critical engagement of Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" that she has elaborately discussed in her book *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). In her book, she defines the term in this way: "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to I" (1). As argued by Kristeva, Koirala's *Sumnima* showcases such human being who opposes his own body. Though Kristeva's theory of abjection implies the feminist agenda in it, the paper examines both *Somdatta* and *Sumnima* along with minor characters like Puloma or Villa youth in the light of abjection and *Somdatta*'s rescue from such state. Kristeva further elaborates on this theory as she states, "Abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution in the paganism that accompanies societies with a dominant or surviving matrilinear character. It takes on the form of the *exclusion* of a substance (nutritive or linked to sexuality), the execution of which coincides with the sacred since it sets it up" (17). Thus, the paper focuses on the obsession of the protagonist and transformation in the worldview after realizing failures emanating from the Aryan way of attaining the self: in each step, Kristeva's insights are used to interpret the happenings in the life of *Somdatta*.

Koirala's novel presents the journey of a solitary man, obsessed on attaining the 'true self' as such through hard penance as preserved in the scriptures of the Aryavrata.

These classical texts that the protagonist excels at deciphering preach on the supremacy of mind over the body. In fact, the central character Somdatta falls prey of the ideology of the scriptures, believing in the ascetic life as the true way of bringing the surrounding reality into his control. The study examines the root cause of his dissatisfaction in life by scrutinizing his values about life, society and self. In fact, he unbodying his self by overly laying emphasis on his mind, reason and soul. He cannot find any sort of remedy for this state of life in the Aryan culture, subsequently moving to the native Kirat culture for help. At this point, Koirala brings together two impulses of life together to maintain equilibrium between the masculine and feminine impulses. The Aryan culture and the Kirat culture embody two divergent sets of cultural values regarding the treatment of body: the former upholds the rationalist tendencies, while the latter recognizes the values of the body as the vehicle of the rationalist self.

Although Koirala realizes that the truth value of the story cannot be determined as it is derived from the ancient sources, he finds it relevant for its mythical and symbolic significance. He interprets the contemporary reality through the lens of the classical lens in order to communicate profound argument to his readers. Shyam Bhattarai examines the secular, cultural analysis of Koirala to understand the mode of social reconciliation (23). According to Bhattarai, Koirala embodies the voice of the contemporary society because he raises himself above the biases through his acute understanding of the society. Here, Koirala himself claims: "[T]his story is an account that cannot be measured in the balancing scale of truth or untruth. Its importance is mythological, symbolic, indicative" (1). The narrative he presents in the novel asserts that the tension between two opposing ways of life led by Somdatta and Sumnima can merge together in the second generation when their children get married to each other. However, this does not assimilate one into the other; rather, the unity synthesizes and makes the ways of living more coherent and blissful in the Koshi region. The novel seeks for a golden means to explore the point of equilibrium between two extremes of life.

The Brahministic mode of living in Chatara promotes the spirit of stoicism. Somdatta's parents inspire and encourage him to raise his consciousness to the highest level possible by neglecting the call of his body. Actually, they emphasize the role of mind in the formation of self: Somdatta follows his parents' expectations in his scholarly pursuits. He offers even his flesh to fire as part of his hard penance, a ritual to overcome bodily pleasure and sensual inclination. In the novel, Koirala describes the incident: "Somdatta, in the same kind of indifference, removed his blanket he was covering his body with, showed his body," as he said, "Mother, who are full of pious acts! I performed all kinds of penance for the preservation of my bachelorhood. I even sacrificed myself to the fire, cutting pieces of flesh from different parts of my body" (40). Somdatta speaks against the belief of the author since the author does not think that there is an absolute way of doing things. Abhi Subedi rightly points out that the novelist does not declare a single way of achieving emancipation as he contends, "We find such weaves of life in the characters in B. P. Koirala's fictions. They are multiple dimensions of B. P. Koirala's imagination that do not have a singular foundation for emancipation. There are multiple ways to emancipation" (49). However, Koirala shows Somdatta as an ardent believer in the Aryan scriptures who fails to respect the demands of his body. Consequently, Somdatta reaches the point in life where he encounters himself in the most disastrous form.

The abjection of the body takes a long time to show its consequences. The neglected body does not pay heed to the command of the overly celebrated soul. When the body and soul are not in unison, the person suffers in many fundamental ways. In the novel, the conjugal life between Somdatta and Puloma also yields no fruit at all, for

Somdatta successfully convinces her not to listen to the call of the body. Koirala presents an extreme of the Aryan scholar when he appeals his wife not to experience any pleasure out of their physical union. Somdatta plans physical union to get a son, not for pleasure. It is the fourth day of Puloma's menstrual flow. Koirala narrates:

On the fourth day in the very early morning she performed the bath taking a full dip into the river and returned to her room to wear pure cloth unworn before and was busy in her daily activity. Somdatta also returned to the cottage from the Koshi after completing his bath and his religious rituals of counting beads with sacred words. He said to Puloma, 'You have purified yourself today after three nights with polluted clothes. The order of our teachers must be followed without question and only for fulfilling our religious duty the occasion of our bodily union has presented itself today just to get a son. According to our Vedic canons and religious scriptures we must perform the fire sacrifice and special ritual to fulfill that particular religious duty.' (44)

Koirala adds that Somdatta knows the meaning of detachment from the carnal desires. For instance, in the novel, Somdatta's conversation goes like this: "First of all with a heart devoid of any physical lust we must perform the initiation ritual of getting a son fixing ourselves in the feeling of pure duty. The main point is the abandonment of passion, lust" (44). Somdatta denies to respond to the call of his own biology for a long time: he looks down upon his own body, upholding the significance of the morality, duty, and his obligation to the dictation of the scriptures.

Somdatta's inclination towards the rational quest implies the masculine impulse. The rationalist quest completely ignores the inner calls of his body: "The abject body repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety" (Covino 17). Having denied the feminine impulse in life, Somdatta and Puloma turn into machine who know no pleasure of conjugal life. They have completely lost the touch of the inner strings of pleasure in life. All of a sudden, Somdatta attempts to seek for the remedy to his tedious life in the Kirat culture. In fact, he brings about change in the way he had been conducting his life. He recalls the Kirat girl, Sumnima, and her father who is a Bijuwa, a Kirat priest as Koirala states,

And on the fourth day he reached the Koshi river bank getting up very early in the morning. He was not able to get a wink of sleep all through the night because of worry. He began to meditate sitting on a lotus posture after completing his daily routine of bath, etc. At that time he was suddenly reminded of Sumnima's father, who was a Bijuwa, a Kirat priest. He knew that the Bijuwa was the religious teacher of the Kirats and he who has pleased the Kirat deities. Like a man surrounded from all sides by water of hopelessness gets the help of a straw, he also thought as if he got something to hang on and directed his feet toward the house of the Bijuwa. (53)

The Bijuwa identifies that Somdatta has ignored his body for a long time and his body and soul are not in unison. The unbodyed soul fails to properly carry out its functions: the body wants to restore the lost connection with the soul and the soul has taken an adamant route to salvation. In fact, the soul understands that the body is the locale of carnal desire and house of sins only, resulting in the loss of bliss and fruits in a conjugal life. The Bijuwa imparts this knowledge in the greatest scholar of his time.

### **Bridging the Two Cultures and Rebodying the Self**

In an attempt to develop his moral sensibility only, Somdatta has abolished his biological drive for pleasure. In other words, he has lost his biological ability of procreation. He lived his life with a focus on duty as promoted in the ancient scriptures.

The moral quest for a coherent self has distanced him for the inner call of his body, resulting in a sterile form of body. Such body is devoid of any power of regeneration. In fact, he has killed his desires for pleasure with penance when Koirala narrates: "Somdatta replied firmly, 'No! Between pleasure and duty we have killed the desire or pleasure with penance. In our life our objective is only fulfilling the duty'" (56). The neglected body whose call was never paid any attention to begins to take revenge on Somdatta's soul. Sumnima's father understands the crux of the problem as he sees through life differently: he realizes that the man in Somdatta is angry with him. The Bijuwa knows that the body and soul connection is completely lost in Somdatta for a long time; so he responds, thus: "The Bijuwa remarked very seriously, 'O Brahmin! The man in you is angry with you because you tried to kill it with your penance. You must take a dip into the man's pond'" (56). The Kirats understand body as extension of soul, while Somdatta privileges the role of soul in the disciplining of the body. In other words, the Aryans take the body and soul separately, emphasizing the significance of the soul over the realm of body.

Thus, Koirala synthesizes both the masculine and the feminine impulses by uniting them in Somdatta as he listens to the Bijuwa. The Bijuwa identifies the ways of reconnecting the body with the soul. The moral sensibility alone destroys the pleasure of the body and robs away from his ability to employ his energy for procreation. The novel further narrates:

Without a single word Somdatta stood on. Stopping for a while the Bijuwa continued as if he was explaining, 'Our body is not a machine, nor a medium, nor a means. It is itself a goal, an objective. You shouldn't neglect or hate it. When the physical body of man is devoid of juice, the desire of pleasure and feeling of enjoyment, it is like lifeless; and it cannot bear children. The body is not lifeless, emotionless tool only. A baby is the result and proof of copulation, do you understand O Brahmin?' (56)

The Bijuwa instructs his daughter Sumnima to arouse the human in Somdatta by massaging his body with different oils. She takes him to the human pond and bathes him there (60). Fully decorating him like a Villa boy (indigenous boy), she kisses him at the end of the day to arouse human passion (70). Sumnima revitalizes Somdatta's body in a novel form, implicitly teaching him the futility of this Vedic rituals to conceive a son. Now, Somdatta's body regains the lost honor and dignity: the thorough massage reinvigorates every cell, preparing the whole body for the union.

Both Somdatta and Puloma have the complete consummation of their bodily passion. The body requires to know the opposite end to realize the significance of the divine (Kristeva 123). Having undergone the process of complete negation of bodily pleasure, the soul was fully unbodyed in both Somdatta and Puloma. Hence, they could not give birth to any child. Now that Sumnima has helped him rebody and regenerate the soul, the couple derive full satisfaction from each other's body. They do not dictate any moral dogma to each other during the intercourse. Each takes the body of the other as indigenous one: Somdatta assumes that he is with Sumnima, while Puloma takes her man for her Villa youth (her lost lover). They forget the moral restrictions and move beyond the promise of their regular morality. It results in full satisfaction of their biological being and then their soul. The soul gets a body and the body gets a desiring soul: each treats the other as the instrument of pleasure. The complete bodily satisfaction results in conception and birth of a baby boy in Chatara.

Koirala's novel asserts that only mind and reason are not adequate for human beings when they ignore the body that carries them. The eastern philosophy treats the body and soul as the feminine and masculine impulse respectively. The dictations of the

scriptures only do not lead one to anywhere since they emphasize on the masculine impulse only. When both the impulses begin to work in human being, a healthy life is achieved at large. Koirala brings Yaba and Somdatta's son together at the end of the novel. In fact, he synthesizes both the values by bringing together mind and body as he sees unity among the Aryan, the Kirat and the Villa cultures. The novelist transcends beyond the restrictions of the Aryan cultures to serve the life better and finds out the remedy of the obsession in the Kirat culture that has long preserved the means of respecting the body. In other words, the Kirats rebody the Aryan soul and settle him back to life.

### Conclusion

Koirala's *Sumnima* presents a case of an extreme quest of rationalist self in which the protagonist loses his body. In the novel, Somdatta fails to respect the call of his biological body, resulting in the futile, sterile life. Somdatta and Puloma cannot give birth to a baby as long as they follow the dictations of the Vedic scriptures. In other words, they must get their body back in communion with the soul. Through the Bijuwa's advice and *Sumnima*'s massage, Somdatta regains his body which begins to feel the inner urge for the pleasure of union. The reinvigorated body now begins to feel and hear the biological call for pleasure. The abjected body is no longer a prohibited zone that must act in accordance with the moral dictations of the Vedic scriptures. Both Somdatta and Puloma respects their inner call and unite their body, without any moral obligation to participate in the act. The soul gets its vehicle body and begins to function in a proper sense. Koirala thus synthesizes both body and soul and the masculine and feminine impulses in his work.

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