

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Comment on *The Gurkha's Daughter*

Kumar Chhetri

*Although the British colonizers, anthropologist and administrators have produced a bulk of ethnographic accounts, travelogues, military accounts, and research papers there is no sufficient English literary work which centers on the life of the Nepalis. The earlier available works were either based on the life of Nepalis in Darjeeling or on the Himalayan kingdom (Nepal), whereas the present work *The Gurkha's Daughter* by Prajwal Parajuly is unique in the sense that it engulfs the life of the Nepalis both in Nepal and its Diasporas around the world in eight short stories. Despite being fiction the stories carry the social reality of everyday life experiences of the Nepali people and its Diasporas.*

Keywords: English fiction, Nepali Diasporas, Gurkha, gender, caste, refugee, immigrants, society and structure.

The book *The Gurkha's Daughter* has captured my attention since it is for the first time that an Indian Nepali writer has received so much of national and international recognition and newspaper coverage. The *Hindustan Times* describes the book as 'the best short story collection that you read in a while'. The author of the book has become the youngest Indian to sign a multi country deal with Quarcus publisher, London. Another interesting point that struck me is the name of the author - Prajwal Parajuly. He appeared to be a high caste Nepali but I was not sure because among the Hindus similar surnames could be seen in more than one castes or communities. The identity of the author, his birth place, his community, his nationality - all this came to be the points of curiosity. This is because of the Nepalis are widespread over different states and regions of the Eastern Himalayas.

The book portrays the 'chronic lives of the Nepali-speaking people

across the world in eight short stories'. It provides a lot of information about the Nepalis and serves as a route map for those who have not been to the Nepali speaking/dominated regions of the world. The author has tried to demystify the non-monolithic national identity of the Nepali speaking community in the contemporary world. He also brings to the fore the issue of otherwise broken ethnic boundaries and tries to differentiate ethnicity from nationality. Though the British colonizers, anthropologists, administrators and others have produced a bulk of ethnographic accounts, travelogues, military accounts, and research papers and so on, there are a dearth of English literary works which centers on the life of the Nepalis.

Among the English literary works, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, the winner of the Man Booker prize in 2007, was based on the life of the Nepalis in Darjeeling. However, for an insider it may appear to be an infamous work because of the negative portrayal of life of the Nepalis, based on the author's limited understanding of the social history and social formation of the Nepalis in India. *Palpasa Café* (translated from Nepali) is another well known novel written by Narayan Wagle against the backdrop of the Maoists insurgency in Nepal. It tells the story of an artist during the height of the Nepalese Civil war. It is regarded as an anti-war novel which portrays the negative effects of the civil war on the countryside of Nepal. There are several other English literary works which are based on the life and culture of the Nepalis by the writers like Tapashyaa Thapa, Goutam Upadhaya and others but they fail to come out of the periphery of the Himalayan Kingdom (Nepal). An autobiographical essay of Prof. Tanka Bahadur Subba gives a critical self-account of an Indian of Nepali origin in the Indian diasporic situation. His other work 'The Nepali Diaspora in India's North East Hill Region in the Current Context', draws a critical analysis and raises several questions on whether the Nepalis of North East India should be considered a diasporic society or not. A Work like *Gorkhas Imagined*, a collection of short stories written by Dr. Indra Bahadur Rai (translated into English by Prof. Prem Poddar, Professor Michael J. Hutt, Anmol Prasad and others) narrate the course of formation of Nepali/Gorkha identity in India.

Looked against this literary backdrop *The Gurkha's Daughter* by

Prajwal Parajuly¹ is perhaps one literary work that portrays the life of the Nepalis both in Nepal and its Diasporas around the world in eight short stories. Unlike other available English literary works, the present book is reflective of the lives of Nepalis around the world in general and South East Asia in particular, which has been thoroughly missing in the earlier available English literary works.

The main character of the first story 'The Cleft is Kali' is a disfigured servant girl who plans to flee Nepal. She was given to a Nepalese lady, Parvati, by her mother for household work because she was having too many mouths to feed in poverty infested region of Dooars². Her mistress uses her free labor just by giving a false assurance that her cleft would be operated upon and she would be sent to Mumbai (India) where she can be a film star. The author has beautifully plotted the story and left a question to the readers whether Kali would be able to flee Nepal to free herself. The expressions used by the author such as 'Your brain is as dark as your face' (p. 2) 'your mother didn't want another girl child' (p. 9) 'you were sick from eating all that mud outside your hut', 'And you didn't have any underwear on', 'You uncivilized being', and 'you are still Adivashi³ in your mentality' (p. 10) narrate the pattern of stigmatization, and subjugation of a black-skinned tribal girl on grounds of class, caste and gender, which precisely represents how a black tribal girl is looked at by the non-tribal privileged people in the region. Her widow mistress Parvati is also not happy with her life and wants to come out of the traditional boundaries but her society does not permit her to do so.

'Let the sleeping dog lie' is about 'a shopkeeper in Kalimpong who faces an impossible dilemma'. It is based on the life of a Bihari-Muslim and his wife who earn their livelihood by running a small *pan dokan* (beetle vines) in a rented house owned by Dr. Pradhan. Munnu, a second generation permanent dweller of Kalimpong, has been excluded by the locals just because of his community identity. He perceives the present place as his own land and he does not have second home outside of Kalimpong. He has always been identified by the locals as a migrant/panwala Bihari Bhaiya⁴ from his Desh (Uttar Pradesh or Bihar). The story has addressed how voices of the marginal people are suppressed by the members of the upper class dominant community. The story talks about

how the upper class people maintain their supremacy over the weaker sections of the society. The story touches upon the fear-psychosis of the members of a migrant, minority community.

'The Father's Journey' is about a father's reflection on 'his relationship with his only daughter'. The protagonist of the story, Supriya, belongs to a high caste, prosperous and well settled family of Gangtok. The story revolves around how Supriya had to sacrifice her beloved, a well educated low caste (Pradhan) young man for the sake of her community. The author succinctly expresses various social problems and the suffering of a young high caste Nepali Brahmin girl through expression like 'Ever since I had my periods, you've become an entirely different person. You locked me in the room for seven days. Mua told me I couldn't see the sun, that I couldn't see a man's face all those days there, I cried. I felt guilty, because I thought I had committed a sin' (p. 76). The present story shows how Supriya had to sacrifice her individual liberty and take sufferings under pressure. Here the author tries to bring in some important sociological issues like how caste relation and socialization processes of a community affect the everyday behavior of an individual. The story disseminates a message to the readers that man becomes great by heart not by caste.

The story, 'Missed Blessing' is about a poor educated but unemployed youth of Darjeeling who has to look after his old grand-mother and cannot afford to move outside for better future. The frustration of an educated but unemployed youth has been portrayed in the story. The author has successfully criticized the burden of the Nepali culture especially the Dasain celebration (major festival of the Nepalis) where a lot of expenditure has to be made. The author has added flavor to the story by bringing in two characters of Christian missionaries who came to Darjeeling for evangelical purpose.

The story 'The Gurkha's Daughter' is about a Gurkha girl who tries to 'comprehend her father's complaints' and crises. It is reflective of the discrimination and subjugation faced by the Gurkha army while serving the Western countries. The story is basically a longing for belonging of the two young Gurkha soldiers who were fighting for the British government. They were hopeful of being granted citizenship rights in the West since they were serving them. The story shows that though the Gorkhas are lauded

as a 'martial race' in reality they are martial race not by their choice but under the compulsions of bread and butter. The present story tries to disprove the martial race thesis which epitomizes the Western outlook for the Gorkhas serving in their army.

'No Land is Her Land' is a socio-psychological story where Anamika Chettri was forced to leave Bhutan, her native place. She had to take asylum at the Bhutanese refugee⁵ camp in Nepal but neither country considered her as 'the daughter of the soil'. The story portrays the everyday life experiences of the Bhutanese refugees in one of the rehabilitation camps in Nepal. They have been treated by the Nepalis as unwanted in their land and this is reflected in expressions like 'Go back to your damn country. Go to Bhutan. No one wants you in Nepal ...' (p.142). This indicates to a process of 'theorization' of those Nepali refugees who speak same language, follow same culture and tradition as that of the citizens of Nepal. The Nepali refugees were thrown out of their native place, Bhutan. The story unfolds how social, political and economic crises faced the Nepalis, and how ethnic Nepalis were made to feel like others, how they were kicked out for no other reason than ethnicity (p. 149). The present work narrates the multi-ethnic character of the Royal kingdom of Bhutan and the genesis of the Bhutanese refugee problem. Anamika saw only one possibility of getting rid of all those problems, that is, to go for 'third world settlement' (America) which is yet to come by. She has both pain and pleasure in her heart and mind because nothing has been certain; whether their settlement ensures more freedom, justice, and meets their minimum basic need or dehumanizes them by making them to fight against the Muslims. She has been subjugated and alienated by her native place and her second husband Ravi because she failed to give him a male child. The title seems to be unequivocal and extends its meaning to signify those Nepali women who are treated as a burden by their family members and as a means for getting a male child to maintain the lineage of the husband. Since they are refugees and unwanted everywhere no land is their land and no home is their home.

'Passing Fancy' is about the kind of adjustments an old couple makes after their retirement when their kids stay abroad. The present story shows the changes that have been brought about by modernity in different social institutions and in the life of the

people.

Two young Nepali speaking immigrants Amit and Sabetri from Darjeeling and Nepal respectively meet at Manhattan, New York, in the story 'The Immigrant'. While Amit is from a middleclass family Sabetri had an impoverished family background. They moved to America in search of better future. Sabetri learnt to live in America in a pitiable condition; she had to adjust with seven people, three of whom were male, in a single bed room apartment. The story demystifies the popular notion that the Western countries provide more comfort and give good fortune to migrant workers. This story shows the struggle of the two young Nepalis in the West for their survival. This story appears to be based on author's own experiences in the West.

The present work is basically a search for a post-colonial identity. It is for the first time that the lived experiences and sufferings of Nepali people of different castes, classes and regions are brought together in a single volume of literary work. Most of the characters have been shown unhappy with their life because their individual liberty and happiness have been put under threat by the structural forces. They have a lot of complaints about the historical and social space in which they live and about the systemic constraints that make their life difficult. It seems that the author has been deeply moved by the socio-economic and political problems faced by the Nepali-speaking people around the world. The empathy of the author for the suffering lot has been transferred in the characters and the stories. I feel that the author has highlighted the sufferings and the negative side of the ethnic Nepalis while ignoring the brighter sides and the successful cases. Had there been one or two stories narrating the achievements and success of the Nepali Diaspora the book would have had a balance in representation. There is however nothing to deny the appreciation that the writer deserves.

The stories in the book articulate the voices of the subaltern, struggling sections of society. The storyteller also touched upon the gender discrimination among the Nepali speaking population. The author deals with the gender issues with great deal of sensitivity. The social subjects that the writer has touched upon include family, community, uprootedness, discrimination, Diaspora, culture, tradition, gender, ethnicity, identity and

nationality which bear high degree of relevance in everyday life of the people and which are the subjects of sociological interest. Despite being fiction the stories in the book have made the characters and their concerns a living reality. Full credit goes to the author for depicting the everyday life experiences of the Nepalis around the world.

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Notes

1. He is originally from Gangtok, capital of Sikkim (India), who holds a master degree in Creative Writing from the University of Oxford's Kellogg College. Earlier he worked as an advertising executive at The Village Voice, New York. He is also the Author of "Land where I Flee" from Quarcus book, London.
2. Dooars region lies in the Northern part of West Bengal in the district of Jalpaiguri. The ethnic matrix of this region is of mixed types; particularly dominated by the Tribal of Jharkhand origin, Nepalis, Biharis, and Bengalis etc. They were brought by the British Government as the tea plantation laborers. This region witnessed a high rate of women and child trafficking rate due to the closing down of tea estates and under-development etc. (Chakraborty, 2013)
3. The Word *Adivasi* literally means 'aboriginal', 'son of the soil', '*vanabasi*' etc. but its notion among the non-tribal people in the region is different; for them it means a black facial community who are basically uncultured, uncivilized, less-developed and non-rational. These types of notion are also popular among the tribe themselves, for example, who belong to the educated upper section and converted Christians discard their tribal identity, language, culture and tradition.
4. Though the word '*Bhaiya*' literally means 'brother' in Hindi language, it is often derogatorily used by hill people to identify the people of Indo-Aryan origin of the plain such as, Bihari, Marwari, Bengali, Punjabi and people from the other Indian states. A large number of Bihari and Marwari

traders are found almost everywhere in Darjeeling district and Sikkim Himalayas.

5. While going through the present story I felt like I am at *Temai camp* (one of the rehabilitation camp after crossing *Dhulabari*,) where we used to visit with my roommate in our college days (2006-09). Now, he is in New York (third world settlement) but his parents denied going and they are still living there in *Temai camp*. I still remember his identity card in which his address was 'Lost Nepal'. A similar notion that I got while going through an autobiographic Nepali novel (*Nirwashan*) written by Mr. Tek Nath Rizal, one of the leaders of the Bhutan Democratic Front. Prof Michal J Hutt had produced research works on Bhutanese Refugee which also shows a similar notion as the present story of Parajuly.

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