

## **Feminist Voice in Abhi Subedi's *Agniko Katha***

Indira Acharya Mishra, Ph.D.

Associate Professor (English), Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan, Tribhuvan University,  
Nepal, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8753-6427>, Email: [indiraacharya42@gmail.com](mailto:indiraacharya42@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes Abhi Subedi's play, *Agniko Katha*, from a feminist perspective. Feminist critics blame that the classics of literature are partly responsible for creating and perpetuating the myth about 'eternal feminine.' They claim that there are only two images available for women in patriarchal literature. One is the image of a virtuous passive woman and the other is the promiscuous selfish woman. The author of such literary texts rewards the virtuous woman whereas they punish the promiscuous one. Feminists argue that the underlying message of this method is: if a woman wants to survive in patriarchy she must act feminine. This effects women in their real life situation for they tend to perform feminine gender roles though they are disadvantageous to them. Thus, they protest the stereotype depiction of female characters in literary and other cultural texts. The article argues that Subedi defies the traditional notion of femininity and creates new roles for his female characters. The protagonist of the play denies to play her assigned feminine role and searches for a new role for her. She questions and protests the patriarchal gender roles which are bias against women. Thus, it is relevant to explore the feminist voice in the text. The finding of the article suggests that women, too, have the potentiality to create new roles for themselves and bring change into society.

*Keywords:* Patriarchy, gender roles, feminism, feminine, stereotype

### **Introduction**

A poet, essayist, playwright and art critic, Abhi Subedi has a distinct place in Nepali literature. He has written over four dozen books of poetry, translation, essay, and play. Among his multiple personalities, his emergence as a playwright is a late one. Nonetheless, there have already been twelve plays in Nepali, and six plays in English under his name. Written in the critical mode of Nepali history, his plays are sensitive towards the issues of women. Among them, *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* (2001), *Agniko Katha* (2004) *Bruised Evenings* (2011), *Sandajuko Mahabharata* (2016) are the most popular ones. These plays dramatize the sufferings of women, their struggle for existence and identity against the backdrop of patriarchal society. Shiva Rijal conforms that most of his plays feature women as the

protagonists in them. Written from the feminist perspective, according to Rijal, his plays dramatize the pain and agony of women in male dominated societies. Rijal appreciates Subedi for providing "new energy to women and common characters often forgotten in the mainstream histories" ("History and Dreams" 64). Subedi voices the voice of historically muted women and ordinary people.

Subedi has portrayed his female characters with high self-esteem. They deny that women are lesser beings on the virtues of their sex. They criticize gender bias cultural values practiced in a patriarchal society like Nepal. Critically evaluating the tradition, culture and history of mankind that fail to acknowledge women's contribution to society, they resist them. According to Rijal Maiju of *Dreams of Peach Blossoms*, Bhichhuni Purnima of *Fire in the Monastery*, Mayadevi in *Māyādevikā Sapanā* [Dreams of Maya Devi] and the Princess of the *Bruised Evenings* ("Subedīkā Pātraharū" n. pag.) foreground woman's role in the society. They criticize the rulers of the nation for staking women's life for their vested interests. In this regards, Sunil Pokharel, a theatre artist views that *Dreams of Peach Blossoms* traces the story of women married to alien lands (54).

Likewise, Bikchuni Purnima in *Agniko Katha* [Fire in the Monastery], minutely explores the bias of gender roles practiced in patriarchy. Under patriarchy, women are deprived from knowledge and power. Purnima resists the traditional subservient role assigned to nuns. She claims that a nun is also a woman and she, too, has the feelings of love and pain; she, too, has the potential to achieve her dream. The way Purnima and other female characters claim for women's rights like that of men provides background for the analysis of the play from the feminists' perspective.

### **Problem, Objectives and Methodology**

Purnima, the protagonist of the play *Agniko Katha* asks the singing nun if she feels weak as a woman while singing. The question is pertinent. She wants to know whether her female gender has affected her capacity for singing. The singing nun answers that her gender has not affected her capacity as a singer. Rather she asserts that while singing, she forgets that she is a female. Then, they question why they have different rules for monks and nuns. The way they question and protest the traditional gender roles assigned to them creates a problem for the study of the play from the feminists' perspective. To examine why they raise their voice against restrictive patriarchal gender roles, the article seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. How are female characters portrayed in the play?
2. Why do the female characters defy the gender roles assigned to them?

The main objective of this article is to examine the feminist voice of the play. Its other objectives are to analyze the portrayal of female characters in the play and to explain why these female characters defy the feminine gender roles assigned to them.

The qualitative model of research is adopted to analyze the feminist voice in *Agniko Katha* which forms the primary source of information for the study. Reviews on the play and feminism are used as secondary sources. Feminism provides the theoretical ground for the study of the play. Relevant examples from the play are analyzed in the light of feminist arguments. It especially draws from Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinman and Betty Friedan. However, it also draws from other feminists whose ideas help to justify my claim. I use the Nepali version of the play. So I use transliteration and my own translation based on the free translation of the cited extracts of the play.

Beauvoir in her seminal text posits, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (quoted in Moi 209). She rejects the notion of 'eternal feminine'. She explains that it is the human civilization that shapes female born individuals as feminine. In her opinion, great literary writers are partly responsible for creating and perpetuating the myth of 'eternal feminine.' The inferior status of women, she points, is created by men to sustain their domination over women (11). She pleads women not be misled by the notion of femininity and live meaningful life like human individuals not as men's subordinate, 'the second sex.'

Likewise, Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* pleads women not to spend their life engaging themselves in the trivial domestic activities. Rather they should find full-time work in the public field. She insists that sons and husbands should also share the domestic works. So that both men and women will be self-sufficient and independent. Gloria Steinem also agrees that women's inferior position in the society is artificial and it can be corrected. She reasons that women should get equal access to resources and knowledge like that of men ((Tong 28 -34). Women's access to knowledge and resources will help to create a gender just society.

Feminist critics believe that patriarchy uses literature and other cultural texts to maintain males' domination over females. They opine women are dominated both in the society and in the literature. They point that in male literary history, mostly, a woman has been depicted as the embodiment of either virtue or evil. M.H. Abrams explains:

Images of women are often represented as tending to fall into two antithetic patterns. On the one side are idealized projections of men's desire – the Madonna, the Muses of the arts Dante's Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin and the 'Angle in the House.' On the other side are demonic projections of men's sexual resentment and terror – Eve

and Pandora as the source of all evil, destructive sensual temptresses such as Delilah and Circe, the malign witch and castrating mothers. (90)

Lois Tyson agrees that there are only two identities a woman can have. She can be either a “good girl” or a “bad girl” (89). She posits that these two roles, as referred to in more modern terms as ‘angel’ and ‘bitch’ define women in terms of male desire and sexuality.

Thus, one of the aims of feminism is to analyze the great literary works authored by males to examine images of women in them and then to protest the stereotype depiction of female characters in them. Another aim of feminism is to (re)discover forgotten or neglected women authors and provide them space in the literary scenario. Motivated by the first aim, this study focuses on the portrayal of female characters in Subedi's *Agniko Katha* as Subedi is a prominent literary figure in South East Asia and the play has been staged both in nation and abroad. The discussion focuses on the portrayal of two major female characters of the play: Purnima and the singing nun.

### **Review of Literature**

*Agniko Katha* is a popular play of Subedi. It has been staged in different theaters both in home and abroad. The common audience, theatre critics and those actors who acted on this play have shared their views on the play. Rijal claims that Subedi has portrayed Purnima, the protagonist of the play with feminist conscience. According to him, she is a rebellious nun. As a determined lady, she leaves the monastery to accomplish her dream of working among the victims of the domestic war in the remote war torn village of Nepal ("Subedīkā Pātraharū" n. pag). The way the nun decides to live a meaningful life is remarkable for him. He also discusses the background in which Subedi composed the play. It was during the Maoist Movement when chaos engulfed the nation. Subedi was the chair of the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University when some frustrated youths of the department burnt it. Subedi confesses that the incident provoked him (*Nepali Theatre* 227). He wanted to experiment in the play by fusing the tradition with modern way of theatrical expression.

Other critics also agree that the play is about a quest for meaning in human life. Shekhar Kharel compares this quest for meaning explored in the play with postmodern search for meaning. The confused characters of the play dive in the warm water of Mansarowar in search of meaning of life (quoted by Rijal in "Ādhunika Nepālī" 17). Sangita Rayamajhi, an academician from Nepal, refers to Purnima in her essay "Can a Woman Rebel?" According to her Purnima's act of leaving the monastery is an act of rebellion. Her decision to leave the monastery and live among the victims of war hints the arrival of new time for women (29). It indicates the changing gender roles of women in the society.

Carol C. Davis views that Subedi has dramatized the difficult situation experienced by Nepali people during the Maoist War.

When fire destroys the monastery's library and its sacred texts perish, the resident monks and nuns seem to lose their center of gravity, just as in war-torn Nepali society, war shakes citizen from the foundational structures that normally guide them. The monks and nuns wail, as they feel set adrift without the guidance of their ancient texts. (34)

Davis compares the disillusion experienced by the nuns and monks of the monastery with the disillusion of Nepali people during the War. Nepali people, too, were unknown about their future.

Amrita Gurung, a researcher views that the female characters of *Agniko Katha* resist their assigned roles and move towards new roles for them. According to her, the play "brings out the issues of the present times through the lens of a woman, one that elevates women to greater potentialities" (10-11). It shows the changing ethos of Nepali women.

Most of the critics agree that Subedi has written the play with feminist consciousness. They also mention the rebellious character of Purnima, the protagonist of the play. Yet, none of them makes a detailed study of the play from the feminist perspective. Hence, this article aims to fill this research gap, though partially.

### **Feminist Voice in *Agniko Katha***

Set against the background of a patriarchal society, feminist voice dominates the play *Agniko Katha*. The female characters of the play are portrayed from feminist perspectives. They display feminist conscience in their activities. Most of the actions of the play take place in a Tibetan monastery. The play dramatizes the experiences of the residential nuns and monks of the monastery. Though the nuns and monks are the residents of the same monastery and the devotees of the Lord Buddha, they have different roles as men and women. It supports Subhadra Mitra Channa's assertion. She points out that patriarchy is everywhere (186). The nuns are limited to domestic activities, have restricted movements and lack knowledge and exposure. The female characters minutely observe this gender discriminatory practices of the monastery and resist them to pursue their dream of living a meaningful life.

The plot of play unfolds dramatizing the chaotic situation experienced by the residential nuns and monks of the Monastery after it was caught by fire. The nuns and monks are rehearsing for a ritual dance. The poet monks comes on the stage and shares his confusion. He feels something has happened in the monastery but he is uncertain about it. Other nuns and

monks ask him what he wants to say. As they are discussing, the singing nun leaves the group, maintain a little distance from them and starts singing a folk song. It disturbs the environment of the monastery where one is expected to chant and recite religious players. Likewise, the devotees are expected to look serious and thoughtful. The stage director reads the gesture of the serious monks and nuns who feel offended by the laugh and causal talks of other nuns and monks. So one of the monks hushed up the singing nun:

*lokaḡita gāuna banda gara. yo gumbāko wātāwaranamā mildaina . . . mula lāmāko abhinaya garnele bhanuparyo yahā sancikai abhinaya garna mildaina* [Stop singing a folk song. It does match with the monastery's environment. . . . The person who is acting the principal monk should tell them that here one cannot do the real performance.] (35)

The extract shows the restriction imposed on the devotees in the monastery. They are expected to recite serious hymns and prayers. But they are not allowed to sing folk songs that express the pain and pleasure of the common people. Though pain and pleasure are common human experiences the devotees have to control them. It shows the artificiality of the religious rules.

The singing nun, however, defies the tradition of the monastery and continues singing the folk song. She insists for finding Lord Buddha in the song. She is too happy and happiness manifests through her song. But this is against the tradition of the monastery. So people divide into two groups. One group believe that they can sing; they reason that without singing they cannot express their devotion to Buddha. The singing nun claims that "*Buddha ḡta huna* [The Buddha is the song]" (36). It shows her stubborn character. She defies the notion of silence and submission ascribed to women. She boldly says that the Lord manifests in the folk songs.

As they are debating about the manner of the devotees, one monk informs them that there is fire in the monastery. Fear and chaos pervade the scene. Monk Gyan informs that fire has destroyed the library of the monastery. All the sacred books are burnt to ashes. Anxious monks worry what they will do without the books, without those books their future is uncertain. But the nuns are unaware of the situation. The singing nun asks: "*ahile āgo katā jādai cha? kahā lāḡyo? hāmīle aba ke garnu parcha?* [Where is the fire moving now? What was caught by the fire? What should we do now?] Her questions show the status of women in the monastery. They lack information and knowledge. It is supported by another nun's ignorance. She asks: "*pustakālaya bhaneko keho? ke jalyo re? kahānira jalyo?* What is a library? What was burnt? Which part was burnt]" (36)? Unlike, these nuns, the monks know what has happened. They know the worth of the library. For them books are the source of knowledge that help them search for meaning of life.

The nuns' lack of knowledge shows the position of women in the monastery. They are limited to domestic activities and have no exposure to books and knowledge. They have restricted movement. But the monks are independent. After the fire incident, monk Gyan decides to leave the monastery on his own. He claims that he is free to go anywhere he likes. He shares that ever since the fire incident, his mind is unstable. Different thoughts are crowded in his mind. Purnima confesses that she, too, feels in the same way. She also wants to follow him. But she is a nun, a woman. She acknowledges that her world is not as open as his.

Like monk Gyan, she, too, is disillusioned. But monk Gyan is independent. He is free to leave the monastery, marry a woman and live a domestic life or return to the monastery in the capacity of a monk. His monk status remains intact wherever he goes. He informs Purnima:

*ma aba jānchu. kahāsamma jānchu bhanna sakdina. tara malāi thāhā cha kailāsa jānchu. tyhā gaera ma jīwanmāke garne bhanne kurā thāhā pāunechu. mero nimti tyahī yātrā thulo hunecha.* [Now I go. I do not know up to where I shall reach. But I know I will go to Kailash. There I will find out the purpose of my life. The journey will be a big one for me. ] (45)

Gyan has freedom of choice. Contrary to Gyan, Purnima lacks freedom of choice. She depends on other. After the death of her mother, her father has brought her in the monastery. Now she is under it. She explains: "*mero sansāra timro jasto khula chaina. ma euṭī swāsni mānche hun. bhichuṇī pani sāwasni mānche ho*" [My world is not as free as yours. I am a woman. A nun is a woman, too"] (45). She accepts her feminine roles. For her women are treated differently because of their anatomy. Guided by the patriarchal mindset, she accommodates with her assigned roles.

She fears that people will boycott her if she leaves the monastery. Her fear supports Millett who proclaims that in patriarchy a woman, who denies to act feminine, will suffer "a variety of cruelties and barbarities" (quoted in Tong 52). She wonders why Buddhism holds double standards. They say that the Lord is omnipresent and omnipotent. He takes care of the monks all the time, irrespective of places, whereas, He will not protect the nuns outside the monastery.

This discriminatory gender practices within the religion triggers her feminist consciousness. She realizes that femininity is a cultural construct, so to say that women are naturally timid, sweet, dependent and self-pitying is to "construct a role for them" (Bertens 98) as pointed by feminists. Thus, she questions the gender discrimination practiced in the religion though she fears the social scandal. She questions the double standards that people hold with regards to morality of men and women:

*Bhagawānle sabailāi barābara garera herchan. tara euṭa kurā timīle ṭhīkai bhaneu. bhikchuharū bāhira gae bhane sabaile rāmrāi ṭhānchan. hāmī gayai bhne narāmrā bhaechh, yī bigrechan bhanchan.* [God treats all equally, but one thing that you told is correct. All people will think it is nice if the monks go away. But if we go away, they say we are bad, we are abandoned.] (47)

They say that the Lord is omnipresent and omnipotent. He takes care of the monks all the time, irrespective of places, whereas, He will not protect the nuns outside the monastery. On the condition they leave the monastery, they need to live domestic life as wives and mothers. It proves that women's grasp on the world is more restricted than that of the men as pointed by Beauvoir (35).

Though these women are complying with their ascribed feminine roles they decide to leave independently. They understand though they are females they too have rights like that of men. The singing nun claims that even if she starts a domestic life she will not follow the dictate of a man. She asserts, "*malāi pani thāhā cha. kahā ma āimāi bhaekole pharaka hu, kahā samāna hu bhanera sidhai bhanne chu* [I know it, too. I will tell him straight how I am different as a woman and how I am equal] (47). Her consciousness is a feminist consciousness. She knows that female is a matter of biology whereas 'femininity is a cultural construct' (Moi 209). Purnima observes that religion also supports men domination to women. She doubts that women are inferior on the virtue of their sex. She asks the singing nun:

*timīle kahile āphulāi nārī bhaekole sāno ṭhānekī chau? timīle gīta gāeko belā nārīko hāreko karma bhane ṭhāneki cheau?* [Have you ever thought of being a lesser being because you are a woman? Do you think that women have defeated luck when you are singing a song?] (78)

The singing nun assures her that she never feels weak when she sings (78). Purnima realizes that the lower position of women in the society and in the monetary is an artificial created. The religion is also bias to the female sex.

In Purnima observation, the treatment of women as inferior to men in Buddhism, she comes closer to feminist thinkers. For instance, Beauvoir suggests that most of the world's social, political and religious institutions support men's domination on women. She claims, "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers, and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of woman is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth. The religion invented by men reflects this wish for domination" (11). Purnima comments:

*Buddha dharmabhitra nārīko sammāna nabhaeko hoina, cha. tara aghilo junīmā alika ramro kāma garna nasakekāle yasa junīmā nārī bhaera janmanu pareko thānincha. malāi tyo kurā bhitra bhijeko cha. . . . bhagawān Buddhale nārīlāi kahile tallo tahama rākhēkā thie ra? [It is not that there is no respect for women in the Buddhism. Of course, there is. But they think that since women had been unable to do fairly good work in their previous life, they were born in the lower level as women in this life. It has hurt my feeling. . . . Had Lord Buddha ever placed women to a lower status? (78)*

Purnima rejects that women are inferior to men, i.e., to be a woman is a curse. She critiques men for manipulating religion to subjugate women to their will.

Purnima understands that patriarchal gender roles are disadvantageous to women. They restrict women to live a meaningful life. Thus, she decides to break the restrictive norms of the monastery. "*tyasaikāraṇale gardā ma jāna lāgekī. ma nārīle euṭī bhikchuṇīle yas jīwanamā ke garna sakche bhanera dekhāuna cāhanchu.* [That is why I want to leave. I want to show what a woman, a nun can do in this life."] She wants to establish that a woman, too, can live her life with a purpose. She challenges: "*nārīko junī hāreko junī hoina* [women's life is not a defeated life]" (79). Her declaration echoes feminist voice. Her activities support feminism, which according to Leela Gandhi "aims to enable women to become the active participating subjects rather than the passive and reified objects of knowledge" (43). She breaks off the muffled voice of nuns which has been silenced for ages. She claims her identity as a nun; even if she leaves the monastery, no one can disown her from her identity: "*ma pani yahī gumbākai bhikchuṇī hu. jahā gae pani* [After all, I am also a nun of this monastery wherever I go] (79). She denies the inferior status given to women on the ground of their biology. She claims that there should be equal rights between nuns and monks, men and women.

The singing nun also realizes her passion for singing. She claims for her potentiality to sing and asserts that she will continue singing. She acknowledges the value of her female body. Purnima and the singing nun do not conform to the traditional roles assigned to them. They become conscious about their position as women in the society and work for change. They resist the traditional belief that treat women as inferior to men on the basis of their anatomies. They demand that women should have exposure to the outside world and knowledge. As proud and high self-esteemed ladies, they acknowledge their potentiality for new roles and decide to live their life purposefully.

## Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that *Agniko Katha* is a female centered play and it is written from the feminist perspective. Purnima, the protagonist of the play and her foil, the singing nun are portrayed as non-conformists. Initially, they are confused about their roles as females; but later they realize their worth as human beings. They become conscious that the inferior position of women in the society is artificial and resist the restrictive feminine roles that limit their potentiality as humans. The singing nun has a passion for singing and continues singing though it is against the tradition of the monastery. Similarly, Purnima claims her identity as a nun even if she leaves the monastery. She decides to live among the war victims and support them. Her activities defy the traditional methods of devotion and prayers practiced in the monastery. Their portrayal defies the stereotype definition of women as good or bad. They are unique individuals with their own desires and interests. Defying their assigned feminine roles, these female characters create new and more meaningful roles for them.

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