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Reimagining Nepali Nationhood: Challenging the Dominant National Narratives in Nepali Poetry of Indigenous Consciousness

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Abstract

Nepal's dominant national narrative has historically been shaped by the upper-caste Hindu ruling elite, who institutionalized their cultural ideology through state mechanisms, literature, and education. This monolithic construction of nationhood has long marginalized ethnic indigenous communities, particularly the Kirant – Rai and Limbu, whose cultural and religious practices challenge the hegemony of the state. In this context, the paper examines how Anjana Ichhamphul's "A Tale of Spoiled Dream" and Naresh Kangmang's "Mr. Poet, My Poem will be Burnt with Your Hand" contest Nepal's majoritarian national discourse by foregrounding the lived experiences, spirituality, and cultural agency of the Kirant people. Drawing upon the postcolonial perspectives such as "the performative and pedagogical narratives of the nation" by Homi K. Bhabha, and the idea "epistemic violence" by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, the study explores how Nepali poetry of ethnic voice reimagines Nepal as pluralistic nation grounded in mutual recognition and coexistence rather than conflict and hierarchical domination. The findings of the research contribute to the existing scholarship and Nepali society in three tiers: literary discourse in postcolonial context functions as site for reimaging inclusive nation; ethnic reconciliation emanated from cultural recognition rather than assimilation; and reinterpreting nationalism through plural consciousness fosters sustainable democratic identity formation.

Keywords: National narrative, indigenous consciousness, identity, reconciliation

Introduction

The conceptualization of Nepal's nationhood was historically grounded in the unification campaigns of King Prithivi Narayan Shah, who established a centralized Hindu

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monarchy in 1768. As Feyzi Ismail and Alpa Shah note, "Dominant Nepali history has focused almost exclusively on the history of the Shah dynasty that ruled Nepal from 1768 when it was unified by the skillful political and military strategist Prithvi Narayan Shah, born in the principality of Gorkha in central Nepal" (114). The historiography focused almost exclusively on the history of the Shah dynasty. The monolithic representation reified a Hindu-centric nationalism that integrated diverse communities into a hierarchical caste system. Alexandra Geiser observes that "upper-caste rulers integrated all different ethnic groups and casted into one single hierarchical system…based on the ideology of the Hindu caste system" (17). Thus, the unification project produced cultural hegemony under the guise of political integration.

When the dominant national narratives underscores harmony, unity and reconciliation, the lived reality of ethnic groups reflected quite contrary experiences of inequality, exclusion and injustice. In contrast to the national discourse, Thomas affirms "There is a myth prevalent among many people that Nepal is a land of ethnic harmony where Hindus, Buddhists, and Animists all get along . . .reveal tremendous conflict between politically and economically dominant high caste (Brahman, Chetri and Thakur,) Hindus and Buddhist and Animist ethnic minority groups" (1318). These tensions became more visible after the 1990 People's Movement, which exposed institutionalized discrimination within Nepal's emerging democracy. Mahendra Lawoti traces this historicity, stating, "The majoritarian electoral democracy Nepal adopted in 1990 began encountering problems at an early stage. Political infighting and governmental instability plagued the country from the early 1990s. From 1990 until 2002, Nepal witnessed twelve governments. Corruption became pervasive…police, and resources during elections eroded democratic institutions" (2). Hence, the discourse of unity concealed structural oppression and unequal participation.

The democratization process paradoxically opened a space of ethnic assertion. The involvement of Indigenous nationalities/Janjati in constitutional committees, as Ismail and Shah highlight "raised objection to the status quo" (113). The growing ethnic awareness found resonance in literature, which became a platform for articulating marginalized voices. Literary figures, artists and poets from indigenous Kirant community such as Bhupal Rai, Rajan Mukarung, Anajana Ichchamphul, Naresh Kangmang and other emerged as cultural agents who questioned hegemonic nationalism and advocated for recognition of indigenous identity and worldviews. Literature in post-1990 Nepal functions as a site of resistance against state-produced historiography and writers from

Indigenous communities challenge the epistemic dominance of Hindu narratives by celebrating the Kirant cosmology rooted nature, community and spirituality.

However, the absence of sufficient scholarly attention to how Nepali literature functions as a counter-discursive site for reconstructing inclusive national identities represents a significant research gap. This is why, the paper investigates how Ichhamphul's and Kangmang poetry not only critique the dominant Hindu-centric nationalism but also envisions a pluralistic model of nationhood, illuminating literature's potential to frame identity politics and promote cultural co-existence, equity, and shared cultural consciousness in Nepal. In this way, the research addresses three key research questions: a. what ideological and historical forces have contributed to the construction and continuation of Nepal's dominant Hindu-centric national narrative that marginalizes ethnic and indigenous identities? b. how do the poems of ethnic indigenous consciousness serve as a literary and cultural resistance to context the dominant narratives? c. Why do the poems advocate for pluralistic and inclusive nationalism and co-existence rather than confrontation?

Methods

The study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology that integrates textual analysis on thematic issues, postcolonial insights and contextual historical interpretation. It examines how two poems—"A Tale of Spoiled Dream", and "Mr. Poet, My Poem will be Burnt with Your Hand" –with the poetic language, symbols, and metaphorical troupes articulate resistance and reimagines Nepal's national identity through close readings of the texts. As the paper centers on how these poems voice for the marginalized people—particularly the Kirant Rai community—whose worldviews, oral traditional values and culture have been exterminated from the dominant historical narratives. To put the poems in the context of broader socio-historical trajectory, the research draws upon postcolonial and cultural theoretical frameworks, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's concept of performative and pedagogical narratives of the nation and epistemic resistance by Spivak. In this relevance, Bhabha contends, "Such a pluralism of the national sign, where difference returns as the same, is contested by the signifier's 'loss of identity' that inscribes the narrative of the people in the ambivalent, 'double' writing of the performative and the pedagogical" (217). The arguement shows the central ides of national unity is undermined because the nation's narrative is always divided between its stable, created history and its messy, unstable, lived reality. The mainstream narrative fails to capture the inherent

diversity in which the real national identity resides. The notion of the epistemic violence by Spivak also relates to the argument of the research. Spivak contends that the process, which masks itself as "advancement of learning and civilization," ultimately replicates epistemic violence, leaving the most marginalized—like the subaltern woman—just as voiceless as before (90). The tension between the contradictions as posed by Bhabha functions as the active resistance against the epistemic violence that systematically silences marginalized voices.

Analysis/Interpretation

The study explores how Ichhamphul's "A Tale of Spoiled Dream and Kangmang's Mr. Poet, My Poem will be Burnt with Your Hand" articulate the nation through poetic resistance through the postcolonial and cultural theories. Ichhamphul's symbolic use of a 'spoiled dream' reflects the fractured aspirations of indigenous communities within a monolithic national identity while Kangmang's direct address to the poet enacts an ironic confrontation with the literary canon that perpetuates exclusion. Ichhamphul, in "A Tale of Spoiled Dream", questions the interference of the dominant groups, defining the ethnic culture in the following lines:

> My Nakchhung while Playing the wooden drum
> Worshiping the hearth [three-pronged stones]
> Inside your heart yourself
> Why does your heart strike and tremble yourself?
> I am like this,
> A man who does not know how to celebrate happiness
> Even in joy fire a double-barrel gun. (My Trans.; Lines 1-7)

She remarks that the ethnic Kirant group has their own tradition and culture; they follow their particular way of living. However, Ichhamphul believes that the ethnic culture is not a matter of celebration for the majoritarians—in fact, the cultural practice of the indigenous people remains a threat to their existence. The mythological practice of the Kiranti people may have their virtue in their performances; nevertheless, their act of being trembles the heart of the dominant group. The most significant thing hidden underneath is that the relationship between the ethnic group and majoritarian is not harmonious. The tension that inwardly inflames both the parties and breeds an implicit contestation that can be illuminated only through their internalization but not through their acts.

Ichhamphul ironically hammers the assumption of the majoritarian by bringing

the cultural practice of the Kiranti people of "worshiping the heart" into account and interrogates the discomfort that the majoritarian encompasses. The prevalence of disharmony is not an immediate reaction but rather a result of perpetual conflict between the rulers and being ruled. Thus, as Barbara Crossette argues, "When there is trouble in paradise, however, it can take time for old images to die" (73), this uneasy relationship indeed is severe and implicitly destructive, this ultimately comes into distortion over time. However, this is not to say that the conflict is normal and they are to be undermined, rather their nature is eerie and demands serious concern because the matter takes a serious turn, if not overcome on time. It is because Ichhamphul clarifies in the following lines:

Whether my dream has deteriorated
Or you need to correct your reality
Like this, after my dream is continuously deteriorated
My dream will always keep
You in nightmare
In the past, for you and me to divide equal share
The contract testimony signed by the ancestors
Today, I beg you
only the photocopy
you are hiding the red book of private property
Frighteningly. (My Trans.; Lines 15-24)

The contentious relationship between the aspiration of the ethnic group and the will of the majoritarian maps the future of their dissipation and allocates the definition of their diverse thoughts in a social problem. Ichhamphul exposes the dissimilar interests between the minorities and majoritarians, hinting at the "reality" of the "dominant and the "nightmare" of the subordinated. Interestingly, she does not harmfully neglect the power division nor does he advocate for retaliation. In fact, he requests the majoritarian to rectify the errors to bring the relationship into equilibrium. Acknowledging the asymmetric division of power between the Khas Aryan and the Kiranti people, Ichhamphul advocates for assimilation rather than hostility and revenge. In this sense, she demands redrawing the boundaries of a new nation where veracity flourishes, evacuating the unequal distribution of power. Her urges for the demand of equal recognition in recreating new national narratives are more palpable in the following lines:

I do not ask you to add Mundhum and Risiya
Singing your Ramayana's verses,

I didn't ask you to offer a few drops of local beer
in your oblation fire,
I didn't ask you to add Sakela Sili
To your Diwali and Teej
but I see the tiger of your mind constantly eating you, I am a man to worships nature.
A man who loves brook, rivers, the air, the insects
Who constantly keeps loving everybody? (My Trans.; Lines 25-34)

Ichhamphul brings mythology and religiosity into consideration to remap the distinctive picture engulfed in national space. Meanwhile, she considers that mythological diversity and religious plurality do not need amalgamation. What she enforces is to reconcile the contestation that discontinues the procreation of cultural harmony. As HH The Dalai Lama puts it, "Many of the world's problems and conflicts arise because we have lost sight of the common experience that binds us all together as a human family. We tend to forget that despite the diversity of race, religion, ideology and so on, people are equal in their basic wish for peace and happiness" (9), the problem with the majoritarians is that they forget the fundamental essence of the human is humanness and that works as a mechanism to instill them in the nexus of togetherness.

Significantly, Ichhamphul celebrates the Mundhum and the Ramayana equally and at the same time he also reveals that the Kiranti people do not have any problem with the difference people encapsulate in the social space because they are "man to worship nature" and they "love brook, rivers, the air, the insects." It is to say that the Kirati people openly accept the ample diversity that flourishes in the social sphere; thus, they are not the problem in social peacefulness. In fact, for her, the conception that the majority holds is the tiger that is constantly eating them. In this sense, cultural dominance is their mindset, which is the cause of cultural dissipation and social dysfunction. Moreover, it is their mindset that is deteriorating their status, resulting in inter-national disparity. Indeed as Eric Hobsbawn contends, "Historically, the coexistence of people of different languages and cultures is normal; or, rather nothing is less common than countries inhabited exclusively by people of a single uniform language and culture" (1068), there is no difficulty in accepting the multicultural legacy of the nation. However, the majoritarian is rigid enough to deny this fact. Thus, she calls for reconciliation in the poem, demanding the recognition of minorities and amendment of contestatory practices. She does this by explaining the common ground they share to proliferate their norms and values in the following lines:

This yard belongs to everyone.
Let's celebrate Dewaali
Celebrate Maghi and Lhosar,
This festival is for everyone
Let's not spoil the rest of my dream
not break your whole life
when my dream spoils
the creation gets in trouble. (My Trans.; 43-50; My Trans.)

Ichhamphul is aware of the universal ground of the people. Moreover, he also acknowledged that the peaceful relationship between them lay in recognizing each other with gratitude. His request remarks on the necessity of integrity that could serve the purpose of the entire people rather than one particular group. She disregards monopoly and believes in sharing tradition for sustained peace and harmony. Indeed, because of the monolithic domination of the majoritarian, the state has confronted unstable national smoothness because historically, "By the time the Ranas seized power from the Shahs in 1846, Bahuns and Chhetris prevailed over Nepal's population as the most dominant groups—landowners, administrators, priests, soldiers, and police" (Ismail and Shah 114). As a result, as B. C. Upreti mentions, "In multi-structured societies, the unification of people in one identity has necessitated liberal democratic structures participatory and secular politics, and development leading to growth and prosperity, equality and freedom" (539). Thus, Upreti concludes, "All these h of nationalism in South Asia. However, one may observe that the decline of participation politics, majority polity leading to social dis-equilibrium, and modernization leading to ethno-regional movements that have challenged national integrity and unity" (539). In this connection, S. K. Chaturvedi argues, "To mitigate such discrimination one community may stand against another, particularly in a plural society like that of ours having diverse cultures, religions, language, literature, art form and variegated mosaic of faiths, beliefs, ethnicities and identities but natural" (1047). In this connection, confrontation is a common expectation in an asymmetric society; nevertheless, she is advocating for reconciliation by sharing fundamental entities like religion, culture, and tradition rather than vocalizing wrestling against the dominant groups.

Indeed, historically, Nepal has witnessed disputes and dissension between the majoritarian and the minorities because of the extreme domination that undermined the aspirations and grievances of the ethnic groups. The subordinated ethnic groups are not

merely socially neglected but also institutionally brutalized. In the words of Mahendra Lawoti:

Even though the 1990 Constitution recognized the multiethnic nature of Nepali society, many articles in that document discriminated against marginalized groups, who collectively make up more than two-thirds of the population. The Constitution declared Nepal a Hindu state, did not recognize native languages equally, and contained discriminatory citizenship articles. Social justice movements burst onto the scene to fight discrimination. (2) Lawoti sheds light on the nation's polarized observation over the folks and affinity towards the majoritarian through constitutional legacy. Valorizing the nation's declaration of the Hindu state, Lawoti exposes how institutionally multilingualism was denied consideration and what it resulted in.

More specifically, he underscores, "The post-1990 era also witnessed violent ethnic and religious conflicts, even though these were largely overshadowed by the Maoist insurgency" (2-3). This antipathy was mechanized by the domination of the ruling class and institutionalized by those who were structurally benefited. Undeniably, the ruling community, Khas Aryan, were in fact in the higher post because as Aurora Sanchez Palacio points out, "A caste system has been in place since the early monarchical dynasties established a unified national regime, and the state has remained almost impervious to ethnic claims" (167), which paved the way for the incongruent dissemination of power, establishing the Khas Aryan as powerful and the others as powerless. This powerful state of a particular group not only dictated the nonbelonging ethnic group but also registered the entire state-governing entities into their account. Reflecting on this historical background, Kangmang in his poem "Mr. Poet, My Poem will be Burnt with Your Hand" writes:

The land was yours,
the water was yours,
the forest was yours,
the International Convention,
one hundred and seventy-nine article was written for you. (My Trans.; Lines 1-5)

Kangmang points out that the dominant captures the entire elements that were pivotal to locating the position of the folks. Since all the belongings were confiscated, it made the non-Khas aryan people minorities and repositioned them in the boundary of nationless-ness. Moreover, he reckons that the dominant not only detained national entities of the minorities, especially ethnic groups but also stopped their extension with the international society. In this sense, the dominant effaced the ethnic group from the

national belonging and international entangling either through national policies or through international treaties.

It is not to argue that the ruling leader merely serves the purpose of the dominant. Nor it is to claim that the historical development of the national building process was one-dimensional. It is equally true that the audacity of the leading ruler incubated the national psyche, breeding a sense of nationalism. When Nepal lost the battle against the British India Company, Nepal started the pollination of nationhood. In the words of Ravi Bhandari et al., "The defeat was humiliating to the national psyche, but, ironically, it hastened the rise of Nepali nationalism, as it pushed the ruling class to consolidate what was left to preserve their national power and authority" (11-12). Moreover, this turn was perpetuated and further accelerated resulting upon "the crown-centered national polity and the Hindu mold converged to solidify the Parbatiya narrative as the version of Nepali nationalism" (11). Hence, "What we see in the movement is a socially informed response to decades of ag-state nationalism" (17). The action taken by the ruling leader not only deformed the conventional notion of the nation but also signified the value of a new nation that was defeated from a Nepali perspective.

However, the question is what type of nation did the ruling leader prioritize? And more interestingly, how did they regulate the nation to imbue national narratives?
In the words of Major Kaisher Bahadur, "At this critical juncture of the history of Nepal, the Ranas committed serious blunders with the result that Nepal was thrown into a ferment of unrest" (22). Introducing Muluki Ain in 1854, Ranas, particularly Jung Bahadur, institutionalized the cast system which inculcated social inequality and formalized the cast-based hierarchical system. This system was further consolidated by King Mahendra, during the Panchayat regime by declaring Hindu state constitutionally in 1961. During this period, David N. Gellner asserts, "Ethnic and caste affiliations were discouraged, in the name of patriotism and nation-building. Organizations could be formed for cultural purposes, but not in order to advance the cause of particular social or regional interests politically" (1824). On the one hand, the ethnic minorities were defanged from their required designation in social junction; on the other hand, they were prohibited from aligning.

In this scenario, "This time was characterized by the attempt of the rulers, the King and the high-caste Parbatyia officials – generally all men – to establish national unity with distinctive national characteristics such as the Nepali language, Nepalese dress, and Hinduism as the state religion" (18). Indeed, it is not to argue that the magnitude

of suppression was oscillated between the Khas Aryan and the ethnic community, undeniable the ruling leader was rooted in his interest to perpetuate his regime and that also dichotomized the panchayat and the common folks. However, the point is that this disparity was more severe in the case of ethnic minorities. In fact, the ethnic community was doubly marginalized, one from the ruling system and the other from the caste system that valorized Hindu-based sects.

Interestingly, Nepal observed a greater transition with the fall of the panchayat regime in 1990 following the people's movement. The redrawing of the national narratives took place voicing the voiceless to some degree. Significantly, "According to the 1990 constitution, the Nepali state formally recognizes the multiethnicity of its society. However, institutions and regulations fostering the participation of the excluded groups have been unsuccessful to date" (Geiser 29). To be more specific, "Even today, Hindu ideology and the caste system prescribe which kind of work Nepali Hindus should carry out, whom they should marry, what they should eat, and which roles they should play in ceremonies" (Geiser 19). Thus, responding to these years of inequality and domination over the ethnic community, Kangmang shows his despair and loss of belongingness in the following ways:

> Ancestor's tears are falling on the portrait,
> Rimachung alis Temke Hill standing in the shadow, passing high through Silichung,
> the face of Dilingdungma
> and the humming Mundhumian sound of Patesung.
> The azure rivers that flowed from Chomolungma
> and the patches of green forest
> were already connected to the Charkose Jhadi. (My Trans.; Lines 13-20)

He shows deep empathy for the lost treasure and realizes that the ancestor's grief because of the loss of inheritance. Although enticed by the fundamental ground of the nation, for example, Chomolungma, green forest, and Charkose Jhadi, the ethnic group is outcasted from what they belong to. In fact, according to Major Kaisher Bahadur, "the history of Nepal opens with the history of the Shepherd Kings. The original place names of the northern shepherds, the Ahirs and the Kirantis . . ." (168). Ambivalently, now the one who historicized the origin of the nation is eliminated from the history of the nation.

Thus, Kangmang is not only nostalgic about the glory of the ancestors but also tragic to lost the national entities collected by the Kiranti ancestors. Hence, he, bringing mythological heroes into account, voices, "Tayama and Khayama's tears / Hetchhakuppa's

hungry stomach / And exhausted body / covered with raw banana leaves" (My Trans.; Lines 21-24), to show how history has been biased and how the historical polarization yet stir the social inequality. In doing so, Kangmang rationalizes the necessity of discussing national history and the present days, where in both cases ethnic groups are either eliminated or effaced from the recognition. Interestingly, his attempt to bring mythological heroes: Tayama, Khayama, and Hetchhakuppa, is to show the ancient connection between the ethnic group and the entities that constructed the nation as a whole. Since these heroes are torn and hungry, this reflects the discomforting situation that the ethnic group has been confronting. Moreover, it also reveals that they have been fighting for their rights for so long which has made them "exhausted." In this sense, he requests for propitiation rather than the elongation of alienation.

Conclusion

The analysis of the study reveals that both Ichhamphul and Kangmang challenge the dominant national narratives by transforming poetic space into a site of resistance and renewal. Both of the poems articulate the psychological and cultural displacement experienced by the indigenous Kirant community and doing so, destabilize the hegemonic assumption that national identity must by synonymous with Hindu and upper-caste values. Both of them use indigenous symbols, oral traditions, and natural imagery exposes artificiality the monolithic nationalism and foregrounds an alternative vision of belonging rooted in the values of cultural multiplicity. Through poetic expressions and articulation, the marginalized voice of indigenous Kirant emerges not as a counterforce of rebellion but as voice of restoration and unity that embrace diversity. In a broader sense, the findings suggest that literary discourse operate as a transformative cultural praxis that enables the reimagination of national identity from the margins. Both of them foreground ethnic indigenous consciousness to reconcile but not assimilate through mutual recognition and shared understandings. The pluralistic rearticulation of nationhood disrupts the binaries of dominant and dominated, self and other, center and margin-opening new possibility for more inclusive democratic ethos. The study concludes that ethnic indigenous literature in Nepal articulates the voice of essential political and ethical functions by reconstructing the narratives of nation through equality and empathy for the diversity and cultural pluralism.

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