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**Book Review**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jodem.v12i1.38729>***Anuradha Bhavan: At the Crossroads of Values and Choices***

Author: Ganesh Lath

Reviewer: Mahesh Paudyal

Ganesh Lath's *Anuradha Bhavan* fundamentally problematizes a conflict of life-views inspired by differences of ages, company and motivations. Two brothers, Biraju and Saraju, both hailing from a lower middle-class family, are outcomes of the love and care of an indomitable mother, Anuradha, widowed so early in her life to struggle alone and raise a family. They have both derived life from the same rubric, the same crucible and the same relentless and unyielding patron. Yet, they choose different paths in life. Biraju, who sides with morality and dignity, does not compromise with his convictions at any rate and anneals himself to face all sorts of hardship, whatsoever befalling his life. His petty business, his premature marriage and family struggle, his migration to India for a job, his return and the foundation of a small business of his own, the terrible flood and his bankruptcy all come into play, aggravating his condition. Yet, he does not give in. He is not a hedonist of sorts; rather, he is a deeply spiritual man, who has borrowed much from his mother Anuradha. Saraju, his brother, is however counterpoint. The company he picks is that of reckless youths, hankering after easy money, name and fame. Apparently, he succeeds and climbs to the helm of material success and fame to the extent that even Biraju's son – Manohar and Sohan – start considering him their ideal, and their own father a dismal failure. Saraju, however, loses his grounds as politics changes its tide and he is forsaken of all earnings, both of property and of fame that he had accumulated. Though age has its pounding blow on both, Saraju ends up being an unhappy invalid and unsung individual, while Biraju lives as a happy god-fearing, spiritually healthy, socially respected and content being.

The novel, thus, dramatizes intersections of worldviews and motivations, and implicitly appeals for a life of integrity, simplicity and faith. Life is, after all, a journey and one can never predict what destiny has in its domain for an individual for the days to come. Those who transcend the quicksand of easy name, wealth and property leave the world peacefully. Others, who hanker after easy money and overnight fame, often end up as destitute and vanquished.

There are a few striking things that make this work stand out amidst a volley of narratives stuffing the market each year. The work comes from a writer stationed in Birgunj, having business legacies. Ordinarily, a business personnel is tagged with numbers: cash, indices profit, loss and bonus. Stereotyped as a creatively barren enterprise, business is not usually

where writers evolve from. Ganesh Lath, who shocks the readers from that praxis, brings equations, secrecies and subtle realities of the business community, including their joys and sorrows in his fine, heart-gripping narrative. This is something fresh for readers. Secondly, Birgunj has not launched many writers in the mainstream Nepali or world literature for that matter. Birgunj's tales, dotted with its own crests, troughs and worldviews is a microcosm at its own accord, which has not been comprehensively narrativized so far. *Anuradha Bhavan* fills this gap so brilliantly and invites us to a domain, setting and world view that we seldom encounter in other narratives.

One of the most brilliant aspects of the fiction is its focus on the minor characters. We, who are members of the literary fraternity have been indoctrinated to locate heroism and humanism in large-size characters, usually from dominant roles and backgrounds—Aristotelian hangover, let's say. But here, as Chekhov and Arthur Miller did long ago, Ganesh Lath lends the most humanistic and heroic qualities on minor, usually neglected subalterns, like Anuradha, the widowed mother of Biraju and Hossieni, a cart-puller. Hossieni, the cart puller, is one who delivers the most humanist lesson in the entire novel. His influence upon Biraju, who is groomed to be a philanthropist, spiritually upright and morally correct individual, bears a lot from the cart-puller's life-view. The cart-puller at one point says to Biraju, "When a big man like you visits a poor man like me and takes a cup of tea, when great people like you accept and eat EID- sewai from the hands of people like me, I shall that day consider that the nation is moving in the path of progress" (170).

Another pole of such high-order humanism is Anuradha herself. She is married so early, say as a child, and is left bereft at the prime time of her life, having no support to take care of her two sons: Biraju and Saraju. Yet, she does it so well, like the captain of a ship in wreck, delivering it successfully to the quay. Biraju borrows so much from her, and reflects her practically teaching in everything he says or does. Saraju, who briefly strays away from her teachings, allured by materialistic and hedonistic air blowing around, finally recognizes his mother's great teachings, although the realization comes at the end of his life. His end, however, does not betray the highness of his mother's high integrity and indomitable faith in good conduct.

Another of such silent but faithful character is Saraswati, Biraju's wife, who more or less shares the same background as her mother-in-law did, and stood similar test of time with the same degree of stoicism and similar sacrificial preparedness. What Biraju says about his wife affirms these observations. He says:

'Ever since I ushered her as my wife, she has not been in any sort of comfort. Since the day of her entry, she has been crushed by work, one after another, in a row. Before she could herself avail the joy of being the mother of her own child, she had to bear a

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mother's responsibility towards her husband's sisters and brother with a smile. She stayed in whatever way she was kept at home; she did not bear any grudge against anyone. I have not been able to give her a new cloth save a cotton loin every year. Yet, she never made a mockery of my poverty. It was my sole decision to leave home and to go Mujaffarpur. She meekly followed, and stepped onto the rickshaw, dropping her head and clasping our baby underneath her armpit. When he had to manage a kitchen and living room in a closet of 100 square meters, she never stretched her hand to her mother's family for help. O God, how ruthless I was those days!' he thought. (188)

With its gripping narration, non-linear chronology and involvement of the protagonist's alter ego as a character, the novel leaves a lasting impression on the readers. They find themselves throughout the novel in one form or another and the dynamism of life, depicted through the characterization of Biraju and Saraju, serves the idea of choices and alternatives, clearly suggesting the outcomes of those choices.

A critical reader might also note a few other study avenues opened by the book. India-Nepali business and familial link finds a voice in a new dimension here. It shows many youths, seeing their fortune in business, look forward to India to teach them the nuances of successful business and lay a foundation to their own enterprise. Readers, who are interested in politics, spirituality and materialism find enough food for thought. Those interested in structuralist readings and experimentations find the presence of Biraju's alter-ego, his soul, as the narrator of the novel something interesting as well as intriguing. Much, more to explore!

I consider *Anuradha Bhavan* a must-read work for those peeking into the inner realities of life and trying to define it in terms of the most viable parameters and variables.

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