

Voice of Protest in Nepali Poetry by Women

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Abstract

This article explores feminist voice in selected poems of four Nepali female poets. They are: "Ma Eutā Chyātieko Poshtar" ["I, a Frayed Poster"] by Banira Giri, "Pothī Bāsnu Hudaina" ["A Hen Must not Crow"] by Kunta Sharma, "Ma Strī Arthāt Āimai" ["I am a Female or a Woman"] by Seema Aavas and "Tuhāu Tyo Garvalai" ["Abort the Female Foetus"] by Pranika Koyu. In the selected poems they protest patriarchy and subvert patriarchal norms and values that trivialize women. The tone of their poems is sarcastic towards male chauvinism that treats women as a second-class citizen. The poets question and ridicule the restrictive feminine gender roles that limit women's opportunity. To examine the voice of protest against patriarchy in the selected poems, the article takes theoretical support from French feminism, though not limited to it. The finding of the article suggests that Nepali women have used the genre to the political end, as a medium to advocate women's rights.

Keywords: Patriarchy, feminism, feminine, male chauvinism, and gender roles.

Background

In the history of Nepali feminism, poetry is the first mode of expression used to protest patriarchy and subvert the norms and values that discriminate women. The first unified protest against patriarchy was launched in the 1940s, during the Rana Regime by Yogmaya and her followers. A social reformer and activist, Yogamaya has been acknowledged as one of the precursors of feminism in Nepal. She protested the prevailing gender discrimination, caste discrimination and corruption in the contemporary Nepali society. Aziz (2001), a feminist anthropologist has introduced her as a poet, teacher and insurgent, who "advocated social reforms for equality for women" (p. xxvi). Yogamaya would compose verses with political messages and recite them to raise consciousness among the mass about male chauvinism. As she would recite: "I am the child in your lap./ You are the babe in mine;/ there is nothing between us, nothing at all./ Your eyes have tears, just like my own" (translated by and quoted in Aziz, 2001, p.

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33). She insisted that all human beings, both males and females are equal for they share the same emotions and feelings. Thus, they should have equal rights. As a mode of expression, poetry helped her raise consciousness among the mass and then protest the perpetrators.

In the then closed society, where women could not raise their voice against child marriage, polygamy and sexual violence against women and claim women's reproductive rights her method was effective. Aziz (2001) compares her activities with the Western feminists' activities in the 1970s:

Yogamaya's anti- Brahmin campaign is more comprehensible if we compare it to the call of contemporary Western feminists for consciousness raising . . . The 1990s feminist's women taught that exploitation was not the action of single men, but derived from a system in which women and men were embedded. (p. 50)

Yogamaya reasoned that the political, social and cultural systems of the contemporary society should be changed for the creation of just and discrimination free state.

Demanding the establishment of *Dharmarāja* (a just state) she dispatched appeal for justice to the then ruler of Nepal Juddha Shmsher Rana (1929- 1932).

Ever since Yogmaya, other Nepali feminist writers, too, have been using poetry as a medium of expressing their frustration and anger against patriarchy. Poetry as a literary genre has become a powerful means for the Nepali women to explore their experiences as well as a medium to question and correct societal ills. They use images and symbols that are subversive to patriarchal norms and values. Poets like Parijat, Banira Giri, Kunta Sharma, Sarita Tiwari, Seema Aavas, Pranika Koyu and others have written poems that contain political messages. They are sarcastic towards the system that defines women as the 'second sex' or the objects for men's pleasure. For these poets, poetry is not a mere medium, a literary genre to explore emotions and feelings but an endeavor to engage oneself in exploring various sorts of dominations directed towards women. So I have chosen four poems composed by the four different poets to analyze the voice of protest against patriarchy in their poems. The poems are: "Ma Eutā Chyātieko Poshtar" ["I, a Frayed Poster "] by Banira Giri, "Pothī Bāsnu Hudaina" ["A Hen must not Crow"] by Kunta Sharma, "Ma Strī Arthāt Āimai" ["I am a Female or a Woman"] by Seema Aavas and "Tuhāu Tyo Garvalai" ["Abort the Foetus"] by Pranika Koyu. In the process of analysis, the article seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. How do the selected poems subvert patriarchy?
2. Why do the poetic personas of the selected poems protest patriarchy?

The article aims to examine the voice of protest against patriarchy in the selected poems from these different poets. It argues that these poets use parody and satire to subvert bias patriarchal norms and values.

Methodology

The qualitative mode of research has been adopted to analyze the selected poems that form the primary source of information for the study. Among the four poems I use the English version of Giri's "I, a Frayed Poster" and Koyu (2017)'s "Abort the Female Foetus" whereas other two poems are available only in Nepali version. So, I use my own translation, based on free translation of the extracts taken from them. The relevant extracts from the poems are analyzed and interpreted from the French feminists' perspectives. It primarily takes insights from Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva. The common ground between them, as suggested by Jones (1981) is:

All analysis of western culture as fundamentally oppressive, as phallogocentric. Symbolic discourse (language in various context) is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else- including women. (p. 87)

They believe that language in general is patriarchal; it is phallogocentric that prefers phallos and treats male and masculinity as superior to female and feminine. Thus, they demand that women should resist patriarchal discourse.

Kristeva (1988) purposes the use of pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal language, which she terms as 'semiotic' in place of the 'symbolic', the father controlled language. She has defined 'semiotic' in relation to the child's language, which s/he speaks in her pre-oedipal phase. She insists that the 'semiotic' language is associated with the female body whereas the 'symbolic', which the child learns as s/he grows, is associated with the 'law of the Father'. (p. 239). The 'symbolic' censors and represses the 'semiotic' for it is threatening to patriarchy. Thus, she suggests that women should adopt 'semiotic' mode of language to protest patriarchy.

Similarly, Cixous (1997) argues that women's place in the history of Western thought, which is phallogocentric, has been at the negative pole of binary oppositions like father/mother, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, activity/ passivity and so on. These binary oppositions, she posits, have structured that history. She explains that all of the couple "come back" to the couple "man/woman," and also relate to another couple like philosophy/literature. All these pairs show the feminine side negative and powerless (pp. 287-88). She claims that women must reject this mode of thinking; and they can reject patriarchal thought by writing themselves. She adds if women are to write themselves they have to create feminine discourse. She connects feminine language with female sexuality, which transgresses the masculine logic. Both Cixous (1997) and Kristeva (1988) have identified women's writing as a mode of resistance against patriarchy.

To examine women's protest against patriarchy as manifested in the selected poems I draw insights from the logic of these feminists. However, in the process of justifying my claim I draw from other feminists as well.

Review of Literature

Reviews on Nepali literature by women are very scanty. Like other patriarchal countries, in Nepal also women literature is on the margin. Most of the critics of Nepali literature are males and they dismiss women literary creations as feminists' grudges. Manjushree Thapa, a writer and critic, deplors the near-invisibility of women in Nepal's thoroughly men-centric literary world. Dr. Archana Thapa, who has been running the publishing house Akshar Creation to support writers from the margin, especially women, mentions that women writings have been undervalued by the male readers/ critics who believe that women's writings consist women's grudges, frustration and complaints. They use a derogatory term "nārībādīruilo" ["feminist grudges"] to refer to women's writings and dismiss the worth of women's experiences (quoted in Mishra (2020), Para 4). For instance, the anthology, *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest* includes 308 modern Nepali poems of 135 poets, out of which the number of female poets is 16. It also supports the marginal position of Nepali female poets.

Evaluating the poetry of Banira Giri, the editor of the aforementioned anthology, Momila (2011), a Nepali poet and critic claims that she writes "advocating for women's esteem and human values" (p. 155). Likewise, she observes that Kunta Sharma raises a feministic voice in Nepali verses, projecting her stiff polemics against the male-dominated social set-up (p. 159). Walsh (2019), a researcher points out that Nepali woman poets mostly "write of domestic oppression, the pressure to marry, and a society that devalues them at almost every stage of their lives" (p. 7). He has analyzed the motives of protest in Nepali poetry by women. He, too, complains that "There has been little scholarly interest specifically in Nepali protest poetry, and even less academic research into poetry by Nepali women" (p. 8). According to him, Banira Giri though "largely dismissed and undervalued by a country that was not wholly appreciative of women who engaged in independent expression (p. 43) exposes the ways in which Nepali women are pressured into subservient roles from birth.

Analyzing the poetry of South Asian women, Manjushree (2014) posits that they "have been considering poetry as a subtle site to showcase the insensitivity and indifference of dominant power politics in assigning passive roles for women" (p. 213). She identifies Giri as an "authentic voices from Nepal" and claims that Giri's poem "'Woman' examines different and extreme attitudes of men towards a woman ranging from the most revered one to the most stereotypical." She adds that the poem "mirrors multiple moods of men towards women in any society where woman is worshipped or

commodified, glorified or dismissed as inactive participants of hegemonic power" (p. 214). Indeed, Giri is critical towards the patriarchal mindset that objectifies and demeans women.

Critics and Reviewers on Nepali poetry, in the list of representative Nepali poets have provided space to Banira Giri as one of the representative Nepali poets among the four poets. The other three receive less attention from the critics. Though critics briefly mention the individual poet and hint the feminist message in their poetry they limit from making detailed analysis of their poems. This article aims to fill this research gap by analyzing the four poems of these poets. Giri and Sharma belong to the first generation of woman poets from Nepal whereas Aavas and Koyu, as emerging woman poets from Nepal, represent the third/present generation. In this regard, the article will be beneficial to the researchers who want to trace the trend and tradition of Nepali poetry by women.

Voice of Protest in the Selected Poems

Written in the tradition of protest poems, in the selected poems the poets raise their voice against gender discrimination practiced in a patriarchal society like Nepal. Aestheticism and activism go together in their poems. Pointing to the need of activism for women, Sarita Tiwari, a Nepali poet and activist suggests that each and every woman who wants freedom and emancipation should actively engage in politics. Without being a feminist, she reasons, a female cannot liberate herself from the shackles of patriarchy (para 17). Koyu (2019) agrees that unlike patriarchy, feminism believes on equality and it is empathetic towards others. She shares that she deliberately uses feminism in her poems. As she reasons:

I did consciously start writing from a feminist lens from 2002. I feel like if anyone is concerned with injustice and autocracy of the state and wants to raise the voice against it, then, feminism is the lens that helps you probe further inside it because unlike patriarchy feminism does not worship power, it teaches you empathy which is an important aspect of any rights activist. And most importantly, one does not have to be apologetic to choose the lens befitting their philosophy to analyze their society, and to write and talk. (para 5)

The feminist voice emanates from her conscious effort. She is intolerant towards the state's indifference towards the injustice heaped upon women in the Nepali society. Being intolerant towards the state's inactions towards the miseries of women in Nepali society, she expresses her anger and frustration towards the patriarchal Nepali society. The tone of rage and hatred against the stakeholders, who are mostly the men, manifest in her poem "Abort that Foetus." Koyu (2017) being angry towards the miserable condition of Nepali women suggests them not to marry. She argues even if they marry they should not become mothers:

All the stories about girls that I now read in the papers/ all I learn of their calamities and misfortunes-/ When I deserve the dispiritedness of the state, / the cowardice of those who are related/ the commerce of those who are unrelated, / with great sorrow I affirms/ my vow never become a mother. (p. 141)

Like in other patriarchal societies, women in Nepali society are defined as the second class citizen and are denied their human rights. A woman's body is reduced to an object for men's pleasure. Women and even minor girls are routinely raped and murdered but the perpetrators are rarely punished. The daily newspapers of the nation make the headline news about girls being raped and murdered. But the government fails to punish them. It seems that girls are fated to be raped and murdered. The persona cannot stand this. So being helpless she affirms her vow not to be a mother.

Though the poetic persona reaffirms her vow not to be a mother one needs not interpret the meaning of the poem on the surface level. The tone of the poem is anger and frustration. She is frustrated by the stakeholders' apathy towards women plight in the nation. She critiques the inaction of the government that promotes impunity in the nation. But the rulers of the nation turn their blind eyes to the victimization of women in the hands of men. Being helpless she suggests women to abort the female foetus. Likewise, she challenges patriarchy that denies women's right to their body. If women are to be raped, tortured and murdered on the daily basis why deliver a baby girl, she questions. Her question transgresses the masculine logic based on hierarchy which prefers values associated to males and masculinity and despises those associated to females and feminine. Cixous (1997) suggests that women should transgress the male's logic (p. 287). Koyu (2017), too, transgresses the logic that insists that women must not make sex selective abortion. As she commands women to abort the female foetus: "Marry if you wish, do not have children/ if you give birth check the foetus-/ is it a daughter or a son? /and if it should be a daughter, then kill it/ abort your daughter's foetus" (p. 141). She is straightforward and suggests that women should abort their daughters' foetus.

The persona of the poem is sarcastic towards the belief that reveres motherhood but kills the female foetus. Though sex selective abortion is outlawed, it has been widely practised in Nepal. The corrupted, greedy people who trade women's body are involved in it. The speaker's disobedience to the law approves the disobedience of the 'Law of the Father' by the 'semiotic' found in Kristeva's theory (p. 239). The speaker's assertion subverts the double standards of Hindu Nepali society. On the one hand motherhood is highly valued and daughters are worshipped as the Goddess Laxmi, but on the other hand the mother is not allowed to deliver the baby girls. Similarly, girls are raped and murdered. She crudely exposes the bitter reality of patriarchal Nepali society.

Likewise, Sharma (2011) parodies and makes fun of the patriarchal mindset that silences women's voice and deprives them from knowledge and power in her poem "Pothī Bāsnu Hudaina" ["A Hen Must not Crow"]. In the Nepali society the proverb 'pothī bāsnu hudaina' [a hen must not crow] is commonly used to discourage women from being vocal and assertive. Being assertive is a masculine activity and it does not suit to a woman. Being bold, assertive and commanding women invite misfortune on them. Superstitious people believe that if a hen crows it is a sign of bad omen. Thus, it should be beheaded. It is against nature for it is the rooster's business to crow confidently. In the Nepali society, to mute the vocal and assertive women, they say 'pothī bāsnu hudaina.' If she does, she will meet the corporal punishment which may lead her to death.

Sharma (2011) is sarcastic to the culture that demands women to be silent and submissive and limits them to the feminine roles. Mukherjee (1978) summarizes the expectations of Hindu women as to be "prepared for domestic life, to be patient, obedient, and submissive to their husbands." (p. 145). Sharma (2011) subverts the patriarchal tendency to limit women to the aspects of reproduction like delivering the babies and nurturing and caring them. But she does not protest directly as the poetic persona approves:

It is the rooster's job to crow/ All the time raising its neck, on the top of the roof,
in the front yard, in the veranda, on the compound wall/ it is the rooster's nature
to raise the voice/Only the hen has to cackle/ Is forced to swallow anguish /Lay
eggs and sit on them/Hatch the chicks and with care/Raise the fledglings. /
Should not burst into laughter /If a hen crows, behead her! (0:16-0:48)

Women should ascertain the secondary and subservient roles assigned to her. If they resist playing the roles and aim to cross the boundary drawn to them they will suffer hostility. "When considering the risks involved for a Nepali woman to put her head above the parapet, it is hardly surprising that many may seem, on the surface, accepting of their role of subservience. The alternative can be far more dangerous" (Walsh, 2019, p. 112). The proverb 'a hen must not crow' then is a reminder to women to act feminine. And the poetic persona also approves that 'a hen must not crow.'

Women in patriarchy need to affirm feminine gender though they are disadvantageous and demeaning to them. According to Butler (1999) one demonstrates his/ her gender depends not on the personal choices of the individual rather one performs gender roles "within cultural situations or as a response to a set of norms." Individuals' "agency is constrained by culture and what I can do is, to a certain extent, conditioned by what is available for me to do within the culture and by what other practices are and by what practices are legitimizing" (p. 345). In Nepali society,

especially in orthodox Hindu community women should demonstrate shyness and remain silent and submissive. If they protest and demand, they will be punished.

Though Sharma's poetic persona seems to confirm the patriarchal expectation from women, as she agrees that 'a hen must not crow, she should only cackle and hatch the eggs,' the tone of the poem is sarcastic. She uses parody and ridicules the culture that compares women with the female animals and limits her to nurturing, caring and doing the domestic chores. The message of the poem is overtly political. The speaker denies playing the subservient role and asserts her agency as the subject. She claims that she is a rational and conscious being like the men and she wants to break through the darkness to knowledge.

Aavas (2016) in her poem "Ma Strī Arthāta Āimāi" ["I am a Female or a Woman"] also subverts the traditional notion of femininity attached to women. She rejects the treatment of women as 'second class citizen.' From the traditional perspective, a daughter is seen as a burden for her parents. She is taken as other's property. So, people in general, despise having baby girls. They despise women's body as it is no use for the parents. Women are demeaned as *aimāi* who is destined to serve others. But the speaker of the poem, sees her woman body not as her weakness, but as strength. She accepts her identity as *aimāi* positively to refer to woman as a creator, the most superior human being. She approves her identity as *aimāi* in her interview with Bhattarai (2017, para 4). It is used to refer to the middle aged women and celebrate womanhood. It is a satire to men who prefer young women.

Breaking the taboo attached to women's body Aavas's speaker speaks the unspeakable. She appreciates the cyclic nature of female body and feels jubilant when she menstruates: "I smiled touching the ground woken by the wave/ smiling like a full moon in the pond" (p. 11). It defies the orthodox Hindu norm that treats menstruating blood as dirt and isolates menstruating women so that the house remains pure. She also subverts the culture that discourages women from talking about their bodies. In her subversion of patriarchal norms associated to female body she aligns to Cixous (1976), who critiques patriarchy for this: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. . . . They have made for women an ant narcissism" (p. 878). Women in patriarchy feel inadequate for they have internalized the belief that female body is worthless. But the poetic persona discusses her womb, the ovary, the vagina and the breasts as parts of the reproduction process. She claims that because of these organs the human creation is possible. Her admirations of the private parts of women breaks the taboo attached to them.

Aavas feminist stance reveals in her understanding of women's suffering in patriarchy and her protest against it. The speaker warns patriarchy not to kill the female foetus looking between her legs:

Just let me step on the ground. /From my cleavage another world may be born /
let me walk across the darkness to see the light. / From the corner of this very
world walking on my own foot/ May come another young age. (p. 43)

She condemns the use of technology that people use to detect the sex of the foetus and abort the female foetuses. She claims that if females are allowed to be born and gain knowledge they will create their own world destroying the age-old patriarchy.

Giri (2011), too, protests patriarchy in her "I, a Frayed Poster." The image of a torn poster is used in the poem to show the omission and misrepresentation of women in the myths. Men construct the myth to create and circulate feminine stereotypes that annihilate women's existence. Some Hindu and Kirat myths treat women as the shadows of men who have no existence beyond their husbands:

Man, do not vary the meanings you give/ to pieces of splintered sentences, /I
have forgotten my story.

Beside the fireplace in the dead of winter, / an old man tells the children a tale:
Parohang and Lempuhang descend/ and from the old man's eyes it seems/ he is
the Shiva of some era, who has lost/ the goddess Sati in Dacha's sacrifice
He tells the story of Lal and Hira; he chases Lal away on the white horse/of
centuries ago, / hose hooves still issue/ their orders to the ears of Time./ How
helpless, those men, we men, that old man telling stories. (p. 156)

Through the extracts she denounces the myths that are created by men, narrated by men for men. She is sarcastic that men are so helpless that they have to create a false image of women to support their domination on women.

Through these myths men repeat the same story of women for generations. Giri compares the men's tendency of repeating the same story about women with a poster that has been torn because of men writings over it repeatedly. As the generations of men write over the same poster it has been torn and the message of the posture is illegible. The image of torn poster is used to show the history of women that have been obscured as men repeat the same myth about women for generations. Listening to these myths created by men women are so confused that they have already forgotten their identity. Through these myths women are made to believe about their submissive and subservient roles. The speaker suggests the notion of femininity is "a cultural construct" (Moi, 2000, p. 144) created by men to dominate women. Simone de Beauvoir claims that "one is not born, but becomes one" (quoted in Moi, 2000, p. 209). So the persona, also accepts her secondary position to men like the Sati and Parohang and Hira in the myths.

The metaphor of a frayed poster in the title of the poem stands for women in patriarchy who have been wrongly portrayed in the myth created by and circulated by men. The false images of women perpetuated by these myths have obscured the real

image of women. So she challenges the patriarchal identity attached to women. The speaker asserts: "I am a torn poster on the wall of Time, / Man, do not vary the meanings you give/ to pieces of splintered sentences: / I have forgotten my story" (Giri, 2011, p. 157). Because of performing and acting the role given by men, women are used to with it. Indeed, they have forgotten to live the real life like that of human. She sarcastically asks men not to change the 'meaning you give me.' But indirectly she protests the stereotype femininity created and perpetuated by men to maintain their power and status quo.

Giri's satire to patriarchal myths shows her feminist stand. Kristeva questions, "What can 'identity,' even 'sexual identity,' mean in anew theoretical and scientific space where the very notion of identity is challenged" (quoted in Moi, 2000, p. 214)? Feminists believe that myths are written by men for men to sustain men's domination on women. Since women were not in writing occupations they were wrongly portrayed. Thus, to protest the omission and repression of women, Cixous (1976) calls women to writings:

We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty. . . . Women must write through their bodies, they must invent impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes. (p. 886)

Cixous (1976) suggests women to break the law, subvert the logic of 'truth' and write their own history. She posits the need of women's writing, "women should break out of the snare of silence" (p. 888). These women poets also through their writing subvert the patriarchal norms and values that silence them. They challenge the rhetoric of phallogocentrism.

Conclusion

The analysis makes it explicit that these poets use images and symbols to subvert patriarchal norms and values. The poetic personas of the poems question and ridicule feminine stereotypes attached to women. The poets use parody and humor to expose the double standards that exist in patriarchy and question the subservient and dependent roles assigned to women. They disclose the inherent biasness that exists in the patriarchal mindset. The poetic persona of Sharma's poem makes fun of male chauvinism that compares women to the hen. Koyu's speaker is also furious to patriarchal hostility towards women. She disobeys the law and orders women to 'abort that foetus', if women have to suffer throughout their life. Aavas, too, challenges the taboo attached to female body. She rejects traditional femininity assigned to women. Similarly, Giri is sarcastic to the secondary position assigned to women. The condition of men is so vulnerable that they create myths about women and circulate them to

sustain the status quo. The personas of the selected poems ridicule and object the tradition that treat women as objects for men's needs and pleasure. They protest patriarchy for it is hostile to women. The tone of these poems is protest and the poets impart feminist message through them.

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