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## Paradox of Women in Development: INGOs and Women's (Dis)empowerment in Singh's *samānāntar ākaś*

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### Abstract

This article examines empowering as well as disempowering impacts of INGOs on the middle-class women working for them by analyzing Padmavati Singh's novel *samānāntar ākaś* [*The Parallel Sky*]. Following her divorce, Susmita—a middle class educated woman from Kathmandu—works for an INGO dedicated to women empowerment. Despite her engagement with the working-class women from villages, Susmita eventually focuses on her individual liberty and empowerment, thereby ignoring opportunities to fight for women in general and resorting to middle class privileges like devoting herself to religious cult figures like Sai Baba and a dream of getting reunited with her US based boyfriend. Under a broad theoretical framework of modernity, this qualitative article derives insights on modernity from Frederic Jameson, middle-class modernity from Mark Liechty, relation between development and modernity in the context of Nepal from Stacey Pigg, relation between INGOs and the Nepali women from Siera Tamang, and relation between the structural dividend and the structural insensitivity from Sanjeev Uprety. Whereas the INGO helps the middle-class Nepali women retain their middle-class privileges, it limits their agency by orienting them to the income generating activities of the target women rather than changing the existing social structure. Moreover, these women's middle-class privileges equally play a vital role in getting them depoliticized. This article expects to shed light on the Nepali women's experience with modernity in terms of their association with the burgeoning INGOs across Nepal.

**Keywords:** Identity, I/NGOs, modernity, patriarchy, rights, women

### Unraveling the Paradox of Women in Development in *samānāntar ākaś*

Through a close reading of Padmavati Singh's novel *samānāntar ākaś*, this article examines relation between International Non-Governmental Organization (INGO) and women's empowerment.

Women associated with INGOs are supposed to be fighting for justice for women. However, in *samānāntar ākaś*, Susmita, the protagonist—an INGO worker—limits her efforts to women's empowerment to her professional responsibilities only. Therefore, the article seeks to answer why women like Susmita, despite their long association with INGO projects focused on women's empowerment, fail to imbibe activism for women's empowerment beyond their professional responsibilities. Though a few eminent Nepali scholars like Govinda Raj Bhattarai, Gyanu Pandey, and Netra Atom have touched upon the issues of women's empowerment in this novel, they have not examined relation between women working for the INGO and women's empowerment. Addressing this research gap, the article claims that the middle-class women have failed to imbibe the much expected life-long commitment to women's empowerment and justice because of the INGO's transformation of such women into cogs into the machine called development and their own structural insensitivities embedded in their structural dividends.

The concept of 'non-governmental organization' was conceived in Article 71 of the Charter of the United Nations in 1945. World Bank defines the NGOs as "groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of government and that have primarily humanitarian or cooperative rather than commercial objectives" (Corten 21). "Many of today's INGOs," as per Tina Wallace, "emerged as part of the 'alternative development' challenge to modernisation" (35). Under the influence of writings by thinkers like Paulo Freire and Franz Fanon, "some INGOs," as per Wallace, "built their visions on this need to challenge power and empower the most vulnerable" (35). However, Arjun Appadurai relates the emergence of INGOs to a change in the nature of governance in the recent decades. Appadurai reflects:

I assume that we are witnessing a notable transformation in the nature of global governance in the explosive growth of nongovernmental organizations of all scales and varieties in the period since 1945 . . . . There is some reason to worry about whether the current framework of human rights is serving mainly as the legal and normative conscience—or the legal-bureaucratic lubricant—of a neoliberal, marketized political order. . . . (25)

Appadurai's anxiety about the emergence of INGOs as 'the legal-bureaucratic lubricant' of the neoliberalist political system seems to have turned into reality with an entry of discourses of development into INGOs, which eventually became big industries that connected the Global North to the Global South. In the context of the media questioning legitimacy and public trust in INGOs, Michael Davis et al. examine the public trust in INGOs in Canada. They observe, "Perceptions of trust are particularly critical for INGOs based in the global North that operate development and humanitarian projects in the global South . . ." (809). Amidst such environment of mis(trust), one of the development areas covered by these INGOs is empowerment of women in the Global South.

Regarding the link between gender equality and women NGOs, Ruth Phillips claims, "The majority of the feminist development practice takes place in women's NGOs, key players in the struggle to gain gender equality across the world" (1125). However, scholars have noticed that NGOs, in relation to women's empowerment, have shifted their attention to development, thereby abandoning social justice. Rosalind Eyben and Rebecca Napier-Moore chime in with Phillips in these words: "International NGOs, once seen as a vanguard for social justice, are today being accused of converging their agendas with the official development community" (286). They are critical about growing individualism and development-oriented discourses associated with empowerment. They claim that the women's empowerment in the 1990s was "a matter of justice rather than something necessary for development" (286). This shift from social justice to development has been critiqued by other scholars as well. Nancy Fraser critiques feminism's embrace of neoliberalism "that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality" (para. 8). She thinks that "the movement for women's liberation has become entangled in a dangerous liaison with neoliberal efforts to build a free-market society" (para. 2). In its turn, neoliberalism "harnesses the dream of women's emancipation to the engine of capital accumulation" (para. 7).

Likewise, critiquing INGOs' trend of using women as an instrument of development, Nandita Dogra claims, "Such messages project a neoliberal logic of good economic sense where the woman is shown as an instrument of development" (339). However, such functionalist approaches to women's

issues “do not serve women’s long-term well-being, and often even contradict it, for example providing short-term employment programmes for women to negate the effects of male unemployment . . .” (339). Deriving ideas from Mary John, Dogra claims that the instrumentalisation of women for development “leads to specific developmental interventions such as self-help micro-credit groups, and both individual and group-level investments in women by INGOs . . . that nurture ‘a depoliticised collective action that is completely non-threatening to the power structure and political action’” (339-40). In this manner, this nexus between women empowerment and development oriented INGOs has undermined the very cause of feminism.

In the context of Nepal, Shobha Gautam et al. claim that women’s presence among the rebels in Gorkha witnessed a rise due to the adult women’s literacy programs run by an American INGO. They assert, “Literacy campaigns . . . designed to promote the empowerment of women inadvertently encouraged many conscientised young women to choose subsequent empowerment through armed struggle” (121). However, scholars have noticed limitations of INGOs in Nepal. Discussing the ideas of Siera Tamang and Bimal Phnuyal, Coralynn Davis points out the limits of these INGOs: “Even so, they have functioned in part to consolidate class-based interests . . . and limit agendas to the level of reform, as opposed to more radical transformation or liberation . . .” (207). Not only do INGOs serve the interests of middle class but they also do not really empower the target communities for radical transformation. Indeed, one, in connection to the empowerment of women, can notice representation of such limitations of INGOs in *samānāntar ākaś*.

However, critics of *samānāntar ākaś* have ignored these aspects of the novel. Govinda Raj Bhattarai appreciates the novelist’s ability to captivate the reader’s attention through the portrayal of life-like characters. He observes that the novel “moves a whole society ahead; that is so positive, that empowers, emboldens and enlightens the characters and ultimately the real people . . . She moves the reader through the vibrant personality of Susmita” (n.p.). Bhattarai, however, does not look into roles played by the INGO and Susmita’s class privileges in shaping her character. On the other hand, Netra Atom points out the location of the woman’s right over her body in the novel. Atom asserts, “By portraying the dawning of awareness in a woman not because of education but only after getting victimized at the hands of a man, the woman establishes her right over her body in it [novel]. . .” (5). Atom misses significance of Susmita’s education that comes with her middle-class urban background. Whereas her background gives her awareness about her right and freedom, her victimization gives her an opportunity to practise her awareness. Meanwhile, Gyanu Pandey, analyzing Susmita’s decision to drive Abinash out of her life forever and restart her new life with her US-based lover, concludes that Susmita stands for the 21<sup>st</sup> century women: “In these details of the last incident of the novel, one can feel aloud her ideas that the women of the present time are not ready to lead their life without identity under the rule of the man by sacrificing all of their joy and right to choice following the so-called female ideals as directed by patriarchy, . . .” (130). Pandey demonstrates how the dramatic ending of the novel presents what the modern women are like and what they want. The modern women like Susmita care for equality, self-identity, right to choose and freedom from patriarchal ideologies. However, Pandey ignores the INGO and her class privileges that enable Susmita to achieve all these.

In such a context, the novelist’s biographical details, as presented by *My Republica* daily, may help one understand why Padmavati Singh may have created a character like Susmita. Born into a traditional Newar family in Kathmandu in 1948, Singh comes from a privileged family. *My Republica* sheds light on the privileged background of Singh: “She is a granddaughter of a Bada Kaji of the royal court, and her father was a minister in post-Rana governments. She bears her aristocratic lineage with panache” (para. 2). Singh admits, “I have no tale of personal suffering, only empathy for the pains of fellow beings” (para. 7). Singh was a development worker herself. Singh “took up writing due to a startling encounter in Gorkha Bazaar, a small township west of Nepal where she was a development worker. A young man was telling another at a teashop within her earshot: ‘*Aimai pani manchhe hun? Aimai ta pashusarah!*’ [Are women human beings? Women are like animals!]” (para. 3). Indeed, Singh uses this personal encounter in this novel as well. Such biographical details help one examine the construction of characters like Susmita and Sweetie from the novel. They also help one understand why Singh thinks that the INGO’s developmental works empower women. Indeed, existing readings

of the novel like those of Bhattarai, Atom and Pandey insinuate the same, thereby leaving a knowledge gap regarding disempowering impacts exerted by the NGO on the middle-class women. Going beyond such readings, the present study, therefore, examines empowering as well as disempowering impacts of the INGO on the middle-class women associated with it.

### Interrogating Institutional (Dis)empowerment of Women

Following the qualitative research design, this study gives a close reading to the selected novel and analyzes it in the light of the ideas on modernity, INGOs and development in relation to women. Padmavati Singh's *samānāntar ākāś* has been selected for this study as it allows one to examine the rise of feminism following the collapse of the Panchayati system in 1990. This novel helps one perceive modernity from women's eyes. Moreover, it helps one notice how INGOs, the information technology and multinational companies are reinforcing the global capitalism even in the country like Nepal. Since this novel was originally written in Nepali, I translated all the words, phrases and sentences used in this article into English on my own. Words, phrases and sentences from the novel, theoretical texts and existing literature on the novel form the data for this study.

This study relies on modernity as a general conceptual framework. Different inflections of modernity—modernity as development, modernity as global takeover of capitalism, modernity as shrinking of time and space with technology, and modernity as women's cosmopolitan experience—have supported the assumptions of the study. In order to relate modernity to capitalism, Frederic Jameson's idea of modernity as the globalization of capitalism has been used. According to Jameson, "the other fundamental meaning of modernity which is that of a worldwide capitalism itself" (12). Meanwhile, Stacey Pigg explains how modernity serves as a paradigm through which the Nepalese people experience the world. According to Pigg, "modernity, in this sense, is quite literally a worldview: a way of imagining both space and people through temporal idioms of progress and backwardness" (163). Emily McKendry-Smith chimes in with Pigg in these words: "Modernity also serves as an agenda for development projects, which introduce specific notions of modernity through their development agendas . . . . Through these development projects, modernity becomes an ideal to which Nepalis aspire, and the 'other' through which they define themselves" (701). However, Pigg does not deal with middle class modernity. Right here, Mark Liechty's idea of the Kathmandu's middle class modernity is pertinent. According to Liechty, "In Kathmandu the middle class are those people struggling to rescue a socially valid 'traditional' Nepali morality from its associations with the provincial vulgarity of the urban poor, while at the same time attempting to define a 'suitably' modern but-still-Nepali lifestyle of moral and material restraint distinct from what they view as corrupt elite lifestyles of foreignness and consumer excess" (62). Though these middle-class people live under a constant pressure to maintain a precarious balance between proper consumption of foreign goods and services and upholding the traditional Nepali lifestyle, Liechty does not treat the middle-class people from Kathmandu as victims of global capitalism. Instead, "Kathmandu's emerging middle class" as per Liechty, "is itself a response to, and active purveyor of, a now globalized capitalist market and commodity regime" (34). Liechty's idea helps one examine middle class characters like Susmita and Sweetie and their association with the INGO. However, Pigg, Liechty and Jameson do not focus on impacts of the INGO on the life of women, who are associated with such organizations. Therefore, Siera Tamang's ideas regarding the relation between development INGOs and the Nepali women associated with them have been used to analyze experience of modernity of female characters, who work for an INGO.

While in her article "The Politics of Developing Nepali Women," Siera Tamang agrees that the Nepali women's engagement with media, INGOs, Government Organizations, and NGOs since 1990 has really been fruitful, she points out a need to "situate the initiatives undertaken in the name of women within the historical context of nationalist imperatives sponsored by the Panchayati state and its legacies . . ." (161). Tamang claims that "the particular project of *bikas*-development- has compounded the structured inequalities relating to class and ethnicity . . ." (161). She critiques the way the Kathmandu-based upper caste women, as experts/ senior officers of I/NGOs, ignore the concerns of the indigenous women from outside Kathmandu. Not only has this development project

“erased the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences in Nepal” but it has “also enabled the co-option of women’s activism” (161). Though the present study does not focus on ethnicity of women, it draws on Tamang’s insights on the elite as well as middle class women from Kathmandu. Moreover, Tamang’s notion of development project’s co-option of women activism also echoes the INGO’s depoliticization of women in relation to their fight for justice. However, findings of this study show that ethnicity may not be as important as class and place are in terms of Kathmandu’s elite women’s treatment of the women from villages. Though Susmita belongs to an indigenous community, her treatment towards the village women is not different from that of her elite female counterparts from upper castes. She perceives herself as a savior of the village women.

Though Tamang has hinted at the structural inequalities along the lines of class, caste and region as reasons behind the gap between the upper caste elite women from Kathmandu and the indigenous women from outside the Kathmandu valley, she does not explain how such structural inequalities build insensitivities in the women who are entitled more privileges than their counterparts are. Sanjeev Uprety’s notion of the structural dividend, therefore, is significant in this regard. According to Uprety, the structural dividend is the privilege one is entitled because of her/his position in the society. Building on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’, Uprety argues, “We receive some dividends by birth, slowly we grow accustomed to them and these comforts created by these dividends sound like our ‘natural right’” (18). Therefore “the more structural dividends are available to one, the more structural insensitivities thrive in him all along” (9). According to Uprety, whereas structural violence demands an external world oriented critical perspective, the structural dividend demands “self-critical awareness or such perspective, which turns our lens inward and forces us to think: What position am I speaking from? . . . Whatever I identified as ‘hard work,’ how much contribution was there of structure?” (19). Though Susmita—as an INGO worker—imbibes a critical perspective to understand structural violence, she does not seem to be aware of her own structural dividends. Therefore, she is proud of her achievements as her individual efforts only. She presents herself as a self-made woman. She, therefore, develops structural insensitivities that eventually erode her will to fight for women going beyond her professional responsibilities.

In this manner, under the broad conceptual framework of modernity, Frederic Jameson’s idea on modernity, Liechty’s idea on middle class modernity, Pigg’s idea on relation between development and modernity in the context of Nepal, Tamang’s idea on relation between INGOs and the Nepali women, and Uprety’s idea on relation between the structural dividend and the structural insensitivity have been imbricated to form a theoretical framework for the study.

### **INGOs, Development and (Dis)empowerment Nepali Women in *samānāntar ākāś***

Nepal has never been colonized. However, Nepal has had its own share of experiences which are very close to colonization in terms of its relation with Britain in the last 200 years. As per Bal Bahadur Thapa, Nepal underwent a “‘liminal’ colonial experience” (215). In many erstwhile colonized countries, development has turned into another way for the erstwhile colonial powers to exert their power on their former colonies. However, in the case of Nepal, since the downfall of the Rana dynasty in 1950, as per Stacey Pigg, the “development — rather than the residue scars of imperialism — [has remained] the overt link between it and the West. *Bikas* is the term through which Nepalis understand their relationship to other parts of the world” (497). *Bikās* thus becomes “the idiom through which the relationship between local communities and other places is expressed” (499). However, one cannot miss a connection between development and capitalism. Regarding this, Arif Dirlik makes the following observation: “The globalization of capitalism has given additional force to the ideology of development, or developmentalism, which forces all societies under the threat of extinction to acquire the technologies of knowledge that contribute to this end” (Dirlik 36). Regardless of connection between capitalism and developmentalism, the countries like Nepal have cashed on these international development projects by linking them to their national development projects.

In this way, there were several INGOs working for women’s rights earlier, too. However, with the state’s subscription to neoliberal policies following the restoration of democracy in 1990, it

became much easier for the transnational institutions to conduct and expand their programmes related to gender identity. Masako Tanaka echoes the same: “Following the restoration of a multiparty democracy in Nepal in 1990, NGOs received recognition as partners in development” (500). They, according to Blaikie et al., contribute to the formation of the middle class by absorbing the educated people of Nepal, thereby hindering the formation of the community that can raise its voice for change. This money pouring from outside is encouraging the middle-class modernity since it “encouraged a massive expansion of the state bureaucracy which served the essential political function of absorbing large number of school leavers and graduates, thereby reducing levels of discontent in a significant section of the ‘middle classes’” (309). Even in the case of *samānāntar ākaś*, the middle-class people like Susmita, Pravat and Sweety have managed to retain privileges of the middle class because of INGO jobs. In return, these middle-class natives, as illustrated below, become the agents of the neoliberal ideas disseminated by their INGO.

In the novel, one can analyze the role of INGOs in terms of identity politics since “[t]he experience of modernity in Nepal is mediated by various axes of social difference such as gender, caste and ethnicity. Claiming a modern identity is associated with the ability to participate in Nepal’s development initiatives, which have historically failed to fully include women, ethnic minorities and low-caste Nepalis” (Thompson-Grossman 4). According to Barbara Thomson-Grossman, “concepts such as modernity, development and the public sphere have been historically gendered as masculine” (Grossman-Thompson 61-62). In such a context, *samānāntar ākaś*’s portrayal of female characters sounds quite refreshing. The novel depicts how the INGO becomes a platform for an upper middle class educated urban woman to gain her freedom and establish her identity. Moreover, the INGO becomes an agent of change for the women of the male dominated villages of Nepal. The village women like Krishnamaya gain their freedom from their husbands through economic freedom and the ideas disseminated by the INGO. Furthermore, the INGO offers the village women a political platform through women empowerment programmes. Owing to the intervention of the INGO, the women from villages take part in politics and become even the Chairperson of the Village Development Committee.

Likewise, one can also observe the INGO as one of the vehicles of global interaction, which takes place in the cosmopolitan hubs like Kathmandu. Anthony Giddens’ observation sounds relevant here: “Modern organisations are able to connect the local and the global in ways which would have been unthinkable in more traditional societies and in so doing routinely affect the lives of many millions of people” (20). In the novel, the INGO, as an agent of modernity, has connected local villagers to the global concerns and the agents of such concerns. The INGO also connects villagers to cosmopolitan Nepalis. Drawing on Heaton Shrestha, David Gellner somehow echoes the same: “For the villagers subjected to myriad NGO development programmes, the modernity to which rural people aspire is acted out and embodied by the NGO workers with their baseball caps, relatively free male-female interaction, and ‘bracketing’ of caste differences . . .” (10). INGO workers like Susmita, Sweety, and Pravat have been presented as embodiments of modernity to their counterparts from villages. Therefore, Pigg avers, “Modern ideas do not come exclusively from outside the local community, but are expressed within it by the cosmopolitan people who are also local” (181). These middle-class INGO workers are cosmopolitan people with local roots. Owing to such INGOs and cosmopolitan people, the ideas like freedom, equality, and democracy are spreading from one corner of the world to another. In this manner, INGOs appear as harbingers of global modernity in Nepal.

Moreover, as *samānāntar ākaś* portrays the lives of both the village and the city women, one has an opportunity to look at modernity in a comparative way. Susmita takes her city life for granted. Only when she goes to the village, she gets to know the difference between village life and city life as can be noticed in this line: “While coming to Kathmandu after completing one month’s field stay, I felt like coming to a new atmosphere” (Singh 25). She finds Kathmandu new when she goes shopping before she returns to the village:

While visiting the shopping centers filled with different foreign goods and exhibition of varieties of goods, I remembered the village small shops where even the goods essential for everyday life were not available. While seeing the people walking pompously in the street,

expensive foreign vehicles, grand buildings, the pictures of the people wearing *kachhād* [loin clothes] and simple clothes, small houses and huts in the village started glimmering in front of my eyes. (26)

In the extract above, Kathmandu emerges as a hub of consumerism. Shopping malls, as suppliers of goods and services produced by the multinational capitalist ventures, are major highlights of Kathmandu. Liechty, therefore, presents “Kathmandu’s emerging middle class” as “a response to, and active purveyor of, a now globalized capitalist market and commodity regime” (34). As a member of Kathmandu’s middle class, Susmita is used to this life. Next time, as Susmita savors the beauty of a restaurant in Kathmandu, she reflects on wonders of modernity in this way: “Modernity has strongly clasped Kathmandu in its claws. . . . Every kind of facility is available here. The arrival of the foreigners, direct contact within country and abroad through computer, internet and telephone, international transaction” (Singh 47). Along with the rise of consumerism, Kathmandu has grown into a global village because of international travel and information technology. One of the most defining features of modernity is that it is a global phenomenon. Echoing Jameson, Bjorn Wittrock claims that modernity “is a global condition that now affects all our actions, interpretations, and habits, across nations and irrespective of which civilizational roots we may have or lay claim to” (31). Due to technology and networks of production and consumption, one can see the connection between Kathmandu and other places of the world. Moreover, the national as well international interaction on a daily basis is possible because of the presence of INGOs as well. In the novel, the I/NGO, where Susmita works, can be taken as an agent of global capitalism. Though these INGOs work for the people from the remote villages, their headquarters are located in Kathmandu. The major seminars and conferences are held in Kathmandu. The interaction between the Nepali people and foreigners takes place primarily in these seminars and conferences. Ideas about identity, development, democracy, human rights, constitution and freedom, among others, flow from the West to Kathmandu. Money flows from the West to Kathmandu before it trickles down to the villages. Despite its global nature, capitalism, according to Arif Dirlik, “bears upon it the cultural legacies of the Euro/American societies that provided the context for its rise to global hegemony” (22). Therefore, it is not easy to be a part of global experience called modernity without adopting certain Western values like human rights, individualism, democracy and freedom. These Western values, as portrayed in the novel, are disseminated as universal values by INGOs.

Nevertheless, Kathmandu, a cosmopolitan space, is not free from gender discrimination. Abinash, Susmita’s husband, makes this humiliating observation about her: “You are a showpiece of the house. I don’t want to see the showpiece of the house outside. . . . Decorate home, enjoy yourself within the house” (Singh 11). One day, as he catches her tired because of shopping, he says, “Why have you drooped today? You are growing somewhat lazy these days. You don’t take care of your figure and beauty” (11). Furthermore, he does not want her to have a baby because of the similar reason: “A woman’s youth vanishes after having a baby” (12). In short, Abinash has turned her into a sex object. However, Susmita goes ahead with her plan of having a baby. When she becomes pregnant, Abinash comes home drunk and reprimands her in this way: “Susmita, now you are a useless vessel to me. You can be disposed to the dustbin now. There is no room for you in my life” (13). Susmita, a modern woman, has been treated as a sex object at the hands of her husband.

The condition of the village women is worse. Despite their hard works, “they are treated like animals,” a village woman asserts (16). Sweety adds, “Some leave their houses because of the husband’s beating; some jump into the brook failing to bear with pain of the husband’s second wife; whereas some elope failing to bear with the rule of their mother-in-laws. Some commit suicide frightened by their suffocating life of widowhood . . .” (27). For example, Krishnamaya, an illiterate village woman, is severely beaten by her husband, who is a retired British captain. When she does not let him touch her body at night following her beating in the afternoon, Captain beats her dragging her around uttering these words: “Did I marry you to worship[?] . . . I brought you to make you my wife” (29). As wife, she is expected to offer her body to her husband for sex at any time he likes.

Both Susmita and Krishnamaya are physically abused by their husbands. The modern man Abinash’s treatment of Susmita is not different from Captain’s treatment of Krishnamaya from the

village in the attitude but only in the way. Abinash may not be as violent as Captain is but both of them take their wives as sex objects. Given their situations, whereas Krishnamaya has no way out, Susmita—as a middle class educated woman—can challenge her husband by threatening him to take her own life with a *khukuri*, a typical Nepali knife. Stunned, Abinash puts some clothes and other essential stuffs in a suitcase and “immediately leaves home” (22). Uprety’s idea is significant here: “The one who was born in the upper- or middle-class s/he receives the ‘class dividend’ in comparison to the ones born in families of labourers” (19). After her marriage collapses, her structural dividends allow her to take a job with an INGO and leave Kathmandu for Gairigaun. She delineates the purpose of her life in this way: “I have come here not to escape from life but in the process of living life. Now I should actively fulfill my responsibility. That responsibility is to make the women of this area self-dependent by uplifting their economic status” (Singh 23). As an independent, educated, responsible, and modern woman, Susmita aims at salvaging the rural women like Krishnamaya from the quicksand of tradition. One can easily notice that she takes the upliftment of women as a part of her professional responsibility. She—overlooking her structural dividends—identifies herself as an elite expert from Kathmandu, thereby missing an opportunity to empathize with these village women. At best, she is driven by ‘sympathy kick’. At worst, she considers empowerment of rural women merely a part of her job.

Nevertheless, Susmita has imbibed critical awareness to understand structural violence in terms of gender in the villages of Nepal. When Sweety—observing discrimination between men and women in the traditional space—wonders when this discrimination will disappear, Susmita, therefore, asserts, “For that, we have to break the social structure itself” (6). Susmita hints at a need for a rupture in the traditional patriarchal society in the rural parts of Nepal. The INGO she works for becomes a vehicle for this change. Unfortunately, Susmita is only the benign face of the development-oriented INGO, which does not really promote radical change in the society. The evaluation system reflects where its focus lies. After the field monitoring, Pravat, who has been hired to monitor the work by the INGO, responds to the work of Susmita and her team in this way: “Women have made a pretty good progress. All have made this or that sort of income. . . . It can be considered good as women have become self-dependent by generating income through some sort of work within a period of three years of the program” (66). During her monitoring of the villages with Linda and Swostika, Susmita makes this observation: “In the gap of fifteen years, in the living standard the women of Bhirgaun, a significant change has taken place” (168). Of course, several women have grown literate. Buddhimaya Tamang from Manegaun has been elected as the Chairperson of the Village Development Committee. However, observations of Pravat and Susmita repeatedly foreground the empowerment of women in terms of income generation activities undertaken by women. From this scene, one can infer the INGO’s concern with development in terms of economic activities even in the case of women’s empowerment. However, such a portrayal overlooks the fact that transformation in the awareness among the people regarding issues of women is more important for justice for and empowerment of women than change in their economic position. Regardless of the INGO’s role as the usher of this global modernity in the life of women from remote villages of Nepal, one cannot really overlook the INGO’s focus on the instrumentalisation of women for economic activities that ultimately serve agendas of capitalist organizations. The INGO, therefore, limits agency of Susmita and Sweety.

Additionally, lack of self-critical awareness embedded in their structural dividends is another reason behind the lack of political will to work for justice for women in the middle class women like Susmita and Sweety. One can examine Sweety to understand how structural dividends deprive one of self-critical awareness. She presents herself as a woman, who has challenged patriarchal values of the traditional society by giving birth to her son without getting married. She is abused by her own male colleague during a field visit. As she grows pregnant, she decides to give birth to her child. But Sweety does not accept the colleague as her husband. She raises the child on her own. Sweety takes these things as her personal achievements. She does not seem to have self-critical awareness to realize that these courageous things partly emanate from privileges she enjoys from her class. Not surprisingly, Susmita also lacks this kind of awareness. Therefore, she appreciates Sweety’s courage.



She adds, “Now this era will give birth to many unmarried mothers like Sweety by questioning social values and norms” (78). Susmita believes that the twenty first century will bring a rupture in the traditional patriarchal society by giving birth to many courageous, self-dependent and intelligent women like Sweety. However, she misses the fact that Sweety has been able to do all these miraculous feats because of her education, which is one of the structural dividends of being associated with the middle class. This privilege is extended to her access to the INGO as well. Regarding such a situation, Uprety claims that structural dividend “is such a ‘comfort’ which we never question because it has grown natural to us” (18). Indeed, these privileges, as norms, have filtered even Sweety’s critical self-awareness, thereby making it really challenging for her to notice them.

One can argue the same regarding Susmita. She changes herself. She changes Krishnamaya’s life by offering her a job in her office despite the latter does not really need money for her survival. But Krishnamaya’s job ensures her equal footing with her husband, who is forced to change his behavior towards her. Krishnamaya says, “I won’t live with him in fear... He might not dominate me if I earned little money and didn’t have to beg for it” (Singh 30). Despite her illiteracy, Krishnamaya, due to Sweety and Susmita’s efforts, understands that her dependence on her husband is the main reason behind her abuse at the hands of her husband. She wants her freedom through her self-dependence. Because of such examples, Netra Atom notes that the strength of this novel lies in “its advocacy for education and self-dependence for gender empowerment” (5). One can easily take this change in Krishnamaya as a case of female bonding as they suffer from the similar patriarchal values and practices.

However, as the discussion above illustrates, Susmita and Sweety—the middle-class agents as well as beneficiaries of the INGO—have been presented as the saviors of the poor village women like Krishnamaya. Echoing Tamang’s idea about the relation between the elite women from Kathmandu and village women, this kind of relationship between the women from two different spaces and classes also sheds light on the role of the INGO in heralding the ideas of freedom, equality and identity among the women of Nepal. Such empowerment of the middle-class women like Susmita, however, has its limits. Along with the INGO’s depoliticizing impact, her middle-class privileges of resorting to devotion to religious cult figures like Sai Baba and her dream of getting reunited with her lover in the US make one question her political will to fight for justice for women.

In spite of being an icon of modernity, Susmita has her own share of attachment with traditional practices and values. The conservative side of Susmita’s life comes to the light when she is transferred to the central office located in Kathmandu. Despite her success, she suffers from loneliness. She thinks aloud, “How alone I am in such a busy city[!]” (106). Susmita goes to see her mother to get rid of her loneliness. Even in this modern space, family, bedrock of tradition, proves a soothing balm to her alienated modern soul. Susmita says, “Terrorized by loneliness, I immediately went to my mother’s house padlocking my house. I felt reassured after stepping on the threshold of my mother’s house. After meeting my mother, I felt the disappearance of all of my sufferings and pains” (93). The mother’s house remains an oasis in the vast desert of the modern urban life. Family appears as a cure to the ills of the urban life. After mother’s death, she ruminates, “Broken into pieces, I drowned in the sea of suffering” (136). This is not just mother’s death. This is also the loss of the medicine she needs to ward off the ills of her modern life.

After the demise of her mother, Susmita grows religious. She ponders, “My faith towards the religion started growing” (139). She leans on Saibaba, an Indian cult religious Guru, when she is disturbed: “Burning incense in front of Saibaba’s picture, I prayed [him] for increasing patience, courage in my mind” (176). Moreover, the way she worries about her daughter’s future reflects her belief in tradition: “Now Astha’s study is about to be over. After she returns, I should get her married selecting a boy. . . . The daughter’s kind has to go to other’s house. . . . [T]his is our tradition” (141). Susmita, an educated woman with a job with the INGO, is sucked in by tradition as she grows older. Eventually, she confesses it in this manner: “Still I don’t have courage to jump across the wall of the social norms” (149). Susmita represents the middle-class Nepali people, who tend to side with modernity for certain purposes like career and identity. However, in their everyday life, they appear to be too much fastened to tradition to embrace modernity in totality. According to Mark Liechty,

“middle class life in Kathmandu is mediated by local caste logics and other religiously based notions of propriety and suitability that, in turn, shape middle-class discourses of honor and prestige” (20). Therefore, preservation of tradition equally becomes the responsibility of the middle-class people like Susmita. Along with the absence of self-reflexivity regarding her class privileges, the appropriation of tradition gradually erodes her political will to work for the justice of other Nepali women. Her job with the INGO is reduced to a means to retaining her middle-class privileges only.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of such strong premodern practices may make one wonder: Are third world spaces like Nepal modern at all? According to Jameson, the co-existence of modern and pre-modern simply shows the negotiation between modern and premodern without the loss of global aspect of modernity. Jameson claims that “in the various countries of the Third World what might have seemed to constitute remnants of feudalism have now been reabsorbed into capitalism in a very different fashion . . .” (39-40). In the case of Nepal as portrayed in the novel, the capitalist phenomena like INGOs, the urban experience of Kathmandu, and the Internet eventually absorb traditional practices and values described above. Indeed, Susmita’s endeavour to remain ‘suitably modern’ manifests capitalism’s absorption of traditional values. Amidst all her traditional values and practices, technology enables Susmita to maintain her relation with her boyfriend Pravat. Eventually, Susmita decides to go to the US. Chiming with Giddens, one can argue that modernity has shrunk both time and space in such a way that her virtual relation with Pravat grows strong enough to convince her to join him in America to spend the rest of her life with him. In such a context, her dream of pursuing this dream of getting reunited with her lover in the US— an example of her agency— may be interpreted as a sign of loss of political will for justice. Susmita does not seem to have self-reflective awareness to identify her power to contribute to empowerment of underprivileged women beyond her professional capacity. The INGO and her middle-class insensitivities seem to have depoliticized her, much to the dismay of feminists.

Beyond these findings of the study, the details of the novel offer a ground for a conversation among the concerned ideas of Jameson, Leichter, Pigg, Tamang and Uprety. In doing so, the textual details demonstrate that Jameson’s idea on modernity functions at a macro level whereas the ideas of Leichter, Pigg, Tamang and Uprety operate at a micro level. Findings of the study show that these ideas work complementarily to show the dis(empowering) impacts of the INGOs on the middle-class women like Susmita. Whereas ideas of Jameson, Pigg and Tamang help one understand macro and micro contexts of Susmita and reasons behind her depoliticization at the hands of the INGO, ideas of Leichter and Uprety help one notice reasons behind Susmita’s insensitivity towards the cause of women. However, these findings also bring an underlying tension among these theories to the surface. Obviously, unlike the ideas of Jameson, Pigg, Leichter and Tamang, Uprety’s notion of structural dividends is not oriented towards development. Unlike the structural violence, the structural dividend demands one to look inward. Moreover, the details of the novel demonstrate that even the critical self-awareness is filtered by one’s structural dividends and thus it becomes really difficult for people like Susmita to get rid of their insensitivity. Therefore, Uprety’s idea of critical self-awareness, in the light of findings of the study, may function better as a self-help idea than a theoretical intervention. Owing to these reasons, Uprety’s idea—on the surface—does not seem to synch with the ideas of others. However, it works in tandem with ideas of Leichter to foreground reasons behind Susmita’s lack of will to fight for the cause of women. Regardless of such underlying tensions, the textual findings demonstrate a plausibility of using such a complex theoretical framework of modernity to examine complex inflections of modernity in the third world spaces like Nepal.

### **Final Thoughts on (Dis)Empowerment of Women in Development**

Summing up, Singh’s novel *samānāntar ākāś* offers a window to examine impacts of modernity on women from different classes of the Nepali society. Krishnamaya, Sweetie and Susmita suffer from the similar patriarchal values and practices. This is one of the reasons why they share bonding with each other. However, one cannot ignore that Susmita and Sweetie, the middle-class agents as well as beneficiaries of the INGO, have been presented as the saviors of the poor village women like Krishnamaya. Moreover, as middle-class women from urban areas, they have access to

modern technologies, whereas the village women like Krishnamaya are far away from them. This kind of relationship between women from two spaces and classes also makes one question the role of the INGO in heralding the ideas of freedom, equality and identity among the women of Nepal. Ironically, these middle-class women—owing to their structural insensitivities embedded in their structural privileges and the depoliticizing impacts of the INGO—lose their political will to fight for justice. It makes one wonder whether the empowerment heralded by the INGOs is designed to help the middle-class women retain their structural dividends in return for the latter's contribution to promoting agendas of capitalist ventures. As more and more women empowerment-related INGOs are sprouting across Nepal, the findings of this study will help scholars and the concerned institutions rethink the role of INGOs in empowering women in Nepal.

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