

Re-imagining Women's Spatial Boundaries: A Study of Lil Bahadur Chettri's *Mountains Painted with Turmeric*

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ABSTRACT

Women always occupy a secondary position since time immemorial and this position is accepted whole-heartedly. Women's position as secondary has been portrayed everywhere in literature and hence naturalize the inferior position of women. Hence, the ideology that woman is weaker than man is imbibed by people as natural. The patriarchal culture always subverts the existence of women as secondary. Hence, women's condition is hardly represented truthfully by male writers unlike Lil Bahadur Chettri who tries not only to portray women's subjugated position in society but also tries to empower women by giving the women characters voices to resist, revolt and finally make them occupy the central position. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how Nepali writers in general and Lil Bahadur Chettri in particular tries to draw attention of readers to the very serious issues of marginalization and suffering of women through Nepali writings.

KEYWORDS: Nepali Literature, Lil Bahadur Chettri, Postcolonial Space, Subjugation of women, Feudalism

Date of Submission: 07 May 2018

Date of Acceptance: 22 July 2018

INTRODUCTION

For a long time the world has been studying British Literature and to some extent American literature. Colonialism is one of the biggest reasons for this cultural and academic dominance and of course no one can deny the hegemonic attitude of the powerful countries. Now the time has come when the focus has been shifting from Euro-centric literary dominance to non-Eurocentric literary achievements. After a couple of writers achieved recognition in the form of literary awards, the South Asian literature received a large number of readership worldwide. People are taking interest in South Asian literature and issues, the tag of exotic and irrationality turned into fascinating and attention seeking literature. So, many South Asian writers made their special space in the world of literary canon by their unique narrative techniques, language and content. South Asia consists of multiple countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Afganistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh including India. More or less these countries have emerged from the same historical past and culturally also similar to a large extent and share the similar custom, tradition, rituals, belief system, social structure etc. Not only culturally South Asian countries are similar but somewhat the problems are also related may it be insurgency issue, refugee issue, border conflicts etc. Having said this, one of the major issues that haunt South Asian countries are the sufferings of the marginalised people. Here marginalised can be those who do not have any say in social, economic and political field of their country and always exploited in the hands of those who are powerful than them. Cambridge dictionary defines it "as treat (a person, group,

or concept) as insignificant or peripheral.” In this category comes the labourer, migrants without valid passports, refugees and of course women.

Women are always considered as the weaker section of the society and never get their rights as equal to men. South Asian patriarchal culture always subverts the existence of women as secondary. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how the Nepali writers in general and Lil Bahadur Chettri in particular tries to draw attention of the readers to the very serious issues of marginalisation and suffering of women through his writings.

THE STORY OF STRUGGLE

Lil Bahadur Chettri was originally from Nepal but settled in Assam for a long time and became the citizen of India. He was born in 1923 and a migrant himself, he understands the pain and plight of migrants who were uprooted from their own country and don't belong to the new country as well. He is considered as one of the most successful and popular novelist of Nepali language as he minutely observes the people and condition and portrays them realistically as well. Chettri has sensitive eyes who could see the sufferings of marginalised and narrated the experiences vividly which can touch the human emotion and through this, he sensitizes and force the readers to think ethically. Though Chettri not only narrated about the darker sides of feudalism but also talk about the patriarchy that denies the women their basic rights. So, in this paper the concept of gendered space in South Asia and especially in Nepal will be discussed along with how the writer tries to re-imagine women's spatial boundaries through his writings. Michael J Hutt translated the book *Mountains Painted with Turmeric* which was originally written in Nepali language by Lil Bahadur Chettri. Through the translation he brings the Nepali culture more familiar to the readers. As Manjushree Thapa also said in an interview that regional literature can reach the global readers and people of other cultures through translation, so that they can be familiar with the new culture.

Chettri's novel, is the story of a farmer, whose name is Dhane, which means 'wealthy' in Nepali language and his family consists of his wife Maina, sister Jhumavati and a three year old son. The story revolves around the struggle of Dhane who tries to survive and fend for his family under the hegemonic and exploitive attitude of the feudal lords of the village. The story narrated the struggle and suffering of Dhane to endure the exploitation and his final departure from the village hoping for a new life devoid of all the evils of the society. According to Michael Hutt, Lil Bahadur minutely portrays the 'Dukha', suffering of the peasants' lives, who are further marginalized by the dominating feudalistic system. Not only the male peasants suffering but also the women's sufferings and double colonization by the hands of their own male counterpart narrated accurately. In this sense the writer, Lil Bahadur Chettri provides a voice to the subaltern voiceless.

PATRIARCHY AND WOMEN

Women and women issues are always placed in the margin in the dominant discourse of patriarchy. However, in postcolonial era writers started giving importance to the margins too as it is the margin that defines the centre. The emergence of postcolonial literature especially after the colonial period has gone through drastic changes. Majorly the postcolonial literature starts with imitating the Western literature, then comes the resistance phase and finally it has achieved its own identity by differentiating itself from the already established Western literary tradition. With its various differences, one of the major differences in postcolonial literature is its preoccupation with boundaries and spaces, sometimes physical and yet some other times it is psychological. Only recently, the hierarchy of temporal over spatial has been challenged and space is treated as central.

In his groundbreaking study, *Thirdspace* (1996), Edward Soja argues that the concept of space has often been overlooked in analyses of human experience. Locating this disregard in the privileging of history in philosophy from the Enlightenment onwards, he laments the fact that 'putting phenomena in a temporal sequence' has somehow come to be seen as 'more significant and critically revealing than putting them beside or next to each other in a spatial configuration' (1996, p. 168).

While crediting the development of the spatial theory in postcolonial studies is given to Edward Soja's work, But Soja acknowledges the influence of Michel Foucault's spatialization philosophy in his work and especially the statement that today's era is the era of space (Foucault, 1986, p. 22). Similar view was put forward by Foucault "Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, and the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic" (1980, p. 70). Here, Foucault identifies a dichotomy of thinking about time and space. Western accounts of history give excessive importance to temporal perspective than spatial one. The identity of a man can also be defined by boundaries and spaces as invisible boundaries and spatial segregation are done on the basis of caste, gender and social class etc. In the South Asian villages, the space is divided for different castes as low caste people cannot sit with the upper caste people and similarly from water resources to graveyard everything is segregated for the people of different class and status. Similarly, the space is also divided in the name of gender. The space for man and woman are also different, the space women assigned is normally in the enclosure of house and known as private space where as men are assigned for public space and take all the vital decisions related to finance and of home. Since ages, writers are trying to draw attention to this discrimination and in this particular text; Lil Bahadur also does the same by critiquing the feudal tradition and economic exploitation of peasants and exploitation of women too.

SPACE FOR WOMEN

Space is always divided as public and private for men and women respectively, women are not supposed to go out as their dignity may hamper by roaming outside home and this is what has been aptly portrayed in the book when the soldier asked the way towards his home the girl Jhuma showed her inability to guide as she said, 'I have never really been farther than Limugaon' (2008, p. 13). As she does not go out she does not have the exposure to understand map nor does she understand the nature of man. In a sense, she is not equipped to safeguard herself from the predatory nature of men. Similarly, the other female characters in *Mountains Painted with Turmeric* like Maina who is the wife of Dhane always busy in household works and busy in managing the kid even though they face poverty, it is the responsibility of the husband to work and earn money not the women: "Maina helps her husband's sister to wash the pots and to mill and pound the grain. Otherwise, all the cooking and serving of food is Jhuma's responsibility" (2008, p. 18). At the same time the wife's position is always secondary and dependant on husband, which can be seen in Maina's relationship with her husband and how she treats her husband as God by touching his feet, "Maina's hand as she massage his feet...Dhane's feet with her head and stood up" (2008, p. 23). The superior position of man is prominently visible in the text and at the same time the outside or public space is always occupied by the male characters may it be Dhane or the soldier or the landlord or Karki. So, mostly women are restricted to a enclosed space of house and this type of space discrimination is not universal, but normally it shows the subjugated position of women and women's less access to knowledge system which is highly valued in public domain. The division of private and public space has been created to legalise the dominance of patriarchy in the society.

Writers challenge this traditional restriction on women's movement and their occupied private space through writings. The writing challenges the concept of space and social order by showing the characters rebellious nature against the social norms. In this text

Jhuma, the female character shows her resistance towards the social norms by taking an independent decision to move with soldier to whom she loves: "Jhuma did not object and the pair of them walked away from the bazaar towards a nearby hollow" (p. 33). She not only actively struggles to transcend the traditional social boundary but also rebelled against traditional upbringing, the concept of arranged marriage, caste system and long accepted enclosure and entrapment of women. Further, when she was pregnant and ditched by her lover, she didn't bow down before the social and familial pressure rather she thought of leading a life of independence. The helplessness of her sister-in-law who treats her like daughter could be seen significantly when she said, "What else can I do, Child? If her brother discovers this, he'll throw her out! When I look at her face, I do love her so. The tears slipped from Maina's eyes" (2008, p. 75). And in return the patriarchy is seen in her brother's attitude who didn't take any initiative to find out her sister who left home, "Dhane answered her bluntly and then was silent: "if she is dead, we will hear of it. There's no need to search for her" (2008, p. 87). The hypocritical attitude of the society is also seen here when Jhuma was abused for the mistake which was not only committed by her but the soldier was also equally responsible for it: "Unable to restrain herself, Maina went outside and began to hurl abuse at Jhuma...Then the friends who once embraced her would abhor her. Voices would surround her, saying "Sinner! Sinner!" (2008, p. 79).

Finally the character Jhuma, shows her resistance by not bowing down before the society or family but shows her resistance by taking a firm decision to get married to a man called Karki and lead her life respectfully. Karki and Jhuma left the village for good leaving behind the hegemonic social order where tradition, custom, rituals are more important than the life of a human being.

CONCLUSION

The text *Mountains Painted with Turmeric* by Lil Bahadur Chettri is a critique on the already established and fixed social order, which does not allow the subaltern to voice their plight and even if they speak their voice were never heard of. By creating a character who transcends boundaries with a hope to find a '*heterotopia*' a space that function in non-hegemonic conditions the writer effectively reimagining a ideal space for women, a space beyond any kind of oppressive forces. Sara Mills opined, "social structure should not be seen as necessarily determining particular spatial relations; indeed it is much more of a two-way process (2005, p. 25). This means that the spatial position of men and women are manmade and can challenge and negotiate the positions in space according to the context.

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