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Voice for Autonomy in Selected Nepalese Contemporary Women's Poetry

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

It is certified that thesis entitled “Voice for Autonomy in Selected Nepalese Contemporary Women’s Poetry” submitted by Sarah Maharjan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts in English is an original piece of research work carried out by the candidate under my supervision. Literary presentation is satisfactory and the thesis is in a form suitable for publication. Work evinces the capacity of the candidate for critical examination and independent judgment. The thesis is forwarded for examination.

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Mahesh Paudyal

December, 2022

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Voice for Autonomy in Selected Nepalese Contemporary Women’s Poetry” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Sarah Maharjan has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Sarah Maharjan

## Voice for Autonomy in Selected Nepalese Contemporary Women's Poetry

### Abstract

*This paper goes through five selected poems: "Tradition", "My Mind is not at Peace", "On Kathmandu's Streets", "Life in the Begging Bowl of Death", and "Durbarmarg" by Nepali women poets Benju Sharma, Urmila Kumari Chaudhari, Yukta Bajracharya, Usha Sherchan, and Ujjwala Maharjan respectively and explores how Nepalese women are raising voice for autonomy in the contemporary times. Taking insights from socialist feminism, this research brings intersectional analysis of socio- economic and cultural structures which is key in understanding patriarchal dichotomy in the present context. The paper applies six patriarchal structures presented by Sylvia Walby as the method to read gender-based discrimination in contemporary Nepalese society. The researcher reveals that Nepali women's fundamental right of autonomous decision-making is highly influenced by the sociocultural, traditional, caste as well as economic factors which is manipulated by traditional patriarchal structures and position women subordinate to men. The research concludes that women's autonomy can be achieved by resolving gender-based discrimination in private and public spheres in contemporary times.*

**Keywords:** patriarchy, women's autonomy, gender-based dichotomy and socialist feminism.

The contemporary women's poetry is a powerful tool to understand how women's autonomy had been manipulated through patriarchal structures. Poetry helps to express women's issues and personal narratives through which their autonomous voice can be heard. The traditional approach creates dichotomy between males and females where women are placed in binary to men and are subordinated. The researcher finds this approach limiting as it ignores analysis based on other important

aspects like geography, time, culture, status and economy. The researcher sees the need to move out from traditional reductionist approach to inclusive approach to voice against rigid patriarchal structure for women's autonomy. Thus, the paper tries to analyze through the five selected poems by Nepali women poets through a socialist feminist perspective.

As the selected poems are written in post 1990s era and the poetic persona in the poems are contemporary women, they echo the status of women in contemporary Nepalese society where women remain subordinate to men. The women poets are selected from different region, culture, caste, tradition as well as class so that overall women's personal narratives and voice for autonomy within capitalistic patriarchal structures can be represented.

Despite covering half the population of the country 53.91 %, as per the 2021 Nepal demographics, women's autonomy is controlled by patriarchal social structures; which valorize men. To voice for women's autonomy, the researcher tries to dismantle old patriarchal structure by introducing Sylvia Walby's six sources of patriarchal structures: "Paid work, Housework, Culture, Sexuality, Violence and The State" (221) to analyze the poems which aids to voice for women's autonomy and combat gender-based discrimination in contemporary Nepalese society.

Walby's patriarchal structures claim: super- base structure leads to rigidity and reductionism while multiple interrelated structures focuses on socio cultural and economic aspect of the contemporary times.

The first poem, "Tradition" by Benju Sharma, a PhD in Ancient Nepalese History, and an academic in the poetry section of the Nepal Academy; was published in "Andolan Purvaka Banda Abhivyakti", 1993 and was translated into English in "Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature" which Min

Bahadur Pun says, "... is the first attempt of English translation from Nepali literature in the post-1990 era" (70). The poem, "Tradition" stands against exploitation and deception carried out in the society in the name of tradition and generational practices and superstitious beliefs projected on women. Wayne Amtzis regarding the poems of Benju Sharma writes:

The powerful cadence of Benju Sharma's poetry cannot be ignored. The clarity of her indictment of a society that privileges half its population on the basis of gender, that tailors the male on the basis of self-conceit and the female on the basis of subservience to others, finds full force in her lyrical and well-crafted poems. (The Stifled Expression of Revolt)

Even in the poem "Tradition" the need to eradicate old belief is seen. The poetic persona who is a daughter is seen revolting against a picture which the poet uses as a symbol to represent tradition which has deeply rooted influence in the Nepalese society. Acharya writes, "Traditions in Nepal are regarded as the blessings from ancestors. So the changes in traditions are not fully supported and accepted by the elderly population in Nepal" (113).

However, in the contemporary period Sharma voices against such traditions which invades women's basic human rights. It is known that in name of tradition women have been forced into marriages, marital rape, dowry system, menstrual restrictions, caste-based discrimination as well as gender based restriction before and after marriage in Nepal. The modern poets like Benju Sharma through the poem is advocating for the mainstreaming of women in the society for growth and development of the society by dismantling the traditional patriarchal structures.

The second poem, "My Mind is not at Peace" written by Urmila Kumari Chaudhari was originally written in Tharu language with the title "Udasi". It was

translated from Tharu language by Manjushree Thapa and is found in *Rastriya Bhasaka Kabita* published by the Royal Nepal Academy. The poem expresses the melancholic state of a women whose bodies are objectified and their minds are tormented by the society. Their fetid behavior towards the existence of women and their falsehood mentality about women has made them incapable to prosper.

Eleanor Walsh in her thesis “Birds with Wolf Hearts, a Collection of Poetry, with an Analysis of Contemporary Nepalese Women’s Poetry” mentions about the poet and says:

In poems such as ‘My mind is not at peace’ by Tharu writer Urmila Kumari Chaudhary, lines that claim that the ‘behavior of our society is fetid’ and that society ‘idealizes falsehood’ are not elaborated on, either in the Tharu version or the English translation, so a theoretical background in Tharu power struggle and discrimination helps to appropriately contextualize poems like Chaudhary’s so that the poet’s anger and despair with society have a contextual explanation that assists with thorough analysis. (27)

Originally “Udasi” means sadness which the poetic persona, a woman is expressing in the poem because of the disbelief society has towards her potentials and capabilities because of her gender.

The third poem, “On Kathmandu’s Streets” by Yukta Bajracharya was published in the magazine “Public Intellectuals” in 2021. Yukta is a Kathmandu-based poet and one of the co-founders of Word Warriors, a youth-led spoken word poetry movement in Nepal. In the poem she talks about sexual harassment and violence carried out in the capital, Kathmandu as a result of weak governance in contemporary Nepal. In an article by *The Kathmandu Post*, it states “Yukta Bajracharya’s work aligns itself with contemporary forms of poetry—from ones filled



with angst and romance to others that connect with the tribulations and emotions that today's youth, especially women, face.” (Singh)

Bajracharya's poem attempts to revolt against the traditional patriarchal structure to reinforce strict laws in the state and minimize male violence. The poem spreads a powerful message about revolting against sexual harassment to make a safer space for women to live freely in the society. It encourages each woman to be strong minded, ambitious, develop self-esteem and confidence and gain their own skills and strengths. It questions government and demand answers and justice for women in the society.

The fourth poem, “Life in the begging Bowl of Death” by Usha Sherchan, a celebrated poet, lyricist and fiction writer affiliated with several literary organizations known for writing on LGBTIQ+ issues, talks about sensitive topic of abortion and cruelty carried out to an infant in the name of gender through her poem. The poem was published in her first poem collection, “Najanmeka Asthaharu” and was translated into English by Manjushree Thapa. In a light room conversation with Usha Sherchan by Nepali Times, Muna Gurung says:

Usha also writes about women's desires and sexualities. Her stories and poems are about the bodies of women that make all sorts of journeys — physical, mental and emotional. Usha is also one of the few writers who writes queer stories with LGBTQ characters. (Usha Sherchan: Humming a tune of her own)

Usha's poem, “Life in the begging Bowl of Death” also talks about women's body through the narrator who is a pregnant woman who is going to abort a fetus. The poem shows how women's body and sexuality is not in her possession and her voice and desires is silenced in front of the society. The poem relates with the current

modern technological advancements made for pre-natal sex determination that has made female feticide a commonplace practice. By showing the imagery of a death fetus the poet motivates contemporary women to revolt against traditional patriarchal structures which valorize men over women.

The fifth poem “Durbarmarg”, written by Ujjwala Maharjan, one of the co-founders of Word Warriors, a poetry group leading the spoken word movement in Nepal since its inception in 2010 compares “Durbarmarg” elite area of the Kathmandu city by giving it the features of women.

While analyzing the poem Walsh writes, “... in ‘Dubarmarg’ by Ujjwala Maharjan, the women in the poem poise and preen and compete for the affections of onlooking men while the narrator decides her safest option is to simply stay still and quiet, as if invisible” (183). She further adds:

The content of the poem has a distinctly contemporary feel to it; the setting is a social occasion yet there is no mention of men, which gives the reader an insider’s view to a woman’s social reality. They are no longer under the watchful eye of a chaperone yet, despite the thin veil of independence, there is a harsh sense of judgement, as if girls balance on an abstract precipice of expectation from which it is easy to fall; to evade tradition and to, by definition, break from societal norms. There is a sense of unpleasant risk in this depiction of surviving as a girl in Kathmandu. (152)

However, the researcher sees that the feminine attribute given to Durbarmarg is on purpose and is likely done to counter the traditional patriarchal structure and gender roles by showing how the concept of masculinity and femininity is changing in the present context. From this view, ‘Durbar marg’ which is an important part of

Kathmandu has been compared with 'women' which is also a way to dismantle the preconceived notion of comparing development only linked with masculinity.

The literary reviews show women poets in the contemporary times have imprinted vivid imageries through their poems which subvert the traditional patriarchal and raises the issue of gender-based discrimination through their poems and voice for women's autonomy.

The researcher uses Sylvia Walby's six patriarchal structures: "the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions" (20) as the method to analyze traditional patriarchal structures that subordinate women in contemporary times in the selected poems. Walby is a British sociologist professor famous for the book, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990) where she elaborately describes her six patriarchal structures.

Walby's first structure, "patriarchal mode of production" analyses how, "Women's labor is expropriated by their husbands or cohabitantes" (21), within the marriage and household relationships. The second structure, "patriarchal relation in Paid Work" talks within economic level. In this structure Walby claims, "A complex of form of patriarchal closure within waged labor exclude women from the better forms of work and segregate them into the worse jobs which are deemed to be less skilled" (21).

In the third structure, "patriarchal relation in state" Walby claims, "The state is patriarchal as well as being capitalist and racist ...has systematic bias towards patriarchal interests in its policies and actions" (21). The fourth structure, "male violence" is considered as a behavior by Walby. She adds, "It is a behavior routinely experienced by women from men... Male violence against women is systematically

condoned and legitimated by the state's refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instances..." (21).

In the fifth structure, "patriarchal relations in sexuality" she says, "Compulsory heterosexuality and the sexual double standard are two of the key forms of this structure" (21) which she revolts against. She talks about the inclusivity of other genders as well such as homo sexuality and LGBTIQ+ communities. For the sixth and final structure, "patriarchal relation in cultural institution" Walby says, "completes the array of structures" (21). She adds, "This structure is composed of a set of institutions which create the representation of women within a patriarchal gaze in a variety of arenas, such as religions, education and the media" (21).

According to Basil Blackwell, "Walby dismisses the idea of patriarchy as a universal form of women's oppression rather treats it as a complex system of interrelated structures which vary historically both in form and degree" (229). Sylvia Walby defines traditional patriarchy as "a system of social structures, and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (214). Therefore, she created six patriarchal structures to revolt against the reductionist patriarchal structures. Walby says:

Patriarchy needs to be conceptualized at different levels of abstraction. At the most abstract level it exists as a system of social relations... At a less abstract level patriarchy is composed of six structures...The specification of several rather than simply one base is necessary ... to avoid reductionism and essentialism...The six identified are real, deep structures and necessary to capture the variation in gender relations... (20)

Along with the six patriarchal structures, Walby uses socialist feminist approach to analyze recent changes in gender relations where socio-cultural, economy, time as

well as space also plays major factors in gender exploitation. Similarly, apart from Walby's six structures, the researcher also views selected poems from socialist feminist's perspective as she finds it to be an inclusive approach to understand women's subordination in contemporary times, unlike traditional reductionist approach which is focused only on binaries.

Socialist movement could be seen getting its ground after the 2016 election of USA. Socialist feminists' critic traditional feminist as being inflexible and limited in its ideology, creating binary opposites between the genders (male/ female), color (black/white), race as well as geography. They promote inclusive ways to express and act against the gender biasness caused by the patriarchal society.

Faith A. Wilson writes, "Socialist feminism is relevant and necessary for confronting authoritarian populism and fascism. It advocates an intersectional analysis, which is critical because of the multifaceted nature of oppression within capitalism" (29). Socialist feminists emphasize the economic, social, and cultural importance of women as people who give birth, socialize children, care for the sick, and provide the emotional labor that creates the realm of the home as a retreat for men from the realities of the workplace and the public arena. They see this as important labor that is overlooked and denigrated.

Jennifer Roesch, a socialist activist, writer, and organizer in New York City writes, "Social feminist movement in its forefront deals with issues such as gender violence, wage inequality, reproductive rights, and women's reproductive work, as well as sexual liberties, at the center of the political and cultural debate of every country hit by the mobilizations" (8).

At the crux of socialist feminist thought is the understanding that not just one system of oppression is at the heart of women's subordination; rather, it is an

interconnection with other systems related to race, social class, gender, sexuality, as well as the nation. From this perspective, dealing with just one issue such as gender without integrating others, will not lead to justice or liberation from the oppression. The importance of socialist feminism, in the contemporary society, is that it isn't fixed, only towards rigid ideological feminism definition; rather it believes in action-oriented feminist practices.

The socialist feminist perspective used for the analysis of the selected poems aim to dismantle patriarchal dichotomy created based on gender and voice for women's autonomy which is key to establishing their autonomous identity in contemporary Nepal. And applying the six patriarchal structures by Sylvia Walby in the literary text examines the attempt of revolting against old patriarchal structures to establish women's autonomy and identity of their own by women poets in Nepal.

Using these six structures as method to analyze the selected poems has contributed to bring new insights to understand the subordinate state of women in the contemporary times, as well as examine gender-based violence and voice for women's autonomy.

The five selected poems present personal narrative of Nepali women's struggle for autonomy in contemporary Nepal through their poetic persona who is a woman. The poems portray gender-based discrimination faced even after democracy in Nepal which through the lens of socialist feminist researcher suggests to be resolved through acknowledging culture and economy as social institutions.

In the first poem, "Tradition" the poet gives insights on traditions which an institute provides a sense of belonging, stability and identity in a society. As tradition have socio-cultural values and religious basis it becomes hard to revolt against it. However, it can be problematic and sometimes vicious when they are blindly

practiced. In Nepal, tradition is indeed often used to justify discrimination and malpractices against women and also to invade their personal, social, political, and legal freedoms. So, the poet revolts against such outdated tradition and demands for change.

Abeda Sultana opines, “Patriarchy is called the sum of the kind of male domination we see around women all the time. In this ideology, men are superior to women and women are part of men’s property, so women should be controlled by men and this produces women’s subordination” (8). This is the old traditional belief in patriarchal structure which Sylvia Walby has tried to change through her new patriarchal structures.

It has been stated many times that men and women are the “Two wheels of the Chariot” but in reality, they are never treated as an equal or a part of the society. For example, the practice of changing “gotras” in women or boycotting men or women from “gotra” for marrying other castes or culture is still prevalent in Nepal, which itself is a bias done to women in name of tradition.

Not only in terms of religion but the tradition of seeing women as less in sectors of employment, public representatives, paid work and cultural values is seen in the contemporary times, which the women poet has revolted against through the narrator who is a daughter, a new generation who doesn’t abide with the previous old mindset like her mother and grandmother did.

In the poem, the narrator, a daughter, describes of a symbolic picture which has been hanging on the wall and is passed down from one generation to the other. Here, the symbolic picture represents the old traditions or the patriarchal structures that subordinate women and take away their autonomy.

However, there is revolt and voice for autonomy presented through the narrator's voice which echoes the vice of new generation women who oppose traditional thoughts held by the previous generation women like the mother and grandmother in the poem. Sharma writes:

worshipped by my grandmother

this picture

hung with pride by my mother.

Today, I look at it askance. (lines 8 - 11)

This old traditional picture followed by grandmother doesn't relate with the present state of granddaughter which implies that traditional patriarchal view of women doesn't fit with the contemporary identity of women.

For instance, female previously fixed in the private spheres within the roles of care givers, housewives or as being submissive, docile and feminine is not reasonable to run the family or gain economy in present context. Walby writes, "While once children were an economic asset, in that they would bring in a wage to the household for several years between childhood and their own marriage, this is no longer the case" (85). So, such imageries need to be broken rather effective and safer spaces needs to be created by the state for women to be a part of the public sphere where they are treated equally as men in their work as well as by the law.

Walby in her first patriarchal structure states, before the concept of production for women was related with reproduction as children were seen as asset to the family who help in the economic and household growth of the family. This led women to be indoors and reproduce for the family. However, in the present time this form of production has changed. Walby writes, "There is a significant decline in the



patriarchal control over women in then household...there is an increase in the direct capitalist expropriation of women's labour" (86).

The poem also provides evidences through the lines which echoes the strong desire of contemporary women to be heard and included in the contemporary society which can be done only through the voice against old patriarchal structures.

Sharma writes, "Now I want this picture smeared with red, effaced/ Let flame reach the far corners/ I place a lit match" (line15 - 17) gives the signal of protest against the blindly internalized outdated patriarchal structures for women in the name of culture and religion which always placed women subordinate to men. Sharma says, "How long must I turn towards it? / What solace am I to find there?" (lines 12 - 13) The contemporary voice of women knows that for changes to happen old structures needs to be called upon and it should start from the young girls. Sharma at the end writes; "in its midst done with, done away, / in its midst" (lines 18 - 19).

Another poem which voices against patriarchal structures is "My Mind is not at Peace" by Urmila Kumari Chaudhary. The poem shares the struggle of women especially from the marginalized community to survive in the capitalistic society as the narrator being the poet identifies from the marginalized group. Although capital plays a vital role to sustain a family in the contemporary times, women from the marginalized groups face double victimization one because of their gender and another because of their socio-cultural state.

Seira Tamang, an activist and researcher working with the Research and Policy Institute, Kathmandu writes, "The Nepali women's movement has been and continues to be dominated and led by high-caste Hindu women and some Newar women . . ." (67). This left no room to voice on the issues of the subaltern women groups, such as, the Dalits, Janjatis as well as Madhesis. The females from these

communities were double victimized; one by their gender and another by their caste and social status.

Although there have been multiple changes in the contemporary times where economy also plays a big role to sustain families, there is struggle for women to work out in the public spheres. In context of Nepal, government has implemented plans and policy regarding uplifting women in the sector of employment and economy. Ministry of Finance (MoF) in Nepal has introduced ‘Gender Budgeting System’ in the fiscal year FY 2007/08 which has categorized national budget under three broad headings: i) Budget directly benefiting women; ii) Indirectly benefiting women: and iii) Neutral budget. However, the Nepalese women especially from the marginal groups face lots of challenges to thrive in public sphere in the contemporary society as they are not accepted to thrive in the public spheres as shown in the poem.

Chaudhari writes:

How can I struggle to truly define life?  
before a society which idealizes falsehood?  
My mind is not at peace for a moment,  
An uproar is taking place within me. (lines 7-10)

Although the society has become capitalistic but because of following the false patriarchal structure women in the cities are also victimized. The pressure through which the modern women are going through in this capitalistic society is also portrayed through the poem where we find that the mental state of a woman is not at peace and it is always under pressure in this society. Chaudhari writes, “My mind is not at peace for a moment, / An uproar is taking place within me” (lines 9 - 10).

Dr. Avinash Chandra M.S. a professor in his book, *The Portrait of a Complete Woman* shares his views after an interview of a woman and writes,

A career woman has to adjust a lot and confine her problems to herself. Otherwise, husband or mother-in-law may say, 'Sit at home, we don't need your salary to run this home. I am competent enough to feed you and the children.' But when the wife takes a casual leave, the next day they say, 'Hey, what's the matter? Are you not going to office, what's your problem?' The conveniently forget what they said yesterday. (50)

It is out of compulsion that women work and it is out of fear of being left out and without identity that women motivate themselves to do household works after work from cooking, cleaning to looking after in laws as well as their children on their own. This can also be analyzed through the poem as the narrator of the poem is trapped between what the patriarchy wants from her and what she desires to do.

Chaudhari writes, "How can I walk forward to dispense faith/ When I am mired in a society of disbelief?" (lines 1-2). Women can contribute in economic growth of the family but these lines show how the patriarchal structures of the society seems to limit their potentials about the lives of women.

Rashmee Shilpakar Rajkarnikar states, "The women in economics are a prerequisite for sustainable development. Increasing the role of women in the economy is said to be the part of the solution to the financial and economic crises and critical for economic resilience and growth" (30).

As a woman wants to give and create but the society disbeliefs them we see a constant flux between wanting to be and not becoming, in the mind of a women. The society becomes like the thorns and needles to not let women be their truly authentic selves. The poem is a great example to show how women of Terai region are subordinate to men not only by their gender but also because of the socio cultural factors that abide them.

The poet through the poem voices to bring changes in the socio- cultural sphere for overall development of women's status in the society. Chaudari writes, "My mind is not at peace for a moment, /An uproar is taking place within me" (lines 9 - 10). In the contemporary time the issue of time and space needs to be considered as well. As virtual space also has great significance in the contemporary times, any misbehavior done to women from the marginalized groups can be voiced through the social media platforms so that the victims can get justice.

An exemplary case is of Ms. Sushmita Regmi (2022) who flushed out the dark side of the beauty pageant industry as well as manipulation, exploitation and rape of young girls in Nepal. The traumatic incidents talked about through her Tik-tok platform went viral and overnight led to social action and movement, to ensure justice and rights for women. Hundreds of protesters gathered outside Baluwatar demanding justice for Sushmita Regmi. They demanded law, for the removal of statute of limitations against rapists and sexual offenders.

This type of virtual platforms helps to fight against the single feminist agenda, which only benefited few 'Khas - Arya' - Nepali Hindu elite females, who were either controlled by their affiliated political parties, caste or religion, and support the excluded minority females. As the socialist feminist focuses on the inclusivity, poem by Chaudary can also be taken as a revolt against such double marginalization carried out against the minority groups.

The poem also tries to share new insight to these issues where women from the Terai or Madhesi area are being double victimized not only by societal and economical responsibilities but also deprivation of their fundamental autonomous rights in the contemporary time.

The third poem, “On Kathmandu Streets” opens up with the lines of a young woman who is the narrator and hints about the fear of walking in the streets of Kathmandu. Sylvia Walby’s third and fourth patriarchal structure, “patriarchy in relation to state” and “male violence” aligns with the revolting voice presented by the poet in the poem.

Within the old patriarchal structures, we find women living in constant fear of being physically, verbally or emotionally harassed and abused in the modern society. The modernity has given women freedom to move out from private to public spheres. But moving out has its risks and dangers because of the lack of proper security and strict rules against the perpetrators who try to abuse or harass women physically, verbally or mentally. The opening lines of the poem “All I want to be/ on Kathmandu’s streets/ is invisible//” (lines 1-3) shares the personal narrative of not only the poet but also of many other young women in Nepal who desire for action to be taken against such misbehaviors.

The constitution of Nepal, 2015 under part 3: Fundamental Rights and Duties, mentions multiple laws to talk about the rights of women. Some are: “Every woman shall have the right relating to safe motherhood and reproductive health. . . There shall not be any physical, mental, sexual or psychological or any other kind of violence against women, or any kind of oppression based on religious, social and cultural tradition, and other practices” (19).

The poem demonstrates through use of personal narratives and imageries that even after 2008, democracy and promulgation of new constitution in 2015, women don’t have a safe space to leave their houses on their own and take autonomous decision, which is their fundamental right. Bajracharya writes:

I have to think over and over again before I step outside my house

Will the purple bra strap that's slightly showing become a trap?

I cast for myself?

Should I wear something more mundane?

Is the color of my hair suggestive?

Is this umbrella I'm carrying too attention-seeking?

Will they think my looking in their eye is an invitation? (lines 14 - 20)

Women are still questioned and seen with disbelief no matter how educated, competent and well organized they choose to be. Although changes are there but women's struggle to gain autonomy still remains as the patriarchal social structure always constructs dichotomy between genders.

Binda Pandey states, "Regardless of long struggle of the feminists demanding equality and participation in decision-making, world statistic hard-core politics has still mono-sex domination, which is caused by deeply-institutionalized patriarch" (5).

The rising cases of such sexual assault has impacted the lives of young women in Nepal which has made them conscious but also compels them to not led an autonomously because of the fear of being another potential victim. Bajracharya writes, "On Kathmandu's streets / every man I don't know is a potential harasser/ until proven otherwise//'" (lines 21- 23). Walby writes:

The delegitimizing of private male violence against women has reduced, but not removed, one of the forms of power that men have over women. Husbands are no longer the sole arbiter of the acceptable level of violence, which is now also regulated by the state. The infrequency of state intervention, and the humiliation meted out to those women who seek it, indicates that this is more a shift in the locus of control and legitimation of violence than its elimination.

(149)

Even in Nepal though laws are implemented action according to it is lacking. The poet pin points that harassment and violence is constructed as a part of social patriarchal structure and is normalized within the society. Wilson writes, “Instead of assuming that the perpetrator is innocent until proven guilty as one would with robbery or even murder, the default position is that the woman is lying or has somehow “misinterpreted” the intent of the perpetrator” (13). This is again a patriarchal structure in the society which saves the harasser by questioning and blaming the victim instead.

As the women’s autonomous voice and self-expression is buried their true selves remain hidden. There are more lines from the poem which reflect disbelief and mistrust towards the other gender. Bajracharya writes:

‘Not all men are like that’

Sadly, I’ve met too many men who are

the reason why I can’t take the more silent, shorter route,

...

or go back home alone at night,

or go to the bus stop alone early in the morning,

or breathe. (lines 33- 41)

These lines also depict how the traditional patriarchal social structure wants to control women’s freedom and speech by showing their power over them through the act of harassment or by inducing fear in the psychology of women from very young age and so that the men can secure their hegemony over women. Walby says, “While there are many changes which facilitate women’s entry to the public sphere there are not so many which improve the position of women in it” (171).

But despite the poor governance and security in Nepal for women, Bajracharya ends the lines of the poem with desire and hope of change in Kathmandu.

She quotes:

On Kathmandu's streets

all I want to be is me,

all I want to be is free,

all I want to be is/invincible. (lines 42 - 46)

The above lines align with Walby's views regarding new patriarchal structure on state where she writes, "Women are not passive victims of oppressive structures. They have struggled to change both their immediate circumstances and the wider social structures" (200).

The explicit description of harassment talked about in the poem, "the other man who zipped down his pants /and asked me if I wanted to suck his dick, /the other man who pinched my tits" (lines 25- 27) also shows the changes women in the contemporary times are undertaking to make their voices be heard which was not heard of in the previous times.

The new generation women protest in rally, part take in #Metoo movements and also vent their anger towards such heinous act through art, drama and poetry which pressures the government to give the power back to the women. This is also portrayed beautifully in the poem. Indra Majupuria in the book, *Nepalese Women Status and Role* writes, "Women constantly must fight for their rights. Sometimes they struggle just to survive without power, as domination of men threaten them, whether a woman wants to conquer patriarchy, will come from her desire to be independent and define outside context of men" (69). The poet through the poem is trying to establish women's voice and their autonomous decision making by



constantly questioning and revolting against the gender-based violence which makes the poem an important asset to fight against the old patriarchal structure and understand how it subordinates women.

Wilson writes, “Socialist feminism is especially relevant for framing rape and assault because of its intersectional dimensions” (12). This poem also echoes these ideas as it tries to include the state and gives socio- cultural description of how women are viewed in the capital when alone instead of focusing just on the binaries between men and women.

The fourth poem, “Life in the Begging Bowl of Death” by Usha Sherchan is examined through the light of Walby’s fourth and fifth structures: “male violence” and “sexuality” respectively. Unfortunately, female feticide is a common practice in Nepalese society for many women living in the capital or rural areas, which is promoted and accepted by the patriarchal social structure although in reality it is a social evil.

In Nepal, there are explicit examples that shows male violence especially after marriage, where the husband controls over all the important activities of the family like decision making. The practices such as *chaupadi pratha* in some parts of Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces of western Nepal, *tilak system and ghumto pratha* in Terai region of Nepal, as well as increasing female foeticide/ sex selective abortions especially in urban Nepal after legalization of abortion in 2002 and introduction of Comprehensive Abortion Care (CAC) in 2004; shows gender based violence performed against women in Nepalese society, which are in disguise, social evils carried out within the patriarchal social structure.

In Nepal the social stigma and pressure of prioritizing one gender over the other has led deaths of many mothers. Although the autonomous decision making is

controlled by the family and their husbands, a woman is penalized for undertaking abortion beyond legal conditions when most of the time they are the victims.

Nepal has guaranteed rights relating to reproductive health as a fundamental right in article 38 (2) of the Constitution of Nepal, 2015. Abortion was legalized in Nepal since March 2002. Although abortion is an integral aspect of reproductive health rights and women's human rights and is necessary to protect the lives of women, but it is seen that abortion is misused against women which is also depicted through the lines of the poem. Sherchan writes:

Emptiness.....emptiness.....ultimate  
 emptiness  
 in a gigantic cage  
 locked vehicles keep rolling  
 transporting empty passengers  
 transporting empty breasts  
 ...  
 in the emptiness, lives and  
 deaths  
 become accursed (lines 1 - 12)

In the lines “gigantic cage”, “locked vehicles” describe the operation theatre and the equipment's used to perform the abortion. The poetic persona here is a pregnant woman who is in an operation theater going to perform an operation which probably is a female fetus. She feels empty and helpless in front of the technological developments which is about to kill her own child. The hollowness and helplessness felt in the lines is in reality the narratives of many women in Nepalese society.

In an article by *The Kathmandu Post*, case of Sabitri who asked her real name to be withheld, a 42 years old and lives in Nepalgunj-5 in Banke talks about her abortion which she carried out three times in seven years as a result of her family's desire for a son. A mother of two teenage daughters and one son, Sabitri says, she could not stand up to her family members alone without the support of her husband. And sadly, her husband also wanted a son. During each pregnancy she was forced to get an ultrasound done to determine the sex of my fetus by my husband and only after the birth of my son did my painful experiences with abortions ended.

However, through the poem the narrator motivates to speak against such hideous crime and says:

Allow life to play without thought for propriety

Shattering the long emptiness

Breaking the long silence

Allow life to turn over

Allow life to gain new dimensions (lines 35 - 39)

These lines aware the contemporary youths about such happenings and warns them to not be under the influence and be courageous to decide for themselves as they have right to their body and children. The use of words like “shattering- emptiness, breaking- silence” (lines 37 - 38) shows the conviction of the contemporary poet to dismantle the conventionally set and accepted standards of women in the patriarchal society. Like Walby protests against the male violence the poet also shows the imagery of a sad happening or death to ignite the feeling of revolt against the cruel patriarchal structure and voice for changes against it.

The life of a women shouldn't be lived with the pressure of other's expectation neither should their bodies be used for that purpose. The poet wants

women to live for themselves and raise their voices for their own legal as well as reproductive rights. Sherchan writes,

Don't let emptiness quash  
 Don't let silence prickle  
 Color life by playing  
 the strings of a guitar  
 Break the emotions by rubbing  
 the sharp strings of a sitar (lines 53 - 58)

Even in the contemporary times in Nepal, biology of women is still considered to be less to that of men although there is nothing defective in women's reproductive function that makes it subordinate to men. So, the poet wants the females to not be manipulated by such ideology that demean and create false consciousness regarding women.

The poet appeals to the young women to be aware about the legal rights and laws regarding women in Nepal and with the strict laws implemented by the government, women should take stands for themselves and speak against gender based violence as their voices matter and is heard. Sherchan writes, "Make life awake from the dream realms/ ... / Come, demolish the emptiness/" (lines 59 - 64).

Before it was only a dream for women to stand up for themselves but in contemporary times with courage and open mindset it has been made easier to take a step towards their own freedom. The poem breaks traditional women's mindset from dreaming and hoping alone to taking action and revolting against the unjust.

When women don't change or stand up for themselves it becomes victory for the narcissistic patriarchy. They have tricked, flirted and played enough with the lives

of innocent women and their bodies. At the end of the poem we find the death of “sweet hope” which is life of a women and their dreams. Sherchan writes:

Death just sauntered by  
 leaving behind anticipation  
 Death just turned away  
 taking with it sweet hope. (lines 81 - 84)

Although the poem ends with death but this tragedy is shown purposefully to awaken the new generation women to voice for their autonomy before they also end up like the older generations. The tragic ending gives a valuable moral for the contemporary women to not give up their rights or be manipulated by the patriarchal demands that subordinate women.

As socialist feminism also focuses on including voices of excluded genders of the society. The poem can also be interpreted as a struggle for homosexual individuals to survive and come out in the patriarchal structure which prioritize heterosexual relations.

In a 2018 report submitted by The Blue Diamond Society, an LGBTQ non-governmental organization, to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for consideration at the 71st Pre-sessional Working Group claims:

Lesbians are marginalized within the gay movement globally. Their issues on health and rights often not talked. Lesbians always try to interconnect their issues with feminist movements in many countries. There is not different opinion, both movement are interconnected but it is not fair enough to analyze the issues through feminist window only because lesbian and bisexual women and trans persons are more discriminated then heterosexual woman. (3)

This idea can also be reflected through the poem. As Sherchan writes:

Oh! Who's trying to break  
 through again  
 ...  
 Looks! Those who plot to take life  
 by tricking it into laughter  
 Look! Those who plan to take  
 life  
 By flirting with life  
 Look! Those who think of taking  
 life  
 by playing with life (lines 65 - 70)

These lines also reflect the mockery and discrimination done towards the homosexual relations in Nepal. The patriarchal ideology make fun of them and laugh at them and play with their lives and their emotions. They are considered as a shame to the society as a result family and society rejects to accept them. But the poem shows that this behavior is also a patriarchal construct.

However, changes have occurred and in Nepal voices for these marginalized groups have also been raised. In order to aware about gender based violence and lack of health rights, many protest rallies as well as LGBTQ parade rallies has been organized in Nepal recently. There hundreds were seen joining the movement, for the first time in Maitighar Mandal in 2019 and even gaining supports through online and digital platforms.

And with the rise of technology and thousands of social media users; social media platforms became the sites for digital influencers as well as renowned

celebrities with huge followers to present their view points on burning global as well as national issues.

The release of lesbian movies like *Soongava* (2016) featuring actors like Saugat Malla, Nisha Adhikari, Deeya Maskey as well as introduction of web series like *Just Another Love Series* (2021) featuring Priyanka Kari and Miss Nepal 2012, Shristi Shrestha also contributed to raise awareness on stereotypes related to them. Other influencers like Parakrama Rana, make-up artist Anish Tamang, singer Nattu Shah also motivated the coming out stories from the LGBTQ community through their posts and stories.

In the academic field, establishment of the Department of Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, Nepal Studies, Anthropology, English studies as well as other faculties of Humanities and Social Science at Tribhuvan University also helped to find researches on these issues and bring inclusion and erase division.

This types of inclusive and progressive movements with the demonstration of art forms along with music, slam poetry as well as dramas supporting victims and protesting issues of exclusion, marginalization and gender based violence and exploitation are key to dismantling old traditional patriarchal structures as Sylvia Walby suggests.

Coming to the fifth poem, “Durbarmarg” the researcher applies the sixth patriarchal structure of Walby, “patriarchy in relation with cultural institutions” to approach the poem. Walby states, “Ideas about masculinity and femininity are to be found in all areas of social relations; they are part of the actions which go to make up the patriarchal structures” (90). Traditionally masculinity is preferred over the femininity as patriarchal structures attribute masculine as traits of men which is seen

as powerful, strong, bold and that represent society, while femininity as soft, fragile that represent private sphere.

However, the poet has tried to dismantle the traditional form of cultural institutions in the poem by giving “Durbar Marg” an integral part of Kathmandu which holds the history of royal kings is given contemporary feminine attributes. Maharjan writes:

You had royalty in your lap.

Nails painted to perfection.

Blemish free skin

And hair so shiny, (lines 3- 7)

Mostly history is always compared with the masculine attributes but here feminine attribute is given to Durbar Marg which shows the revolt against the old cultural institutions formed by the patriarchal structures.

Even in the above lines “You” is referred to as Durbar Marg. The word like “royalty” which is usually compared with masculine figures and Kings is now attributed to female characters in the poem. This is also an attempt by the poet to show that the concept of motherhood and fatherhood or masculinity and femininity is changing in the contemporary society. Walby writes:

Motherhood . . . in the nineteenth century this was firmly bound up with domestication, today it is a little more independent. . . fatherhood in the discourse of masculinity has been undergoing some significant changes. In the nineteenth century it was bound up with the notion of head of household which was central to adult masculinity... There is a significant restructuring of what properly constitutes fatherhood away from economic provider towards emotional nurturer, though this is replete with contradictions. (106)



Ujjwala uses the word, “sleek” to define Durbarmarg which means smooth and glossy which again is a feminine trait. Maharjan further goes on and says:

Everything about you

Confident, modern, with the air of a colonial lady

You’re basically class, as people of class define it.

You’re one of your kind here.

Surrounded by many, not your kind at all. (lines 12 -16)

The poet uses “Colonial Lady” as an imagery to compare Durbarmarg. She claims it to be of class which hints that women also have class and have identity of their own and not limited to being the other. The choices of words like “confident”, “modern” also spreads the message that women’s confidence and self-esteem should not be reduced by seeing oneself as lack.

Women in the contemporary times should embrace their femininity and used it as power to gain back their autonomy. Maharjan writes, “... painting herself/ with the lights and colors of neon, selling herself to the world/ the world that bowed down on my feet/” (lines 17- 18). We gain confidence when we are sure of our identity as a woman not created by the society but from the self within. It takes courage to take the step along with it comes setbacks and difficulties but this is how we learn and create our own identity.

To conclude, the traditional feministic discussion on traditional feministic agendas; male as oppressors and females as victims is countered by the movements like socialist feminism who move beyond binaries of male and females. Thus, the five selected poems also align with this concept where the women poets have voiced for autonomy raising the importance of the issues of space, caste, economy as well as socio cultural factors which leads to the subordination of women.

The poets demand the need of change in the traditional patriarchal structures and the application of six patriarchal structures provided by Sylvia Walby in the poems has given a creative and affective way to fight against the gender dichotomy and voice for women's autonomy.

In the contemporary times, women have realized that raising the issues for formal equality either by liberal wing or class-based left wing political forces, could not be enough to achieve substantive gender equality. This has led to promote socialist perspective among the feminist movement even in Nepal post- people's movement 2006.

There is necessity of inclusive spaces where all genders can vent their anger and personal narratives and gender-based violence stories to the mass, without categorizing genders in group. In present context contemporary literary texts like these selected poems, dramas, films as well as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram as well as TikTok has helped to voice for autonomy without any censorship.

The social parameters of social development have changed in the modern world and so has the roles of women in the society. As the contemporary world is patriarchal as well as capitalistic, capital or economy also plays an important role to sustain life, which has made work and innovation the major focus even for women, who were previously seen mostly in domestic roles.

Nepal has witnessed multiple changes from its historical time to present time from change in demographics, governance, peace building, political and sociological restructuring, economy, gender development, health care, employment, infrastructure, law reforms, water resources, disaster management, waste management, transportation, natural resources and energy, agricultural and rural development,

environmental management as well as education. But the statuses of women remain subordinate to men, with only slight changes. Therefore, traditional socio- economic stereotypical roles created by the traditional patriarchal structure needs to be revolted for women's autonomy which the poets in the selected poems have attempted to do.

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