

CRITIQUE OF ESSENTIALIST CULTURE IN KOIRALA'S SUMNIMA

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze how Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala's novel Sumnima critiques essentialist culture by the rulers of the contemporary time. Presenting two characters from diverse cultural background, Koirala makes a subtle distinction between the culture and way of life. In doing so, he snubs the superiority or inferiority of the cultures and shows that they are unique in their own terms. By taking insights on culture and ethnicity embedded in the identity of a person, this paper reveals that Koirala chides the essentialist thoughts of the rulers.

Keywords: *identity, culture, materiality, spirituality, essentialist culture,*

The novel *Sumnima*, which is set in the ancient period, is about the encounter of an orthodox Hindu Brahmin boy with a Kirant girl and the differences in their cultural lifestyle and culture. Somdatta representing orthodox Hindu followed a specific culture whereas Sumnima representing Kirant had her own culture and way of life. Sumnima lived in a community where there were different sets of behaviour. Somdatta, the Brahmin boy had disagreement with Kirant girl Sumnima's culture. The novel ends with the realization of Somdatta and Sumnima that no culture is superior to the other but each has own importance. The ending shows the reconciliation of Kirant and Hindu culture as the complementary and equal to one another. Kirants valorise their own culture and Hindus do the same; the outcome of the blend of these two cultures forms a complete and diverse human society, which is seen in the generation of Somdatta's son and Sumnima's daughter.

The novel's main concern is to show that two ethnic communities that seem to be rival to one another are not the opposite but complementary to each other. Rather than imposing essentialism, all the culture must be allowed to flourish so that one can learn from the other and move forward hand in hand. The spiritual and intellectual part of Brahmanism is essential for better development of human race and the material emphasis of Kirant gives way for healthy and happy life. The call for reconciliation between the Hindu and the Kirant culture is reflected in the novel. Michael Hutt writes, "The novel brings the two characters close together in order to show that the denial on the part of the Brahmin is a path to misery and failure and that healing can take place and harmony can be established only through a compromise between the protagonists'

very different views of life” (131). Somdatta had emphasized on his spiritual part and had denied caring for the body because of which he was in trouble. Sumnima was not concerned about spirituality because of which she had no idea about the spiritual life.

Sumnima tells Somdatta about her husband's dream to go to Kashi. She says, “He says he will now go to Kashi and there he will adopt a lineage like that of a Brahmin and will also embrace a big dream”(69-70). Sumnima's husband wanted to attain spirituality as the Kirants have become more matrealistic. Both of these protagonists of the novel lack what the other holds. If the spirituality is interwoven with materiality, the sound body with spiritual mind can be attained. The novel shows that one culture can learn from the other. Therefore, rather than negating and trying to impose own value over another, one should acknowledge and respect different culture.

Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala throughout the novel presents the tussle between the two ethnic people but at the end of it gives much emphasis on ethnic harmony critiquing essentialism. The final words of Sumnima to her daughter and her son in law (son of Somdatta) reveals the novelist's desire for ethnic harmony between the two ethnic communities rather than the superiority of the one over the other.

Sumnima tells her son-in-law about the need of compromise both her daughter and he has to make for co-existence as they have very different way of life and philosophy regarding it. She says, “If you understand her ethnical tradition and see the way she is traversing. You can understand my daughter very well. The daughter, too, by understanding your ideas must be prepared to abandon her path somewhat. In the same way, you must also try to compromise, being prepared to abandon some of your ways. May you prosper! May your descendants be such to be able to find out the ways of compromise! (114)

The conversation between Sumnima and Somdatta in their first encounter itself shows how the two kids have internalized the racial differences between them through their appearance. The young characters are proud of belonging to respective ethnic community or culture and try to defend it. The act of defence shows that the difference between them is constructed by the society and they have accepted it.

The novel presents the conflict between the two cultures. Somdatta's father Suryadatta teaches his child to be away from uncultured non-Aryans. He says, “ My son, this is a non-Aryan region. You have to live here very cautiously. Non Aryans follow the religion of beasts, but whereas we believe in the religion propounded by gods.” (8). Suryadatta is an essentialist. He believes his culture to be the best and other's culture to be neglected even by his naive son. The identity that Suryadatta is trying to create is not a solid identity but is fluid and changeable. Regarding the same, Jacques Derrida states: “Identity, whether of human self or of objects in the world, is no longer viewed as having a stable, fixed or pre-given essence, but seen as fluid and dependent, like linguistic terms, on a variety of contexts.”(652). The identity of Suryadatta, Somdatta and his son can be compared and contrasted. The identity of these depend upon their performance and context. Suryadatta had independent identity, far and detached from the Kirants. Somdatta has his identity in relation to Sumnima and her culture and in the same way Somdatta's son's identity is connected directly with the Kirants.

Both Somdatta and Sumnima learn the essence of life from each other's culture.

Sumnima finds importance of spirituality through Somdatta's culture and in the same way

Somdatta finds out the importance of bodily pleasure and connection to nature through Sumnima's Kirant culture. Michel Foucault states that he intends to "[de]fine the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality" (3). Somdatta and Puloma cannot get any sexual pleasure. They maintain physical relationship only for the sake of procuring the children (preferably a son) to run their generations which is religious as well as parental responsibility. Both of them either neglect or suppress physical urgency claiming it to be sin. Sumnima, on the other hand, makes Somdatta aware about the need to fulfil the physical desires at the pond. In the same way, Puloma feels the urge and gratifies the need. Koirala presents the need of orthodox Hindus to learn from the Kirants about sexuality and physical needs rather than discarding their culture labelling as savages and uncultured. The Kirants have learnt to live their life to fullest enjoying every physical pleasure but Hindus tend to live spiritual life. Koirala opines that if both physical and spiritual lives are brought together, the life will be worth living. Avoiding and dominating over other culture is not the solution but respecting each other.

Sumnima in her old age has learnt much about Brahmin tradition and culture and the type of behaviour Somdatta showed his whole life. She had seen the reflection of Somdatta on his son and worries about the relationship with her daughter who is exactly like her. Because of the differences they had, Sumnima and Somdatta could not get married though they loved each other unconditionally. Sumnima does not want her daughter and Somdatta's son to meet the tragedy she and Somdatta had to face. She is trying her best to explain the differences the newly-weds have and is teaching how they have to tackle the problems that may arise in the days to come. The ethnicity shapes the way of life of people and the way they think. Sumnima wants them to synchronize their ethnic values and give space to the partners to be on their own at times required. This gesture gives the way for ethnic harmony between husband and wife belonging to different culture. Sumnima's teachings do not reflect any essentialist thought. She tries to show that both Kirant and Hindu culture are good in their own way.

Sumnima's final words to her daughter and Somdatta's son hold the essence of the novel critiquing essentialist culture and the need of ethnic harmony. Both Somdatta and Sumnima could not practically implement the idea of ethnic harmony in their life due to essentialist thought of Suryadatta who was the representative of ruling class of that period. About Sumnima's final words, Michael Hutt writes, "Sumnima's final words about the need for compromise between her Kirant daughter and her new Brahmin son-in-law are commonly read as a call for harmony among Nepal's variegated ethnic groups" (136). The statement is not only the teaching for Somdatta's son and Sumnima's daughter but also for all the Nepalese people. Sumnima's final words give way for the people desiring to extend relationship out of their ethnicity. It is also a warning to them about the possible problems one might encounter in the close relationship with someone of another ethnic group. Sumnima had already anticipated the possibility from her relationship with Somdatta. So, she is warning the varied ethnic people to understand

about the complexity of getting married to someone from another ethnicity. But it does not mean that she is discouraging them from doing it rather she is encouraging them to do so being aware of the problems that could arise later.

V. Sharma makes a general outline of B. P. Koirala's characters and shows that Koirala focuses on the characters who express his social values through those characters. The characters' problems are not personal but are the problems of the society they live in. Sharma writes:

Koirala has always given importance to characterization, which he projects in a natural way through the use of simple language. Through his characters, he expresses his social values; and when conflict is transferred from the social plane to his characters' inner selves, his works assume great intensity (209-210).

Characterization is much important and evidently seen in *Sumnima*. Sumnima and Somdatta are presented as the characters that are poles apart from social and cultural standpoint who happened to meet casually. The conflict that was prevalent in their societies is deeply reflected in their friendship as well. Their belief is based on their social experiences and their personal experience is also social experience. But the experience of each and every individual cannot be termed as social experience as the experiences are always private or personal.

In it he shows the confluence of Kirati (i.e., tribal) culture and Hindu philosophy. The attitude of Sumnima, a Kirati girl, towards life is centered on the body, but her lover, Somdutta, the Brahmin boy, believes more in the soul than the body, and in life after death. In this book, however, the importance of both body and soul has been emphasized and a compromise is struck between body and soul for purposeful existence in this world.

Abhi Subedi, regarding the novel *Sumnima* writes, "This novel introduces a completely new theme in the history of Nepali novels. Just as Hermann Hesse's novels that dramatize the clash between life and cults and stands independently in the tradition of Western literature, this novel also stands on its own (123). Subedi opines that the novel established a new theme in the literary traditions on Nepal. In that regard *Sumnima* has established itself as novel writing.

The novel shows that essentialist culture is not possible to prevail in any condition. In the beginning, Somdatta was not positive towards the view of life of Sumnima, the representative of the Kirants. At the later part of the novel, Somdatta developed faith upon the Bijuwa of Kirant. It shows that finally Somdatta accepts the values of the Kirants. Even the prince who had visited Somdatta's hermitage had tried to impose Brahmanic values over the Kirants and Bhillas. The domination of the prince can be analyzed in the line of Mahendra Lawoti's notion of the imposition of CHHEM values over other ethnic values. Lawoti writes:

Nepal's rulers were strengthening their authoritarian regime and caste-based hold even until the mid-twentieth century. Among other things inequality and other things, inequality and exclusion, which are not favourable for fostering

democracy and could become inimical to it as well, became entrenched during this long period of authoritarian rule. The CHHEM (Caste Hill Hindu Elite Males) consolidated their hold with the consolidation of the state (2).

The Kirant tradition requires the sacrifice of cows and pigs as their ritual for making their deities happy but Brahmin and Kshatriya consider pig as untouchable animal and holy animal simultaneously as the incarnation of lord Vishnu. The Hindu Brahmin and Kshatriya consider cow as Goddess Laxmi and forbid the sacrifice of both cow and the pig. Because of the position of power, the prince as per the request of Suryadatta, father of Somdatta forbids them to sacrifice both the animals leaving them unable to follow their tradition. "From today on you are notified by the king's order that killing of cow is prohibited in this area." (12) Despite the attempts of those in power to impose essentialism, the attempt fails.

V. Sharma further writes about the symptomatic writing of Koirala as focusing on individual rather than the society. He writes,

In his literary works Koirala gives more emphasis to the individual rather than to society. According to him, the new human being of the new era is a rebel against both society and socially evolved laws. Humans are now important in themselves and not as a unit of society (212)

In the novel as well, the focus is on the individual. Somdatta is the centre of the plot and the society he belongs to is ignored from the beginning of the novel to the end. Even though he belonged to a society, he is liberated from it and lives a solitary life. Even the family comes secondary to his personal goal. He does not want to compromise the individual freedom indulging in other acts.

To conclude, the voice against essentialist culture in Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala's novel *Sumnima* is so strongly put that it makes the readers feel the urgency to establish harmonious relationship among the people of all the culture forgetting their differences. The sons and daughters of a Hindu Brahmin and a Kirant get married at last despite their ethnic and cultural differences. The novel presents the possibility of co-existence between the ethnically different types of people as a family rather than fighting on the differences one carries. The differences in our ethnic culture might separate us from the others but nationality binds us together. The novel invites every Nepali to join hands together and move towards prosperity respecting cultural differences and not attempting to establish essentialist culture.

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