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Cultural Representations in Border Literature: Reflecting on Harka Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal*

Mani Bhadra Gautam, PhD 

Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal

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2024 **Corresponding Author:** Mani Bhadra Gautam, E-mail:

gautammanibhadra@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article explores the issues raised in Harka Gurung's Vignettes of Nepal and analyzes them from historical perspectives. Cultural activities of the different geographical locations of Nepal that Gurung explores in the book are based on border, culture and the literature. Culture is a part of social practices interlinked to the cultural activities that connect people and literature of a society or a cultural community under a chain of social/socio-cultural activities. There might be different kinds of cultural groups within the same geographical border but they have the same kind of humanitarian values. However, they have some conflicting borders because of the space on performances and understanding of the cultural critics. Here, border refers to both the cultural community's line as well as geographical territory. Many people respect to each-other's culture but some of them disrespect borderland culture and literature that creates social disharmony in the name of cultural identity. Culture is a part of literary activities that helps to generate the literature and every literature is based on the culture. Gurung's Vignettes of Nepal incorporates twenty essays based on different geographical borderlands, cultural practices and literature. He begins his essays from west of Kathmandu and concludes

them coming to the east. In this study, this researcher selects particularly a few essays based on cultural borderland. Border, culture and literature are inseparable and so this study is on cultural cum ethno-geographical methodology as it studies the behavioral things of the people of different cultural communities. Objective of this paper is to show the connectivity of literature in the cultural borderland. To achieve the research goal, this study centers on historical places and observes cultural practices in Nepal. This researcher applies Mary Anderson and Dor Bahadur Bista's ideas as supporting tools to the research in addition to Shalom H. Schwartz's theory based on universal human values and cross-cultural psychologies. Finding of this paper is that the humanitarian cultures of the borders are key subjects to create the socio-cultural harmonies that help to generate the literature.

Keywords: Geographical locations, humanitarian values, border literature, cultural practices

Introduction

Harka Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal* presents different geographical locations of Nepal that he has visits. He explores his lively experiences in the book which are critically studied in this article. The experiences are based on space of the border, culture and their literature. He visited different geographical territories of Nepal and studied the activities of people residing there in between 1960s to the 80s. It is an account of his life and works based on his traveling throughout the country and his observations of the cultural performances in different geographical borderlands. It looks like a travelogue of a renowned geographer who accompanied with arts and artworks in the hills, mountains and the plains of Nepal. He takes the geographical and cultural connection between people and places in the borderlands of Nepal as an inseparable part of arts of border-cultural relationships.

Major cultural groups in Nepal include the Gurung, Magar, Thakuri, Thakali, Tamang, Tharu, Chepang, and Khasa-Aryan. The major religious communities are Hindus and Buddhists. Gurung rightly studies them and writes about their cultural practices. He predicts that the overpopulation problem in the Tarai affects the growth of culture and literature. This problem arises in the management of residential, agricultural, and industrial areas for these groups. Socio-cultural adjustments, cultural connections, and transformations are other issues in the new geographical location, where certain communities cannot understand humanitarian values. Managing food, shelter, and other facilities becomes difficult due to the mass migration of people from the mountainous and hilly areas of Nepal to the Tarai. People migrate there for the easily available daily necessities and modern facilities. Gurung's essays convey a message to the concerned authorities to solve the problems of cultural practices, provide shelter, and address the food crisis by applying humanity-based principles. This research makes an analysis on the issues mentioned in the *Vignettes of Nepal*.

Critics remark Gurung to be a geographer, humanitarian and a development planner. He has studied broadly about geography, artworks, culture and literature within different

geographical territories of Nepal and abroad. He writes to historicize the geographical boundaries, national heritages and cultural activities. He is a path-finder of the cultural identity movement. His academic height helped him to create a reputation as a humanitarian in the wider space of geography as an advocator of the geographical and cultural issues. He writes about the Indo-Nepal open border and exposes the issues of ignored fate from the side of Nepal. He invites people for public discourses to discuss the problems seen between the 1980s and 1990s. In this regard, this study is made on a qualitative method by observing his works and studying the essays. Devendra Raj Panday in *Nepal's Failed Development: Reflections on the Mission and the Maladies*, published in 1999 writes, “. . . the engaged-intellectual of the 1990s” (3). Devendra Raj has rightly observed him as an intellectual who engaged in academic endeavors, socio-cultural activities and geographical issues. As an honest secretariat and a leader of the Civil Right movement of Nepal, Panday rightly takes Gurung as a development practitioner. He claims that Gurung “. . . strongly speaks for the nation but many other intellectuals are just engaged in minor issues” (4). Pandey's claim proves Gurung as a national hero and an advocator who speaks for the geographical territory, arts, culture, literature, human values and the National identity.

Panday tries to connect Gurung's activities with Dor Bahadur Bista and writes, “Bista's *Description of Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* was first published in 1991, but it began to fire the imagination of critical thinkers only in the late 1990s” (4). Panday claims that Gurung's works trace out the roadmaps like Dor Bahadur Bista's visionary works for Nepal's development. Professor Chaitanya Mishra, like Panday, has rightly appreciated his works and he has followed his way of writing for national identities, culture and the border. He rejects immature decisions of the authorities as he has a vision for a powerful state mechanism. Gurung is also a politician but his politics is for the prosperity of Nepal and Nepali citizens. Mahesh Chandra Regmi writes, “Unlike dissemination, production of knowledge is a thankless task away from the limelight of public adulation” (6). Regmi claims that his works are the sources for knowledge production among the people. In a public forum they speak for equality. Panday, Mishra, Bista and Regmi claim that Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal* rightly helps to escape away from intellectual wasteland. Cultural issues are explored through the narratives of pundits and well-trained Hindu scholars who advocate for religious campaigns.

Cultural History and Space Boundaries in the *Vignettes of Nepal*

Harka Gurung, scholar and geographer of Nepal loves traveling, making discourses with the people, observing the cultural activities and spaces. In his travels to the different geographical borders and cultural places, he collects information about people, places and things. On the basis of field-based observation and information collection, he writes about culture, borders and literature. Himalchuli, Sagarmatha, Mustang, Dolpa and Manaslu are major geographical locations that Gurung writes about in his essays. He writes in the *Vignettes of Nepal*:

The snow peaks of Manaslu and Himalchuli loom large just twenty-four kilometers north of the village. Thula was born in Taranche where his father has established himself well through his earnings as a Gurkha soldier. The old man has been to France and Palestine during the First World War and had been mentioned in dispatches during the Waziristan campaign of 1919. Thula's two elder brothers had seen battle action in the jungles of Burma and Borneo during the Second World War. Two generations of soldiers in the family had quite a collection of war medals and Thula would listen enraptured to their material exploits. He was equally fascinated by their description of strange places and peoples in far off lands. ("The Initiation", 1)

Cultural representations, games, sports and related performances are in environmental connection to the people. Gurung's essays include the geographical locations and the subjects of wooden hills with snow ranges. Cultural events are interconnected even with animal's activities and the men-animal based performances in relation to the people as they are culturally performed. Gurung brings his Thula Baba, uncle Thula's stories frequently to describe cultural practices. Thula (socially respected word addressed to the big and honored one of the family or a community) and the boys play games, "supposed to be a thief crow and other boys small nesting birds" (2). Egg stealing and climbing the tree games are really interesting as they are known as a part of culture in the community. It also includes the stories of war literature through the narratives of Thula who had seen battle action in the jungles of Burma and Borneo that helped to create the war literature based on life, love and the wars. Geographical locations and weather changes are other interesting things included in the narratives that create an impact on cultural activities. People practice sitting in the different geographical parts and continuing their activities according to the seasons that are clearly shown in Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal*.

Farmers come down from upper parts of the mountains and Himalayas to the lower parts of the geographical location with their cattle, sheep and horses to graze in the village field in the winter season. They celebrate the socio-cultural festivals in homes and temples frequently with butter, cheese and ghee of the cows and sheep. Friends and family reunion of the carnivorous people are really enjoyable with meat in the festivals like Dashain and Tihar. Some of the bad practices in the society are hunting/killing birds and animals as written in Gurung's essay, ". . . it was customary for the elders to go hunting for deer, bear and wild boar in the autumn" (2). In addition to the cultural practices of killing birds and animals they collect antlers and horns for intact home decoration.

Longer tail monkey and deer dances are the parts of mountain culture in literature. Bears, leopards and *Ban Jhakri's* connections with people make the cultural literature more interesting in the border. They are as mentioned, "Thula made a lot of smoke in the hut to frighten away wild animals and the *Ban Jhakri*. He was really scared when he heard a whistling sound in the evening, for he had been told that the *Ban Jhakri* usually whistles" (2). *Ban Jhakri*, Thula and the shepherd's relationships are here turned to be frightening matters as cultural practices to observe and follow to the children. They practice to escape

away from not only the wild animals but also from the wild beasts and evil spirits. Colorful dresses and the skins of animals worn among the people of the cultural communities can be historical documents as they are not much practiced in the present. Senior citizens try to train the young age people in cultural practices that are practiced from earlier generations that helps to generate the cultural literature as included in the *Vignettes of Nepal*

Theoretical Underpinning

Intellectuals have a number of judgments upon Gurung's planning and his works. Sardar Bhim Bahadur Pandey and Yadunath Khanal take him as an "entering moral hero" (4). They evaluate him on the basis of his works. In his book, he points out the weaknesses of road extension in the Himalchuli, Sagarmatha, Mustang, Dolpa and Manaslu areas. He advocates against inequality in distribution of national property. He argues that there must be equal distribution of the resources and the infrastructure development that is required in every geographical location and the national territory. His excessive concentration on the issues of development projects helps to interlinks between the Kathmandu valley and the mountainous areas of Nepal. Hilly and mountainous areas are in the bulk of population growth where food scarcity is a grave problem. There is a lack of food supply as there is not easy access to transportation and communication. The food and nutrition problems are to be solved from the food-surplus of *Tarai*. *Terai* belt is the production potential area of Nepal that suffered from mass moving of the people from hills and mountains in search of food and modern facilities. Gurung advocates from the side of national developers who bring out the planning for solution of the problem with the way-out road extension in the hilly and mountainous areas.

Gurung focuses on the geographical boundaries and writes about cultural communities' understanding. His concept is close to Shalom H. Schwartz's theory based on universal human values and cross-cultural psychologies. The theoretical notion extends the underlying motivation of the community-based ideologies. Cultural connectivity and hybridity help for socio-cultural inclusion. Developers start the works for road extension that helps for traveling and transportation that is mentioned in Gurung's essays however they are insufficient in making the meanings up to now. Traveling and writing helps for exploring the cultural meanings. The writers can learn something new about people and their behavioral activities based on their arts and cultures as Berkeley publications. In Schwartz: An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values, it is written:

. . . ultimate meaning is a basic human need, then spirituality might be a distinct value found in all societies. The value survey therefore included possible markers for spirituality, gleaned from widely varied sources (a spiritual life, meaning in life, inner harmony, detachment, unity with nature, accepting my portion in life, devout). However, spirituality did not demonstrate a consistent meaning across cultures. In the absence of a consistent cross-cultural meaning, spirituality was dropped from the theory despite its potential importance in many societies. (Schwartz 7)

Traveling for the behavioral observations and cultural studies of the people's performances helps for multi-cultural connection of the geographical and the cultural borderlands. Ultimate meaning of traveling and writing is based on human values. Gurung's essays make a comparative analysis of the spirituality and physical presence of the human values in the different geographical borderlands. Gurung argues ". . . regional inequality is one of the major development challenges in Nepal" (37). Gurung is an intellectually fueled geographer encapsulated with widely visionary thinking among the intellectuals. He argues for the changes in policy level to bring that is important in Nepal.

Harka Gurung points out the activities of the national planners whose biased road maps create a problem to interlink between Kathmandu valley and the other parts of Nepal. He questions the weak linkage of the roads and connection problems between the food-deficit hills and the food basket *Tarai* where the bulk of the people are living. Gurung speaks also for the problem of Karnali sector and advocates to interlink the road from Nepalgunj-Surkhet to Dailekh. Surkhet-Jumla road construction is another way to link the far-west zone. Dhangadhi-Dadeldhura link also is an additional north-south link to make easy access to food supply. Gurung in his article, "Nepal, Regional Strategy for Development" writes:

. . . the space-economy and cultural connection of Nepal is more articulated now than during the 1970s but the growth dynamics in peripheral areas as envisaged in the regional development strategy remains far from realized. Location specific potentialities remain unexplored and the "development package" that should have accompanied the laying out of roads is conspicuous by its absence. (Gurung 7).

Gurung's focus is on space-economy and cultural connection of Nepal. He articulates the things in our history with an objective of road extension. Subsequent plans in the road extension and physical development helps for cultural connection that finally produces the border literature. Gurung's ideas are close to Schwartz Theory of Basic Values:

In addition to identifying ten basic values, the theory explicates the structure of dynamic relations among them. One basis of the value structure is the fact that actions in pursuit of any value have consequences that conflict with some values but are congruent with others. For example, pursuing achievement values typically conflicts with pursuing benevolence values. Seeking success for self tends to obstruct actions aimed at enhancing the welfare of others who need one's help. But pursuing both achievement and power values is usually compatible. Seeking personal success for oneself tends to strengthen and to be strengthened by actions aimed at enhancing one's own social position and authority over others. (Schwartz 8.)

Schwartz focuses on human values and his theory explicates the dynamic structure for humanity and the socio-cultural changes. He suggests helping each-other among the people that lead the human values towards the path of success. Like Schwartz, Gurung identifies basic ideas on human values in national developments and border-culture

activities. Thus, laying the foundations in clearing the way out for development of the borderlands, this paper outlines the basic foundation through Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal*. Gurung's attempt in his writing is to create a cultural harmony giving values to the different activities of the geographical locations and the practices of the cultural communities. He focuses on pursuing novelty and bringing a change in the society to undermine preserving time-honored customs i.e. tradition values. In contrast, "pursuing tradition values is congruent with pursuing conformity" values.

Power exercises and ideological conflict are obstacles to pursuing cultural communities. Socio-cultural advocates experience conflict between pursuing self-transcendence or self-enhancement values. Conflicts between specific values (power vs. universalism, tradition vs. hedonism) are also near-universal obstacles. Power exercises of the rulers also created some problems among the people of the different geographical locations. Unequal distribution of the national resources in the hilly and mountainous area of Nepal brings a great loop hole in national development and so the people from these locations try to migrate to the safety areas where they can manage the food and shelter safely. Another problem to dislocate the location or to shift the people from place to place is the weather condition of the different geographical places. Internal wars, geographical conditions and the problems in food supply are the issues mentioned in the border and culture literature of these geographical boundaries. Gurung writes:

The hill fort is now in ruins but during the medieval times following the decline of the Khasa empire of Jumla, Doti was one of the powerful kingdoms in the far west. Ajmerkot of Dadeldhura is credited to Ajayapal who ruled Doti during the 14th century and had his summer capital at Ajmer Coat and winter capital at Dipail. Doti rule extended north-west as far as Johar and Darma and Kumaon until 1581 A.D. when Kumaon rulers of the Chand dynasty re-established their authority. There were constant wars between Doti and Kumaon through the next two centuries and it was to the last two decades of the 18th century, that a Gorkhali force under Ranbir Khatri defeated the then ruler Dip Shahi and finally annexed Doti to the expanding Gorkhali empire. ("West of Kathmandu" 12-13)

Gurung highlights the wars between the Khasa empire of Jumla and Doti. He describes the empire as a powerful kingdom of the west. Gurung also talks about Ajmerkot of Dadeldhura, which extends up to the northwest in Johar. He emphasizes the long-lived enmities of the geographical territories as the war of borderlands. Gurung writes a travelogue about his personal experiences and the group's sights. Collected experiences about other beautiful places are, "We had brief halts at Dhangarhi and Bhairawa and white peaks of Dhaulagiri, Annapurna, Ganesh and Langtang floated above blue ridges and brown hills as we flew east wafted by the strong westerly afternoon wind" ("West of Kathmandu" 17). Gurung's glimpses and memories about the beautiful places are written documents to historicize about the people, places and things. They are historically and culturally important documents that describe the borderlands. Professor Kamal Prasad

Malla also praises the tours and travels, works and writings of the national geographer Harka Bahadur Gurung.

Professor KP Malla wrote actively between 1970 and 1990. In the essay, *The Road to Nowhere*, he writes, "Harka Bahadur Gurung, 1939–2006, was a geographer, a development planner, an anthropologist and a gifted author" (93). Malla's writing supports the discourses made on *Vignettes of Nepal* throughout the 1980s. Like Professor KP Malla, Devendra Raj Panday writes, "Restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1990 turned out to be what Faiz Ahmad Faiz had lamented as the 'night-bitten dawn' at the time of Indian independence" (4). Panday takes Gurung not only as a geographer and a development planner. He takes him as a politician who is aware of international politics, too. Like Panday's remarks, Dor Bahadur Bista's *Description of Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization* also supports the claim. In addition to the above-mentioned reviews, a prominent scholar, an accomplished translator, socio political critic and a respected teacher Khagendra Sangraula turns out to be reflective on the humanistic characteristic of Gurung. He writes, "Having been a learner in the 1960s, a reader in the 1970s, an observer in the 1980s and a chronicler since the 1990s, I find the absence of a woman, a Dalit or even a Madhesi" (42). Sangraula appreciates Gurung's historical studies who historicizes the buried memory of unburied history but he criticizes the loop hole seen in his research and writing regarding gender, culture and location.

Methodological Application to the Study

It is difficult to pinpoint easily on the humanitarian, socio-cultural, economic and environmental dimensions that Gurung indicates in the *Vignettes of Nepal*. This article tries to make a coverage firstly on Gurung's travelogue, secondly to the cultural heritages and thirdly to the geographical boundaries by keeping the human values in the center. This study applies Schwartz principle, human value-based theory, and investigates the essays of Harka Gurung from a humanitarian point of view. The study is purely based on qualitative research techniques for critical analysis. It focuses on the loopholes in the linkage of cultural activities across different geographical boundaries, for which Gurung's essays, reference books, online reviews, and critical remarks are studied, analyzed, and applied. Tourism development can help to bridge between the geographical knowledge and the cultural practices. Tourism activities, feasibility studies and development planning are the study issues investigated in this research paper. This paper questions the weaknesses of the government mechanism, planner's biases, and other problems that people living in the hilly and mountainous areas face regularly. This study also highlights the unequal distribution of national resources and questions the unequal treatment by the concerned authorities.

Result and Discussion

This paper raises the issues of very poor infrastructure built on the way and the home stay places; such as traveling facilities, porter's management for the traveler's baggage's supply and food services. Major problem occurred because of the lack of transportation facilities. Travelers face the road difficulties and problems in medical

facilities for health treatments, too in the mountains and the hilly areas. The government agencies fail in institutional support to the planners and the travelers. Crucial challenges have to be faced to meet the bridging points of the culture and literature of the border. Home stay practices help in the close observation of the cultural practices and performances for the ethnographic study of the behavioral activities and attitudes of the people. The possibilities in interlinking between culture and border literature are clearly shown in Gurung's essays. Tourism profession also helps in creating employment among the local people that helps to increase the capital income. There are a number of tourism areas discussed in Gurung's essays and Ghale Gaun is one of the places this researcher has collected the same kind of experience. This researcher grabbed some opportunities to know about their cultural performances. The observation made on the cultural performances and dialectics used in the communication among the locals and the travelers helped to know about the cultural changes. Importance of cultural values practiced in the different socio-cultural communities' influence people to see, study the things, investigate, preserve and apply the positive aspects of tourism.

Travelers love to know about cultural connections of the people living in the different geographical boundaries. They see and observe the fashion, hymns, songs and dances that are practiced in the local communities to help for the cultural connection. Tourists love to pass the time in home stay to research and explore the things of the different geographical locations. They choose the local residences to study about their traditional cultures and local people's way of life. Cultural differences of the different geographical territories, especially the Ghale Gaun people. Travelers in their journey love to exchange the things as gifts. They love to exchange cameras, chocolates, clothes and the home-made handicrafts. Travelers are eager to carry home-made products. The exchanges of the things increase the love and develop a close relationship among them. Foreigners might induce changes in their products with the local productions. They seem funny in the traditional dress up. Among all the things, the food habits of the locals along with the new way of living standards are researchable.

Numbers of travelers enjoy sight-seeing of the mountains, Himalayas and the homestay area that are recorded as a cause for financial sustainability of the people in the concerned area. It has many positive impacts in the changes of life style of the people there. It has some negative impacts, too, as it increases in drug addictions, growing prostitution and consequently it can divert the society towards the criminal activities. Gurung seems worried about increasing environmental pollution, youngster's interests in taking drugs and social disharmony. Modernization has invited the concretization and the modern gadgets invite environmental pollution. The fresh environment of the mountainous and the Himalayan areas also has been polluted. Excessive use of the chemicals and different kinds of pesticides have turned the greenery of the fertile land to the deserted area. Excessive cutting of the trees for firewood and throwing tin and plastics everywhere destroy the fresh environment. The available information shows that the haphazard and unplanned development has destroyed the environment. We are compelled to face the

world's environmental challenges in recent years and that is also a serious issue in Nepal, too. Therefore, we have to turn to the biocentric path to guarantee the future of all the people, birds, animals, living beings, their culture and their literature, too.

The sharing and caring of the travelers have also indicated increasing social and familial solidarity. Written and translated version documents of English translators of Himalayan literature publish books in English work as the sources for travel information to the foreigners. The information resources work for guiding the tourists. Travelogues have helped to inter-link between the border and cultural literature. The travelers, geographers and the explorers have given us various guidelines to know about the cultural heritages, people and the places. The ecological consciousness of the climbers highlights the spiritual meaning of our fragile heritage, which travelers can feel in the mountains and the Himalayas.

Conclusion

Gurung's *Vignettes of Nepal* clearly portrays the humanitarian picture of early to mid-21st century Nepal. The travelogues are related with the dialogues made among Nepali travelers, local people, tour guides and the tourists from abroad who are aware of the human values. Many travelers face problems due to the geographical difficulties and weak road access in the mountainous and hilly areas of Nepal. The helpless travelers expect to get help from the local people. Travelers love to make their journey joyful in everyday traveling. They bring the myth and mystery together as we don't see and feel in our day to day activities. Travelers observe things on a deeper level as their experiences about the world are highly experimental. Like Schwartz's concept developed and explained in his theory on humanism, Gurung makes us aware of human values in the cultural and geographical borderlands. He connects artworks, arts, culture, and creatures of different geographical boundaries in *Vignettes of Nepal*.

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