

## **Antithesis to Machismo in the Poetry of Parijat and Kundan Sharma**

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper tries to provide an analysis, from the feministic approach, of the Nepali modernist poetry written by Parijat and Kundan Sharma. They were the avant-garde female poets of the 1960s in Nepali literature to write on the gender issues threatening the patriarchal system. Their antithetical stand to machismo was inspired by the Western academic and literary tradition. Some of the women characters in Parijat's poems are found to have been sufferer under triple marginalization, namely, from the perspectives of economic status, caste and gender. In spite of the fact that the society in the 1960s was inhospitable to gender equality and women's rights, these poets brilliantly articulated agonizing experiences of gender bias pervasive in both textual and practical world. Undoubtedly, the preliminary moderate feministic voice in Nepali poetry initiated by Parijat and Kundan played a significant role to deconstruct myths about women institutionalized by text, tradition and socio-cultural context. Unlike the usual reading, this study shows how these two pioneer female poets initiated revolutionary zeal to defy status quo based on traditional gender role.*

*Keywords:* machismo, antithesis, stereotypes, patriarchy, feministic enterprise, subjugation

### **Introduction**

The objective of this research article is to examine and analyse the representative poems of Parijat and Kundan Sharma through the feminist lens. Despite the presence of a number of female poets in Nepali literature earlier to Parijat and Kundan Sharma, these two were the first female poets to systematically write poems, with a revolutionary zeal of social transformation, on the issue of Nepalese women, as an antithesis to machismo. Borrowing the consciousness from the Western modernist literature, a small but avant-garde group of Nepali poets emerged in the 1960s with their experimental consciousness both in form and content. They did foreground

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varieties of women's experience of subjugation and hitherto sidelined typical feelings about the domineering patriarchal set-up.

A number of researches have been done on Nepali poetry either on the basis of periodization or on the basis of wholesale approach that is more descriptive in nature. In the similar fashion, these two senior female poets' poetry, especially, that of Parijat, have been widely analyzed from the Marxist and the Existentialist perspectives. However, their reading from feminist perspective has received less critical attention. Despite the fact that Kundan was a precursor for so many Nepalese female poets, knowingly or unknowingly, she has been sidelined from critical as well as academic discussions.

It is very rare to find out analytical writing, standing on the theoretical background, on the poetry of women. This researcher aims to explore and scrutinize feminist voice and concerns germinated in these two female poetic precursors. General as well as intellectual readers, through this research, might get oriented to pinpoint the exact poetic location of Parijat and Kundan and their impact on the poetry of successive generations. There lies the significance of this study.

The time when Parijat and Kundan wrote these poems, the socio-political and cultural scenario of Nepal was extremely inhospitable to women. Illiberal political system, radical patriarchy, dowry system and the inhuman practice of untouchability were in the culmination. These Nepali modernist female poets occupy a space in Nepali poetry which must be visited by the poets and scholars of any generation who search the preliminary feminist voice in Nepali literature. They creatively and forcefully projected, for the first time, in Nepali poetry, an antithesis to the conventional machismo deeply-rooted in the social psyche since ages.

### **Theoretical Framework/Research Methodology**

This study analyses their poetry in the larger purview of feministic outlook. Despite the fact that feministic outlook is diversified from the issue of women's equal rights in private and public spheres to supporting the lesbian practices, the concern here is to explore, in their poetry, the issues and rights of women in the heterosexual society and their typical experiences of menstruation, pregnancy and child bearing never experienced by men in their life time. The feministic insights developed by Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Mina Loy and Elaine Showalter have been used as theoretical parameters. For that purpose, eight different poems, : 'Women Folk' , 'A Statement of the Raped', 'A Room, an Objective and an Intellectual Lady', 'A

'Love Story' and 'An Interview of a Woman' by Parijat and 'Three Forms of Men - My Vision', 'Hello Ram' and 'Me, Mother and Daughter' by Kundan have been taken as primary texts for this paper.

### **Results and Findings**

Nepali modernist female poets Parijat and Kundan Sharma in order to shake machismo, sometimes rigorously and other times moderately chide patriarchy. As the powerful pioneer female poets in Nepali literature they venture to intellectually deconstruct the myths created to subjugate women. Under the patriarchal system, women are excluded from the positions of power and authority. The patriarchy positions the masculine at the site of authority and power in the society. Inventing an innovative, creative and comprehensive register of language these two poets despise patriarchal extremities upon women and also lower down the image of superior male god to the level of common humanity and cast aspersions on conventional gender roles.

### **Discussion**

The conventional gender ideology defines separate spheres for the work of men and women, roughly based on public-private dichotomy and identifying motherhood and married domestic life as the domains suited to women's natural talents and abilities. But the waves of changes taking place in women's life led men to fear a loss of power and prestige. As a result, among male writers, this preoccupation generally took the ambivalent form of simultaneous admiration to an empowered female and scorn for her abilities. Wollstonecraft wanted to use poetry "to enter public debates about gender roles, poverty and slavery" (Wollstonecraft, 1797). In the poem 'Women Folk' Parijat makes a cursory survey of gender roles and pleads the men folk not to be treacherous but walk together for the advancement of human society. In doing so, she reminds the age-long discriminatory practices institutionalized by the male-dominated society. Even though the expression sounds delicate, she is asserting for gender equality. Her appeal to the men folk reads convincing:

We are not creatures to survive separately  
I tightly hold your hand  
You take me to the point you have reached  
The point where exactly  
I had taken you  
In the ancient time of civilization. (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 43-47)

In the preliminary phase of civilization, people would live in tribes and societies were matriarchal in nature. Women nurtured the men lovingly and guided for better life. The speaker here wants to remind her partner that men and women are creatures to survive together.

The deeply embedded gender bias turns to be historical and textual tradition from generation to generation in the long run of history. Women, from the time patriarchy initiated as a social system, are considered inferior and lowly creatures. They are enclosed within the periphery of patriarchal system. Most of the biased mythologies from around the world have represented women both as devil and goddess whereas men are considered to be superior, powerful, adventurous and victorious. Positive stereotypes are attached to men. Contrary to it, pernicious negative images are used to refer to women. On most of the occasions in history, women are considered just as the means of men's attention, pleasure and victory. They are deprived of their rights to live an honored and fearless life. They are made socially powerless and physically exploited creating a false discourse that women are weak and emotionally fragile. Women are trivialized not only in mythology and practical spheres but in theoretical and philosophical texts as well. Needless to say, theoretical and philosophical establishments, overtly or covertly are the reflection of the social structure. However, the impact is vice versa, too. Mostly, our social and legal structure has remained male-dominated and that no more attempts to protect women's right to live freely and fearlessly. In Parijat's poem 'A Statement of the Raped', in front of the judge at the court, the raped woman states that the forester and his confidants raped her in the jungle. She further says:

Nobody is there to protect me outside  
Send me kindly inside the prison  
Please sir  
Send me kindly inside the prison (2073 BS, 20-23)

The raped speaker is looking for a secure haven that is not an open atmosphere but an enclosed space of prison where no invader can out rightly enter.

While visiting English modernist poetry, we can find some feminist poets' presence dashing and influential. Nepali modernist female poets like Parijat and Kundan Sharma were influenced from their modern education system. Parijat was born, brought up and educated in Darjeeling of India where the expansion of modern education system was far ahead as India was directly colonized by the British Empire.

There was an easy access to modern English education in Darjeeling in her time. In the similar fashion, Kundan Sharma was from the urban location of Kathmandu. When these poets wrote poems keeping women's issues at the center, Nepalese society was still feudalistic in nature. The autocratic rule of the monarch had curtailed fundamental rights of the public. Nevertheless, they borrowed modern consciousness directly or indirectly from the West. Among the modernist feminist from the West, Mina Loy was an unconventional poet most of the time engaged in her own experiments. Later on, she broke her relation with the Futurists because she confronted the hypocrisy that they showed on sexual politics. Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' strongly defends rebellious type of feminist principle. After the appearance of her poetic work 'Love songs to Joannes' she was instantly established as a poetic figure. Her poems consist of intellectual strength, technical innovation, ironic and traumatized tone and engagement with psychology and sexuality. Further, those poems explore visual capacities of language. Regarding feministic concern in writing she remarks, "Women if you want to realize yourselves- you are on the eve of a devastating psychological upheaval- all your pet illusions must be unmasked- the lies of have got to go- are you prepared for the wrench- There is no half-measure. No scratching on the surface of the rubbish heap of tradition, will bring about reform, the only method is absolute demolition" (Loy,1925).

In the 1960s, in Nepal, the socio-political atmosphere was suffocating to the artists, poets and intellectuals. A section of Nepali poetry written at that time was full of modernist characteristics. Inspired by the wave of western modernism, some Nepali poets brilliantly articulated their experiences of gender bias pervasive in both textual and practical world. Parijat, a towering modernist figure in Nepali poetry, is optimistic in her poetry in asserting that women, economically and politically marginalized, can resist oppression and create their own domain. Another poetic figure Kundan Sharma too looks interrogative about traditional gender role that has paralyzed women's vigor and potentiality. Parijat performs her willingness to eradicate gender prejudice from the private and public domain. She asserts the possibility and desirability of such changes. In an optimistic tone, in the poem 'A Room, an Objective and an Intellectual Lady' Parijat draws an image of middle class intellectual lady this way:

Window facing the opposite direction of wind  
A very simple table  
A mirror as a reflection of life  
Eye liner, powder, cream and eye-brow-pencil  
As symbols of an intellectual  
There are kept

An English novel and some daily newspapers

This is the room of an intellectual lady (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 1-7.)

The objective behind designing such an image of an intellectual lady might be a desire to produce a punching threat to the age-old pernicious machismo ruling over our psyche and the society as well.

In the process of tracing the western history of feminist enterprises and movements, modern version of feminism is supposed to have taken birth with the publication of Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Then after, many women activists and feminists tried to find ways to erase gender discrimination and promote women's empowerment in various fields of socio-economic and political life. Beauvoir posits that female's identity as the 'second sex' or other is not biological or natural fact but a cultural construct. She believes most of the myths are made and sustained by men so that new women need to create their own myths. Modern feminist writers and theorists have transformed old myths into new ones and replaced patriarchy with matriarchy. Females have been defined as 'other' or a kind of 'non- man' due to their lack of identifying male genital organ. Nobody is woman in-born but civilization, that is male-dominated, produces culture which is described as feminine.

Through this cultural process, in our civilization the masculine is identified rational, active, dominating, creative and adventurous whereas the feminine has come to be identified as passive, powerless, irrational, emotional and conventional. Beauvoir in her essay 'Myth and Reality' writes that the feminine "...in the amorous or conjugal relations in all relations where the woman is the vassal, the other, she is being dealt with the immanence" (Adams, 1992). In order to undo the traditional injurious images associated to women folk, Nepali women poets have contributed to the literary achievements of the modernist period, particularly in their articulation of class and gender issues. Their poetry represents a blending of folk and modernist aesthetics in their attempt to capture the complexities of contemporary life of female. Under the patriarchal social structure, women are treated as the other. Their position and role is minimized in the gender-bias society. A woman, who is not free to love her boyfriend, has to suffer a lot as a result of her involvement with a man of higher social status. In the poem 'A Love Story' Parijat writes:

My friend would report  
She had loved a boy  
Belonging to higher caste and status

As the gift of love  
Feudal shaved her scalp  
And made her roam about the village  
Her coward lover went to hide himself  
Into his mother's lap  
She roamed around the village  
Carrying a model voice of love  
Her everything was confiscated in return  
Village villains exploited her body  
And charged her to be a whore  
Now my friend has turned a lunatic  
Women's story of obligation  
You can read on her cataract (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 16-24.)

Caste and socio-economic status play a vital role to destroy a women changing her into a whore and a lunatic. Social structure is unfriendly for women.

Under the patriarchal set-up of society, women's subjugation is practiced by a combination of physical violence and cultural pressure. All aspects of society and culture function according to the sexual politics that encourages women to eternalize their own inferiority. However, the experiences of male and female are different as they physiologically possess great much dissimilarity. Regarding women's special experiences "men are unable to penetrate.... they are condemned to ignorance of the quality of women's erotic pleasure, discomfort of menstruation and the pains of childbirth" (Adams, 1992). In the similar vein, Parijat, in her poem 'Women Folk' demonstrates differences between the experiences of male and female. Naturally, women are bound to tolerate greater ranges of physical sufferings. Moreover, social rules are oppressive and discriminatory. She writes:

Not the same you and me  
Only complimentary to each other  
So you can't be participant  
In innumerable feelings of mine. (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 10-12.)

Sex and gender are two different concepts. Sex is biological whereas gender is social construct. Feminists find it useful to distinguish sex and gender. This enables them to argue that many differences between women and men are socially produced and therefore changeable. Although biological differences are fixed, gender differences are the oppressive results of social interventions that dictate how men and women should behave. Gender is the "socially imposed division of the sexes" (Rubin, 1975). Since

gender is social fabrication, it is thought to be mutable and alterable by political and social reform that would ultimately bring an end to women's subjugation. He argues feminism should aim to create “genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love” (Rubin, 1975).

Under the oppressive patriarchal system, women suffer discrimination, physical torture as well as psychological horror. Moreover, as female body, some natural type of painful responsibilities they have to carry out. In this way, we can see two different dimensions of their suffering. In the same poem ‘Women Folk’ Parijat, with an intention of presenting an antithesis to machismo, writes both kinds of biological and social suffering of women. The female speaker is addressing her male counterpart:

I can die alive with your corpse  
I can live enduring your collective rape  
Never this fate you have faced  
Never have you experienced never  
The painful period of menstruation  
No risk you need to take of your chastity  
No idea you possess  
The extremely boring period of pregnancy  
You need not tolerate limitless pain of delivery  
Right, I can't be mother without you  
But credit I have granted you to be father  
However, spontaneous maternity you don't understand  
Did woman ever rape you?  
Did woman ever tarnish your image?  
Did woman ever sell you somewhere? (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 13-26)

The poem, on one hand, demonstrates natural differences of female body from that of male body. On the other hand, it serves as a commentary on the masculine space and feminine space traditionally defined by patriarchal ideology.

Selecting a poor woman from the so-called untouchable class as the speaker of the poem, Parijat, in the poem 'An Interview of a Woman' presents a panorama of socio-economic backwardness of the marginal women of Nepal. The speaker in the poem is living a life of triple marginalization in the sense that she is economically challenged. Furthermore, she belongs to the economically depressed so-called untouchable caste of *Kami (Bishwokarma)*. She reveals her condition through the following lines:



Yes sir,  
I only know I have worked  
I only know I have undergone suffering  
I only know all about  
Wearing a tattered blouse  
And a hand-me-down sari  
You asking about my youthfulness  
I don't have any idea sir  
When it appeared and when went away. (2073 BS, 1-7)

Some Hindu scriptures illogically have institutionalized domination over women by deifying the husband and prescribing the subservient role to the wife. The influence of such belief system is visible especially in Aryan communities in Nepal. The deified image of the husband rules over the traditional wife. Parijat lets her speaker to portray her grandma's ideologically subjugated psyche. However, the speaker seems to be judgmental about her depressed state of life. She says:

I bitterly cried under the wedding veil  
The moment my old grandma said-  
He is the living god in your life  
Every morning and evening  
You should drink the water  
You collect from his feet after washing them. (2073 BS, 30-33)

It's not sure whether modern feminism can address the issue of the women belonging to the economically depressed class. However, the economically destitute woman interviewee in the poem is further vocal to reflect her economic deprivation:

Due to dandruff and parched lips  
I look like a ghastly ghost  
Do I look like a woman?  
.....  
My *Kami* husband's color and iron's color  
Look exactly the same. (2073 BS, 60-62, 66-67)

Another modernist female poet in Nepali literature Kundan Sharma, though doesn't reach to the lowest point of the social hierarchy seeking her character the way Parijat does connecting the marginal economic status with the marginal gender status, she digs up various layers of gender relations and attempts to establish woman's

significance in the male-dominated society. An indirect challenge she gives to the society which undermines women's role in the private and the public spheres of life. In the poem 'Three Forms of Men- My Vision' she imagines three different kinds of form of men namely lover, husband and baby. The image of the lover is very pleasant to mull over. The same man when changes into her husband, they turn to live a life of ambivalent relation meaning sometimes like and other times dislike. However, they can't snap their relationship and run away from each other. Unlike a radical feminist, Kundan makes a claim for equal status and recognition in the conjugal relation. The following lines read interesting:

I came to know  
You and I have opened  
A joint account  
Operates it not in your absence  
Opens it not in my absence  
What an irony  
Aren't you an everlasting addiction? (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 32-37)

She finds the image of a baby in the third form of the man. As the lover, the man is a sweet dream. As the husband, he is inevitably connected to her life. In this way, she regards men and women are complimentary to each other. After bearing babies, she finds her image higher than his, caring like that of a mother. By subverting the role of primary and secondary status of men and women in the patriarchal structure, she treats her husband like a baby. Such role distribution can be taken as an illustration of redefining gender status:

You look much smaller than my baby  
You became like my another baby  
Aren't you seeking your mother  
Again within me? (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 56-60)

Doubtlessly, male-dominated society formulates certain stereotypes to understand and interpret the entire female race. The traditional feminine stereotype is of a passive creature that is vulnerable, dependent and not capable of violence. Whatever kind of feminine stereotypes to which women are supposed to confirm, it is necessarily a construction of patriarchal system. "An alternative practice of criticizing images of women retroactively, and a way of challenging the representation of women by the traditional white heterosexual male writer, is for women to represent themselves

positively" (Green & Lebihan, 1996). In order to alter the stereotyped versions of women, women characters should be depicted as strong and active personalities rather than passive sidekicks to the great male protagonist. A revisionist approach is necessary to oppose and correct those stereotypes. Kundan Sharma deconstructs the sexist version of Hindu scriptures to bring a change in the patriarchal mythological outlook. In the poem 'Hello Ram' she writes:

Hello Ram!  
I repudiate you  
I was Shakti and Saraswoti  
I became Menuka and Urbasi  
I reincarnated as Kunti and Draupadi  
But you why choose me in Sita's form?  
Because me Janaki  
Passed in the superior measuring rod of male  
A marooned form of female  
A best kind of sacrifice I become for you. (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 7-17)

In spite of the fact that a large body of literature has been written by women writers, it hasn't been read yet in an appropriate way. A woman-centered critical practice needs to be established for the purpose that has been named 'gynocriticism' by Showalter. According to her, gynocriticism involves women reading about women's text and constructing a largely sympathetic discourse about women's text and constructing a largely sympathetic discourse about this body of work. She explains:

The program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature to develop a new model based on the study of female experience rather than to adopt male models and theories. Gynocritics begin at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (Showalter, 1986).

A question may naturally arise why there is an urgent need of promoting woman's writing, its analysis and its access to academic location. The answer is based on the idea that women's work has been not only systematically ignored by male critics and academics, but also they have been systematically misread or read according to the parochial patriarchal parameters. In the context of Nepali poetry Parijat and Kundan were pioneers to promote feminist cause. In their time, Nepali poetry bearing voice

of feminism was in nascent form but its primary emergence was doubtlessly forceful. The poetry obviously, to borrow Showalter's phrase, demands a 'female framework for the analysis'. Women's subjectivity and desire to live a life for freedom is thwarted in the male-dominated society. Showalter sounds absolutely correct in her assertion that typicality of female experiences needs to be analyzed by using a typical female modality. In the poem, 'Me, Mother and Daughter' Kundan addresses her daughter comparing the situation of her mother and her own and finally declares her aggression towards the patriarchal history long-reigning over women and their consciousness:

I hate our history  
That solely inspires us to live for others  
That teaches self-negation (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 10-12)

Kundan's feministic notion is of compromising nature in the question of performing gender role. She doesn't reach to the level of radicalism. Conjugal relationship, for her, should be based on reciprocity. However, she mentions three different generations of women: her mother's generation, her generation and her daughter's generation; each generation bearing their own kind of view point regarding gender role. The mother's generation lived a life of suffering without questioning over the patriarchal establishments. Her generation, represented by herself, wanted to live a life of reciprocal love and understanding. But she wants to see her daughter living an independent life and says:

My beloved daughter!  
Let me give you blessing of new dream  
I lived a life of milksop  
In the old dream my mother showed me (Sharma et.al., 2067 BS, 73-76)

Changes take place when civilization moves from one generation to another generation. Each new generation of women wants to live a life of freedom, new dream and aspiration.

## **Conclusion**

What significant task Parijat and Kundan Sharma did is the initiation of feministic voice in Nepali literature to make it audible inside academia and beyond. Some assertive western female poets became precursors of the praxis of feminist poetry in the decade of the 1960s in Nepali literature. Parijat and Kundan Sharma enriched their feministic awareness from western literary tradition as a part of modernism.

Moreover, they implanted consciousness of a dimension of feminist outlook in Nepali literature to be used by the poets of successive generations. Through their creative endeavor in poetry they heralded an antithesis to machismo long-grown in Nepali socio-political, economic and cultural system.

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