



OFF THE MARGIN: PORTRAYAL OF SLAVERY IN GURU PRASAD MAINALI'S SHORT FICTIONS

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Abstract

Guru Prasad Mainali's literary accomplishment *Naso* [The Ward] portrays the issues of slavery in the late 1920s in Nepal. The collection of eleven stories has two specific stories that deal with the issue of the former slaves: "Papko parinam" [The results of misdeeds] (1927) and "Naso" [The ward] (1935) depict the life of the people who once lived the life as slaves. Mainali draws his characters from Nepali society after Chandra Shumsher abolished slavery in Nepal in 1924. Mainali presents them in the most humane form, struggling to settle themselves into an organized society after their emancipation from the bondage of slavery. "Papko parinam" (1927) builds the world around their quest placing the former slaves at the center stage, while "Naso" (1935) pictures former slave Nauli in a functional role to bring Devi Raman's first wife Subhadra back to her house from Kathmandu. Both stories leave traces of slavery and the issues surrounding the era of fundamental change in the history of Nepal. Mainali sets the events in the background of the change in the 1920s and unfolds his story of Devi Raman and Shubhadra in "Naso" and Kanta Padhya in "Papko Parinam." This paper rereads Mainali's two fiction in the historical backdrop to get into the world of slavery as depicted in them and conclude that Nepali fiction has dealt with the issue of slavery in the 1920s.

Keywords: Slavery, short fiction, historical representation, social history

Introduction

Modern Nepali literature is supposed to have begun in the late 1920s. As Chandra Shumsher proclaimed the abolition of slavery from Nepal in 1924, the issues of slaves have not been treated as the main subject matter of fictional writings. However, modern Nepali writer, Guru Prasad Mainali (1900-1971) has captured the essential footprints of slavery as a living social institution in Nepal in the late 1920s in his short fiction. While telling the story of Shubhadra and Devi Raman ideally finding their reconciliation, Mainali's "Naso" [The ward] (1935) also develops Nauli Gharti as the confidante of Shubhadra. The bond of Shubhadra and Nauli refers to both inclusion of the slave and exclusion

of the first wife after a cowife enters into the house. As the name suggests, Nauli reminds us that she was recently freed after the decree of Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher. Mainali's 1927 story, "Papko parinam" [The results of misdeeds] portrays the tension between Kanta Padhya and the Ghartis: Kanta Padhya wants to keep Simalchaur intact for his sons to use in the future, while the Ghartis also require a piece of land to resettle themselves. Recently freed Ghartis want to resettle themselves into an organized society by clearing the grounds at Simalchaur. Kanta Padhya and the Ghartis fight over the use of land as resource.

After the slaves were granted freedom from the state in 1924, history shows that there were two

types of responses from the people living as slaves at the time. The story "Naso" pictures the case of the assimilation of Nauli into the old order even after she is granted freedom. She has lived her life in Devi Raman's house as a slave and she continues to live her life in the same role. On the other hand, "Papko parinam" invigorates the Ghartis with their choice to resettle themselves in the society. Juthe begins to dream of the future of the Gharti settlement in the backdrop of progress, for he believes in human efforts to transform fate. Since Juthe had served Kanta Padhya's family and Kanta had secretly planned to allocate the land at Simalchaur to his sons, the tension grows between the Ghartis and Kanta. The Ghartis who believe in their labor to transform their destiny pose a direct challenge to the authority of the local feudal lord. The late 1920s witnessed assimilation and resistance on the part of the former slaves. Mainali presents both the shades of reconfiguration of the late 1920s in his stories.

Contemporary Readings of Mainali's Stories

This brief review discusses some of the seminal readings on Guru Prasad Mainali's stories. Contemporary critics primarily focus on Mainali's short stories as realistic writings. As a social conformist, he projects a world of reconciliation in which two opponents are brought to the point of agreement. Mainali's husband and wife, neighbors, brothers, and the like are in a state of perpetual disagreement; still, he thinks that such disagreements can be resolved after each of the parties begins to see each other from a higher standpoint. The social need of each other is created in the world in such a way that both parties have to forgive each other and embrace them. The prevalent readings of Mainali's short stories show their focus on the politics of gender and patriarchy. Also, his stories have been studied from a narratological point of view. The critics have found the domestic reality of early modern Nepal as the key feature of his stories.

As an idealist, Mainali seeks a coherent picture of a society that is ruled by certain abstract laws. The master storyteller weaves the narrative in and around the domestic life of rural Nepal of his time and builds a world of his own. As Pradhan (1984) has critically viewed, "His 'Pratyigaman' (The return), along with 'Naso' and 'Paralko ago', shows him to be an adept at the depiction of domestic life. All his stories are collected in *Naso* (1969)" (p. 148). The domestic reality pictures the points of conflict and the issues of the conflicting parties. So, the story writer does not complicate his way of telling the story; rather, he employs a linear way of dealing with the narrative. Dhakal (2020) has also argued that his stories present a chronological structure and embody the message for everybody to grasp and realize it (p.179). Dhakal has studied the ways of developing the narrative in Mainali's works and concluded about the structural aspect of the fiction. Mainali's characters resemble the rural people and voice the issues of the people.

On the other hand, feminist critics like Marahatta (2022) has examined the role of power structure and patriarchal ideology in shaping the fate of women in Mainali's writings. She sees a huge domination of patriarchy as the mode of the society in Mainali's *Naso* which brings the narratives of suffering women and the instrument of suffering is the patriarchal power domination (p. 169). On the other hand, critics have also found the presence of people from all strata of life in Mainali's writings. In one of the studies on Mainali's fiction, Budhathoki (2022) has explored that the author populates his stories with people across all the classes and castes of his society. He further explores the variety in the ethnic backgrounds of the people in the stories (p. 69). The study has shown Mainali's ethnic consciousness through the analysis of use of variety of characters in his fiction. The readings of the stories from the perspective of gender, power, and diversity in the use of characters

attempt to explore the comprehensive nature of Mainali's world of fiction.

As a means to assert abstract cultural norms, Mainali treats literature as a space for asserting and expressing cultural values. Paudyal (2022) has read Mainali's stories as the repository of knowledge of intangible cultural heritage. As the source of the historical, rural Nepal, Mainali's fictions continue to inform and educate the readers about the cultural practices and the values of the time. As she argues,

Guru Prasad Mainali is the story writer who acknowledges the truth by being influenced by the impact of the traditional culture. He has made use of the abstract culture that the society was continually practicing in two ways in his stories: satisfaction of the divine and the satisfaction of the self. (p. 127)

She has critically uncovered the unspotted issues of intangible culture in the author's works. Furthermore, she has also pointed out how certain aspect of spirituality has found its appropriate treatment in the early works of modern Nepali literature. Mainali's stories have a close ending as he attempts to satisfy both the physical and the ideal world, resulting in the reconciliation of the uneven forces of society.

The critical scholarship has missed the issues of slavery in Mainali's writings. Even in his recent study on Nepali literature and slavery, K. C. (2023) has missed Mainali's short stories as the documents that deal with the issue. He has extensively sifted through the modern literature on slavery and examines the emotional aspects of the slaves who come from the Tharu community. As he has observed,

Literary texts have not only illustrated the painful life of slaves but also the struggle, movement, and revolt against slavery. Literature has encouraged the Kamiya and Kamalari to protest against the injustice. Literature shows that the government

declared a slavery-free country but problems are unsolved. Still, many kamaiya and kamalaris are obliged to join the previous life of slaves. (p. 55)

Also, Maycock (2020) has comprehensively studied about modern forms of slavery, by focusing on the issue of Tharu society. He talks of bonded laborers, Kamaiyas, and Kamalaris as he has mentioned, "Alongside specific regional considerations, there are limitations in the South Asia bonded labour literature that are broader than the issues relating to the absence of gender" (p. 36). Neither K. C. nor Maycock has gone back to the 1920s and the 1930s to examine the literary resources for their studies; so they have both missed the narratives of slavery present in the body of Nepali short stories and failed to connect their studies with Nepali world in the 1920s.

The contemporary readings of Mainali's short stories are more focused on the prevalent theoretical lens of literary theory. Such readings do not deal with the traces of the social institutions of the time. For instance, *Naso* presents two short stories with traces of slavery. Even though the stories are not proper narratives of slavery as such, they open up a window to look into a distant world that practiced slavery. Mainali's fictional world in the late 1920s witnessed the abolition of slavery in Nepal. The stories like "Naso" (1935) and "Papko parinam" (1927) depict the issues of recently freed people. This study examines the people and their issues as they appear in Mainali's fictional imagination. This paper reads the treatment of the issues in and around slavery in two of Mainali's stories, placing them in the historical context of the 1920s in Nepal. The social change that was gaining momentum at the moment paved a new way of perceiving the social reality and justice. Nepal underwent the experience of both assimilation and resistance in its attempt to resettle the freed people who had lived a dependent life for a long time.

Slavery in Mainali's Short Fiction

Guru Prasad Mainali's social world also comprises the issues of slaves, recently freed by the Rana Prime Minister, Chandra Shumsher in 1924. His collection of stories, *Naso* (1969) includes "Papko parinam" (1927) and "Naso" (1935) which weave their narratives in the context of Nepal in the late 1920s. The ethos of the changing social world enters into the heart of the narrative in which the author sets a path to explore the traces of slavery in Nepal. The former story depicts the quest of the recently freed slaves, attempting to resettle themselves in Simalchaur – just below the Gogane stream. Even after the abolition of slavery, the Ghartis suffered at the hands of the feudal order of the society. As the weaker section of the society, the Ghartis were excluded from their access to the resources: they are not allowed to settle themselves in the plot of land they choose for themselves. Also, Mainali writes the story from the perspective of Kanta Padhya who undergoes immense suffering, supposedly resulting from the sins inflicted on the poor Ghartis. Even while telling the story of a man falling from the grace of providence, Mainali ends up narrating the touching story of the slaves in the 1920s. Similarly, the title story of the collection "Naso" pictures Devi Raman and Shubhadra's conflict: the resolution is realized in the story as Devi Raman's second wife Laxmi loses her life to tuberculosis. However, Mainali incorporates the story of Nauli Gharti as the confidante of Shubhadra. The recently freed maid works for Devi Raman and works as a bridge between the family and Shubhadra when Shubhadra leaves her house to live with her aunt in Gaurighat. Mainali's narratives capture and treat the traces of slavery as a historical reality that later turns into the context to ground the narratives of social harmony.

Even though Mainali writes the story of the upper class like Kanta Padhya Devi Raman, the footprints of slavery pop up in his stories. He develops the characters of Juthe Gharti and Nauli

Ghartini out of necessity to pave a background for Kanta's fall or Devi Raman's rise. Since Mainali's fictional world is ruled by poetic justice, he emphasizes on creation of the ideal world in the end. Still, he cannot ignore the social reality, forcefully emerging from the bottom in the 1920s in Nepal. Komal Prasad Phuyal appreciates Chandra Shumsher's decree to abolish slavery in 1924 as he sees the presence of a powerful agency in him. As Phuyal (2022) has stated,

Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher had all the authority to strike at the heart of the weakening social system, slavery. As the powerful agency, he issues decree to write it off from the social structure, thereby serving the chief agenda of modernity as the ethos of present. (p. 125)

Phuyal's study has indicated Nepali's quest for modernity and the formation of ethos challenging the traditional institution of slavery in the 1920s in Nepal. Mainali's story "Papko parinam" (1927) introduces the readers to a conflict, resulting from the dispute between the local feudal landlord and the recently freed slaves in the mid-1920s. Mainali has narrated:

One day, Chaure, Jiune, Dhane -all the Ghartis gathered at Juthe's place after having a meal. Previously, Juthe was a slave at Kantu's house. He was the most mature, understanding, and honest. Everyone respected Juthe. Dhane said, "Brother, the master says that we can't live near the village. If we don't move away, he has threatened to dismantle our huts. He fights for a trifling excuse. Where do we go, leaving the country? If we want to stay here, he is there to drive us away. What should we do now? We must make a decision. (p. 26)

Mainali gradually builds the tension between Kanta Padhya and Juthe who have lived in the same family before the abolition of slavery in 1924. Both the master and former slave know each other well; still, as the representative of the old order, Kanta exercises his authority and dictation upon the Ghartis. The wisest of all the Ghartis, Juthe rises like the man of his people: everyone looks up to him for his counsel; they trust him in all the decisions; and finally, he decides that they are going to settle in Simalchaur. The next day, they cleared the ground and erected their huts on the plot of the land.

Mainali's "Naso" introduces former slave, Nauli Ghartini: she has been working in Devi Raman's house for a long time. Even after being freed, she continues to stay in the family. Unfolding the narrative about Shubhadra's quest for self-realization and Devi Raman's attainment of emancipation by having a song, the author lets the story percolate into the life of the slave, now working as the housemaid at Devi Raman's house. Even after Chandra Shumsher's 1924 proclamation, many of the freed slaves continued to live in the same family like a helping hand to the family. Introduced towards the middle of the story, Nauli holds a special position in the story as she lets the reader peep into the world of slaves in the late 1920s. As the author has presented Nauli Gharti to his readers,

Nauli Ghartini was making plates of leaves in the dim light. She has been serving Devi Raman for a long time. She is as old as Subhadra is. She was freed from the life of a slave in 1924 by the mercy of High Highness Late Chandra Shumsher. (p. 3)

When Devi Raman marries Laxmi as a cowife to Shubhadra, Shubhadra needs a confidante to reveal her heart to: now, the author feels it necessary to bring Nauli into the story. Nauli

forcefully enters into the story and acts so prudently that she cements the cracks in the idealistic vision of Mainali's world. Viewed from another point of view, Shubhadra and Nauli meet each other as they are pushed off the mainstream -at the margin.

Even though Mainali's treatment of slavery appears to be sketchy, the picture carries historical and political significance since it reveals both sides of the coin. After the abolition of slavery in Nepal, the former slaves had responded to the situation in two ways: a group of former slaves continued to live with their former masters in the role of the domestic helper, and the other group chose to build up their destiny. Mainali pictures Nauli as the member of the first group: she assimilates into the existing order, seeking her salvation through the prevalent practices. At the premise of the Pashupatinath temple, Shubhadra and Nauli meet and talk about their life. As Shubhadra knows about the most difficult of times in her husband's life, she says: "Nauli, you should not have left the master in such hard times" (p. 9). Nauli responds to her, "Mistress! I had to serve the master as a slave throughout my life; so, I took leave for twenty days from the master to worship the Lord Pashupatinath" (p. 9). Nauli thinks that the Lord Pashupatinath is the way to her salvation for the next life: she assimilates herself into the existing order of the society where she does not seek for a better position than that of a maid. On the other hand, Juthe knows that only their labor counts in shaping their destiny. The members of the second group of people believed in themselves, searching for the ground to prepare for their destiny. He captures the new land for themselves. Mainali has narrated:

Juthe was smoking at his *sote*, sitting on a stone. There were multiple waves in the lake of his mind: "Even a pub will make much as it's on the main way. If we can set put a grinding wheel by bringing

water from the Gogane stream. They say there will be a foreign bridge in the stream. We can also start small shops on the side of the bridge. If we go to catch fish in the stream in our leisure time, it also brings benefits." (p. 28)

Mainali projects a rebel figure in Juthe who begins to travel within himself in search of emancipation. He emerges as the agent who decides for his people, imagines progress for everyone and implements his plan for the collective welfare. Chandra Shumsher's emancipation had given them freedom from their masters; still, they were groping for their ways amid a host of challenges. They knew they had to address them and make independent decisions of their own to resettle themselves as a free citizen. As an awakened soul, Juthe Gharti sees the possibility of progress that the people can enjoy by taming the resources at their service.

Unlike Nauli who can never think of revolting against society for the use of resources, Juthe and his team clear the bushes in Simalchaur and set up huts for their families. In other words, they pose a straight challenge to the local feudal order. The members of the old order take it as an encroachment upon their celebrated territory. Kanta Padhya knows the use of law, manipulation of state machinery, and the power of bureaucratic structure. He searches for a way to drive the Ghartis from their new settlement: he files a case against the Ghartis, charging them with felling the trees from the protected forest because they occupy the fallow land. The villagers had felled the trees from the protected Rani Ban and Kanta Padhya filed a case against the Ghartis for the deed (p. 25). As Kanta goes to the new settlement of the Ghartis, Dhane challenges him by saying that Kanta has made money through all unfair means. He drives Kanta away from the settlement by physically and morally challenging him (p. 29). Since he had always dreamed of allocating

the barren land of Simalchaur to his sons: he sets a legal trap for the humble Ghartis who do not know much about the ways of the court and bureaucracy. However, the Ghartis cannot understand what Kanta Padhya is up to: he files a case in Chautara Court that fines the Ghartis and sends them to prison.

In the most humane form, Nauli serves Devi Raman's house even after emancipation. She goes to Kathmandu and helps bring Shubhadra back to Devi Raman's life: she emerges as a bridge between Devi Raman and Shubhadra in "Naso." She protects Devi Raman's family which is about to collapse by informing Shubhadra about the present crisis in the family on time. Shubhadra does not return home with Nauli; still, she cannot stay in Gaurighat with her aunt, either. As Mainali writes, "Nauli said, 'Oh! Mistress, you have come.' Laxmi opened her eyes at these words of Nauli" (p. 10). Again, Nauli appears in the pivotal role at the end as well: she sees Shubhadra back and her words soothe Laxmi, waiting for a mother to her son (Sushil). Mainali humanely treats Nauli as he has narrated, "Shubhadra was shocked to hear what Nauli said. She said to herself, 'Fie! It's like chopping your husband's nose, for you are angry at your cowife'" (p. 8). As the bridge between Shubhadra and her family, she requests her mistress to go home, "I plead without you, the master will be ruined" (p. 9). As a wise woman who has undergone multiple hardships in her life, Nauli can make independent decisions of her own: even without her master's request regarding Shubhadra, she wisely acts on behalf of the family. Nauli feels that she is part of the family and she had to act in every possible way to save the family.

Chandra Shumsher (1924) was worried about the liberty of the people living under the bondage of slavery. He notes that people derive the real bliss from having an organized form of life and family. He accepts that as a double-edged sword, slavery

hits both the owner and the owned: it robs away dignity from the owned and then infuses a false sense of superiority on the owner of the slave. He agrees that it also debases the moral ground of the slave owner, for the sale of other human beings for one's survival is unbecoming of a free being (p.104). Therefore, he puts the open question before the gathering in Tundikhel, "What kind of custom is this that enchains in slavery the posterity of a person simply because there was money invested in his body?" (p.113). Chandra Shumsher's rhetorical question challenges the inner core of slavery as the social institution; however, the local feudal order remains safe at the corners of the nation. Such feudal repression could not respect the right to freedom for an organized life for the recently freed people.

The local feudal lord completely suppresses the voice of the Ghartis and nullifies their attempt to resettle themselves. In the tension of the old and the new, Mainali chooses to depict the fall of the old over the rise of the new. Kanta Padhya brings a team of government officials to study and make a report about the Rani Ban. The government team reported by the locals that the Ghartis had cleared the forest as they needed more land to settle themselves. Padhya successfully tricks the Ghartis for his profit by trapping the whole community into saying that the Ghartis had cleared the forest: actually, everybody except the Ghartis had felled the trees (p. 39). The local feudal order manipulates the laws against the Ghartis: the laws are instrumentally used to torture them. Mainali fails to reconcile the issues in the story without inviting divine intervention: he shows the fall of Kanta Padhya in the outbreak of cholera. He loses his wife and both sons to the epidemic. To Mainali, the story aims at balancing the good deeds and bad deeds: he unveils the consequences of the bad deeds of Kanta Padhya who has to pay for his wrong deeds.

Mainali's slaves appear in the most humane form in the stories. Nauli never thinks herself apart from the family –she is an integral part of the family. She is emotionally attached to Shubhadra: she listens to Shubhadra's agonies; she keeps Shubhadra's inner conflicts within herself; and finally, she helps Shubhadra regain her lost position in the family. They share the same ground after Devi Raman married Laxmi; so too, Nauli can understand Shubhadra's emotions and serve her as her weeping wall. Similarly, Juthe is never infuriated at Kanta Padhya: even after Kanta attempts to disperse them from Simalchaur, Kanta seeks help from the Ghartis for paddy plantations. Some of the youths raise their voice against such a shameless request from Kanta. However, Juthe offers him help during the plantation of Paddy (p. 31) as he wisely decides every matter. After the Ghartis are jailed for the crime, which they never committed, the people cannot stay there in the same place: first of all, they fear being attacked there; secondly, their breadwinners are put in jail; and finally, the women and children find no help to start their life afresh. Juthe's wife Mangali and their two children Rupe and Sante take shelter in an inn in Kathmandu. On the other hand, the village loses Dinnanath Padhya, Kanta's wife, and his two sons to cholera (p. 40). Mainali depicts the completely broken heart of Kanta, roaming in and around Kathmandu in search of solace when he gets to see Juthe's wife ill and her children begging in the street. Mangali passes a curse on Kanta (p. 43). Finally, Mainali writes: "Kanta Padhya hears somebody saying, 'You are the sinner! This is the consequence of your sinful act'" (p. 43). Both Kanta and the recently freed slaves face tragic endings in their lives.

Mainali sides himself with the mainstream as he conforms to the existence of society. He develops the inner soul of Kanta Padhya in "Papko parinam" (1927) and Devi Raman in "Naso" (1935); however, he sets both his protagonists in

the backdrop of the social world of the late 1920s in Nepal. The stories simultaneously serve two purposes: firstly, "Papko parinam" tells the story of the fall of Devi Raman as the crooked soul, and "Naso" reconciles the husband and wife through divine intervention, and the stories preserve the traces of slavery in the mid-1920s in Nepal as the society was claiming maturity of its own.

Conclusion

Guru Prasad Mainali's short fictions move beyond the margin and weaves the narrative of the slaves in the late 1920s. They depict the ways the recently freed population was trying to cope with the social world. The question of settling oneself and one's family primarily stood as the challenge to the people after 1924: some of them chose to stay with their former masters, working as a helping hand in their domestic chores. On the other hand, other people set out to tame the resources to pave the way for a good life on their own. Mainali's short stories picture the changing ethos of the age in fragments and provide a platform for the readers to observe the struggle and quest of people to reorganize themselves after their emancipation from slavery in 1924. In the most chaotic transition from dependence to independence, the people found two ways of resettling themselves: assimilation and resistance. Mainali's 1935 short story presents the slave choosing the path of assimilation, while his 1927 story portrays resisting people believing in themselves and the idea of progress as a product of their efforts. In this sense, both the stories tell the narratives of slavery in Nepal by placing the bits from off the margin to serve as the backdrop for the main plot narrative in each case.

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