

Rewriting Elderly Self in Selected Contemporary Nepali Short Fiction

Komal Prasad Phuyal, PhD

Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University

ephuyal@gamil.com

Received Date: March 22, 2024; Reviewed Date: May 19, 2024;

Accepted Date: August 22, 2024

ABSTRACT

Nepali short fiction has also rewritten the elderly self by depicting the protesting spirit in them. Even though old age is stereotypically believed to have been a time devoid of any possibility of agency, some contemporary authors have envisioned the resisting elderly self who attempts to rewrite the values of society. Such people have the power to challenge the deep-seated beliefs and ways of society. I have taken Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017), Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [The Dimension] (2020), and Nayan Raj Pandey's "Sarpadash" [The Snakebite] (2021) to analyze of the self of the central character in each of the stories. Madhushree presents an angry and frustrated old man who fells a ripe guava tree after his sons tell him that he cannot come to celebrate Dashain with him. The old man's rage spills in the most unconventional ways: spiritually, he chops off the irresponsible branches emanating from his own body. Theeng's central figure loses her son to a bike accident; still, she encourages her daughter-in-law to resettle herself. Pandey's hero charms the snakes and learns to live with the pains of life. He begins to redraw the boundary for himself by blurring the line between the real and the fantastic: he reinvents his dead daughter in the form of a phantom to accompany him. The old man takes a political bend in his course of action as he seeks revenge for the oppression imposed on the people on the whole. Madhushree, Theeng, and Pandey capture the changing ethos of time by showing the elderly people rewriting their self through dissent, protest, and resistance. This paper contends that Nepali fiction has reviewed modern Nepali elderly self by rewriting it in contemporary context as it analyzes the selected texts in the historical and sociological context of the changing times.

Keywords: Agency, Aging, Nepali Fiction, Protest, Resistance, Rewriting Self.

Introduction

Contemporary Nepali literature rewrites the self of people at the margin through the portrayal of people resisting the prevailing social circumstances. A few instances from contemporary short fiction present that the elderly self transcends beyond the regular, usual mold of the past: now, aging has been presented in a different light of time in which the emergent ethos of the time has found its voice through the old characters. Through the analysis of Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017), Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [The Dimension] (2020), and Nayan Raj Pandey's "Sarpadash" [The Snakebite] (2021), this paper argues that the short stories depict the old people who resist against the

exiting ways of the world. They struggle to change their society. Madhushree's old man is pushed to the extent of axing his own guava tree which symbolizes his own offspring. Theeng's character helps settle her daughter-in-law with a man of her choice. Pandey's old man appears as the charmer of the snakes, fighting against his own people in the family and the community. Alone, he rises to the height of a protective patron to his people and inspires his snakes to take revenge for the atrocities imposed upon him and his people.

In the past, Nepali stories depict old people as the context for certain other things. For instance, the death of an old person in the family would turn into a backdrop for some other things to happen in the story. From the background, the elderly people have traveled to the foreground in these three stories: Madhushree's old father, Theeng's old mother-in-law, and Pandey's old man challenge the prevailing ways of society. They break the conventional dye of the self of the elderly person, whereby letting a vibrant and new self emerge in the present context. The stories depict the contemporary social reality in which the old people struggle and attempt to find meaning for themselves. Generally taken as solitary beings, the elderly people show their self larger than the contemporary social context: they begin to rewrite the mores of society, imposing a certain degree of change in search of solace for their deserted souls. Since I have studied Madhushree (2017), Theeng (2020), and Pandey (2021) in Nepali as the primary source of the data, the materials quoted in the paper from each of the stories are my own translations. Even when I have paraphrased the ideas from each of the texts, I have indicated the page on which the ideas appear in the primary source in Nepali. The rest of the texts consulted for the study were in English.

Approaching Aging in Literature: Critical Appraisal

The inner composition of the self evolves with the change in time and experience of the people in the world. The social norms and their impact also reveal new meanings as people become mature along with their age. After the 1950s, the advancement in health facilities and technological changes have positively impacted human life. The people have access to better health facilities as a result of the rise in welfare states, the policies of the states, and the health programs in the world. Consequently, the world has witnessed the growth of the population of elderly people after the 1990s. Since the literary world comprises people from the real world in search of a potential reality that contemplates the possible consequences of the actions in society, elderly people have also entered as major characters in contemporary writings. The question at the moment is: how does

literature present and project the elderly people as such? The representation of old people carries a deeper political meaning in that such representation also helps understand the prevailing perceptions, attitudes, and biases toward aging in general.

Healthcare facilities have become the prime agenda in the welfare states after the 1990s. The teaching-learning of nursing and other disciplines of health care have treated aging as an issue of prime concern. Such studies focus on the biological functioning of the body of the people in taking care of themselves. The growth of body cells and the use of energy to maintain and sustain life are spotlighted in such studies. However, the cultural assumptions regarding old age are equally important for people to mentally prepare to combat the complexities of age and aging. The biological body finds its psychological energy in the cultural assumptions that program the whole being. The cultural rules write and rewrite what the people believe themselves to be the world. Sgarbieri and Pacheco (2017) have critically examined the relationship between aging and external factors, concluding that aging is not genetically programmed. They state that food and nutrients have a very vital role in the way people experience the impact of aging (Sgarbieri & Pacheco, 2017, p. 18). The study has highlighted the care and support in the old age. However, the intangible needs are not taken into consideration in the study. Furthermore, they also leave space for cultural assumptions, values, and perception as the major forces in shaping the attitude of the people towards aging. The ways the perceptions of people are built also contribute to the smooth transition in the experience of aging people.

The research in health care emphasizes on real people and their problems in understating themselves in old age, while creative writings unfold the issues of the people in their old age through the potential imaginative corpus of data. Linguistic data that can be derived from literary writings has not been extensively used to pave the road to understanding the speculation about elderly people at present. Falcus (2015) has examined the most fertile ground of literary works as the source of data to examine the position of elderly people. She treats literature as the source of knowledge about age, aging, and elderly people. She has stated:

In literary studies, ageing has been the unacknowledged shadow that intersects with more prominent approaches such as gender or postcolonialism. A similar lack of interdisciplinary connections has also been the case in gerontology, meaning that the humanities, including literature, found themselves marginalized in this area. However, this is

changing and a genuinely dialogic relationship between literature and gerontology is becoming established, a field appropriately coined by the term 'literary gerontology'. (2015, p. 53)

She has pointed out the need for literature to take a gerontological turn as much as gerontology has to take literary turn to complete each other. In the modern world, the imaginative projection appears to as real as the world outside. The intersection of both the discourses helps to observe the challenges one domain encounters through the lenses developed in the other. Literary Studies has taken a different path to uncover the issues of the people at the margin after the 1970s as scholars were trying to explore and bring to the limelight the challenges that have not been previously discussed in academia. "It would seem that our analysis of old age and literature provides some support for the position that cultural stereotypes regarding growing older, biases with considerable history, continue to be reflected in the printed word" (Ansello, 1977, p. 217) in the 1970s. As literature serves society as the soft power that develops interconnectedness with other domains of knowledge, the complexities arising from perspectives, perceptions, and biases find the best place to manifest themselves in creative writings. The analysis of such works. The questions regarding aging also found their place in the choice of literary critics and literary writings were now taken as the source of data. The cultural assumptions of the people were examined to understand the stereotypes, biases, perceptions, and worldviews of the people regarding aging in literary writings.

When the elderly population gradually shifted to the center of study for literary critics, they started unearthing the psychological complexities of aging as evident in the characters in works of literature. Also, it paved the road for a new discipline in the study of aging in the literature department: literary gerontology. Falcus (2015) has written that literary gerontology aims at unearthing the intimate observations of elderly people as they are found in literary writings of a particular age (p. 58). On the one hand, such a study has promoted the issues of identity; on the other, it has added new dimensions to the reading of the issue of the people at the margin. As the shift suggests, the circumstances of the elderly people were the focus of the study. Kohn, Donley, and Wear (1992) have also agreed with this line of argument when they conclude, "Literature can help us understand some of the problems of aging and identity by placing using the perspectives of the elderly persons experiencing the ambiguities of self and in the perspectives of friends and family of that person" (p. 4). The new ways of approaching literary texts give way

to multiple perceptions regarding the formation of self. As a fluid notion about the inner being of humans, the self refers to different experiences of people, depending upon their age. Literary critics pay attention to the ways such inner soul is formed in people and examine the experience of the people in the broader frame of literary writings in a particular age.

Literary writings people their world with various types of characters to fulfill their goal. In other words, the use of characters serves a specific purpose in each literary text. In this sense, the uses of elderly people also imply the political goal of the authors in their texts. Generally, old age is treated as a time of absence of energy: old people live without energy, sleep, vigor, desire, and the like. The bleak picture is associated with the idea of impending death for the people. For example, Gilleard (2018) has studied the use of old age in English writer Samuel Beckett's literary works –specifically, his plays and novels. Gilleard has found the presentation of failure in the modern world in such writings as he has put forward,

While aging and old age are as present as ever in his later work, agedness seems to be represented differently, more symbolically than functionally. This can be seen, for example, in the monochromatic contrast of white, grey, and black dress or hair, rather than in the display of somatic impairments or complaints. (2018, p. 49)

The world is fundamentally identified as the fragmented space in the modern times, while human mindset is defined with two primary features: failure and emptiness. Beckett's works employ elderly characters to present the themes associated with failure and emptiness. The elderly people's life is devoid of success and meaning. Such portrayal of the old character informs the later generations about the perception of time about aging. In the absence of proper health care facilities, life was a horrible experience in old age in Beckett's time: a similar kind of projection finds a place in his imaginative world. Wyatt-Brown (2018) also firmly believed that the speculation of literature reveals so much about the real world and the issues of the time. To her, the inner core of a character's self is derived from the prevailing sensitivity of the author as manifest in literary works (2018, p. 125). Like Gilleard (2018), Wyatt-Brown (2018) has agreed that a critical examination of creative writings reveals the power balance of society. The analysis of literary works also equally makes sense of the world outside by capturing the essence of social life as it has accumulated in the perceptions of reality in society. Such studies can contribute to the understanding of the issues the elderly people, age, and aging in literature and society.

The global picture gives a comprehensive picture of various attempts to understand the issue of the elderly population. Some serious attempts have been made to uncover the dynamics of aging as such in the writings of Beckett as the earlier discussion shows us. On the contrary, Nepali scholarship has not been able to pay any significant attention to the issues of elderly people in literary writings as the literary critics have not seriously taken up the issues of elderly population in the creative works. One of the studies made by Sigdel (2021) has also pointed out this direction. In the past, Western societies had undergone massive material transformation, resulting in their failure to give due attention to the issues of old age, aging, and death. Sigdel (2021) has stated:

Different examples are available in literary narratives to substantiate this idea. While discussing the concepts of aging in American novels, Maricel Oró-Piqueras quotes sociologist Norbert Elias who claims that "aging" and "old age" have become frightening, almost taboo terms in Western society because death is increasingly invisible in advanced societies. (2021, p. 107)

The critic has examined the global scene in the study of the issues of elderly people in literature and stated that the domain has called for serious attention; however, only a few people have devoted their time and energy to examine the issues of people in literary writings. After the 1990s, the issues of elderly people gained prominence in the West as the governments started thinking about them and devised plans and policies for graceful entry into old age. Similarly, Chalise (2020) has found that only a few studies have been conducted to unveil the problems of the people in question. As he is more focused on the functioning of the government and addressing the policy based on social welfare, he has emphasized the role of government agencies in addressing the challenges in our times. He has critiqued the policy lapses and has written that such studies help in shaping certain intervention programs for the people and promote the quality of life for the subnational governments (2020, p. 11). In the national context, the proper study of elderly people helps the government to plan for intervention programs, and the public and academia to develop a critical sensibility towards the people. Critical scholarship on age and aging contributes to the cause of justice as the people left out at the margin begin to occupy the center stage of research and knowledge.

Contextual Reading

As social trends change over the period, new realities are born. Literature sets itself as the playground for new realities to emerge and gain a particular shape. In other words, the historical realities find their place in the literary writings of a particular time. Walia (2014) has argued that the understanding of context serves as the backbone of any type of reading of literary texts (2014, p. 325). The meaning embedded in the huge networks of literary writings becomes almost inaccessible without properly grasping hold of the changing spirit of the times. The shift in historical realities and transformation of societies carry a huge significance in the study of any social issues. A serious study of literature has to take care of the context in which such literature was produced, provided that the essence is the target of such reading. Nepal began to review, revise, and rewrite itself after the political change in Nepal in 2006 after the regime change in contemporary Nepali history. The margin began to send the issues of the people to the center for the polity to institutionalize them. The hitherto ignored people and communities sought their dignified position and presence in the core of the state. The new ethos was emerging in Nepal at the time.

The literary writings still promoted the regular, usual self of the people. The elderly people were treated as the background for some events to happen in the past. The same pattern of writing the elderly self was continued in the writings after 2006: despite the change in the ethos of the time, Nepali fiction waits for a long time to document the first resisting elderly people who oppose the prevailing ways of the world. The discontent old generation merely observed the things happening around them in the literature of the past: now, they rise to fight against the atrocities of the time, review their family circumstances, and finally rewrite their self. When the creative texts are read in the changing social contexts, the traces of political happenings and their impact on the formation of self are found in the present context. The historical shifts, transformations, and reformations pave the way for the new self to emerge in society. The subjugated people accept the domination of the prevailing circumstances: they cannot resist in any way. They silently continue to adjust to the most uncomfortable circumstances as well. On the other hand, the revolting people attempt to modify the circumstances through protest and resistance to bring about favorable circumstances for themselves and their society. Such people analyze society and see the contradictions embedded in the underlying structures. Reading a literary text

contextually incorporates all the historical and political factors involved in its production and reveals the (im)balance of power that leads to writing the text.

Rewriting Elderly Self

Contemporary Nepali short fiction rewrites the elderly self differently by equipping the elderly people with a voice for change and an ability to strike at the heart of social inequalities. In the study, Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017), Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [The Dimension] (2020), and Nayan Raj Pandey's "Sarpadash" [The Snakebite] (2021) have been contextually analyzed to see the formation of the self in the central character. The stories uniquely capture the soul of the elderly people who resist the existing ways of their society: they attempt to revise, rewrite, and modify the prevailing practices of society. How far do they succeed if they succeed to any extent? The paper keeps the question at the center while analyzing the texts. Also, the paper sees the difference in the emergent self and reads it against the backdrop of the regular, usual self of elderly people.

The child-parent conflict appears as the major theme of fiction in Nepali literature. The parents want to keep their children at home to support them in the old days, while the children want to explore the world. Pandey's "Sarpadash" [The Snakebite] (2021) presents Hakka Pahalman as the old man of the new world to tell the story of his life and death. The author beautifully explores the ideas of age and aging as present among the Saperas [Charmers of the Snakes] community in Nepal. Hakka Pahalman dies at the age of 50. The story presents him as the wisest and old man in the community. As Pandey has written,

Hakka Pahalman is the chief of the Saperas in Jaipun. He was almost six feet tall. Even at the age of 50, his body had not lost vigor. He had a broad chest. His arms were strong. His thighs looked like the pillars of the strong *sakhuwa* wood. He always wore a pagadi around his head. (2021, p. 12)

As old age is a relative term, it means differently to different people. Pandey's Hakka encounters aging at fifty: he is a widower who had lost his wife long ago (2021, p. 13). He lives a deserted life by himself when his sons also fight with him to go to India in search of a job. Pandey has narrated:

The sons say, "Father, we can't stay here taking the snakes around. This occupation won't help us now. We'll go to India to work as daily laborer or coolie instead."

Hakka Pahalman said, standing in front of the sons about to move out of the house, "You are not real men to choose the job of a laborer, quitting the occupation of the forefathers. I don't want to see your inauspicious faces. Don't come to offer me the last piece of earth (mud) even at my death." (2021, p. 13)

Hakka experiences the early stage of aging chiefly as the result of being deserted by everyone in the family. Even after losing his children and wife, he is not defeated: he knows he has to continue to live his life. He goes out to the people with his snakes in the basket to entertain them and make a living out of it.

A similar tension between the new and the old is realized through the old man's conscious choice to leave the city life in Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017). Narrated by a lonely, old man, the story unfolds the events in his life. A devotee of Ganesh, he visits the temple every morning (2021, p. 18). Like Pandey's Hakka, Madhushree's old man is living a solitary life, with a dim hope that his sons will come to meet him at Dashain. She has narrated the scene thus:

As soon as I was out, a crowd of children gathered around me.
"Grandfather, give us guava."

"Where do I have them?" I try to avoid them.

"The trees have so many. Please give us." They appeal to me.

"They are not ripe." I try to lie to them.

"Look! There are so many ripe ones." Excited, they point at the tree.

"They are for Dashain." I try to avoid it.

"Dashain has already come. They have killed the goat." They seek to prove it. "We have got the new clothes." (2021, p. 181)

The old man's Dashain has been lost in the absence of his sons: he has kept the yellow guavas in the tree for his sons. He makes many excuses to avoid the children, asking for the guavas. He had planted the guava seeds long ago at Dashain and reared the guava tree like his own children.

Both Pandey and Madhushree weave the narratives of the deserted old men, while Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [The Dimension] (2020) tells the story of a widow and her mother-in-law. Like Hakka, the mother-in-law is just forty-nine years old. After her son, Kamal's death in a bike accident, both the mother and the daughter-

in-law live the most distressful life. The society does not think of remarriage for the widows. Theeng does not present them in a helpless form. She has further written: “Do you think I am old now? Do you think I can't do this much work? My hands and legs are strong. Yangji has a lot of work to do. I come home a bit earlier than her. I am doing it in my free time.’ Then, the mother would make the roti ready—it would be a white, wide, soft and tasty roti” (2020, p. 71). Yangji’s mother-in-law asserts herself through work at home and office. She does not withdraw herself from life. Furthermore, she inspires her daughter to find a job and join an organization to keep herself engaged. Despite being the deserted people, elderly people seek to draw their own fate by adopting multiple ways. Pandey and Madhushree take their characters to the esoteric domains, while Theeng just presents the most telling ways of the old woman.

The elderly people reject the dictations of society upon them. Pandey’s Hakka fights against his fate when he begins to project the phantom of his daughter to accompany him. Hakka had lost his wife and daughter Kasturi to cholera (Pandey, 2021, p. 19); however, he revived the shadow of his daughter to accompany him in his old days. As he moves around the village in daily affairs, his daughter accompanies him. He does not accept rejection of the society, thereby rewriting the elderly self capable of challenging the prevailing circumstance. Similarly, Madhushree’s old man is a widower whose sons do not return to celebrate Dashain at home (2017, p. 188). Unlike Pandey’s Hakka, the old man cannot escape the harsh reality and revive the spiritual company for himself; still, he cannot find himself content with what has happened in his life. Typically, the parents continue to assert their love for the children in any adverse situation. Madhushree’s narrator stands tall like Parashuram from the Hindu myth chopping the guava tree off with an axe (2017, p. 190). The old man’s frustration and anger blend in with his resistance to what his sons have done to him by leaving him alone back at home.

Theeng captures the other dimension of a woman’s heart who knows the meaning of being alone. Kamal’s death has shattered her daughter-in-law like herself in the story. The mother does not stand as an obstacle in the way of the happiness of the young daughter-in-law—she has measured the size of Yangji’s heart. One day, Yangji confesses to her mother-in-law that she is in love with Suraj Magar, her boss. The mother is elated as she knows that one cannot live life alone. The mother-in-law happily accepts her daughter-in-law’s choice. However, she wants to keep them with her since she understands how it feels to live a lonely life. Theeng has put it thus: “I will accept all your terms,’ I stammered. ‘You two should stay with me after marriage. You can’t leave me alone in my old age.’ The

mother said, with a thumb under my chin. There was no tear in her eyes now” (2020, p. 79). The story rewrites the traditional self of old women who used to force their widowed daughter-in-law into following the hard dictation of customary practices. Since remarriage was not possible for the widows, they silently suffered and led their lonely lives.

Pandey's *Hakka Pahalman* reads the society and its unequal structures which favors the elite and politicians. Madhushree's old narrator cannot tolerate the pain of separation from his family. Both the characters have one thing in common: they are rejected by society and family at the same time. However, Pandey's old man emerges in the most complex form by inventing the phantom of his own daughter to accompany him in the most complicated of times in his life. He consults with her and answers the local politician. When his hut is set on fire, he liberates the snakes from bamboo baskets and tells them to avenge the atrocity imposed upon him. Pandey rewrites the elderly self by completely rejecting the stereotypical old man who forgives everyone and everything. Most unconventionally, Madhushree's old man also does forgive his sons: his frustration and anger pour upon the guava tree. On the other hand, Theeng's old woman challenges the existing practice of society by allowing her widowed daughter-in-law to marry the man of her choice. Instead of rejecting such a possibility, she asks them to stay with her in her old age. Theeng's story rewrites the new elderly self that challenges and resists unequal practices. Pandey, Madhushree, and Theeng rewrite the elderly self to reflect the changing ethos of the time.

Conclusions

Nepali short fiction rewrites the elder self by depicting the resistance embedded in it. The selected cases show that the elderly self has emerged as compatible in modern times. The contemporary departure for the elderly self is seen in its ability to challenge and revise the social norms that have turned dysfunctional. For instance, Bina Theeng's short story presents the mother-in-law inspiring and preparing Yangji's for widow marriage. In a way, the mother-in-law boldly asserts herself against the mores of the society. Pandey's *Hakka* escapes the contemporary reality, choosing to live in the world of his own fantasy. He rears and trains the snakes like his own children, invents the phantom of his daughter to accompany him, and asks the snakes to avenge his death. *Hakka*'s energy and liveliness help him stand as the most unique elderly self in contemporary Nepali short fiction. Madhushree's revolutionary old man chops off the guava tree with an axe. The frustration and anger are directed against the time that has robbed away their children of their old parents. Pandey, Madhushree, and Theeng have rewritten the

self of elderly people in the changing socio-political context and captured the changing ethos of the present time in Nepali short fiction.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge that the present research paper has been developed from the larger research project titled “Representation of the Issues of Elderly People in Contemporary Nepali Short Stories” (UGC Award No: SRDIG-77/78-H & S-06) conducted with the financial support from University Grants Commissions, Nepal. I express my gratitude to the Commission for the generous support during the research.

References

- Ansello, E. F. (1977). Old Age and Literature: An Overview. *Educational Gerontology: An International Quarterly*, 2, 211-218.
- Chalise, H. N. (2020). Provincial Situation of Elderly Population in Nepal. *American Journal of Aging Science and Research*, 1(1), 9-11.
- Falcus, S. (2015). Literature and Ageing. In J. Twigg & W. Martin (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, (pp. 53-60), Routledge.
- Gilleard, C. (2018). Old Age and Samuel Beckett's Late Works. *Age Culture Humanities*, 3, 33-56.
- Kohn, M., Donley, C., & Wear, D. (1992). Introduction. In *Literature and Aging: An Anthology*, (pp. 3-4), Kent State University Press.
- Madhushree, M (2017). Ambako Bot [The Guava Tree]. In *Budhanko Ghodi* [Budhan's Mare], (pp. 180-190), Dambarkumari Ganesh Sahitya Pratishtan.
- Pandey, N. R. (2021). Sarpadash [The Snakebite]. In *Jiyara* [The Inner Heart], (pp. 11-24) Fine Prints.
- Sgarbieri, V., & Pacheco, M. T. B. (2017). Healthy Human Aging: Intrinsic and Environmental Factors. *Brazilian Journal of Food Technology*, 20, 1-23.
- Sigdel, K. (2021). Conceptualizing of Aging Literature: A Global Perspective. *The Outlook: Journal of English Studies*, 12, 104-109.
- Theeng, B. (2020). Aayam [The Dimension]. *Yambunera* [Near Kathmandu], (pp. 70-80), Phoenix Books.
- Walia, G. (2014). The Role of Contexts in Textual Understanding of Literature. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 5(1), 322- 329.
- Wyatt-Brown, A. M. (2017-2018). Enlarging the World. *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging*, 41(4), 124-129.