

## Negotiation for a free belonging: Home and human rights in Bhattarai's *Registān Diary*

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### Abstract

*Home and human rights appear as intertwined categories in narratives related to migration. However, these two categories have not been amply explored as proximate matters in any migration related texts such as Registān Diary. Home is not only a place for dwelling with varying frameworks but also many other things like a space, a feeling and a will to belong. Having a home, a place to dwell and belong, is one of the basic rights of human, specifically in line with the view that human rights are rights held by individuals simply because they are part of the human species regardless of their sex, race, nationality, and economic background. In this paper, the researcher, remaining within the paradigm of qualitative research, draws ideas from the scholars alike Pico Iyer, Salman Rushdie, Shalley Mallet, Lynn Hunt, Joseph R. Slaughter; examines the life narratives of the labour migrants to the Gulf from Nepal, argues and concludes that be it through the multifaceted depiction of home or cases of human rights abuse, Registān Diary negotiates a free belonging for all the citizens in a secure world.*

**Keywords:** Belonging, empathy, home, human rights, negotiation

### Introduction

*Registān Diary* accounts the plight harvested by migration that is increasingly becoming the alternative for many Nepalese due to the high rate of unemployment and acute poverty prevalent in the country. Nepalese migrating to the Gulf is a relatively new phenomenon which began about twenty years ago. Karki (2011) opines that migration has contributed to the national economy and poverty reduction through remittances, which in turn help the families of migrants to improve their livelihoods (p.1).

On the other hand, Nepali migrants are facing a number of problems and challenges; they are betrayed by manpower agents in their home country Nepal as well as are abused by the landlords and masters in the Gulf. Besides, crossing the border and leaving home does not always promise them their rights; instead it violates their rights as human beings. In turn, these human rights related issues resonate to their sense of belonging and entail the matters of home. Hence, they interchangeably raise the issues of home and human rights to negotiate for a free belonging in a safe home i.e. the secure world.

### Laying the Foundation

The word 'home' has its origin in Proto-Germanic *haimaz* that is a dwelling, house, estate or a village. Similarly in Old Norse *heimr* referred to residence or 'world.' In modern sense of the word literally it is a place of residence with a number of variations in terms of its structure. It ranges from the shacks of the squatters, hut, bungalows, villas, apartment buildings to the condominiums. However, the term 'home' tends to pose myriads of manifestations both concrete as well as abstract to a researcher's eyes. It unfolds unending prospects in the fecund interdisciplinary ground of academic, social and cultural studies. *Registān Diary* also presents various such meanings about home and it latently connects them to human rights.

Shelly Mallet's "Literature Review on Home" (2015) covers a wide range of definition and spatio-temporal alteration about the notion of home, starting with the traditional,

etymological idea of home as a dwelling place to the institutional living in a family and even journeying. Then expanding her inquiry of the concept of home she links it even to her own culture: “My journeys inflect ideas of home integral to the modern Anglo-European imaginary. In this realm, which is at once personal and social, house and home are related but not conflated” (p. 63). Mallet thus articulates social and psychological aspects between the terms like house and home.

Then she attributes ‘home’ which is also the place of one’s origin, the ‘formative characteristics’ in relation to a person. That is also a springboard from where one embarks upon her/his journey after the formation. That is the ‘place of return’ from the journey one makes. Its boundaries expand along with one’s journeys. So home stretches as geography how far you can reach:

The birth or family house holds symbolic power as a formative dwelling place, a place of origin and return, a place from which to embark upon a journey. This house or dwelling accommodates home but home is not necessarily confined to this place. The boundaries of home seemingly extend beyond its walls to the neighborhood, even the suburb, town or city. (Mallet, 2015, p. 63)

Presenting it as a place, Mallet argues for ‘home’ as a particular point in geographical space which is lived by human beings in a family, “Home is a place but it is also a space inhabited by family, people, things and belongings – a familiar, if not comfortable space where particular activities and relationships are lived” (2015, p. 63). Mallet in the aforementioned quotation introduces some more ‘non-material’ concepts related to home especially the sense of belonging, familiarity and life.

In connection to the concepts of home with regards to familiarity and comfort, Pico Iyer in *Global Soul* (2001) draws a complex portrait of his friend Richard who, with his briefcase full of phone cards and plane tickets, needs no office, subverts the concept of home only as a material space. However, Richard lives in Hong Kong; his sense of home is similar to Iyer’s “nowhere” and “everywhere” (p. 121). In relation to this erased concept of material, permanent home in Iyer’s work, Chatterjee (2012) asserts, “Home is reduced to a fondness for where one lives, when one is not touring”, an idea of where you are at the moment and one or two objects that ground you” (p. 48). Thus, for Iyer as he articulates in his *Global Soul* it is reduced to a comfort object, whereas for Rushdie as inscribed in his “Imaginary Homelands” (1992), it is “something that everybody has lost, and left behind in their past so pines for and creates in his/her imaginations” (p. 12). The aforementioned ideas on home are pertinent for this article, in relation to *Registän Diary* (RD henceforward), which is a piece of journalistic literature that depicts issues related to home and human rights. However, the anthology of life narratives (RD) has not been studied from this perspective yet. Therefore, this article makes an inquiry into the text through cloze reading and presents an interpretation from the standpoint of home and human rights.

### Methodology

The article is within the paradigm of qualitative research; it follows interpretative and analytical designs. Cloze reading of the text is the method used with reference to some scholars’ concepts rather than rigid theories about the theme of home and human rights since it is comparatively a new field of study in literature. Characters’ dialogues, words, expressions, and attitudes will be interpreted and analyzed with narrative analysis as the tool. In doing so,

the paper attempts to bring the two seemingly different discourses that of home and human rights together and streamline them for the study of literature.

To reiterate, this paper draws ideas from scholars like Pico Iyer, Salman Rushdie, and Shelly Mallet to discuss about the characters' perception of home. When it comes to transporting the discourses of human rights and literature closer; locating literature in human rights discourse or vice versa, it brings in Lynn Hunt for her discovery of the sentimental novels that played a role in inculcation, realization and promotion of human rights in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hunt in her book *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (2007) states that, the experience of reading novels, through characters and events is capable of arousing empathy i.e. feeling with the characters' feelings.

Thus, the universal humanitarian link between literature or the novels and the human rights is the feel of empathy and fact of universality. When reading a specific novel, almost all readers feel empathy; similarly, when human rights are the abiding factor among us, we resonate to the feeling of empathy for each other. Hence, the feeling of empathy in witnessing (i.e. for Hunt, reading a novel) a piece of literature can be emulated in instilling the human rights and being abide by them. The instillation of compassion gets accomplished through the empathetic shared experience of being into the piece of literature. The emulation of the state of empathy can be represented in literature too. This subtlety of literary representation is very significant for the support and promotion of the human rights.

Similarly, 'human rights' need a universal acceptance by each individual with a feeling of empathy to them (the rights), only then, they can be universal. To universalize human rights, it is an imperative to feel 'double-way' empathy; first all the people are required to be empathetic to each other and, then all the people collectively should empathize with the human rights. It can be made possible through the experience of reading of the novels as one can experience the channelization of 'empathy' in universal individuals or individuals universally.

There lies profuse subtlety in this process. In reading a (sentimental) novel, the readers may empathize with a certain character or characters as well as with each other; and also in the case of human rights first they should be able to empathize with each other and then with human rights together/in common. Also, the universal human rights through empathy around the globe are in the process of their making, they are evolving and revolving to their fulfillment and better concretization. In this process of evolution, they also have been a subject of study in and through literature.

Schaffer (2004) states that over the last twenty years, life narratives have become one of the most potent vehicles for advancing human rights claims. The decade of the 1990s, the aftermath of cold war is labeled the decade of human rights, and the decade of life narratives in the form of memoir. Many of these life narratives tell of human rights violations (*Human Rights and Narrated Lives*). In the same line, the journalistic stories that are compiled in *Registän Diary* are also a form of memoir that records and unveils dozens of human right issues that beg a discussion. It not only crosses the border of journalism to human rights but also builds one towards literature, hence making it a trajectory for further analysis and discussion.

Slaughter J. R. (2007) relates that the study of human rights in/through literature is an emergence of a nascent field that is “beginning to sketch the parameters of interdisciplinary study of human rights and the humanities” (acknowledgement). The book is about the socio-cultural, formal, historical and ideological conjunctions between human rights and the novel, particularly “the coming-of-age genre, the Bildungsroman”, whose plot, in Slaughter’s words, we could provisionally gloss as the didactic story of an individual who is socialized in the process of learning for oneself what everyone else (including the reader) presumably already knows (2007, p.3). In this way, the interdependence of human rights and individual narratives deems permissive and primal. Hence, this article is an endeavor to explore the interconnections and implications of home and human rights in migration narratives depicted in a semi-literary text, namely *Registän Diary*.

#### ***Registän Diary: Analysis and Interpretation***

Bhattarai’s *Registän Diary* stages questions of home in relation to displaced characters whose subjectivities are changed and human rights are challenged as a result of their obligatory migrations. This anthology presents a series of journalist-authored migration stories that foreground the concept of home and human rights that are ‘fluidified’ and challenged respectively in migration as Zdanowicz (2006) holds:

The process of migration changes the concept of home as these categories are renegotiated. As the concept of home is renegotiated, it becomes more than just a single geographic place. Instead, home is realized as many geographic sites and psychological spaces. (p. ii)

Akin to Zdanowich’s articulation in the quotation above, the process of migration not only changes the concept of home but also challenges the concept of human rights as these categories are renegotiated continually in the process and aftermath of migration. To reiterate Zdanowich, the concept of home is re-negotiated; it becomes more than just a single geographic place. Besides, it inflates into many geographical spaces for instance the spaces of home and host lands and later is realized as many geographic sites, transposed objects and imaginary as well as psychological spaces and conditions.

*Registän Diary* depicts similar notion about home as conceptualized by Zdanowich. The anthology consists of life narratives based on real life events of Nepali migrants that a journalist documented during his stay in the gulf countries for more than a year. As a journalist, Bhattarai travels to different gulf countries observing the different geography, cultural and social practices especially carried out by the Nepali (e) migrants and the people of the host countries who are directly and indirectly related to them. Today, Nepali youths go not only to Bhot, Gorakhpur and Lahor but also migrate to the Middle East. Even though, this is the case, many of their stories which latently raise the human rights issues have remained unheard.

Contrary to it, as mentioned in the preface of the book, the narrator devotes his time listening to the stories and finds out what the migrants are facing. He visits different places and meets a number of migrants to explore their work as well as living conditions. Unfortunately, he uncovers only sorrow, pain and despair in their lives. There are altogether fifty entries/stories concerning fifty different real life characters in a foreign land in search of work.

In the host land of the Gulf, their rights are violated in various ways. For example, the book describes the pitiable and reproachable working conditions for the workers. The author finds them living in filthy accommodations which are comparable to prisons, or herding animals in the desert in temperatures higher than fifty degree centigrade. The author pinpoints the fact that Nepalese are often engaged in professions which are quite risky. At this juncture, the book uncovers that the majority of the migrants regret coming to the deserts as they were not given adequate and correct information by manpower agents in terms of the nature of their work, their accommodations, and the salaries they would receive.

*RD* also explains the attitude of the employers towards the workers. Most migrants often complain that their employers behave very rudely and do not treat them as human beings. At work, they face problems like low or unpaid salaries, and physical or mental harassment like having to live submitting their passport to their masters/owners (Bhattarai, 2010, p.46). Many workers are deprived of medical treatments even if the accident took place while on duty. The author is astonished to hear that in some places, domesticated animals are better fed than the workers, and are housed in air-conditioned buildings, a distant dream for the underprivileged humans. This raises the issues of human rights with a question to nationalities. Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before law (UDHR, Article 6).

The anthology also emphasizes on the stories of Nepali women migrants. Bhattarai encounters many women who were sexually abused by their masters. He finds many heartbreaking stories of sexual abuse and rape (2010, pp. 40-42, 89). The women also declare that moving to the Gulf to work as a housemaid is the worst option for a woman (Bhattarai, p.26).

Besides the above mentioned themes, *Registān Diary* also talks about other issues such as family, relationships, debt are also amply explored. Though the workers live in the deserts, they long for the lives they once had back at their homes. Another major worry is the debt that most of them had taken, from the landlords back at their villages, while flying to the Gulf. The high rates of interest agonies them; the thought of repayment constantly haunts and ruthlessly holds them in the grip of gulf masters.

Thus, the book deals with the theme of home, the loss of home, the reasons for leaving home, desired return and frequent human rights abuse as the barrier to their return to their homes. As they cannot return to their homes when they wish, they transpose things to feel 'at home' at that vast desert. The characters reminisce and anticipate rain; they desire for the coolness of the breeze, they wish for whey. It unfolds one more aspect of home that is, in addition to food and drink like whey, aspects of weather also impart migrants a deep feeling of home. In the story "Rain Drop in the Desert" it is reported that they become very happy hearing the rumors that it will rain tomorrow (Bhattarai, 2010, p.35). As Yeoh in her article "Transnational Mobilities and Challenges" cites specific case studies, she concludes that home can be many things. It can be a site of struggle, exile and alienation, comfort and kinship, or any combination of these kinds of ties (qtd. in Zdanowicz, 2006, p. 23). Akin to Zdanowicz's conception, home has been many things such as a site of struggle where they toil to earn bread, fail to do it, so they take an exile to foreign land, the countries in the Gulf where their rights as human beings get challenged and violated.

In this way, *Registān Diary* documents the themes of home and human rights that are intertwined. When their rights are violated at the workplaces or in the host-homes then they pine more to go back home as a relief and security. It entails another question that is— is there a possibility for human beings to feel at home away from their home too?

Almost all the stories start with the ‘home address’ of the character, where the person is from, thus while dealing with the concept of home, the location or geography is emphasized. The geography of the place of origin at times stands contrary to the migrated nation for instance the landscape, the juxtaposition of forest and desert, rivers and no raindrops. The difference in geography brings their homeland more closer to their imagination giving way to nostalgia.

The character named Maya in the story “Affection Woven at Chwang Carpet” was deprived of seeing her husband more than for 5-7 minutes, she had to be at work since 4 am in the morning to 1-2 a.m however she remains reminiscing and missing her children back at home (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 66). Thus, the notion of home is embedded in a person’s memory.

The sense of home is evoked even through the art ie. in the story “Kaagbeni at Two Riyal” it is written that the weekend gatherings at Bismillah Square in Doha where there is a big mass of Nepalese workers to collect lot of things related to home like “*Kaagbeni*” a documentary which was sold at a discounted rate. Perhaps they have an attachment with the name and theme of the movie as it is named after a place in the Himalayan region in Nepal and depicts life in Kaagbeni itself (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 67). The migrant characters urge to buy the documentary in the foreign land can be commensurate akin to Zdanowicz’s assertion in his article “Migration and Home in Literature” also points out that characters do come to recognize home not only as a physical or geographic location, but as an emotional space and a variety of physical locations (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 10).

Similarly they heave a sigh of relief and pleasure in nostalgia about home, “there is a different pleasure about reminiscing bygone days this way” says Santakumar Rai who was born and grown up at a barren village in Illam, Nepal (Bhattarai, 2010, p.101). Another character Moti Lal (in Bhattarai, 2010) expresses the pangs in his lyric:

It is better to stay home, keep a buffalo and have milk  
It was a great misfortune that pushed me to a foreign land  
The hands which we supposed it skinks to manage the dung  
The cement made them bleed, oh my brother! (p.142)

Some how similar to Motilal, in the above quote, who thinks it would have been best to stay at his home land irrespective of the hard work he had to do, Som Bahadur regrets for not studying nicely so he had to spend the life of a goat herd in the gulf. He reveals that there is ‘betrayal at home’ too, the manpower agencies do not let them know the real situations, they cheat them showing them the expectations of well-paid and safe jobs and there comes the broker at another step. However, all of them board the big airbus with myriads of nice dreams but as they reach the real place everybody feels betrayed. The very betrayal challenges the concept of ‘home’ as there is no ‘feeling of security’ in one’s homeland too. Deceived about the promised jobs, living conditions and remuneration Som says, “I would plough the field, stay at home if even someone offers me fifty thousand per month, I would not go to a foreign land (Bhattarai, 2010, p.150). This story entitled “An Explanation after Writing Churate” reveals that ‘home’ can also be a source of betrayal.

Narabhadur, in the story “Brother in Law Lost” explicitly relates a stark story of the disappearance of his brother in law who had made Kuwait his home after Nepal (Bhattarai, 2010, p.178). On the other hand he offers the narrator some tobacco back from Nepal as a symbol of homeliness, which implies that there is home even in the tobacco he takes. The tobacco is something that takes the narrator back to his home, in imagination and feeling, along with the person he meets at the National roundabout.

Each story in the anthology starts with the actual geographical location of the characters’ home, the home which they had left for (Gulf) host countries. Various (real life) characters belong to different locations and sites on the fore-grounded geography. However, they all have ‘left’ it, from migration point of view, they have crossed the borders. Therefore, their homes have become imaginary pinning for them since the time they left them. But they ‘remake’ or ‘reconstruct’ home, fragmenting it and re-imagining it, here the concept of home gets transposed and inflated. The tents and the cow/goat/sheep sheds become their homes. Still, they think of their geographical homes and try to ‘feel’ it in the things related to ‘home’ in the desert— the drop of rain, art, informal mass gatherings on weekends at Bismillah Square, in the whey they drink and in the crumpled photographs they have kept close to their perspiring chest.

In the story “Sita, Arita and Dolma” it is mentioned that Sita entered Kuwait, with the dream of self-earned bread and butter, at the age of twenty four. Now she is thirty four, but her stories of pain seem to have been seasoned for many more years. She landed on Gulf without knowing what household work is. She was deployed at a Kuwaiti landlord. The Kuwaiti master’s house was similar to a jail; and she was like a detainee there. She was deployed for working at the house for last two years. To her dismay, she did not only have to do the household chores, but she also had to take care of the physical and sexual needs of the house owner. After a clash flared up at that house she was thrown out of it; but then she had a fetus of eight months in her womb (Bhattarai, 2010, pp.40-41). The so called ‘house’ dispelled her when she needed that the most.

Similarly, another character named Rambabu Chaudhari went to Qatar on a plumber’s visa but he was deployed at a labourer’s duty. Last year, while connecting an electric wire, he fell of a ladder and got his right leg fractured then started his misfortunate days. Neither his leg was cured nor did he get the salary for last six months. Then he went to the labour court at the advice of the embassy. When he went to the court, the Syrian owner not only beat him badly, but at night, also physically assaulted him to near death. After that running away from the company camp he is at the protection of the Nepalese embassy (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 45).

“Monthly salary is net 500 Riyal ... there is no separate room to sleep too. Sometimes have to sleep in the dining room whereas sometimes on the roof. And there is no good provision of food too”, says Maya. The Indonesian lady and Maya were the victims of the owner’s verbal as well as physical abuse. The owner has bought me for 400 riyal so I can’t go home without returning that money the owner says. Due to too much of trouble, once she called at the embassy. But the personnel there asked her to run away and reach there, as she could not she was still there at the house (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 64-65).

Not only women but also men are sexually abused. The entry “Sudani Cupid in the Desert” narrates a similar saga of sexual exploitation of the young Nepalese by the sexually

defunct owner's whims. At the time of night as the young lad would sleep by his side due to fear, the owner would sexually abuse him throughout the night, unable to bear the torture, he ran away from there leaving behind all his belongings (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 56-57).

When the narrator reaches at the Nepali embassy at Doha, which is the shelter for emergency states, he finds more than a dozen of Nepalese staying as refugees. He states that if we try to know about who drove them to this situation, it will be discovered that the exploitation started from Nepal itself, be that from the manpower company or the broker or an agent (Bhattarai, 2010, p. 99).

Nowhere in these sheds of the deserts there was the provision of air-condition (AC) whether the heat reaching fifty five degree Celsius or the sand taking to the air . . . the shacks or the tents where the Nepalese herds lived there was not even electricity. . . the shepherds of the sand are mostly Nepalese who have studies upto 5-7 classes. Among them, many had neither visa nor passport . . . the herds' life in the desert is really awful (Bhattarai, 2010, pp.112-113). In this way the anthology clearly lays bare the issues of home and human rights in subtlety.

### Result and Discussion

As the interpretation and analysis above facilitated by cloze reading shows, in *Registän Diary* also home is recognized as many locations, the very concept of home is expanded to include emotional space as well as physical place. As a result, home is never static, but a state of being rather than a physical location, an ever-changing dynamic that shifts across geographic and psychological planes without coming to rest as Zdanowicz opines in her "Are We There Yet? Migration and Home in Literature" (2006, p. 43).

*Registän Diary* ends in hope with a story that relates to an investment of three Nepali businessmen's investment in Pearl Qatar as its citizens, hence suggesting that Nepalese migrants too have been faring the flux of change in the phenomena within locations and beginning to become transnational as well as cosmopolitan citizens crossing the boundaries of nations (Bhattarai, 2010, p.196).

The anthology (*RD*) first introduces the conditions of home and human rights. Then, it discusses the relation between home and human rights to illustrate the dual characteristic of their relationship that is complementary as well as contradictory. The complementary aspect is implied when the characters feel at home in host land when they feel that they are treated as humans in terms of the basic provision of proper food, shelter, entertainment, socialization and wages. On the other hand, when their basic needs to survival which are also the markers of civil rights are not guaranteed, they fail to be at home, both at the home country as well as in the host country. When they are betrayed by the man power company agents in their own country, the place home as a nation not only denies the idea of assurance of human rights but also defies it; hence it lays bare the contradictory nature of home and human rights relation.

*RD* also leads to more in-depth and multi-faceted definitions of home by presenting the notion of home in terms of concrete geographical light and giving way to the representation of home in 'things'. The book moves through the double bind of home and human rights. On one hand, the characters miss home in the host land when they witness their rights being violated. On the other hand they accuse home (land) also not guaranteeing the rights and failing to address their basic needs, therefore, migration becomes obligatory. However, the

abuse of human rights transgresses the boundaries of time and space; of host and home. Besides, home is defined as each character's individual geographical space as well as a common living space with differing facilities and fences in host lands. However, it ends with a mention of a transnational island like Pearl Qatar triggering a glimpse of a cosmopolitan world in the minds of the reader.

### Conclusion

Though *Registān Diary* moves through the double bind of home and human rights, the ending of the anthology with 'Pearl Qatar', which is an island that will be in free hold of multinationals and three Nepali migrants' investment in it further adds to the representation of home and human rights in their universality. Similarly, human rights concerns are as particular as an individual and explanation of their specific condition, at the same time they all are discussed within the framework of human beings' rights at universal level. Thus, we can conclude that through the seemingly interminable dialectic of universality and particularity of both – home as well as human rights, this anthology presents a negotiation for a free belonging in a secured world.

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