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Theoretical/Critical Essay Article

## Indigenous Characters and Their Nation: A Socio-Political Analysis of Selected Nepali Plays

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## Abstract

The rise of modern Nepali intellectuals especially in Kathmandu during the 1930s inspired many writers and political leaders to articulate new narratives of the nation. For instance, Balkrishna Sama's Mukunda Indira, Bhimnidhi Tiwari's Sahanshila Sushila (Permissive Sushila) present characters from various strata of Nepali society. In the plays, indigenous communities speak about the psycho-social realities of the time. The indigenous characters of the plays are humble and hardworking. But in the play Simma written by Rayan right before the 1980 referendum, the time the Panchayat regime became stronger and kept denying the people's democratic rights the indigenous characters in plays become politically vocal. They question the polity based on modern social and political theories. However, the indigenous characters of Mayadevika Sapana (Dreams of Mayadevi) written by Abhi Subedi and staged in 2004 and later years speak for the universal peace and brotherhood. By drawing upon Ludwig Stiller and Mahesh Chandra Regmi's social, economic and political interpretation of Nepal's history, particularly of the nineteenth century, the article concludes that while presenting the indigenous characters, the playwrights directly and indirectly address the social and political ills of the Nepal society. These indigenous characters' attitude towards their masters and the representatives of the state around reflects the political and historical courses that Nepal has gone through over the centuries and the rise of a force that might free them from such lines of control.

Keywords: Alienated, indigenous, elite, modern nation-state

#### Introduction

This paper makes a con/textual reading of four modern Nepali plays written across seven decades in order to explore the state of sensibilities of the characters belonging to indigenous communities. They include Balkrishna Sama's *Mukunda Indira*, Bhimnidhi Tiwari's *Sahanshila Sushila*, (*Permissive Sushila*) Rayan's *Simma* and Abhi

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

Subedi's Mayadevika Sapana (Dreams of Mayadevi). These plays mark politically three distinct dimensions of Nepal's modern history. Mukunda Indira and Sahanshila Sushila (Permissive Sushila) were written in the last years of 1930s, a decade that marked the rise of democratic political sensibilities against the Rana oligarchy (1846-1950). John Whelpton, in this case, opines, "In the mid-1930s, a nascent political party, the Nepal Praja Parishad (Nepal People's Council), was secretly formed and its members had managed to make contact with King Tribhuvan" (67). As the first wave of political consciousness in Nepal, it paved the way for new adventures for the intellectuals, writers and artists of the Valley. The three members of the Council, who were hanged by the regime, two of them belonged to the Newar community. The news had spread all over the nation and beyond. The other play Simma marks the height of the party-less Panchayat regime that had displaced the democratically elected government in 1960, and had muffled the voices for democracy time and again in later years. It was written at a time when the Panchayat regime had manipulated the result of the referendum held in 1979 to its favour. Since the resources needed to conduct the nationwide referendum were in the control of the regime, the Panchas or the group of people who actively supported the Panchayati system made the best of it; the call for multi-party democracy got derailed. For Urmila Phadnis, the "mounting pressure within the palace, and perhaps his own assessment of the future of the Crown in the event of a multi-party camp victory, gradually tilted the king towards preservation of the Panchavat regime" (441). As a result, free thinking Nepali artists and intellectuals started nurturing a politically radical vision. Similarly, the last play Mayadevika Sapana (Dreams of Mayadevi) written and staged in 2004, at the height of the brief years of the direct rule of the then King Gyanendra (2001-2005), was produced in one of the most violent periods of Nepal's history as the 10 years long 'Arm Struggle' (1996-2005) was being launched by the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). It reached its culminating point to become a major factor to bring a historical end to the monarchy. Finally, it opened up a door to the establishment of multi-party democratic federal republic Nepal, which represented the mood of that challenging time.

In the plays, the supporting characters such as Punacha from *Mukunda Indira*, Sete from *Sahanshila Sushila (Permissive Sushila)*, the protagonist character Simma from *Simma*, and one of the main characters Salleri Sahinla from *Mayadevika Sapana* (*Dreams of Mayadevi*) together form a cohort as it were of the indigenous characters who help us understand not only the theme of the respective plays but also of the political and socioeconomic characteristics of Nepal's modern history. Based on Nepal's political and historical analysis carried out by Mahesh Chandra Regmi, Baburam Acharya and Ludwig F. Stiller, this paper argues that Punacha, Sete, Simma and Salleri Sahinla live with a kind of reality that is directly connected to the economic and cultural policies that the rulers promulgated at different times in history to retain their hold on power. These characters' attitude towards their lords in each play reflects the political and historical courses that Nepal has gone through over the centuries and the rise of a force that might free them from such lines of control.

#### Set, Jwain Saheb and Nation

Sahanshila Sushila (Permissive Sushila) written in in 1939 and performed two years later and *Mukunda Indira* performed in 1939 share a similar subject that the youths belonging to the Kathmandu-based elite class needed moral reformations. For this, their wives play important roles and importantly minor characters who come from indigenous communities help their masters and mistresses get reunited. Sushila endures physical and mental torture and becomes successful in bringing reformation in the character of her

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husband, a pampered son of an elite family. Sete's contribution is very significant in getting the protagonist's goal materialized. Similarly, Indira brings a reformation in her husband's attitude and character through her moral integrity and innocence. Punacha's contribution in this regard cannot be underestimated.

The plot line of these plays reminds one of the historically real political and economic journeys that Nepal as a nation was passing through in the first half of the twentieth centuries. The Kathmandu-centric elites mainly the Thakuris and the Brahmins had already started to dominate the national political scene by the mid of the nineteenth century. In course of time they had possessed so much property that they were afraid of getting it exposed publicly. That's why they moved their money to Calcutta, the capital city of the then British India. Regarding this economic phenomenon that had become a dominant force in the Nepal's domestic politics and economy by the end of nineteenth century, a USA-born Nepali historian Ludwig F. Stiller notes,

While Bir tried to improve his personal finances through revenue reforms, other members of the Rana family tried to improve their own on the Calcutta market. Between the two, they emasculated Nepal's economy. Bir soaked up whatever surplus income farmers might have. The rest of the Ranas skimmed whatever money they could off the economy and invested it outside the country. This was a new form of exploitation. The Ranas had never been addicted to the lavish living for which other rulers in the subcontinent were notorious... As Ranas investment in the Calcutta market increased, the Ranas themselves were alienated from the needs and opportunities of their own country. (129)

The word 'alienated' rightly sums up the spirit of the protagonists of both plays. Since these protagonists belong to the same socio-political era and the class, they lose themselves into the world of similar kind of mannerism: debauchery and licentious activities. Mukunda from the first play spends his free life in Calcutta whereas Juwain Saheb, the major character from the second play enjoys all forms of luxury available for the elite class ruling families in the Kathmandu valley.

The world of engagement that these protagonist characters do have in the plays helps us understand the pinch of bitter salt that the characters belonging to the economically and politically deprived class and community had to swallow. Punacha, a local Newar youth from the Kathmandu valley assists Bhavadeva in the project of bringing Mukunda back home from Calcutta. He, an innocent local youth about the world outside, gets flabbergasted especially by the world of Calcutta. Rooted to his language and culture, a Jyapu linguistically it is natural that he pronounces Nepali words, originated mainly from the Sanskrit language, in his native flavour. The linguistic performance that comes naturally to him becomes a subject for entrainment for others, mainly for the Khas *kura* (dialect) speakers. For example, he pronounces the dental /tʌ/, as the alveolar /t'ʌ/, phonetically. Similarly, he mistakes one phenomenon for another, a naïve curious countryman that he is. For example, he takes the popular *gazal* (a poem with a repeated rhyme, mostly about love and written to be sung, having its origin in the Mughal court) that Mukunda and his friends in Calcutta are listening to or watching at their flat for the holy hymns or *Haribhajans*.

Another important job Punacha is asked to perform is to keep secret about the plan that Mukunda and Bhavadeva had designed. Despite all moral pressures given by the parents of the whereabouts of Mukunda, Punacha remains true to the words he had given to Bhavadeva that he will not reveal the secrets that Mukunda is already in Kathmandu and has disguised himself as a local Romeo and is wooing Indira to fool and derail her from her vow of fidelity. A servant and helping hand to the family, Punacha is denied any familial attributes except that he comes from the Jyapu community, known

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

for agricultural and labor class jobs. He does not achieve anything significant to him. At Calcutta, he talks to a loader or coolie in a superior tone. Sans the consciousness of the right order, he fails to recognize the freedom that capitalism in other parts of the world had already brought and freed the bonded laborers like him. In vain, he is proud of his monarch that he carries a locket that contains a photo of his king albeit he does not know the name of the town he comes from. He becomes a helping hand to his masters, he assists them, entertains people including his audiences and gets the job done for these masters.

Sete Magar, the helping character in Sahanshila Sushila (Permissive Sushila) comes from Nuwakot, a neighboring district of Kathmandu. Sete, the very name given to him evokes a socio-reality that members belonging to indigenous and Dalit community did not deserve to have any prestigious name. He works as a domestic helper in the family of the protagonist, Juwain Saheb ('Son-in-law'). Historically, this family represents the elite class that had come to dominate in Kathmandu right after the unification. Connected to the top rank of the then Royal Nepal Army, this family is resourceful. Though Sushila is mistreated in the family, her parents as a matter of ethics do not intervene but wait for the reformation in the behaviour of their Juwain Saheb or son-in-law. As he cannot take any moral or intellectual stand, Sete supports whatever his master, Juwain Saheb asks and orders him to do. He does not hesitate to tell lies to protect his master's misdeeds. In many cases, he functions like a mask for his master. Sete gets physically exploited but he does not complain. Another significant thing about Sete is that he can sing and dance very well. On top of that he can disguise and spy very well. Such performative qualities in him makes him probably one of the most brilliant human beings. Judged from the level of aesthetic sensibilities, he is a far better performer than a good for nothing, degenerated member of the elite class that he serves and adores so much. In the world of *Gazal* or Hindi Urdu dominated performance culture of the then Kathmandu valley, he brings his own kind of folk flavor. He sings the folk *jhyaure* songs or ballads. He reads the plot that Chiniya Champa, a local honeybee trapper has thrown over his master. He can read the dramatic situation very well. He warns his master but in vain.

On the other hand, his wife and her sex partner, Juthe Gharti, fool Sete. But Sete stands tall morally. He is capable of separating immoral from the moral and truth from the lies. He calls the villagers for meeting. Batuli, Sete's wife, is free to live with the person she likes. Unlike his master in Kathmandu, he is not violent to his wife. One phrase that defines him economically and politically is 'a tukro kanlo' or 'a mere piece of land' in the hills that he owns, in the words of the villagers.

VILLAGERS: (Pointing hand to SETE) What an unmanly chap you are! Shame on you, Sete! Don't act like a coward!! You sound like a stupid kid. Go and get a woman. In case, you can't. Don't worry about the land. We are here to take care of it. That piece of land, you own, isn't a big thing for us to look after. (4.02. 38) Not having enough land is one of the reasons why he needs to leave home and

stay at master's family as a bonded laborer in Kathmandu. Similar to the way his master is alienated from familial responsibility, Sete is alienated from his own world, his family at Nuwakot. His wife finds it difficult to handle her erotic desires. Whereas Sete looks calm. A married man without any erotic desires, Sete fails to fulfill his familial and biological needs. There is no doubt that he is a poor person. What he needs now is more land and money for the economic security of his family. His wife should have been the priority of his life. Like a lost man, he is entangled into the whirlpool of relationship that his master and mistress have created. Though he reunites them, no change happens in his

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

life. His master and Sushila do not reward him, nor does his wife return to his life. The only person who seems to have got lost in the play is Sete.

Ironically, there is not a single moment when Sete does contemplate on his personal life. His masters' pain and frustration, jokes and habits seal him off from his subjective world, as it were. In this sense, Sete has talents, quality to endure as well as a mind to decide on time, and a tremendous softness required to live a life of quality. But what he lacks is subjectivity, a force that could drive him to know his predicament, and a force that would motivate him to question the existing social, economic and political values. Sete's silence, his alienation from his own desire and family requirements speak the psychosocial realities with which did the indigenous communities live in Nepal.

Unequal distribution of land has remained one of the most dominant problems of the nation in the immediate post-unification period, as mentioned earlier. Similarly, the rise of the Kathmandu-based Thakuris and Brahmins, the elite class that influenced the government to promulgate policies in their favor paved the way for Hinduisation, and their mother tongue Khas kura displaced other indigenous languages. Nepal's one of the most influential thinkers Harka Gurung states: "Hinduization, unequal land distribution and imposition of Khas language and cultural practices exploited indigenous population of the country" (253). This class of exploiters multiplied like-minded elites throughout the nation. The family that Punacha and Sete serve in Kathmandu, their predicament is a part and parcel of the land-divided society. These two stories provide a picture of the rise of Nepal as a nation that promulgated unscientific land policies. Regarding this elite centric land policies, historian Baburam Acharya argues, "The malpractice of exploiting state fund for private purpose was rising in trend. The most productive plots of land from Terai got registered in the names of the members of their families and henchmen. Bir Shamsher, the Shree Tin Maharaj and his brothers became successful in holding properties on a large scale" (291). The elite class owned up the most fertile land of Terai whereas the indigenous community owned only a 'kanlo' or just a strip in the hill side. Such policies paved the way for a gap between the classes. As a result, the youths of the elite class enjoyed abundance, and misused the resources available to them. This could be the reason why they needed to be taught and motivated to take care of their family and life partners. They needed their counterparts to be taught what it means to be honest, hard-working, faithful and humans. Tiwari's implied message in the play could have been something else as the title suggests, the enduring quality of Sushila, and the miracle it does to save a family from getting ruined. But seen through Sete's role and economic policies of modern Nepal during the nineteenth century, the world of this play is the result of a century old unjust economic and political policies taken by the state. Written at the time Praja Parishad, the picture that Tiwari draws of the capital city, Kathmandu of the period is politically intensive as four youths were sentenced to death. Some of the artists playing role in the play were arrested as a result the rehearsal was halted for some months. Student artists Balabahadur and Govinda Prasad were put behind the bar for supporting the ongoing movement (Preface).

#### Simma and the Rise of Political Consciousness

Nepal's rise as a modern nation state paved the way for the elite class that amassed public properties for their benefit. Mahesh Chandra Regmi points out this very historical fact that has remained one of the most pertinent issues in later times: "The Gorkhali rulers maintained their monopoly over political power by sharing the economic benefits of that power with the aristocracy and the bureaucracy in this manner. Those groups, consequently, appropriated a part of the economic resources that otherwise would have secured to the state" (213). Moreover, the very agreement that the Nepali

SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities

rulers had made with the British Force of the East India Company in the second decades of the nineteenth century, i.e., after the Anglo Nepal war in 1816, to allow Nepali youths to be recruited in the British Indian Army. It had paved the way for the kind of economy Nepal would live through in later period of history. Historians call this deal between the East India Company and the rulers as a strategy to please the Empire and facilitate this elite class to remain in power. It is often believed that the Kathmandu based elite class could become successful in retaining its power at the cost of sending thousands of youths, the commoners to fight for the British. With it, the British Empire continued to maintain a hold on power in this region. Thus, the Khas language speaking elites and the British Empire both prolonged their power because of these Nepali youths.

Simma, first performed in 1978 and published in 1981 by Rayan, a contemporary Marxist thinker and ideologue transforms a romantic story between Simma and Dengsu to a political one. Both of them come from a locality that is known for its simple folks and natural beauty. Culturally, they belong to a liberal society where a boy and a girl take a decision and choose life-partners and get married. Women are heard in this society. Geographically, they belong to the mountains and the forest areas, full of pastoral land and public places. Politically, they come from a locality where most of the resources such as land, forest and community spaces have been registered in the name of the landlord and people's representatives. Economically, speaking the available opportunity for them is to join the army, mainly the Indian and the British army, or work as laborers in Indian towns. Together, such settings and atmosphere represent the condition of the indigenous communities mainly that of Tamang, as well as that of Magar or Gurung or Rai or Limbu. Getting recruited in such Indian and British army becomes the dreams of the boys of this area. Denshu goes abroad and gets recruited. So do other boys. Simma suffers at home. So do other common folks. What could be the source of their suffering? Why do they lack land whereas some people around possess that so much? As reported by Thule, Simma is supposed to have written the following lines in the letter sent to her Denshu: ....

The *Pradhan* owns the *raniban* famous for fodders and firewood now The *jimmawal* is now the master of the entire pasture land The *mukhiya* possess all the community property now

Common folks find it difficult to make our livelihood. (VII: 29) 'Pradhan', 'jimmawal' and 'mukhiya' ('local government authorities during the Rana regime') among others represent the agents that rulers from Kathmandu had created to rule over the people. Though uneducated, Simma's understanding of the problem is politically correct. She realizes that political liberation is the only solution that can end their suffering. The landlords and the policies the state has promulgated are the main cause of their subjugated life. She calls for a union among youths of her community working abroad. She calls for a revolution. The boys at barracks in the foreign land, at their offices get the message and circulate it. There is a hope that a public uprising is going to take place at home.

Simma speaks about the political suffocation that Nepal's political activists and supporters of open and progressive political system had gone through in the context of the 1960 royal coup. Simma acquires the political spirit of a Marxist not because she has been trained on it, not as someone who has read Marxism but someone who has analysed or discovered the local form of corruption by heart. She has understood the nation she belongs to. Landlords and political representatives become richer and influential on the one hand, and exodus of youths or mass migration of young people continues to take place on the other. How come a certain class of people prospers while the other class of people continue to suffering in the same locality at the same point of history?

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#### Salleri Sahinla and Peace

Salleri Sahinla, one of the major characters of *Mayadevika Sapana (Dreams of Mayadevi)* written by Abhi Subedi in 2004 and performed in the same year at Aarohan Gurukul under the direction of Nisha Sharma is living through a difficult time (1996-2005) of the political unrest. The Nepal Communist Party Maoist and the His Majesty's Government led Royal Nepal Army are fighting a war. His only son had died in this very war. Himself a veteran who had served as a Gurkha in the British army, he reads the mind of the youths. Amputated, he is now partly visionary and partly a senseless man. As a man of animistic faith and poetic imagination, he keeps on pacifying the dead, evokes the local deities, and tries to stop the ongoing war. To the fighting youths, he says:

OLD MAN. ... But if you want to see the face of war after it's all over, just look at me. Imagine a person: he possesses medals safely tucked in a trunk, but with one arm amputated, he can hardly manage to feed himself. He lives with the memory of a disappeared son, and lingers like a shadow everywhere. Your fate will be no different than mine. Forget about me. My story happened in a foreign land. Think of the time when both sides, hunters and hunted, will be living together. You will share water from the same well. With amputated arms, you will live through the same *karma* of suffering. You will look into each other's eyes, but no tears will drop from them. You'll have no words for one another. There will be nothing to say to each other. The war that takes place at home generates no story, only raw pain. Do you hear me brothers? Don't fight. You will achieve nothing! Ach, you're just pawns of a higher command. No use giving you any advice. (1.3. 23)

Salleri Sahinla has seen the world and been through the experience of such nasty wars. He knows the painful situation that one has to carry 'raw pain' in the postwar situation. This war in the play is fought by both indigenous and non-indigenous youths, like the real one Maoist guerrillas fighting against the then Royal Nepal Army. Historically speaking, this war had a goal to bring reformation in the country at the political, social, cultural and economic levels. It had a goal to end the dominance of the elite class that had come to exist from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Thus, seen through the indigenous people's perspective, this war was inevitable. But Salleri Sanhila's remarks makes one contemplate on the heroic self that the sufferer indigenous people have carved out over the period. Sahinla's self and vision promotes humanism, not revenge and war. He cautions that violence does not breed happiness in the community.

Similarly, Mayadevi, the most significant character of the play, a widow of the British or Indian Gurkha army is watching the war closely. Her only son has joined the Maoist force or People's army. Though she is a mother of a Maoist guerilla, she tries to judge the situation on human ground. Courageously, she faces both the Royal Army and the Maoist or Armed forces. She does not talk of the land policies nor does she talk of the cultural policies of the state. She asserts the importance of peace and love as taught by Gautam Buddha. Ironically, by picking up the theme of war and violence as its subject matter, this play highlights the significance of peace and teaching of the Buddha. These indigenous characters in the play have gone through suffering of all kinds. They have suffered at home and abroad. Both females at home and males abroad have suffered. But such suffering has made them more human. Morally, they stand tall. They know the consequences of war and revenge. They speak for peace and speak for all.

This war and the political revolution or public uprising paved the way for a drastic change of 2006. This change brought an end to the dominance of the Kathmandu-centric elite class that had come to function since the rise of the Shah and the Ranas in

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Nepal. Leaders and ideologues belonging to indigenous communities occupy Nepal's influential political parties and offices. Writers and artists from indigenous communities lead in several domains of arts and literatures in the current times. They write in Nepali and their mother tongues. This means to say that the indigenous Nepalis live in a significant period of the history of their communities. As human beings they speak not only for their rights but also for the betterment of the entire Nepalis.

#### Conclusion

To conclude, the journey and meaning these characters undertake and achieve make one realize that the history of every nation or community is 'the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time" (395) as Walter Benjamin states. The issues not solved in one era do not disappear into a thin air but return back with storm and avalanche. The characters of the selected plays discussed above motivate to see the indigenous Nepalis and their aspirations moving with new meanings. One thing that is so inspiring about them is that they do not regard history as a game of revenge. They may have served as servants and bonded laborers, or as armies and security guards abroad, but like poets and seekers, they live with a vision to free all kinds of people from different forms of exploitation. Their power lies in the fact that their vision is made by the lofty sense of the alleviation and overcoming of the terrible cycles of hatred and revenge.

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