

**SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities**

Print ISSN: 2773-7829; e-ISSN: 2773-7837

eJournal Site: [www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/](http://www.cdetu.edu.np/ejournal/)

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL; Star-Ranked in JPPS
- Permanently Archived in Portico



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URL: [www.cdetu.edu.np](http://www.cdetu.edu.np)

Research Article

## Women under the Panchayat Regime: Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain* as a Feminist Project

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**Article History:** Submitted 02 Nov. 2023; Reviewed 01 Jan. 2024; Revised 03 Feb. 2024

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v6i1.62728>

### Abstract

The representation of the female in Nepali fiction has been a fascinating subject for critics. This paper examines the representational position of the women as projected in Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain*. In this novel, the novelist critiques the patriarchal society's treatment to women in a different social structure. Parijat's female characters are projected as suffering and marginalized people of the Nepali society around the student's revolution of the early 1980s. Other issues raised in this paper focus on students and subaltern characters who are treated badly as they raise voice against the oppressive Panchayat system and other kinds of dominance. She writes against social wrongs and ill intended human activities. She exposes the character's desire for freedom, individuality and equal rights. Thus, the objective of this study is to find out the answers to whether the suffering of women, laborers and students are concretely represented in her novel or not. In this paper, this researcher explores the issues around the plight of the female, which are interpreted from the feminist perspective. The relevant feminist notions developed by the feminist critics such as Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Catherine Belsey and Susan Bassnett have been adopted for textual analysis as a methodological tool. This paper concludes that the gender discrimination and political disharmony are the major obstacles to women upliftment.

**Keywords:** Panchayat system, patriarchy, suppression, feminism, rebellion

### Introduction

Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain*, with its original title in Nepali *Anido Pahadsangai*, reposes the representation of women and working-class people. Her understanding to the society is based on the characters' experiences and observations as they raise voice against the oppressive Panchayat system and an unnecessary political control over the people's freedom. Bishnu Kumari Waiba, popularly known as Parijat, is a Marxist feminist writer, who writes against social inequalities. The asymmetric

political access to and/or control over the rights on the basis of gender and occupation to the women, industrial labourers, and student unions make them feel oppressed and as a result that give rise to conflicting ideas against the “unequal social statuses” (Bassnett 13). Bassnett’s argument presents a vivid sketch on her acrimonious conflict based on the socio-political control of the Panchayat system, power responses on the basis of social hierarchy and discrimination in the light of the 1980 students’ revolution in Nepal. The oppressed people tried to take revenge and overthrow the biased political system that enslaves them. According to Nara Pallav, an English translator of *Anido Pahadsangai*, women, students and activists jointly conducted the anti-Panchayat movements as he writes, “The rulers had not been able to control the situation, and their corrupt administrators were being exposed, condemned and rejected by the people” (110). The causes and consequences of the demonstrations were now turned to the behaviours of the corrupted administrators. Anti-administration movements reach to the climax and their activities run to take a revenge against the Panchayat regime that reached to the apex and the authority failed to control over the people’s powers. The multi-party system politicians’ versions and their voices burst against dominance. They opposed asymmetric treatments to the people. They raised voices against injustice in sharing of the community-based facilities. The oppressed people of the same community used hooks and crooks to take revenge against the Panchayat rulers. The multi-party system political movement overthrew the biased political system that the Panchayat rulers practiced.

Parijat pleads for a political awareness and individual freedom. Her novel unfolds the novelist’s perception on human sufferings. She examines the Panchayat regime’s control over the marginalized citizens, including women, students and working-class people. The novel sketches various kinds of political activities done by the rulers on the one hand and activists on the other hand, so they start the rebellious activities. Regarding such a rebellious activities and practices, Nara Pallav again takes the references from the news headlines and writes, “People hurled stones at the leader of the Panchayat party on the stage and chased him away” (146). In Nara Pallav’s translation, the narrator reviews a conflict between the rulers of the Panchayat regime and the leaders of the multi-party political system.

The novelist takes some events of the clash between these two groups of people. On the one hand, the supporters of the Panchayat regime advise the leaders to suppress the demonstrators/activists but on the other hand, women, students and activists jointly lead the freedom movements ahead. The Panchayat regime uses the coercive forces to control the people in the margin of society. Parijat highlights the protests of students and women who were wearing black paints and smudged on their faces. They tried to garland with old and shabby shoes to the Panchayat regime leaders. Most of the time, many diverse news and views were booming in the market. Many observers comment “such ups and downs were the outcome of the change in their previously unchanging world, and many viewed it as the fresh taste of a new life” (146). Labour unions, women groups, activists and students who experienced the dominance of Panchayat party taught the people not to trust easily on the speech and slogans of the Panchayat leaders. They started teaching them to use their rebellious voices as tools to oppose the suppression and exploitation that they have faced in their day to day activities. The oppressed people started to expose the real situation of the common people in their shabby shoes and torn pants.

In this context, Parijat’s narratives highlight the 1980s students’ movements that brought a great political consciousness among the Nepali people. Talking about the women’s issues, the novel projects the rebellious voices of women like Gorimaya,

Chandra Kanta, Padma, Suwani and Lalita. Certainly as they have different ideological stands regarding the life's experiences:

Lalita was confident, forward girl, even as compared to Suwani, she had won a trophy in a debating contest on her campus. She could argue and surpass others, and she could just argue for the sake of arguing. They had totally different views on what a democratic society was. Suwani was a follower of Marx, and Lalita believed that philanthropy could cure all ills. Right then, Suwani did not try to overpower Lalita by arguing. They were familiar with each-other's views. Suwani came with a few proposals about the students' unity movement. So, trying to keep for argument for argument's sake aside, she asked, "what made you think that the consequences of my proposal were so horrible that they might lead the students into darkness?" (68-69)

The women characters like Lalita, Suwani, Padma and Gorimaya have different ideas, skills, views and planning about their lives. They share their experiences in each other and discuss whether they are similar or dissimilar regarding life expectancies, sufferings and identity issues. They take their problems as representatives of the women sufferings and plan to fight against them jointly. They want to take help from the politicians and students' leaders to make their freedom movement successful. In addition to the women's issues they question upon students and labour's suffering, too. In the issues regarding all kinds of social injustice, they oppose jointly in groups with united effort of students' leaders, labours and raise the voices for change.

Parijat, through different characters, focuses on social exclusion and socio-economic wrongs prevailing in the society during the early 1980s. For instance, Gorimaya, Chandra Kanta, Padma, Suwani and Lalita's advocacy is for female freedom. But the labourers of the industrial area and the students' leaders/political activists like Lal Bahadur, Puspa Ratna, Pradeep and M.R. are fighting not only to advocate for male freedom, they organize the movements against the Panchayat system for their identity, equality, human rights and freedom for all. Meanwhile, the Panchayat leaders try to have control over the human rights and protect the practices of exploitation and suppression. A joint effort of the united force of students' groups, industrial labourers and women agencies threaten the Panchayat rulers in various ways as the resistance power.

### **Feminist Perspective**

The present paper is prepared through the qualitative approach as it discusses the women's issues from the feminist perspective and activists' movements, their experiences and reformation issues for the social changes in the political system. In this regard, Simon Gautam claims that "society must be freed from political dominance and bleaks of the corrupted administrators" (*Nation Persona in Parijat* 52). Gautam's argument is on social awareness as he advocates against the political dominance and corrupted ideologies of the administrative power politics. Similarly, Belsey's writing is "a giant in the field, displaying a quiet feminist grace, wit, and fortitude, when given pushback, while holding a plenary at the large . . . where she spoke about "Gendered Revenants" (*English Studies*, 74). She writes about plights of women rights. Belsey projects that the people should be conscious about politics and historical representations. Parijat and Belsey's efforts on the social changes follow the same track. Both of them speak for freedom and equality.

To unravel the real condition of Parijat's female characters Gorimaya, Chandra Kanta and Padma, one should undergo through the difficult times of women who needed help for resistance. In this condition, they are inspired by student activists including Suwani, Lalita, Lal Bahadur, Pradeep and M.R. involved in the underground political

movement during the Panchayat regime. Parijat raises consciousness among the rural people against the state's suppressive and exploitative social structure. Her revolutionary ideas helped overthrow the corrupted political system. The characters of the novel fight against the biased state mechanism with consciousness about gender, class and political system in relation to oppression and exploitation. To borrow the challenging ideas and resisting approaches from Charles Bernheimer, the female protagonists, "take the cultural-political class-consciousness approach that helps the characters to fight against exploitation and suppression" (27). Bernheimer teaches a lesson for a socio-political awareness. Though Bernheimer, Aparna Basu and Susan Bassnett are not directly concerned about the Nepali politics, they discuss about the trends of dominance, sufferings and the revenge. Their insights on these issues are relevant to examine the issues of third world feminist perspective under this study. Parijat guides her characters to speak for social changes to establish the equalities among all by omitting the social, cultural, political and gender-based bars. As a result, her characters make plan to fight against dominance with rebellious motive and oppose the social wrongs. They discuss about their collected memories that they experienced which is still fresh and works to guide them to fight against all kinds of wrongs.

### **Textual Interpretation: Representing Women in Society**

Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain* reinvents the political movements of the 1980s Nepal. It unfolds the political issues of Panchayat regime and its treatment to the women, activists and students and their united movements against the Panchayat regime. Women activists, politicians and conscious students continue to oppose the discrimination in different ways. Among all, Chandra Kanta is a great sufferer of social injustice, sexual violence and gender biasness. In her adulthood, she experiences bitter feelings with sex workers at a hotel in Darjeeling before marrying with DSP Ale in Gyaneshor, Kathmandu who rescued her from the dangerous mode of life. Chandra Kanta, after she gets married and experiences her life asks for help to fight against gender discrimination and overall social ills. She participates in the political and social movements against social ills for which she works together with the social activists. Another sufferer is Gorimaya, as the novel begins, Ghyabring *baje* and his daughter Gorimaya are suffering under poverty who faced difficulty to manage the food and shelter and Ghyabring *baje* is unable to educate and save his daughter Gorimaya from sexual cum social violence. Krishna Karki, a relative of Ghyabring *baje*, forces him for Gorimaya's marriage with a mentally unhealthy and physically weak boy by taking some money and she undergoes experiencing physical torture after she is married. The following passage illustrates her pitiful condition:

Life is the enemy of a woman! With weeping eyes, Gorimaya looked at the old woman and said, "He did not only beat me, but in his madness, and without ever speaking to me, he tried to take my life." "You have just barely survived, you poor girl," said the woman, wiping tears away with her shawl. Gorimaya returned home in a whirl of thought- "A destitute life is really worthless, like stony and sterile earth. How could such a well-off rascal dare to make a poor girl like me his wife, for a few more possessions-perhaps, a little land? She could never forget Krishna's flirting. (*Under the Sleepless Mountain* 17)

Gorimaya's insane husband tries to torture her in many ways using rough words and giving her physical punishment. The psychological and physical tortures force her to take a strong decision about her life. Talking about the behaviours of Gorimaya's husband, he is a moody fellow, who jumps over a cliff and snatches away all the belongings and ornaments of Gorimaya. He tortures his wife almost every day - and she needs to plan

about a new way of life to manage. She has either to leave the home to run away from the possible dangers. She remembers the days that her relative, Krishna Karki forced Gorimaya not only to marry such a lunatic fellow but also, he suggested to accept the family violence. Karki enforced Gorimaya to marry not because of her love or honour but he did so to receive a big amount of money from the boy's parents.

Krishna Karki's act of forcing Gorimaya for marriage for the sake of money represents a social ill which is still prevailing in the Nepali society. Gorimaya's awareness to oppose the forced marriage helps the women activists to fight against the gender biasness. She fights against patriarchal dominance but she does not reject the male-female activism to fight jointly against all kinds of dominance. She tries to take revenge against her husband's monstrous activities as a representative of the male structured society but she fails to win the war due to lack of women's unification. Therefore, she remarks, "Father, you should have thrown me in the Trishuli Ganga River rather than sell me for sixty rupees to such a cruel man. You have drunk two litres of your daughter's blood like alcohol. Haven't you?" (*Under the Sleepless Mountain* 12). Gorimaya's expressions of the pain and suffering demoralises her father Ghyabring *baje*.

It is quite relevant to bring the references of women's movement from other parts of the world that can be a pathfinder for the women's movement in Nepal. The women activists learn lessons from historical events that they observed and experienced themselves. The women's rights movement 1832-95 stresses "freedom of imaginative expression" and transformation in "theory and practice of literature" (Benstock et al. 46). The women activists learnt a lesson to fight for peace, prosperity, freedom and equality from their predecessors. The activists' movements inspire the women writers to write for the sake of their individual freedom and bring "political, cultural, and literary changes" in the society (46). Such voices and versions inspire the people to fight against the social ills to establish their prestigious position that are practiced in our society even today as a lesson to fight against biasness, discriminations and dominance.

In the novel, Parijat depicts the issues like political activism, liberation movements, and individual identities in connection to the "historical experiences, memories, identities embodiment and agency-based representations" (Smith and Watson 26). Smith and Watson discuss on the personal issues as well as the public matters and the concerns of men/women's rights for their memories and experiences. These cultural and political identification processes are now constructing discourses in the academia in Nepal. However, the construction of such discourses is not free from the male's subject position as a universal representation of human beings in this male structured society. The representation is the "myth of domesticity" (Showalter 3). The myths of male superiority and representation of women cannot escape anvil of reformation of the social structure. The oppressed people's experience towards identification in literature and other disciplines awaits historiographical recording whether they are women, industrial labours, or any other people of the community seeking for their individual freedom. The research question of insulted and injured people's condition and its analytical approach are applicable in Parijat's novel in terms of local and global models to study on social, cultural, political and gender-based violence. It is important to explore and analyse the conditions and discriminations of marginalized people in the society, especially the women and the labours. This paper locates the issues for socio-political formation that is dislocated in the male dominated society. It is making a voyage in and voyage out from surface of the social practices to underneath and vice versa based on the structural illusion of the society.

Parijat, though she raises the collective issues of the society, seems here keener to explore the female characters' ideologies through differences in their conditions. This

ideological shift makes a break with the socio-historical tradition of characters' portrayal through which the social protest and political reformation approaches work as a formative tool for the social changes. The issues raised in Parijat's novel help to excavate the social ills. This break with the tradition strongly questions on the patriarchal supremacy theorised, philosophised and manifested in spheres of an individual's life. Not only does the life represented in the novel refer to the women but also reflects the social structure. In the case of Parijat, the critics question on her ability to make the people united to oppose the political dominance, injustice to the women and socio-cultural discriminations that helps to create a prestigious position to the characters as a whole.

In this way, Parijat's work exposes a number of issues and excavates the causes and consequences of the social wrongs. She narrates a series of strikes and events of the women, and students and labourers' groups who were trying to oppose the political violence of Panchayat rulers. The tyrannical rulers used weapons to control the demonstrations of 1980 from which a number of demonstrators were wounded and even killed as it is named as the second *Kot-parba* (Massacre in the palace). They were appealing for help from the pool of blood. The individual sufferings and painful stories of the oppressed people are discussed below as a written source of the newspapers:

Throughout our history, nothing like these brutal suppressions has ever happened, nor in any other part of the world. "Conspiracy of assault on powerless students carried out". ASCOL campus soiled with blood, in blood path-the second '*Kot -Parba*'. The people are insecure, unsafe, etc." The whole of Kathmandu was covered with a mist of terror. One professional observer, who was among the crowd, commented, "In the proposed 'Zone of Peace region,' helpless students were thrown from a third-floor window." On the other hand, the administration was saying: "Those anti-national elements will be crushed in time." (97)

The freedom movements and demonstrations turn out to be divided politically in favour or against the Panchayat system. Students' leaders and activists are treated like the anti-national elements and workers treated like slaves by the rulers. Activists oppose the Panchayat government strongly with slogans like "Give us shelter, food and clothes" and "Abandon the region if you can't manage" (163). Activists are now, somehow united to raise their issues that threatened the rulers. The more the Panchayat government suppresses, the more the anti-Panchayat movement emerges.

The student leader Subani's rape is also an ill-intended activity to "demoralise a sovereign woman's invincible mindset" (Basu 32). Guided by the Panchayat regime, the government tries to rape girls and crush down the students as well as labourers' movement by killing the student leaders/activists like Lal Bahadur, Subani and their friends. While suppressing the landless people's revolutionary movement, Lal Bahadur's father DSP Bhisma Bahadur Ale loses his life. Lal Bahadur, a child born in Chandra Kanta's sexual violence committed from an irresponsible man in India, was accepted by DSP Ale as his own son and later on Lal Bahadur wants to fight against those ill activities. It exemplifies that there is no freedom at all and they go on opposing against the biased socio-political system, power performances and dominances. Ale remembers the socially unjust activities by the rulers on the people as Nara Pallav writes in the translated version of Parijat's novel: "A drunken policeman had once attacked his mother in her bed and raped her repeatedly all night long, in spite of her screaming protests" (29). The statement refers to the physical violence and psychological torture of the women. He remembers the incidents of women sufferings. Apart from these incidents, Chandra Kanta has to bear obstacles while working in Tarai-Madhes villages. While observing the novel from the multiple perspectives, this researcher can reach a

conclusion that the violence against women has drawn an attention in recent years. It speaks for a greater sensitivity to human suffering and a keener sense of the demand of justice for women, labourers and students, who were involved in the anti-Panchayat movements. The mass violence of the women draws an attention of the activists that they are much more sensitive on human suffering whereas the minority rulers/political leaders control over the rights of majority people of the society. Therefore, Parijat's novel is a collection of narratives to oppose the political, social and gender-based violence.

Critiquing on the activists' demand for justice, the Panchayat leaders attempted to dominate and dehumanize their humanity. The activists turned to be mild to fight wisely as their friends were imprisoned and remained silent on their witness. They determined to struggle strategically for the freedom of women against such violence. Their joint efforts on working along with students and labour unions supported them to rescue their victimized friends. Their campaigns to succeed in bringing changes in the law and its implementation as a rule book is a great achievement of the 1980s. The efforts were made to sensitize the judiciary, the political system and social roles that were effective. Panchayat dominance was made against the weaker sections of the society based on class, caste, race, religion, or gender that frequently took the form of gender victimisation. A joint effort of the students, workers and women activists worked as a united force to overthrow the biased political practice.

Parijat's novel portrays the experiences of oppressed women, workers and the students. The novel focuses on the incidents of the poor and working-class people. Her characters have to struggle hard and face social ills. She advocates for the women's unity to take an action for liberation. To critique Parijat's novel, Simon Gautam writes, "Parijat's novels depict Nepali women's varied experiences of their suppressed physical and intellectual conditions, on the one hand, and voices for identification of nation persona in the construction of nation identity, on the other, obtaining both within and beyond national boundary" (1). His argument suggests that the female characters need physical and intellectual freedom to organise joint activities. It is difficult to organize the protests, ignoring the men because of the social structure. Women should go ahead taking men in confidence to fight against the socio-political structure. The men must realise that women are discriminated and victimised systematically/institutionally. The men need to work together with women to subvert the criminalised system to unbury the buried memory and history. In brief, Parijat's novel brings the marginalized men and women together to fight against the discrimination.

The marginalized women should be united and fight for their rights. In this case, Nick Stevenson states, "Women learnt to live as cultural, political and national citizens" (17). Though Nepal is diverse in castes, cultures and ethnic groups, the country fails to recognize its people of all corners as Simon Gautam opines, "The patriarchal shoes are not taking them any further in the competitive march; therefore, it is a great time to march and experience" (*Nation* 11-12). Gautam argues that the female should come to the front to reserve and preserve their rights. Consequently, at present, several cultural as well as ethnic groups are often taking even armed means to raise their identity issues and rights for freedom. To achieve the goal, they are raising the cultural and gender issues strongly. They are trying to make their voices to be included in the constitution for identification of them as a politically and culturally independent citizen. It is an opportunity for Nepal to identify itself as a nation by acknowledging different groups of people such as subaltern, minority groups and women as living images of their nation that helps to create national identity. A culture of questioning and writing the historiography of Nepal greatly contributes to the identification of the women as part of

the Nepali national identity that is possible if one rewrites the history from the feminist perspective.

The question of identity of the marginalized whether they are labourers, women and/ or students, they should be re-identified, structured and re-defined as Gorimaya and Chandra Kanta are the rehabilitated women. Subani, a university student as well as an activist, is involved in the underground political movement with Pradeep and M.R. Here she recollects the memories and experiences for identity to oppose the political dominance during the partyless Panchayat system. She raises her people's consciousness who are imprisoned within the industrial boundaries as she inspires them to fight against all kinds of dominance. They create an agency to fight against the state's suppressive and exploitative system.

### Conclusion

Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain* exposes the pitiful conditions of women. Students and activists inspire these women to fight for their rights and come to the front for their independence. As the issues of women raised in the novel, the tyrannical Panchayat rulers attempt to restrict the individual freedom whether they are women, students or industrial labours. The oppressed people are united to fight against all kinds of dominance, especially attempts are made to fight against gender discrimination. The socio-cultural and political awareness movements before 1980s inspired people to fight against all kinds of discrimination and dominance.

Parijat's characters question the hierarchy-based discriminatory activities and the supremacist political value system. They leave a message to the other kinds of marginalized people so that they can be united to oppose the long-practiced but biased value systems. The Panchayat rulers have made the rules based on cultural and gender biasness. The system enslaves the common citizens, undervalues the women's strengths and questions their identities.

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**To cite this article [MLA style]:**

Gautam, Mani Bhadra. "Women under the Panchayat Regime: Parijat's *Under the Sleepless Mountain* as a Feminist Project." *SCHOLARS: Journal of Arts & Humanities*, vol. 6, no. 1, February 2024, pp. 128-136. *NepJOL*, doi:10.3126/sjah.v6i1.62728.