

Research Article

Portrayal of Women in B. P. Koirala's *The Soldier* and *To the Lowland*

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Abstract

B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) presents Nepal's quest for social and political awakening through women in his short fiction. His fiction portrays women as puppets in men's hands and agents questioning social authority to tame their bodies. This paper examines two of his short stories: "The Soldier" (1938) and "To the Lowland" (1938). Historically, Nepal was socially and politically awakening into its modernity in the 1930s. These stories help us understand the social forces and the perceptions of people from the 1930s. "The Soldier" depicts women as objects of men's desire. In the next story, he explores an entirely different contour of women's self in "To the Lowland," where the widow decides to resettle in the Terai by marrying a man and starting a family. The writer challenges traditional beliefs about widowhood by critiquing the limits of patriarchy through the portrayal of a woman's self in his fiction. This study reads the selected two short stories through the feminist lens of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Miller to examine the formation of social forces and the challenges posed to the rigid structure of patriarchy during the awakening of modern Nepal in the 1930s.

Keywords

Agency, Resistance, Rewriting Self, Mobility, Hegemony

1. Introduction

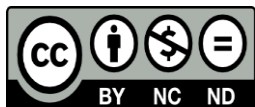
B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) critically observes the course of history through his writings, outlining the contours of new subjects in his fictional narratives of the 1930s. He identifies the birth of new people who can challenge the traditionally accepted mores and the hegemonic practices of the mainstream. His fictional writings depict several political, social,

economic, and religious issues in Nepali society from the 1930s onward. In his writings, the characters hail from different social strata and develop their tension in relation to the formation of the main force in the narrative. However, most of them are rugged individuals striving for success as perceived by the masses. They struggle to establish themselves, hope for

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a better life, and dream of prosperity; however, they fail to seize opportunities when they arise. In “The Soldier” and “To the Lowlands,” published in his collection *Doshi Chasma* [Faulty Glass] (1949), Koirala critically observes the rise of a new class of women in Nepali society.

These two stories showcase the hardships faced by individuals in Nepal in the 1930s. Also, he moves beyond the quotidian quests by exploring the characters’ inner psychological drives. The stories serve as a site for revisiting a historical slice of Nepali society during its modern awakening. The vital aspect of the stories lies in exploring the man-woman relationship and the psyche, offering more profound insights into humanity. Though all the characters in the stories are facing a critical crisis in their lives, their connectivity and collectivity offer strong issues to explore and analyze in this study. Thus, this paper aims to analyze how women have been portrayed in the stories “The Soldier” and “To the Lowland.” This paper further analyzes the social beliefs they adhere to and the social practices they have challenged, even while remaining within patriarchy’s sphere of influence.

2. Literature Review

This study uses a qualitative historical research method. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Oral interviews were conducted with elders and families of early migrants. Secondary data came from books, journals, archives, and government records. All information was compared and analyzed. The aim was to trace events and explain how migration shaped the economic and social life of Esie in the twentieth century. MLA 9th edition style was followed to cite all sources used in the study.

B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) is a renowned literary figure in the canon of Nepali writing. His writings generally range across diverse subjects, contexts, and themes. Scholarships on Koirala’s writings echo man-woman relationships, existing cultural practices, and emerging social issues in profound ways. Critiquing the thematic issues in Koirala’s writing, Michael James Hutt states: “The most common theme of his stories and novels was the relationship between men and women, but a significant number of stories also dealt with social issues” (197). As the basic concerns of society, male-female relationships, socioeconomic realities, and the deeper human psyche are found in his short stories and novels. His writings also show the psychological complexities of the characters. As scholars discuss Koirala’s literary practice, they stress that “he has depicted the problems related to the socioeconomic and political conditions by focusing on the suffering of the downtrodden, the poor, and the exploited in a predominantly feudal society” (Sharma 209). A central literary figure in Nepali literature and politics, Koirala writes about the pangs of suffering endured by the Nepalese people as they were on the verge

of modernity.

In the 1930s, Nepal was attempting to politically awaken by questioning the prevailing practices that led to social contradictions and distress among the masses. Ordinary people suffered from everyday problems, and their distress reached beyond imagination. Koirala’s fictional and autobiographical writings deal with the passion, desire for power, and social status of the Nepali youths. As Hutt further remarks, “Authors such as Bishveshvar Prasad Koirala, better known as B.P. Koirala...addressed topics such as rural landscapes, traditional moral and sexual values, or the status of women and widows” (193). Thus, he is a realist writer who reflects on the suffering of people in contemporary times and projects his vision beyond to address both the suffering and its agents in the social setup. His writings vividly depict the influence of modernity in Nepali society.

The diversity of themes, unique styles, and brevity are the key characteristics of Koirala’s narratives. Mallika Shakya thinks that Koirala has seriously reflected on the nature of human fate through his fictional narratives. For instance, she writes, “The predicaments of human conditions for him are not about the pains of political or social borders, rather they represent negotiations with liminal space that are intensely personal” (57). His short stories convey sharp distinctions between caste and class, oppressors and the oppressed, village life and city life, and prosperity and poverty. As Hutt writes, “‘The Soldier’ ... is the most carefully considered portrait of a Gorkha soldier ever written in Nepali. The main characteristics Koirala attributes to the soldier is his complete freedom from social responsibility and social convention” (186). The soldier serving in the British Army in Baluchistan attempts to emulate the British officer’s ways to impress his co-traveler and the shopkeeper’s daughter. Koirala captures the essential factors shaping the soldier’s self in the colonial context in South Asia.

As the authors began writing fiction in Nepal in the 1920s and advanced the genre in the 1930s, it was a new form of artistic expression at the time. As Hutt remarks, “The Nepali short story, a genre that began to adopt its present form only during the early 1930s” (3). Hence, fictional narratives generally present reality as it was in society. However, Koirala delves deeper into the underlying space to observe the cause of the tension on the surface. For instance, his short stories have derived their central tension from poverty, opposition to superstition, and the social status of women. Nepali literature was heavily influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud in the 1950s, as Nepali writers drew on psychological themes in their writing after this period. As Hutt writes, “Nepali writers began to investigate the mental processes of the unconscious and subconscious mind” (6). Koirala was one of the first short story writers to use psychological elements in his story “Chandrabadan” [Moon-Faced], and he also wrote “Karnelko Ghoda” [The Colonel’s Horse]. In this sense,

Nepali stories feature elements of social realism, socialist realism, and psychological realism. In this connection, V. Sharma also notes, “Koirala had distinguished himself in his literary works.....in the process added a new dimension to contemporary Nepali literature by introducing an altogether new element of psychological realism into his literary works “(2). Koirala’s notable literary works have extensively raised the issues of love, sex, human predicament, fidelity, and poverty. Through his literary works, he interrogates the social practices that have led Nepali society to a long period of backwardness and social stagnation.

Regarding the thematic concerns in Koirala’s literary works, sex, love, culture, social evils, socioeconomic conditions, and political conditions are the major ones. Also, Sharma comments: “. . . the themes of his short stories . . . are not merely confined to sex, love, culture, and social evil . . . he has depicted the problems related to socioeconomic and political conditions . . . focusing on the suffering of the downtrodden, the poor, and the exploited in a predominantly feudal society” (2). As a liberal humanist, he has emphasized on individuals than on society. He takes social problems as an individual problem. Koirala gives more emphasis to “the individual rather than to society “(Sharma 5). Breaking the traditional moral boundaries, his narratives critique the drawbacks of the feudal social order, thereby transcending the social restrictions.

In the decades leading up to 1950, much of the early modern literature was published in Indian journals, which were in transition from age-old traditionalism to a new spirit of social progressivism. In the selected stories, Koirala has depicted the plight of landless poor, the low social status of widows, and the exploitation of women by men. As Hutt writes, “It comments on the sorry plight of the landless poor, the depopulation of the hills, the low social status of widows, and the exploitation of women by men “(14). For instance, “To the Lowlands” realistically depicts the lives of the poor hill dwellers who are migrating to the Terai.

The characteristics of typical Nepali society can be explored in his short stories and novels. The physical landscapes, rural-urban settings, social traditions, economic and political consciousness make his writings unique. However, the psychological aspects, mentality, and intricate relationship between men and women, as corroborated in his literary artifacts, give a sense of universality. Thus, his writings consist of a formidable combination of local, regional issues and broader humanity.

Extensive research on B. P. Koirala and his writings has focused on various schools of thought, including philosophical, psychoanalytical, mythical, and political issues. Previous studies have not adequately analyzed the role of gender and the formation of women’s self in the two specific works, “The Soldier” and “To the Lowlands.” The existing scholarship provides insights into human psychology, the trauma of a soldier, isolated individuals, and human adversity. The paper departs

from the conventional approach by studying gender relations in the selected stories in the backdrop of patriarchy.

2. Methods

The present study interprets Koirala’s “The Soldier” and “To the Lowlands,” translated by Michael James Hutt, and explores the depiction of women in his stories. The feminist critical lens of Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet has been applied to analyze the texts. Then it examines women’s conditions through the critical insights of feminism. To examine the depiction of women, the study reads the selected stories contextually. The feminist critic Simone de Beauvoir’s 1956 work, *The Second Sex* discusses women’s ideological domination throughout history. She further argues that women do not have an ideology of their own; instead, they have internalized the ideologies designed by patriarchy to rule over women. As Beauvoir states, “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (161). So, the question is about representation, writing, and rewriting women’s contexts and conditions. Besides, Millet argues that there is a sexual politics, grand design, and interior colonization of women in society for a long period of time in human history. As Millet states, “If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women” (42). Through the means of knowledge and ideology, patriarchy does not allow women to use their own consciousness and rationality. The problem is in the process of socialization, which humiliates, suppresses, dominates, and represses women. The women are ideologically dominated in the patriarchal setup. The traditional gender roles have ideologically programmed women. It asserts the view that women are weak, emotional, irrational, and submissive. The patriarchy associates women with these qualities, which create their sense of subordination. This paper interprets Koirala’s “The Soldier” and “To the Lowlands” to explore the depiction of women in the then-contemporary society through the critical insights of Beauvoir and Millet.

3. Result and Discussion

Complicit Nexus: Suppression as Ideology

B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) stands as a signature in modern Nepali politics and literature. His short stories feature female characters that explore the suppression of patriarchy and its ideology, and the challenge posed by the awakened feminine agencies of the modern world. For instance, his two short stories, “The Soldier” and “To the Lowlands,” capture the inner tension of Nepali society in the 1930s as he reflects upon the fate of women. Published first in 1938, both short stories

depict women seemingly adjusting in society; however, the inner landscape reveals their questioning attitude. Viewed from this way, Koirala's meek women just wear the mask of social conformity. Nevertheless, they harbor an intense energy to break the repressive order and its ideology asunder, founding a just society. This section analyzes the two stories and examines how each portrays women's self and what purpose such a depiction serves for Koirala.

Koirala's "The Soldier" pictures a soldier's life, his duty, and his perceptions of society. Also, the story shows women's suppression, domination, and exploitation by the patriarchal ideology over women. Though the soldier feels completely isolated, fragmented, and traumatized due to the war, he still wants to mock and mistreat the women. The soldier's interactions with the women, his treatment of them, and the women's response to him are the major issues of discussion that show the ideological repression of the women. The soldier demonstrates a dominating nature, especially towards women. The soldier deliberately dominates, teases, and makes fun of them when he meets the women on the way, thus, "On encountering an older woman, he would address her as 'mother-in-law' and enquire after the well-being of her daughters: 'How is your little girl?'" (198). The soldier's treatment of the women is astounding. He teases, misbehaves, and objectifies the young women whom he meets on the way. In this regard, the narrator narrates, "Some girls were on their way home from cutting fodder, and they were coming towards us. The soldier winked and said, 'Wait now, I'll tease them. They all clucked their tongues in disgust and hurried away'" (198). Furthermore, the women and the girls have been a matter of pleasure for them. The ignorant village women are frightened by the way he dialogues with them. He does not respect and talk amicably. He reflects the agency of patriarchy in his gestures and manners.

Through the soldier's friend's narration, a clear picture of typical Nepali society emerges. Traditional tea shops run by women reflect not only the rural economy of the period but also the women's obligations to run their households. The women really want to go beyond the four walls of domesticity. It is a paradigm shift towards entrepreneurship and independence. The narrator quotes, "We went inside. ... two hill men were drinking tea and eating pieces of stale old bread. ... I saw a fire burning in one corner, with a teakettle placed above it: this was the cause of the smoke" (200). The soldier entered the teahouse as if he were its owner. He meets the young girl. She is the daughter of the owner of that tea shop. The conversation between the soldier and the young girl at her residence reflects their mutual attraction. As Irene writes, "For Butler, bodies do matter, but not as biologically and sexually determined entities. Rather, bodies matter because they are the site for culturally gendered performativity" (14). The lack, need, and exploitation of Nepali women can be noticed in this narration: "The woman told him to bring her a framed Indian mirror when he returned next time. The soldier replied that he wouldn't just

bring her a mirror but a dress as well, made from twenty hands of printed cotton" (201). Trifles such as a mirror and a dress can be major sources of temptation. The women are wooed, tempted, and exploited for a long period of time in the Nepali society. He woos her with the prospect of bringing one mirror and some printed cotton clothes, which are the basic requirements for the young girls. She wants to offer her youth and life and marry the soldier. The soldier wants to take an opportunity. However, he does not want to settle with her.

"The Soldier" reflects the socioeconomic reality of Nepali society—the conformity of gender roles. The women follow traditional gender roles, such as doing household chores, being obedient to men, and being responsible for the family and children. Gould and Kern-Daniels also state: "Gender is that which is recognized as masculine or feminine by a social world. The word gender itself implies inherent sociality; it is best perceived as a continuum of human attitudes and behaviors, socially constructed, socially perpetuated and socially alterable" (184). The male character, namely the soldier, seems to have a dialectical view of humanity. He shows no faithfulness towards his family, whereas the female characters contribute to the family's sustainability. They settle, look after the family, and support the rural economy. The story depicts the lifestyle of ordinary men and women, in which the ideological upbringing of patriarchy suppresses women. They cannot resist it; rather, they merely follow the ideological apparatuses that always repress them. Thus, the women characters in "The Soldier" become victims of Nepali social, cultural, economic, and ideological realities.

Koirala's short story "To the Lowlands" provides a clear picture of the then-Nepali society, particularly the women who suffered under various ideologies. Apart from the socioeconomic reality, the long-existing belief created by the patriarchy has been the major form of dominating women. As a modernist text, the story presents a woman who challenges society's authority to impose its will on her. As Bavé Carol writes, "Modernist texts frequently stage the desire for upheaval of the social order, a desire that sustains Kristeva's theory. Kristeva has used the term 'modernity' (*modernité*) in a similar way to describe twentieth-century texts attempting to cope with the crisis of identity and rationality, a crisis exacerbated by Fascism and Stalinism" (116-17). From Kristeva's perspective, Koirala's widow reframes herself to maintain a sense of normalcy in her own life. The socioeconomic reality is mentioned through the interwoven relationships among the characters, namely, four men and a widow. To quote "Four or five people rose from where they had been sleeping, curled up on the ground. Each asked the same question as he awoke: What were they going to eat? They turned to one another as if reading each other's minds" (202). The story portrays the harsh economic reality. The four people met due to their critical financial circumstances, including a lack of food, a home, and the means to survive. Thus, they lived as either beggars or

coolies. The widow's past life creates a profound effect on the four people. She shares the food she brought for herself among them.

Koirala empowers his women by depicting their challenges in his narratives. For instance, "To the Lowlands" weaves the narratives of the widow who has been exiled from home and mistreated by her in-laws. She communicates her isolation thus, "I have no husband. My in-laws are not blind. My brother-in-law was disrespectful. I couldn't stay in that house with no husband" (202). The story further complicates the man-woman relationship. As a social construct, the widow woman performs her motherly duties in Benighat, worrying about her friends. In this connection, Irene Oh also writes: "If motherhood is performative, then, according to Butler, mothers are defined not primarily by biological function but by their culturally encoded lived realities" (5). *When the widow joins the group, seeking her protection, the young man asks about it. As Koirala narrates, "Bhote was greatly surprised. "Why should you feel fond of us? We're not your husband, your sons, your father.' 'But you are people, nonetheless,' said the widow"* (202). Though the widow has been mistreated and exiled from her home since she lost her husband, she still has a strong faith in the men she meets on the bank of the river.

Her strong affinity for these men can be interpreted as a strong conviction about humanity in general. Though the four people are not close companions, they are closely tied to one another due to their shared material and financial circumstances. They are homeless people who have been walking aimlessly. There is no decent work for them. However, they are strongly convinced they can find a job in the lowlands. As Koirala notes, "They all decided to go to the plains. Four men and a woman took the road for the south. *Budho* told them about his past. Once, he earned a lot of money, farming 17 *roapni*" (203). All of them decide to go to the lowlands in the hope of finding easier means of survival, and *Budho* leads them, narrating tales of his past. On the way, the widow and Gore walk together, and the widow shares her pangs from her past life. She wants to settle with him, although Gore is younger than she is. She proposes to Gore to settle with her. However, Gore looks at the widow in astonishment. Then, the widow reflects on her inner psyche: "Am I not good enough for you? So, what if I'm old? My longing is like a flame in my heart" (204). Being vulnerable, the widow wants to ensure her security in society. Grappling with loneliness, the widow expresses her pain rhetorically. She further states, "Won't I ever have children? Won't I ever have sons and daughters, a home of my own, a man of my own? ...Gore I have a little jewelry" (204). Traditionally, having sons and daughters, land and home consolidate one's own position in society. Therefore, she tries to compensate for her insecurities about being lonely. The ideological beliefs do not allow women to marry after being widowed. Rather, they should remain isolated and

excluded from society. Conversely, the widow challenges existing beliefs and hopes to find a suitable man, marry him, and have children. Therefore, she proposes to Gore that they marry.

Also, all men depend upon the widow. They want food from her when they are hungry. On the other hand, they are not ready to help and support her. Men appear selfish and opportunistic, whereas the widow seems cooperative and kind-hearted. However, her golden dreams are shattered when she finds that her companion has disappeared. "The widow's heart was heavy. She was surprised by her companions' lack of concern. Were they not even the slightest bit saddened by the disappearance of someone who had been their comrade through such hard times?" (204). The widow faces a great deal of disaster: her plans, her hope of settling her life, and her dream of being a mother, all turned to dust. Her dreams are shattered. When jewels are stolen, she becomes angry and weeps bitterly, "I'd thought it all out, what I'd do with those jewels. I was going to buy some land, get married again, set up home and have a son...Now my hopes are all destroyed. She wept and wailed loudly" (205). The story concludes by showing how men and women differ in how they manage things. These women are the best managers of human civilizations. Their contributions in organizing and managing the households in miniature cannot be underestimated. Their roles and contributions are really remarkable. The story also depicts humanity on the verge of crisis. The widow has served and shared her food and inner desires with the fellow travelers. Nevertheless, they do not help her; they take advantage of her. Thus, men appear as the patriarchal agents who only program women to be obedient to men and responsible for the family.

4. Conclusion

Koirala's "The Soldier" and "To the Lowlands" portray both possibilities of women's selves. "The Soldier" depicts the challenges that women face in the larger colonial setup that is further supported by patriarchy. "To the Lowlands" presents a woman who challenges society's prevailing mores and seeks her liberation. In the 1930s, women were dominated, exploited, and ideologically suppressed for a long period of time in Nepali society. Both stories offer the profound psychological subtleties of the human condition, in which individuals are caught between societal expectations and individual aspirations. The individuals seek prosperity, freedom, and dignity through their conscious efforts to transform their lives. Koirala demonstrates that, as women move from vulnerability to autonomy and assertiveness, they challenge ideological beliefs. The widows stand against discrimination and propose that a young man resettle in a distant land. They know the issue lies in society's moral codes, not in biological ability or aspiration. Koirala challenges the existing beliefs of Nepali society that have restricted widow marriage. The stories describe the outer

social milieu and paint the inner shades of women's selves that challenge the underlying social setup in search of liberation from patriarchy's prevailing dictates.

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