

Book Review-1

Prajwal Parajuly, *The Gurkha's Daughter*. Quercus, United Kingdom, 2012. 280pp, price INR. 499/-.

In spite of its publication in 2012, Prajwal Parajuly's collection of short stories, *The Gurkha's Daughter* continues to remain *the* book for those who are interested in the 'Gurkhas' – a constituency that is hitherto mostly spoken about, at least in English. Breaking the silence that history may have imposed so far, Parajuly enunciates the moment of articulation that surprises the reader with the depth of his insight and the range of his creative canvas. And it is not easy to create in a language that does not have a tradition: it is nothing less than a challenge to flesh 'their' language with 'our' soul, to use the burden of marginal Gurkha experience in a language that is historically wont to imposing marginality rather than becoming the instrument of its articulation.

Parajuly's canvas is large. In the opening story, *Cleft*, Parajuly explores the marginalisation and othering of an adivāsi girl in the Kathmandu Nepali society; similarly, the second story, *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie*, deals with the exclusion and othering of a Bihari Muslim *pānwalā* in Kalimpong. *A Father's Journey* explores the changing dimensions of caste system between the Bahuns and Matwalis in Sikkim. *The Missed Blessing* highlights the politics of religious conversion in Darjeeling. *No Land is Her Land* underscores the pain and resilience of the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. *The Gurkha's Daughter* similarly deals with the injustice and oppression of the Gurkha soldiers by the British government. *The Passing Fancy* deals with the extramarital attraction between two retired neighbors in Sikkim. The final story, *The Immigrants* explores the lives of Nepali diasporas in America. In many of these stories, the experience of subalterneity emerges as a binding thematic motif.

Yet it is not merely marginality and subalterneity that the book chooses to focus on as does the vast corpus of writing in the Nepali language especially from India. Parajuly's focus is subalterneity as well as the celebratory side of globalization: he chooses to focus on the upward mobile middle class Nepali who has made his money; can speak English with the right twang; who aims at America for education and suitably a higher caste partner for matrimony; who paints and reads, is conscious about the post-retirement right body weight contemplating a leisurely retirement life in his/her luxury bungalows; a Nepali who frequents a Tibetan *momo* joint in New York and owns an apartment in Manhattan and knows well that he has made it in life. It almost comes as a surprise to see Parajuly's only passing reference to the politics of identity that forms the crux of Nepali literature in India. De-bunking the myth of Nepali as a perpetual subaltern in India, the author explores the multiple otherings experienced by a Bihari, Mussalman *panwala* in Kalimpong. Similarly, the opening story of Kaali, a deformed, black, illiterate adivasi girl from the Dooars who works as a domestic help in a Nepali family in Kathmandu seeks to add layers to the issue of marginality – thereby refusing to freeze power flowing from the permanent oppressor on the permanent oppressed. Parajuly highlights the othering and humiliation of Nepali Bhutanese refugees by the Nepalis of Nepal. Perhaps Parajuly's debunking of the conventional story of oppression is liberating

for people who are mostly at the receiving end of power and history. The author subtly brings forth the cultural otherness and othering – linguistic and cultural - of the Nepalese of Nepal by the Nepali of Darjeeling.

It is because the institutionalization of subalterneity is more disabling than enabling. Perhaps the author also feels that the construction of Gurkha also as an oppressor can be liberating – the image of perpetual victimhood comes here for critical interrogation.

The author seeks to de-territorialize the notion of what constitutes a Gurkha. His Gurkhas are from Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Sikkim, Bhutan, Kathmandu as well as the Nepali diasporas living in New York. The construction of a pan-Nepali umbrella seems interesting given the burden of history and geo-political nightmares that the term encapsulates. Parajuly's self-description as "son of an Indian father and a Nepalese mother" also carries political implication as his surname unambiguously posits him as an Indian Gurkha/Nepali: why does he qualify himself as an Indian in the Indian subcontinent where finding an Indian is possibly the most arduous thing possible? Are the Nepali of India not Indian unless they deny their Nepalihood? Similarly, his use of the colonial "Gurkha" instead of the contemporary Gorkha elicits surprise given the revival of the term in India to denote complex geo-political reality. And the author quite aptly de-bunks the myth of "Gurkhas" as peerless fighters and born soldiers: the mystique of heroism, bravery and bravado comes to be seen as colonial clichés that made them pawns (and perhaps continues to do so) in the global history of imperialism and conquest.

Parajuly knows well how to capture the contemporary: many of his characters are caught between colonial (post-colonial?) modernity and tradition. Sins and phobias of menstruation uneasily co-exist with modernity and its insignia of rationality and science; liberal education with the desire to retain the purity of Brahminhood; professional military career with the desire to propitiate the planetary bodies that are out of joint. In this uneasy balance and lack of poise lies the tragic poise and dignity of his characters. Modernity is not really liberatory, tradition not a pure anathema. Both seem to be needed to make life the holy mess that it is. It is possibly this delicate dialectic that makes the book a parable of most South Asian communities that are experiencing similar dilemmas and transitions.

Parajuly's style is decisively unsentimental; and austere at its best. The stories unfold through narration as well as through images and symbolism. His vision is ironic yet catholic, insightful yet indulgent, critical yet carnivalesque, subversive yet celebratory.

The writer's focus on female perspective is borne out by the gendering of the title. Kaali, Parvati, Shraddanjali, Supriya, Geeta, Anamika, Sabitri – these are some of his important female characters and the stories are primarily told from their perspectives. Though gender and class form very important leitmotif of this canvas, the question of caste eludes the writer's otherwise inclusive imagination.

The book, coming in the aftermath of Kiran Desai's Booker's winning novel on the Indian Nepalis, invites some passing comparison with her *The Inheritance of Loss*. Desai's Gorkhas

are insurgents, terrorists, murderers, thieves, intruders, looters, guerrillas and confused idealists at best who, unable to finance their consumerism, resort to ethnic agitation and violence. Desai demonizes Indian Nepalis in the name of artistic freedom and fictionality. The journey from Desai to Parajuly is the journey from misrepresentation to representation, from colonizing gaze to self-representation, from objecthood to subjecthood, from other-hood to selfhood. Desai's fictional violence is the real testimony of the fact that if you do not write your own narrative, someone else will. And such process of writing unfolds simultaneously with the process of unwriting. And Parajuly creates history by beginning this beginning that balances complexity with catholicity, artistic freedom with the ethics of writing, relentless criticism with the nebulous hope of redemption.

Balram Uprety

Balram Uprety is an Assistant Professor,
Department of English, St. Joseph's College,
North Point, Darjeeling, India.
Email: balauprety@gmail.com