

Nepalese Diasporic Literature: Voicing the Silence from the Margin

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Abstract: *The concept of diaspora is different from the concepts of transnational and cosmopolitan cross-border-migration based communities. Like in the studies of many Diasporas and their literatures around the globe, in the study of Nepalese Diaspora and its literature too, there still loom the confusions and debates on the differences among them. It is necessary to make a clear distinction among these terms and give a clear orientation to further studies in this growing field of world humanity and intellectuality. Thus, this article, at first, deals with this debate in relation to Nepalese Diaspora discourse; and then discusses the formation of both of the Old and the New Nepalese Diasporas. It further throws light on their minority and marginality status that puts them under socio-political discrimination and make them live in silence. It highlights how the conditions in the formation of Nepalese Diasporas in the other parts of the world are entirely different from those of the Nepalese Diaspora in India. Finally, this article touches upon the issue of how their existential conditions work as the background for the emotional outlet and existential awareness that Nepalese Diasporic Literature voices.*

Keywords: *diaspora, diasporic literature, migration, marginality, minority, discrimination, silence, emotion, voices.*

I. Diasporic Difference and Nepalese Diaspora Studies

The concepts and practices of diaspora and diasporic literature contrast with those of transnational migration and cosmopolitan globizenship, and their literary creations. Though some inclusive theorists of diaspora studies treat all types of cross-border migrations under the umbrella of diaspora, “the concept of diaspora cannot be used to describe all types of scattered population issues from a migration process” (Bruneau, 2010: 41). Diaspora is a community of hostland citizens who have permanently left their homeland and got settled in the land of naturalization. The people of such a community share the homeland memory and live with nostalgia for the place they have left, never to return for long-term settlement. But other cross-border communities are of temporary nature. A transnational community comprises such people who leave the homeland temporarily; and so they never feel completely isolated from it. On the other hand, the cosmopolitan globizens possess both of the homeland and hostland citizenships or at least the permissions to move freely to different nodes and intersections of international migrations.

The next difference of diaspora from the other two concepts is the nature of earning, investment and emotions. Unlike the diasporans who both earn and invest in the hostland, the transnationals earn in the hostland and invest in the homeland; whereas, the cosmopolitans live, earn and invest at any place of the world. Their major difference is found in terms of their emotions related to the homeland. Being nostalgic the diasporans grow their homeland in their imagination till they become emotional to it. They have some deeper and aesthetic sense of emotion to homeland than that of the two others. But the emotion of the transnationals and the cosmopolitans is of everyday type. Unlike the diasporans, the transnationals only have personal memory and the general human emotions for the homeland and their family back there. On the other hand, the cosmopolitans divide their actual memory and emotions to different places. Thus, these three types of cross-border migrant communities are specifically different from one another.

Nepalese Diaspora discourse has not evolved to this level of specification. Some critics of Nepalese Diasporic Literature have put forward their views on the characteristics of Nepalese Diaspora. Abhi Subedi is one of such critics who have tried to differentiate Nepalese Diaspora community from Nepalese Transnational and Cosmopolitan communities. So, he does not like to put the temporary labour migrants to different countries

such as the Arabs and the Malaysia under Diaspora because they reside in those countries for a short term until the end of their contract period or work permit. They go to these destinations for work and earning; send their remittance back home; invest for their homes and families back there; and finally they are bound to return home. Critics Khagendraprasad Luitel and Mahesh Poudyal have similar ideas. But Luitel proposes to keep only the permanent Nepalese settlers away from the SAARC countries under the study of Nepalese Diaspora (in Homnath Subedi, 2014: 35). Unlike him, Poudyal (2012) argues that the Nepalese permanently living in SARRC countries including India, for many generations, are the original Nepalese diasporans (6). Since critics have various opinions regarding the actual identity of Nepalese diasporans, there lacks a single definition of Nepalese Diaspora.

The next group of critics and literary creators has put every person who leaves Nepal under the category of Nepalese Diaspora. They do not differentiate the diasporans from transnational, cosmopolitan migrants and even tourists in this discussion. Diasporic poet and critic Homnath Subedi, critic and researcher Govinda Raj Bhattarai, literary activist Narendra Raj Prasain, critic Netra Etam, researchers Puran Rai and Mahesh Subedi belong to this group. This confusion has grown because of the limited study on Nepalese Diaspora as only the departments of literature in Nepal have recently started a systematic study on this subject. Whereas, theoretical discussions on diaspora in other departments such as the department of sociology, population studies and international affairs have been scant. Thus, the confusions loom.

On the basis of recent developments of the theories of diaspora studies in contrast with transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, it can be clearly said that Nepalese Diaspora is made up of NRN (Non-Resident Nepalese) and PNO (People of Nepalese Origin with citizenship of some other country) who have been permanently living out of Nepal. In different periods of the history, they have migrated from the territories that are currently within the borders of the Federal Republic of Nepal and the descendents of the people who once lived within the political boundary of Nepal. They follow Nepalese culture and take it as the signifier of their identity. But economically, they have been assimilated in the hostland workforce. Their life pattern has been hybrid because of the mixture of traditional Nepalese culture and present-day hostland work culture. This hybridity has ultimately made them belong nowhere emotionally. It has robbed of their happiness. For them, “the point of reference [...] is and perhaps will always be Nepal” (Subba, 2008: 230). In the same way, because of their number and socio-political status in the hostland, they live the life of marginalized minority (Atom, 2070BS: 30). Thus made are the Nepalese Diaspora and its existential-emotional realities.

II. Formation of Nepalese Diaspora

Researchers of Nepalese Diasporic Literature have divided the Nepalese migration to the world into three waves: the first wave (up to AD1815), the second wave (1815-1970s), and the third wave (1970s onward). In the first wave the migration was limited to India, Sikkim, Bhutan, Burma/ Myanmar, Tibet and China (Limbu, 2012: 19; Hutt, 1997: 102, 111; Rai, 2069BS¹: 22-23; Luitel, 2014: 55-58; and Rawat 82). In the second wave (1815-1970s) the large volume of Nepalese migration continued to India in the level of common people. It was the period when Nepalese people migrated to Darjeeling to work in tea plantations. Whereas, during the period of World War I, the settlements extended to Burma, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Fiji and Britain since Nepalese youths were recruited in the British Army and travelled to these destinations for warfare (Hutt, 1997: 111-13). And the third wave is the latest phase when Nepalese people have been migrating to the Europe, the Americas, the Oceania and the Gulf countries. It was accelerated in this last twenty-five years when Nepal became open to the world after the re-establishment of democracy in 1990. After a few years, Nepal started to bear the pangs of the armed insurgency which made Nepalese people insecure in their own homeland. Then the migration to Western nations increased. It was the same time when even global migration accelerated (Etam, 2070BS: 22). Nepalese Diaspora is the result of these migrations.

On the basis of the time of migration and formation of Diaspora, Nepalese Diaspora can be divided into the Old and the New ones. Most of the migrants who moved to India, Bhutan and Burma have formed the Old Nepalese Diaspora. According to Subba (2008), the Nepalese “form one of the largest and most widespread

¹ BS stands for Bikram Samvat i.e. the national era of Nepal started by emperor Bikramaditya 2073 years before now. This date is 56 years, 8 months and 15 days earlier to the Christian era i.e. AD. In this article the references in which AD is not found, BS is used. Decreasing 56 years, 8 months and 15 days this can be made equal to AD. For example, the day I am working with the final version of this article is April 14, 2016 (2016-4-14) in AD and Baishakh 2, 2073 (2073-1-2) in BS.

diasporic communities in India numbering about 5 million and found in every part of India with great concentration in the states bordering Nepal” (213). Even the Nepalese living in Bhutan and Burma/Myanmar have created Nepalese Diasporic communities. But according to critic and researcher Govinda Raj Bhattarai (2013), the Nepalese people who settled in Malaysia and Fiji in the first and the second waves could not grow into diasporic communities. Instead, they assimilated into the local communities and ultimately disappeared there (16-18). The Nepalese migrants to Tibet had the same fate (Bista, 1980: 10). Migrations of the third wave to the Western nations have created the New Nepalese Diaspora. Unlike the Old one, the New Nepalese Diaspora is an incipient one. It is continuously getting formed and growing. Because of the attraction of jobs and settlement in the Europe, the Americas and the Oceania, many educated Nepalese youths are getting settled in these locations; and they are forming this Diaspora.

Nepalese Diaspora in India is different from all the rest in terms of its formation. It has been created because of both the people flying over the Indo-Nepal border and the Indian border flying over the Nepalese people. Nepalese people have flown over the Indo-Nepal border to settle in India for various reasons such as natural disasters in Nepal, poverty, lack of employment opportunities in the country, political and social unrest, cultural tourism and pilgrimage. Nepalese Diaspora in Darjeeling is formed by the job-seekers in tea-plantation; in Sikkim, particularly, by the Limbu people who left Nepal in order to save them from the atrocities of the expansive Shah Kings and other late settlers; in the North-East India by job-seekers, fly-away homes, disaster affected and pilgrims; and in Varanasi by the religious people who want to die on the lap of the Ganges. The other Nepalese diasporans attached to Nepal-India border are the result of Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) that made the Indian border fly over Nepalese people. Many Nepalese settlements fell into Indian territories with the Sugauli Treaty in 1816. They are Nepalese because of language, culture and emotion, but Indian because of their citizenship and other political facts. Thus, the formation of Nepalese Diaspora in India is different from the formation of all other Nepalese Diasporas which are the result of the gradual accumulation of people who cross the borders for personal reasons. At the same time, both of the Old and the New Nepalese Diasporas are not colonial or post-colonial Diasporas because Nepal was never colonized in its history. Thus, the analysis of Nepalese Diaspora and its literature demands a non-postcolonial and purely humanistic outlook.

III. Minority and Marginality of Nepalese Diaspora

Both of the Old and the New Nepalese Diasporas suffer from their minority position in their hostlands. The number of the diasporans is far less than that of the mainstream hostland people. This status of minority has put them in the position of marginality and consequent discriminations. In India, the people of Nepalese origin live in constant state of insecurity. The Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling is the result of the same. They fear the loss of their linguistic, cultural and political identity. Many Nepalese diasporans in India do not dare to term themselves ‘diasporic’ because they fear that it may be interpreted wrongly; and because of the same, they may be more discriminated. This identity crisis and split mentality is a diasporic feature of this community. They are promoting Nepalese culture, language, literature and life-style; but still want to dissociate themselves from Nepal because of political reasons. Culturally they seem to be more Nepalese than the Nepalese in Nepal.

The position of Nepalese Diaspora in Myanmar is similar to that of the Nepalese Diaspora in India. Settled hundreds of years ago, they have nearly been assimilated into the Burmese society. Recently there has been a growth of cultural and linguistic awareness among the people of Nepalese origin. They are re-gaining diasporicity. The case of Nepalese Diaspora in Bhutan is more severe and heart rendering one. More than one hundred thousand such Bhutanese people of Nepalese origin i.e. the Nepalese diasporans in Bhutan were expelled from Bhutan in early 1990s. It was the result of their demands for linguistic, cultural and political rights. They had settled there for more than seven centuries; but still they had been treated as marginalized outsiders. The discriminations were unbearable. Even then, they “cannot think of going back for they have nowhere to go” (Subba, 2008: 231). Though Nepal provided them temporary refugee camps, it could not treat them as its citizens. On the other hand, despite their constant struggle for return to Bhutan, the Bhutan government never listens to their demand. So, after two decades, most of them have already got settled in the Western countries since the countries like the USA, Canada and Australia make the arrangement of the establishment of this community in their countries. However, some of the remaining ones still want to go back to Bhutan. Now they are trebly-diasporic. Thus, once a diasporan, the people remain diasporic forever.

The New Nepalese Diaspora is even more marginalized and discriminated. On the basis of the four-phase development based discussion of diaspora proposed by diaspora researcher and creative writer Uma Parameswaran (2007), it has just reached to the second phase in many European and American nations. They are extremely busy in the areas of jobs and settlements. Only in the USA and the UK, it has entered into the third phase in which the diasporans reach out to the public for social activism and political representations. In May 2015 Kiran Sitaula happened to be the first Nepalese diasporan to be elected in a political post in the USA. He was, then, elected for the post of the Deputy Mayor of the Indian Head City under the Maryland State (Shah,

2015: 17). Similarly, Nepal-born-couple Laxmi Gaire and Shankar Gaire were elected for the post of town council in Swanley in the UK in 2015 (Pokhrel, 2015: 4). In other countries, they have not even reached to this level. It indicates the marginality of the New Nepalese Diaspora; and their consequent silence giving way to discriminations against them. These conditions have made them physically absent from Nepal and emotionally absent in their respective host lands. So, they always pine for the life in Nepal which is possible for them only in imagination.

IV. Voices in the Nepalese Diasporic Literature

Amid this growth in the magnitude of Nepalese Diaspora, their marginalized outsiders' position, and theoretical issues on the characteristics of real diaspora and its literary creativity, Nepalese Diasporic Literature is getting widened. Though the details of the Old Nepalese Diaspora have not been explored yet, some hints to this direction are found. Literary creation from Darjeeling, Sikkim, Deharadun, Assam and Myanmar are replete with the portrayal of the existential condition and emotions created by the marginalized minority status of Nepalese Diasporas there. Researcher Rajendra Subedi (2068BS) finds that literature created by many Nepali speaking writers from India before Nepali got the status of Indian national language is with the sentiment and other basic qualities of diasporic literature (7). Other researchers such as Puran Rai (2069BS) and Mahesh Poudyal (2012) have similar arguments. Poudyal goes one step ahead and stresses on the need of in-depth researches on present day Nepalese Diasporic Literature that is getting created in India (6). This is the condition of Old Nepalese Diasporic Literature.

But in case of the New Nepalese Diaspora, there are a lot of activities, writings and many organized efforts for the promotion of both the 'Nepaliness' and Nepalese Diasporic Literature. It is able to voice its existential condition. In this case, the Nepalese Diasporic Literature is able to work as a strong means of defending the diaspora's existence amid the hostland people and institutions that represent hostland hegemony. It has also provided the individual and the Nepalese diasporic communities' chances to release their traumas caused by the loss of actual homeland and life back there. It is just like Vijay Mishra (2007), a researcher and critic on Indian Diasporic Literature, argues that the diasporic recognition "comes, finally, through art" (21). Brandi Bingham Kellet (2010) also explains how diasporic literature is a means of reclaiming history and development of "a diasporic consciousness" as a means of resisting "hegemonic power" (4). Salman Rushdie (1992) has the similar argument. According to him, the diasporan's "being elsewhere" position "may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal" (12). It works as a means of strengthening the self.

Nepalese Diasporic Literature from both the Old and the New Nepalese Diasporas, just like the arguments of above mentioned scholars and creative writers, has been used to give voice to the silences of the Nepalese diasporans who have been living the life of marginalized minority in several forms of discrimination. Poetry and fiction are two major genres used in this connection. The prominent themes in these creations are the diasporans' hopes, aspirations, amazements in a new land, and mostly the shocks they receive when their imaginations and the realities they face have no meeting points. The equally prominent theme is the portrayal of their feelings of getting pushed to the margins, and so being compelled to remain significantly nowhere because of their absence in both end-points. As a result, most of these writings deal with their nostalgia and the desire to get freedom from traumatic hostland atmosphere.

V. Conclusion

The studies of diaspora and its literature differentiate themselves from those of transnational and cosmopolitan migration based communities and their literary creations. But all makers of Nepalese diasporic discourse are not still clear in these differences. So, critics of Nepalese Diasporic Literature have been debating on the nature of such creations. Despite this, the histories of Nepalese international migration and the formation of Nepalese Diaspora based on it clearly show the formation of two types of Nepalese Diaspora: the Old and the New. The first one concentrates in India, Bhutan and Myanmar; whereas, the second one has been growing in the Europe, the Americas and the Oceania. Both of these Diasporas have been suffering from minority and marginality status in their respective hostlands. Nepalese diasporans have been discriminated and consequently put into silences there. These existential conditions have worked as the background for the creation of Nepalese Diasporic Literature, mainly poetry and fiction. It gives voices to their traumatic existence, and inspires them to search for their identities.

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