



Abandoned at Old Age: Aging in Contemporary Nepali Short Fiction

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Abstract

Contemporary Nepali short fiction has depicted the plight of the people left at home in their old age when the children seek a better life and settlement in the first world. Such people suffer in silence and perpetually wait for their children to return and embrace them. As the national boundaries have not been able to keep people within them, the family has faced the most critical challenges of our time. It has failed to serve the usual expectations as a social institution. The root cause of such abandonment lies in the crises of family. Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017), Neelam Karki's "Parkhai" [The Wait] (2019), and Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [A Dimension] (2020) picture the people abandoned at their old age: they lead a solitary life in the most critical phase of their life. This paper reads the stories in the contemporary contexts of Nepal in particular and South Asia in general as the developing world has similar kinds of problems. Since the study is built on the assumption that the study of creative texts helps understand the course of action that society has prepared for itself, this paper attempts to examine the content of the elderly self as presented in the selected Nepali short fiction.

Keywords

Aging, elderly people, literary gerontology, Nepali fiction, loneliness

Introduction

After the advancement in healthcare facilities, the world has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the population of elderly people in the first two decades of the twenty-first

century. Many people have carried out various types of research in the domain of health care and other related domains to understand the issues of elderly people. They have also attempted to devise the best facilities for the elderly population to provide them with physical comfort to ease the experience of growing old. However, literary critics have not been able to conduct such research in creative writings as such even though literature possesses the potential to contemplate the issues of elderly people and weaving the narrative of the people undergoing certain complexities, arising from aging. How is the experience of aging for the people of the modern time? How has the old age unfolded in the contemporary times? As the pressing questions of the time, the issues draw the attention of the literary studies towards it. In this study, I have taken three short stories from contemporary Nepal to examine the ways the issues of the elderly people are depicted to discuss the changing socioeconomic structures in the society. Written quite recently, Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree] (2017), Neelam Karki's "Parkhai" [The Wait] (2019), and Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [A Dimension] (2020) have explored a new approach to view the issues of the elderly people: the stories depict the plight of the parents abandoned in their old age. They live a lonely life on their own.

Aging and Elderly People

The issues of elderly people require serious critical attention from academia as they have also remained left out of the mainstream discourses. However, the academia seems to have ignored their issues in the study of contemporary literature as such. In other words, the literary writings that celebrate the questions of the youth and young age have drawn more attention than of the writings with the elderly people. Also, Phyllis Winet Barnum finds out that elderly people are seriously underrepresented in such books. As he explores, "Although the aged made up 9.3 percent of the population on an average from 1950 to 1959 and from 1965 to 1974, the elderly constituted only 3.3 percent of the main characters, and appear in only 5.3 percent of the illustrations" (303). This sort of findings of the research suggest that this has emerged as a growing field of study requiring serious attention from the practitioners of diverse domains of knowledge. Furthermore, it implies that the people have started moving into the margins under our shadows.

Even though academia did not accept the course of life as a domain of serious studies

earlier, it has evolved into an exciting area of knowledge in modern times. First of all, the knowledge about elderly people helps to explore the key concerns of old age, aging, and the need to understand the problems of old age as such. It also puts the young people in a critical position to realize the fundamental nature of their future: simultaneously, such findings prepare the people to accept the old age gracefully. Reviewing the development of research in the area, Glen H. Elder, Jr. views that the studies in the 1950s focused on ahistorical aspects of human life as the time excessively emphasized objectivity. Gradually, people began to think of the issues differently as they acknowledged the significance of the changing sociological conditions in the modern world (12), resulting in the shift in the ways of scientific studies in the 1960s. By understanding the elderly people, we learn to cope with the issues of the elderly people and see the meaning in our practices in general. Candida Gillis views literature as a way of preparing people for their later life as well since it depicts the condition of living for people of all ages. Specifically, elderly people suffer a lot in their old age and literature becomes a public space to deal with such traits. As she argues, “English teachers are in an excellent position to help students learn about the aged and the aging because they know literature that treats the joys and pains of later life and understand how language shapes and reflects cultural attitudes” (62).

The implication of literary representations of aging goes deeper as Keshab Sigdel argues, “It offers a bridge between the past and present through the alternative documentation of social, cultural, historical, and political experiences that can provide future directions” (106). Generally, teachers of literature can help their students understand aging and old age better by bringing into the spotlight the issues of such groups in the classroom discussion.

Nepali literature has not paid serious attention to the issues of elderly people. The critical scholarship picks the issues of politics or the historical transformation of society in general. The contemporary readings focus more on the power relations existing in society and the contextual forces leading to the production of such writings. Since literature intensively contemplates the inner composition of the human self, the surroundings, and the placement of people in the real context, it began to draw the attention of literary critics and scholars to study the concerns of the elderly population in the 1970s. The advancement in health care also resulted in the rise of the elderly population in the

1970s. As the literary texts pick up characters (people) from society, the elderly people naturally show their presence in such texts. As the social relations imply the political texture embedded in them, the treatment of the elderly people presents a unique world that reveals the deep-seated assumptions, biases, and judgments of the people about this new reality of our time. However, the writings generally presented old age in the stereotypical negative image: failure, inability, fall, loss, decay, and the like were associated with aging. The traditional concept of aging is reflected in such writings that attempt to portray old age as time without any energy in the people.

At present, aging has been rigorously studied in medicine and other domains of biological sciences. Such researchers direct their attention to the issues of energy, the growth of certain types of cells, and the like. On the other hand, the cultural assumptions and perceptions about aging become more prominent for creative artists to produce certain types of texts. Furthermore, the present study focuses on the cultural dimensions of aging as perceived in literary writings: it attempts to explore the cultural dimensions and implications of aging. Valdemiro Sgarbieri and Maria Teresa Bertoldo Pacheco argue that aging is not genetically programmed; rather, external factors like food and nutrients play a vital role in the experience of aging in people (18). Sgarbieri and Pacheco imply that the cultural practices of the people have a great role to play in the experience and understanding of aging in people in any society. Implicitly, such exploration opens up a huge avenue where the political set-up of the whole society becomes visible to the external eyes.

Though creative texts carry a huge corpus of data to understand the political implications of age, aging, and elderly people, this domain remained ignored for a long time. The obsession with the linguistic interpretation of texts inspired the critics to investigate the aspects that appealed to young readers in academia. Even the elder academicians and readers could not devote adequate attention to the field of study. In other words, literary critics have ignored a very fertile domain of exploration of human possibility in literary texts. As Sarah Falcus critically analyzes:

In literary studies, aging has been the unacknowledged shadow that intersects with more prominent approaches such as gender or post-colonialism. A similar lack of interdisciplinary connections has also been the case in gerontology, meaning that the humanities, including literature, found themselves marginalized in this area. However,

this is changing and a genuinely dialogic relationship between literature and gerontology is becoming established, a field appropriately coined by the term 'literary gerontology'.

(53)

The 1970s witnessed a huge shift in the domain of knowledge production: the marginal areas were now explored for the study of the issues of the people that remained 'yet uncovered.' Edward F. Anselmo concludes in the 1970s that "It would seem that our analysis of old age and literature provides some support for the position that cultural stereotypes regarding growing older, biases with considerable history, continue to be reflected in the printed word" (217). The literary critics now began to examine the creative texts as the source of data to reflect on the nature of biases and cultural worldviews about elderly people. The cultural stereotypes that shaped the understanding and perceptions of the people about age, aging, and the elderly people became the key subject matters of the study.

The critics who were interested in studying the identity of the people also treated literature as the source of data to examine and understand the issues of the elderly population. For them, literature functioned as the window to the social circumstances that surrounded the lives of the old age people. As Martin Kohn, Carol Donley, and Delese Wear critically remark, "Literature can help us understand some of the problems of aging and identity by placing using the perspectives of the elderly persons experiencing the ambiguities of self and in the perspectives of friends and family of that person" (4). When the critics seek the issues related to identity in literary writings, they can observe the formation of self of any class, group, or age. The inner composition of self of the characters organically manifests in creative writings: often, the unspeakable truths of human life also find their creative outlet. Careful readings unearth such facts and let the world stand visibly. Emphasizing the need to understand the issues of the elderly people through literature, Falcus concludes that literary gerontology posits the critic to unearth the intimate observations of the elderly population as reflected in/through creative pieces of writing (58). Both the issues of identity and the margin emerge with prominence in the study of age, aging, and elderly people in literature.

Viewed globally, critics have read literary writings to examine the issues of elderly people. The use of elderly people serves a particular purpose of the authors. Stereotypically, such people are depicted to show death, decay, fear, and loss in literary

writings. For instance, Chris Gilleard analyzes the use of old age in Samuel Beckett's plays and novels. The modern condition of failure is symbolically presented through old age in his literary works. As he argues, "While aging and old age are as present as ever in his later work, agedness seems to be represented differently, more symbolically than functionally. This can be seen, for example, in the monochromatic contrast of white, grey, and black dress or hair, rather than in the display of somatic impairments or complaints" (49). The negative portrayal of aging helps us understand the general perception of aging.

Anne M. Wyatt-Brown also agrees that the world of fiction helps in the exploration of the attitude of society towards elderly people, highlighting the ways society generally treats them. As the character's inner self is modeled after the living people of the society, reading literary texts can enhance the sensitivity of the people about the issues raised therein (125). Both Gilleard and Wyatt-Brown agree on the study of the creative pieces to examine the political message embedded therein: they explore the perceptions and perspectives of the people about aging in literature.

However, the Nepali literary landscape presents a quite different picture from that of the global one. Keshab Sigdel's study points at the dismal picture of the national scene as he analyzes that the study of aging has gained prominence in the West as societies have advanced in material transformation and ignored alarming concerns of human life like death. He observes:

Different examples are available in literary narratives to substantiate this idea. While discussing the concepts of aging in American novels, Maricel Oró-Piqueras quotes sociologist Norbert Elias who claims that "aging" and "old age" have become frightening, almost taboo terms in Western society because death is increasingly invisible in advanced societies. (107)

Western societies have identified the need to look into the issues of elderly people and the perceptions shaping general attitudes towards them; consequently, they have started treating creative writing as the source of data to conduct serious studies on age, aging, and elderly people. Such studies also help the government agency formulate and implement intervention programs at the national and sub-national levels. Yet, another study by Hom Nath Chalise points out that only a scanty amount of research has been conducted on the issues of the elderly population in Nepal as he writes, "Now, the

provincial government should promote to carry out some local-level research and their findings should be incorporated in the policy formulation. It will help to promote the quality of life of the elderly” (11). Sigdel and Chalise agree that properly researching the cause of elderly people can help the government in particular and the society at large. The goal of public welfare is implied in their discussion on the issue of scholarship on aging.

Departure

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the issues of identity, gender and sexuality, war and conflict, trauma, and the like as short fictions are approached for serious critical study. However, the issues of people from the elderly population have not been able to draw serious attention to the critical study of Nepali short fiction. This study examines the life and the situation of the people abandoned in their houses by their children who go and settle abroad for a better life. The elderly people suffer heavily as the younger people are not with them. This study departs from the prevailing studies in that it focuses on age, aging, and elderly people as they appear in the creative imaginations of contemporary Nepali short fiction.

Waiting for the Unknown: Elderly People at the Margin

Contemporary Nepali short fiction has presented the narratives of elderly people abandoned at the corners of their own families. Aging has never turned into a positive experience for these people: they feel rejected in old age. Mandira Madhushree’s “Ambako Bot” [The Guava Tree] (2017), Neelam Karki’s “Parkhai” [The Wait] (2019), and Bina Theeng’s “Aayam” [A Dimension] (2020) present the people abandoned at their old age in Nepali society: they lead a solitary life in the most critical phase of their life, waiting for their children to come back and support them. The unknown future unfolds into the present just to perplex them further in that they get no solace from their life. The bleakness of the present torments them as much as their experience of aging does to them. This section analyzes the three stories to examine the general context and the problems of age as they emerge in the life of the aging population in Nepal.

Contemporary Nepali society fails to see the elderly people as the repository of knowledge. As a reflection on the course of present development in society, Nepali short fiction spotlights the plight of elderly people. The national boundaries have

become inadequate for people to find happiness in the twenty-first century. The young people go abroad in search of opportunities and luxury of life. For instance, Neelam Karki's "Parkhai" [The Wait] tells the story of a lonely father who waits for his son to return home. Writing the fate of modern Shrawan Kumar, Karki meticulously shows the emotional state of the father on the one hand and the psychological fragmentation that the son has to undergo in the US on the other. The son Shrawan Kumar and his father Dinanath undergo in the modern context of the world. As an immigrant in the US, Shrawan Kumar finds himself trapped among the multiple complexities of modern life. He wants to listen to both his wife Raksha and his father Dinanath. However, modern Shrawan Kumar leaves the elderly father alone in Nepal (197). The long wait never comes to an end for both the father and the son. Karki presents Dinannath's letter to her son in the story as she writes, "After your departure to the US, we have not celebrated any Dashain here at home; still, we pretend to celebrate it for the sake of the society. We had pretended well" (197). The festivals have no meaning for the old parents waiting back at home in Nepal, while the children settle in the first world.

Karki portrays the lonely father waiting for his son to return home and take care of him in his old days. The son fails in his duties: he has struggled throughout his life to settle in the US by obtaining a permanent resident (PR) visa. The old father has not been able to enjoy the festivals in the absence of his son. A similar sort of problem has troubled the protagonist in Mandira Madhushree's "Ambako Bot" [The Guava Tree]. The father waits for the sons to join him at Dashain. He remembers how he planted and took care of the guava trees when he came to the village. The quest of the father tells the story of his struggle to help the sons know their land. However, the sons invent their excuse that each of them will not be able to accompany the father at Dashain. The orphaned father says:

I gave my sons the modern education of my time. My sons who were educated in the city did not want to stay in Nepal for their higher studies. They could not remain aloof from the fashion. They moved to the US as they thought they wouldn't be able to spend a good life with an education in Nepal. We are the parents who were orphaned. Their mother couldn't tolerate the loss of the family. She lost her mind in the absence of the sons. And finally, she left me alone. I was completely an orphan. (185-186)

The suffering elderly population is the contemporary reality of the nation that is reflected

through the creative pieces of short fiction. They wait endlessly for the mercy of the kids. However, the children can never return home to give them any solace. The sons inform the father that they have found their ways of living their life away from the country. The father rears the guava tree, hoping that his sons will come to enjoy the fruit one day. The sons do not understand the expectations and hopes of the elderly father. They tell him why they cannot come home to celebrate the Dashain with him.

After the political change in 2006, Nepal saw unexpected growth in the pattern of youth migration to the first world. Karki and Madhushree's protagonists are created against this backdrop. The early days were well spent as the parents were also young: they could carry out the daily activities on their own. As they grew old, the trouble began in their life. Karki's helpless old man who lives a completely neglected life in his country dies in the end. He cannot do anything except wait for his son. Ironically, the son also fails to do anything except wait for the father to meet with an end. Death solves their problem. In Madhushree's story, the father emerges as resisting one in the beginning: he concludes that his sons have forsaken him. So, he attacks the guava plant that he has taken care of throughout his life. In the end, the regeneration indicates that he forgives them. A similar type of uncomplaining retired medical professionals appears in Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [A Dimension]. Their children are also settled abroad. However, Theeng does not fully develop their character in the story.

Karki's modern Shrawan Kumar in "Parkhai" fails to serve his father at the end of his life. Dinanath is living a solitary life in the absence of his son: after his wife passes away, he has no company to live with (198). The author shows the life of elderly people without any young members in the family. Dinanath suffers because he does not have anybody to depend on. On the other hand, Neelam Karki's Shrawan Kumar cannot decide to come back to Nepal: he is thinking a lot. As Karki narrates,

"Shrawan, have you booked the tickets?" Manohar asks.

His wife Raksha looks at him, amazed.

"Have you really decided to go? Are you going, to quit everything when you are almost about to settle on everything? Aunt Sulochana says.

"One must go. What the hell can a son do to a father if he does not do anything in such a situation?" It is the voice of intoxicated Tika. (206)

Even though Shrawan Kumar feels more connected to his father, he cannot make any decision to just leave the country: he has been waiting for a permanent resident (PR) visa in the US. Trapped in the uneven circumstances of modern life, Shrawan Kumar turns into a very complex man who fails to choose between duty and modern life. On the other hand, Madhushree's protagonist suffers in isolation, talks to his children over the internet, and waits for them to come and enjoy guava at Dashain. When he gets to know that the sons are not coming home at Dashain (188), he gets furious at them. He chops down the tree. Symbolically, the tree represents his children. Mandira Madhushree cannot give it a cruel ending as she writes, "After a few days, there were new leaves springing from the studs of the guava tree" (190). In both cases, the fathers cannot meet the sons. Karki's Shrawan Kumar cannot even attend his father's funeral.

The conceptualization of elderly people has significantly changed in the time between Shrawan Kumar and his father Dinanath: the son cannot cherish his father's old age, while his father Dinanath mended the boots and jacket as a matter of protection. Elderly people gave comfort and protection in the past. Dinanath loves his father's jacket and boots: his father was an ex-soldier in the Indian Army (202). At present, the youths have started to take them as a burden. The elderly people become a burden to the youths and the society. Though Shrawan's wife, Raksha can also feel the pain of the elderly people, she finds herself helpless to take any action to help them. Raksha says:

"We cannot do anything staying with them [the old father] back at home. We have fulfilled our duty. We have brought them to a luxury house in the city, away from their search for grass or wood in the forest every day. We are not yet settled here. We have provided for good clothes and food. We have paid the medical bills. If we had not come here, your father would have passed away some five to ten years ago. Don't you see it? We have given him an additional life." (207)

The son stays in the US, undecided, while the father peacefully passes away one day. There appears a spiritual rift between duty and the prevailing circumstances in the lives of modern people, resulting in complications in the lives of elderly people in general. The helplessness of the modern youth has turned the experience of elderly people into a very frustrating part of their lives. Elderly people undergo huge psychological pressure and they cannot experience positive emotions like love, pity, kindness, and peace in modern times. Bina Theeng's "Aayam" [A Dimension] depicts a woman in her early

fifties as an old person. She has lost her hope: her only son, Kamal dies in a bike accident. As a liberal woman, she encourages her daughter-in-law to get married to Suraj. However, she also seeks the support of the younger people in her later life.

Viewed from the other way around, Karki and Madhushree rewrite the story of modern Shrawan Kumar. To them, the sense of duty makes no sense at all: they know that life requires material gain, transformation, and luxury. They enjoy the fruits of modern life, away from their society and family. Bina Theeng talks of another widow who works as a domestic helper in a retired doctor's house. The old couple's children are settled abroad. Yangji sends a widow, Santamaya to work in the house of a retired doctor. They are old and Bina Theeng describes their life thus:

After a week Santamaya started working. The house for which she worked was that of a retired doctor couple. Only the couple lived in the house. Both the sons were abroad. The house had a wide compound, a garden, and a two-and-a-half-storied house. The couple had difficulty managing the house. They needed hands to work in the garden. They needed steps to go across the kitchen, bathroom, lawn, and balcony. (75)

The retired medical professionals join an endless queue of the people whom we find in Karki or Madhushree's stories. Though Theeng does not further explore the life of the couple, we get to see the life they are spending in their old age. Without Santamaya, they cannot support themselves. They cannot move about in the house in the absence of their domestic helper and driver. The author never talks of their sons living abroad.

Conclusion

The contemporary Nepali short fictions depict the situation in which the people suffer in their old age. Karki's old man swiftly dies. Madhushree's old man sublimates his anger by felling the guava tree; still, he has to continue to lead an unhappy and solitary life. Theeng's professional doctors do not emerge in the full stature of the story as the author explores a different dimension of social life through the story. All these cases imply that aging has emerged as an issue requiring critical attention in society and people have not been able to positively experience old age. The complexities of old age and the experience of the elderly population have been greatly affected by the age of migration in Nepal. Karki, Madhushree, and Theeng approach aging, placing the experience of aging from the perspectives of the elderly people abandoned back at home to patiently

wait for their ‘happy ending’ (?) in the absence of their ‘busy’ children.

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