

Sampurna Rai: A Case Study

Bedika Rai is a senior faculty and an Assistant Professor at the Department of English in Salesian College Sonada. Her area of interest is translation studies. She is associated with the Translation Centre, Salesian College.

Abstract

The creation of a literary writing depends on the type of words and expressions used by the writers along with writer's deep observations of everything within and outside. Sampurna Rai is one such Indian Nepali writer whose keen observation led to the creation of wonderful collection of short stories, essays, and poems. In one of her Kalimpong TV interviews she had expressed how she would look for a space to create a work of an art hinting at the necessity of an artistic space and time. It would be apt to remember Virginia Woolf's words, "So, if we may prophecy, women in time to come will write fewer novels, but better novels; ... when women will have what has so long been denied them- leisure, and money, and a room to themselves."¹ This article attempts to analyse Mrs. Rai's works as an important part in the development of Indian Nepali Literature in post Gorkhaland Movement of 1980's of Darjeeling Hills.

Keywords: Gorkhaland Movement, Indian Nepali literature, universal, politics

Sampurna Rai (1948-2012), the almost forgotten one of the Indian Nepali writers of the Darjeeling Hills has to her credit collection of short stories titled *Nabho*² and collection of poems titled *Marubhumi Ko Nadi* (2011). These are the only published writings that go to her credit. Collection of twenty-four short stories and collection of sixty-two poems keep Sampurna Rai alive for some of her readers. Her essays and satires were occasionally published in local newspapers. She was honored with *Ranndhoj Rana Smarak Cup*, *Shrasta Puraskar* and *Arugi Puraskar*. A person of dignity and personality, a teacher with disciplined approach, a writer writing with simplicity yet intensity- is Sampurna Rai. The name itself as suggests 'completeness' so do we find Mrs. Rai living and writing with completeness. Reading a volume on Sampurna Rai in *Sahitya Sangket*³, one could get enough information about her literary life and her engagement with the literary organizations like *Basudha*. Her poem *Purne ko June* (1963) opened the literary gates for her. Her writings are a reflection of her experiences and observations. Many autobiographical notes, family issues, child labour, child psychology and the impact of Gorkhaland Movement in the lives of common man can be found as the major issues in her writings.

*Nabho*⁴ is the title of the collection of her short stories and is also one of the short stories in the collection. The word *nabho* is chosen so delicately and perhaps deliberately to represent the common Indian Nepali. *Nabho* in general means 'the crop grown from

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Women and Fiction*, (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, John Wiley and Sons Ltd.), 139.

² Sampurna Rai, *Nabho Kathaharu* (Namchi, Sikkim: Nirman Prakashan, 1996).

³ Kumar Pradhan, ed., *Sahitya Sanket: Sampurna Rai Smriti Ankan* (Kalimpong: Nepali Sahitya Adhayan Samiti, 2012).

⁴ Sampurna Rai, *Nabho*, in *Nabho Kathaharu* (Namchi, Sikkim: Nirman Prakashan, 1996), 61-63.

the fallen seed'. *Nabho* is a character who has no name, who even doesn't know his father's name, as if crying out in Shakespearean style "What's there in the name?" He's not listed in the voter's list too which is quite an interesting area to explore. He isn't Auden's 'The Unknown Citizen', who having every identity card including health card has no identity in the modern world. Rather he's a different category of a modern man without any identity, including the voter's card. And yet he survives. The narrator observes him closely and finds the most suitable word *nabho* for him. He has grown from the fallen seed and will continue growing as this is his characteristic as the narrator rightly says, "I feel he'll not die. Like a nabho plant he'll survive every time in every situation". He knows not what politics is but has an interest in *panchayat* election. During Indira Gandhi's visit to Kalimpong, he had gone to see her in Mela ground, one of the historic gathering spaces in Kalimpong, leaving his work in the ginger field and was astounded by the crowd that was waving black flag and shouting *murdabad*. During the election campaign, he had heard both Sidhartha Shankar Roy and Anand Pathak, representatives of two opposing political parties, so much so he pasted the election posters on the walls of Kalimpong streets for both of them. A man without name and an identity, perhaps, can be the one who could work for both the political parties and yet remain unidentified.

In the 1986 Gorkhaland movement⁵, he had stood with the green flag of the Gorkha National Liberation Front which was spearheading the movement of the time. The narrator beautifully states, "He's the leftover of the 1986 Movement". Many people who were protesting in support of the Gorkhaland movement didn't return home on the eve of 27th July 1986 after the State police ruthlessly opened fire and killed innocents where many were shot dead and many beheaded. But he survived the cruelties of war, of bloodshed, and of death. Carrying *khukuri*, a traditional Gorkha knife, with bare left-foot, he arrived at the narrator's veranda. His legs were injured and the narrator had applied him herbal ointment. It's difficult even for the narrator to tell whether *Nabho* had understood politics or not but he had started worshipping Subhas Ghising, a vocal Gorkha leader, and had pasted his picture on the altar. During the forty days of strike *Nabho* was found to be the most easy and reliable person by the villagers because he was brave enough to watch and warn the villagers shouting *Aayo re! aayo re!*, informing villagers about the marching contingents of Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF). The CRPF would mean the coming of death and despair. As he would run he would carry the goods of the narrator too. In his compassion, the villagers depended and sheltered during the chaotic state of the Hills.

Nabho has been described as a 'robot'. And yet the narrator finds that even a robot can be disease stricken. She says, "it's been four months now that he's sick". Kalimpong Government hospital has no mercy on him and his struggle with his disease continues. The saddest part is that none of the villagers went to see him in the hospital, "None went to see this man in the hospital with charity". *Nabho* has no complaints nor does he revolt against anything, so the narrator feels that to live he shall come back to his shed, in the village because *Nabho* does not die. Every time he dies, he sprouts again

⁵ Gorkhaland movement is a century old and ongoing movement of the Nepali speaking populace of India, also known as Gorkhas, for the demand of statehood within the union of India.

as a new life just as his nick name suggests. He has been called “a valueless but a precious man”. The author says everything that comes easily always comes with less value, so is *Nabho*. He represents all those people who joined politics during the 1986 Movement, survived and remained land-less, identity less, and valueless. Such people are easy to find and easy to forget.

Mrs. Rai’s description of *Nabho* tells us a lot about her. She has not vilified any political party or any political leader involved in the Gorkhaland movement of 1986. Her *Nabho* speaks a lot about the life of a common man least bothered by the political party and the intricacies of politics. With one speaker throughout, the writer brings the issue of Gorkhaland in an artistic method narrating the tale of how it made the people to suffer at the same time bringing awareness regarding politics. The story is representative, realistic, regional yet universal.

Mrs. Rai’s other stories like *Chenni*, *Kali* and *Shoshan* represent the dark world where young girls find their existence difficult. Dr. Raj Kumar Chettri, in his essay, *Sampurna Rai Ko Kathagat Shilpa Baishitya*⁶ has called Mrs. Rai’s short stories as an example of a *sabal* (strong) and *safal* (successful) writing. The young girls of these stories speak volumes about child labour, domestic and social violence, and doubly victimized life. Poverty adds more fuel to the fire of their pain. Like Blake’s ‘Chimney Sweeper’ or ‘The Little Black Boy’ from the *Songs of Experience*, these characters are aware of their pathetic situation as *Sampurna Rai*’s protagonist *Kali* in *Kali*⁷: “Everyone calls her *kali* and this name is like a curse for her”. It is the story of the subaltern.

*Pratishodh*⁸ narrates the tale of a difficult marital life. The imbalance in the family, the struggle of a mother and of *Nidhi* speaks volumes about family and relationships. *Nidhi* in her conversation with her mother says, “I was blind enough in not seeing the ego and darkness that you were made of. What a fool I was for eight long years?”. *Nidhi*’s acceptance of her mother’s struggle and her father’s irresponsibility makes her mother realize the absence of her husband. The mother in elation, thinking of her husband who never performed his family duties, thus says, “You are not in her eyes, nor in hatred nor in love.” And such realization gives the mother the freedom from her illusion, shame, and mental distress. The writer in these stories is found to have understood the psychological situation of the victims. These stories are also a subtle attack on the society which makes the life of women miserable. The source of their miseries is either drunken fathers or husbands, who enslave them in perpetual servitude as in *Mulk Raj Anand*’s novels. The theme is universal.

Sampurna Rai’s short stories follow *Poe*’s definition of a short story. Her stories can be read in “one sitting” with one or two characters, and limited action. Her language is expressive and while reading her writings, one can get the impression of a struggle for the proper word. She uses colloquial language and is quite selective about words; the best example would be the word *Snabho*.

⁶ Raj Kumar Chettri, “*Sampurna Rai Ko Kathagat Shilpa Baishitya*”, in ed. Kumar Pradhan, *Sahitya Sanket: Sampurna Rai Smriti Ankan* (Kalimpong: Nepali Sahitya Adhayan Samiti, 2012).

⁷ *Sampurna Rai, Nabho Kathaharu*, 6-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

Her essays are autobiographical in nature. The present study shall take two of Mrs. Rai's essays; *Rog ko Audaha*⁹ and *Mahina Marne Kram*¹⁰ for further discussion. The writer's intense experience of life can be found in both the essays. *Rog ko Audaha* speaks of her sickness and the pain that she experienced due to arthritis. The unbearable pain, she writes, made her to embrace death but she claims, "Yamaraj's bull wasn't ready and death didn't come, life once again had to be lived." Being bedridden was a painful thing for her. "Bed and me, me and bed and was the pain", she states. Through such expressions we could understand the weight of the pain that gradually kept the writer away from participating in literary association's meetings too. A certain distance was born. The pain made her immovable and she writes in a sarcastic tone, "That time the advertisement company would not have found a better Fevicol than me." She narrates how medicines became the primary importance in her life. "I thought of medicines before I could think of God". She tried several remedies from homeopathy to naturopathy as well as many other therapies. With the aid of medicines when her pain would subside, she would think of 'community, society, literature, and family' and with the pain back again, she couldn't help but think of pain. She tells one interesting incident of how she misunderstood the size of shoes and tried from one shop to the other looking for fitting shoes when in reality the problem was her leg which had swollen. Teasing herself or the disease, she writes, "Interesting is this disease- terror and chaos, hue and cry", further adds that her life became weak and useless to an extent of thinking, "even the ants would win this disease" but not her. Thus, she has aptly used the word 'audaha' as the title. Dictionary defines this word as an intense pain which is unbearable leading sometimes to psychological pain.

Mahina Marne Kram is another interesting writing with a story-like quality. The importance of the end of every month in the life of the lower-middle class has been expressed excellently. The end of month saves the life of the family with only one person having a job above all the month ends twelve times in a year. Twelve times thus a family is saved. But with the drinking habit the finance loses the balance. The speaker here is a man and he wonders how his wife looks after the family without complaints. He had pride in having a beautiful wife who was enough to ignite the fire of envy among his friends but the wrong habits took him farther away from his family and finally when he comes home after missing for three months he sees his wife preparing local alcohol. His masculinity is hurt when he sees his wife making and selling alcohol leading to an argument resulting in domestic violence. The wife then shouts, "Are we to remain hungry? It's difficult to spend the month without money, do you even know?". The narrator here remains silent for it was the matter of the end of month and the life of family. With this story it is clear that the writer knew the life of ordinary people. The language is again simple but the depth of the context is important in her writings.

*Roti ko Khoji*¹¹ a play by Mrs. Rai is another writing that attracts both by its title and story. The play is a beautiful satire on society, politics, and politicians of the Hills. The

⁹ Kumar Pradhan, ed., *Sahitya Sanket*, 80-82.

¹⁰ Ibid., 83-86.

¹¹ Kumar Pradhan, ed., *Sahitya Sanket*, 87-95.

play has two characters named simply as first and the second. The play begins where young boys and girls gathered for an interview is distracted by an announcement, "Youth of the present time is directionless due to societal and political situation. Youth are tired of their life where politics has no impact. They have no faith in society nor a feeling of security. They are injured. As to the future, they have only deserted land and a compulsion to walk in that deserted land." The dialogues between the two characters further elaborate the condition of the youth. This play reminds of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* where two characters engage in continuous conversation and their eternal wait. In the play *Roti Ko Khoji* the two characters talk about dissatisfaction in life and politics of Darjeeling Hills. Their conversation deals with *Roti* (a symbol of sustenance) and Gandhi (a symbol of non-violence and political awareness) with a final realization that politics has impaired the youths. The politicians who take 'roti' for themselves from the empty stomach mass, place constitution as a fantasy and takes right to vote is taken as just another factory to create human bomb, are the center of their dialogue. The first speaker says, "Even Gandhi walks in Hitler's footsteps in the present world". Satire continues in the lines like- "Nation has become foreign for the people, politicians made it. Flag is of tri colour, now which colour will be taken by whom? ... in the name of race the throat has been parched. But politics betrayed the race..." The play, unlike in Beckett's, ends with a hope for the future with 'roti'. The repetition of the word 'roti' several times emphasizes its need for one to sustain life in the Hills. *Roti ko Khoji* begins with a search but ends with a hope of getting it in future for future generations. Such writings are a specimen of a good observer and that of a good writer.

*Marubhumi Ko Nadi*¹² is a collection of poems written and published during the hard times of Mrs. Rai when she was battling the pain of arthritis. One of her poems is:

*How difficult is to live
Like a river in the desert,
Carrying the heat of the sun
In the sand spread far and wide
Becoming a river in the desert!
Everywhere is spread the preparation
To kill a river,
When has a river become the life of sand
By overcoming the fear and
Becoming a river in the desert!
In the heat of sun during day
In the heat of sand during night
River that flows gently in its course
Giving water to the sands
Is difficult for a river, becoming a river in the desert!
There's no shade*

12 Ibid., 96-97.

*Only vultures flying in the sky,
It cannot be a shade
It's difficult to live
Becoming a river in the desert!*¹³

Conclusion

Sampurna Rai's writings represent the common Indian Nepali community and society battered by the Gorkhaland Movement of 1980's. Her works are a candid portrait of dark issues of family and the deserted life of sickness. The themes are regional at the same time universal thus, becoming a part of literary writing. Her writings surpass the boundary of time and space. Unlike other Indian Nepali writings which express the life-world of Nepali communities living across geographies, her writings are free from such territorial overlapping. This may be partly because the whole frame of reference or lens through which the issues of identity and other concerns of Darjeeling Hills has changed dramatically after the Gorkhaland Movement of 1980's. Post 80's movement, the Nepali speaking community in India has largely distanced themselves from Nepalese living in Nepal. Nabho does not touch upon the problems of history and the question of territory and migration. There's no nostalgia about past but a hope for a better future with society free of domestic violence, political hypocrisy and a safer place for women both at home and outside. Mrs. Rai remained optimistic till the end in of her writings. Though she has written less yet all her writings are highly realistic and pragmatic. Her words and expressions are meticulously chosen, thus knitting the story into a beautiful structure. Her poems are full of images and simplicity of diction. Over all it is like a big stroke on a canvass completing the picture of human story.

Her poems are autobiographical in nature. Her essays have story-like quality like the essays of Charles Lamb. One can apply femisinst and psychoanalytical theory helpful in understanding of her characters in the stories like Kali, Chenni, Gaida and many others. Mahina Marne Kram speaks volume of the Marx's 'base' and 'superstructure' of a class in society. Moreover, her satires are so subtle, mild, yet powerful. More reading and writing on Sampurna Rai is necessary to bring her into the mainstream Indian Nepali literature. Her miniscule but effective works should keep her along with the other prominent figures in Indian Nepali writing.

¹³ Ibid., 96-97. (Translation mine)