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The Burden of War: Examining Postcolonial Melancholia in *Blue Mimosa* and "Lahure Phool"

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Abstract

Blue Mimosa (Shirishko Phool) is mainly studied as an existential expression of an educated, modern, bold lady who could not make her life a fulfilling experience. The life of any character in the novel has not been characterised to be meaningful enough and has been expressed in the form of her knowledge of nothingness and absurdity. However, the main objective of this research article is to study the novel from the postcolonial point of view that the women and indigenous people have been more exploited in the war or by the colonial power than anyone else. However, some subaltern people have realised colonial exploitation, subordination, and subjugation, and they have developed their character not to let anyone exploit them like that of Sakambari. The postcolonial literary theory, with a special focus on the ideas of Leela Gandhi, Edward Said, and other postcolonial thinkers, has been used to read the text, and the bold characters of Sakambari and the war widow have been made to challenge the power of the people who try to exercise power upon the less powerful people. This article explores the themes of destruction, alienation, cultural displacement, unjust exploitation, and the shared legacy of loss caused by colonial power and its residue. The poem "Lahure, I want to Change Your Name" by Tirtha Shrestha criticizes the lahure culture developed among Nepali people and its adverse effects on family, society, nation, and the subordinate mentality of Nepali people.

Keywords: alienation, disillusionment, exploitation, subordination, suffering, war

Introduction

Blue Mimosa, a novel by Parijat (Bishnu Kumari Waiba), is regarded as a semi-autobiography of the novelist and the account of the effect of great wars. In the novel, the narration is made by the male

protagonist Suyog Bir Singh, a retired soldier of WWII who fought for the British army in Burma against Japan. He has a bleak expertise of the war and its aftermath on the soldiers and society. He has not married, has no family, lives a lonely life, and wanders around the city aimlessly. Though the pension from the army supports him, he leads a lonely life, feels completely alienated, and regrets his past because no one trusts him; he has done nothing good for humanity. He has the bitter memory of raping the innocent girls in Burma, living a beastly life, the hardship undergone while dragging the living corpse while returning to India. He feels sorry for surviving in the war. He has not been killed in the war even if he has remained an officer in the army, but he feels remorse for fighting for nothing good but killing others just for the benefit of the colonisers. Through the character of Suyog Bir Singh, Parijat has exemplified the dire situation of the soldiers who died, and those who survived have found it more challenging to live rather than die. The war has left them just as the residue of colonialism. Society has developed pessimism, and the youths do not see any better prospects for their future. The war has not only destroyed objects but has slain humanity in the people. The family members, especially the widows, have suffered more than anybody else in the war that has been well described by the poet Tirtha Shrestha through his protest poem "Lahure, I Want to Change Your Name," which expresses the widows' contempt against the war because he does not like even the lahure flower standing upright on her courtyard because it reminds her of her husband and adds salt on the injury.

Blue Mimosa has been read from diverse perspectives by different readers. Krishnachandrasingh Pradhan also comments upon the notion of meaninglessness revealed in the novel. (345). Indra Bahadur Rai, a well-known writer and critic of Nepali literature, has categorised the novel as an absurdist creation. He has claimed that the novel inaugurates the theme of absurdism and meaninglessness in Nepali literature (196). Krishna Hari Baral and Netra Atom have commented *on Blue Mimosa* as a pioneering novel that heralds the theme of nihilism and absurdism in Nepali novels (187). Murari Aryal contends that Parijat is a towering novelist of Nepali literature, and *Blue Mimosa* is an uncontested Nepali novel. According to him, the themes of absurdism and nihilism expressed in the novel affect

her understanding of the devastation wrought by the Second World War on human life (59). Simone Gautam has analysed the varied experiences of women as depicted in the novel and finds them influenced by feminist thought developed in the West during the sixties. According to him, Bari bears several persona petals (149). However, Arun Gupta asserts that over-reading the novel from absurdist and existentialist approaches has marred the novel's beauty (10). Another reader, Govinda Bhatta, on the other hand, finds the novel entirely worthless. For him, it is like a beautiful flower of paper written in a beautiful language that has no use-value (123-28). These are all obvious facets of the novel; however, the novel and poem both are byproducts of the war, and postcolonial study can dig out the effects and consequences of war on the people who were directly involved in it and those affected by it. It is basically library research that employs qualitative methods. Books, journal articles, critics' opinions, and texts themselves are studied in depth to discover the meaning and message of the texts. This mode of research has been adopted for reading texts and books. Critical insights of postcolonial theory and the opinions of critics and academics have been used to delve into the meaning of the novel.

According to Leela Gandhi, "Postcolonial Study is mainly the study of relationships of the dominance of the colonisers and the pain of subordination of the colonised and long history of colonial consequences" (3). In this context, Edward Said has argued that colonisation is a fate with lasting, indeed grotesquely unfair, results (Representing 207). According to Said, the colonial aftermath does not yield the end of colonialism; as Jean-Francois Lyotard has argued, "... it is both possible and necessary to break with tradition and institute absolutely new ways of living and thinking" (90). Gandhi highlights, "... the postcolonial dream of discontinuity is ultimately vulnerable to the infections of the residue of its own unconsidered and unresolved past" (7). According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the postcolonial study has blossomed into the garden where the marginal can speak and be spoken, even spoken for" (Outside 56). The postcolonial theory supports other revolutionary and political theories as Gandhi asserts, "Feminism and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the

poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself" (83). "Colonialist ideology is based on the colonisers' assumption of their own superiority, which they constructed with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) people" (Kandel 115). He adds that postcolonial writing "... resists colonialism's oppressive ideology by depicting the misdeeds of the colonisers, the suffering of the colonised, or the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonialised" (116). Homi K. Bhaba adds in this context, "As the aftermath of colonialism, undergoing of cross-currents of fantasy and phobia of colonial power, the person feels... displacement, guilt, aggressivity... " (169). The consciousness of self, according to Franz Fanon, "is not the closing of a door to communication-National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the anything that will give us an international dimension" (199).

Colonial power has impacted the genre of the novel as if it would not have been complete without the colonisers' influence, whether direct or indirect. Edward Said, in this case, asserts "... imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible... to read one without in some ways dealing with the other" (84). "Women, as the people regard those of inferior rank, she asked, "Is there an "unpresentable subaltern class that can know and speak itself' (Spivak, Can the Subaltern 285). Therefore, the main objective of postcolonial theory is, according to Benita Parry, "... the constitution of politically conscious, unified, revolutionary Self, standing in unmitigated opposition to the oppressor" (30) that has been practiced in different novels written after the end of great wars.

Suyog Bir's Alienation

Suyog Bir Singh is a retired soldier from WW II and a survivor of a British Gurkha rifle that fought against Japan in Burma. He is almost forty-six years old and lives in a rented flat in Kathmandu. He lives a lonely life that suffers in itself; he says, "Simply to suffer in life doesn't make life meaningful. . . . All lives are meaningless" (Parijat 7) because he has nothing except Alienation and dark memories of war. He further adds, "I came back empty" (Parijat 7) because his experience is but just ".... running away with bottles and glasses"

(Parijat 7). As a soldier, he has learned to drink alcohol, and bottles and glasses have been his friends.

Suyog Bir is well enough and lives on a pension, but he does not feel a special love for any beautiful woman like even Sakambari. He expresses the hollowness of his heart, "Yes, I have become an old man. I do not feel passion of that young boy..." (Parijat 20) because, as he as he adds, "... I have fought among bayonets and bullets" (Parijat 23). He drinks too much, and in fact, he does it to forget the trauma of war and to mitigate his loneliness. He confesses, "I am an old man, a soldier, a drunkard... Suyog Bir Singh, old man, drunkard, soldier" (Parijat 25); a worthless person's life is like the burnt down ashes of cigarettes and emptied bottles of whiskey every night. The soldiers suffer not only on the battlegrounds; they are hated in society and disliked by the people. As Sakambari says, "Who can trust a soldier" (Parijat 38)? It makes Suyog Bir feel "... a chill through my whole body" (Parijat 38) and questions himself, "Is a soldier nothing but the symbol of distrust" (Parijat 38)? He is confused about whether he likes a girl or not or should love one.

He feels like people satirise him when they speak to him just to "... make my life sour. Having grown up accustomed to meaninglessness. I was indeed afraid of life "(Parijat 39). He does not know what love between a man and woman is, exemplified when he expresses," I do not know if it is necessary to love a wife. What a lie love is, what a joke, what futility"(Parijat 39). War has made him forget the essence of life. He had only a sour experience of living when he was a Lahure, "By my body, almost a corpse, kept on crawling"(Parijat 66); he has the experience of having humanity washed its hand from people. Suyog Bir does not see the meaning in other's life, either, because when Shiva Raj feels sorry for Sakambari's illness, he thinks, "For no reason this man lives in nothingness without meaning he escapes" (Parijat 83). He also runs away from Sakambari after he kisses her with his blue lips because his life has taught him not to be emotionally close to anyone in its real sense of love and togetherness.

Cultural Displacement

Nepal was never colonised politically by any imperial power. However, the Nepali people were involved in the great wars through

the British and East Indian armies, and the wars left a powerful cultural effect on the Nepali people, whether they were directly involved in the war or not. Girls started cutting their hair short, as Suyog Bir notices in the first meeting with Sakambari, "Her hair was cut very close to her head in the style of ancient Hebrew soldiers.... "(Parijat 3), cutting hair so short for Nepali women was not a usual cultural practice at that time. Smoking for a woman is not culturally acceptable in Nepali society. However, Sakambari is a revolutionary young lady who smokes a lot, "Seeing a thin line of smoke glisten in the sunlight and vanish, I realised that she was putting on a cigarette... " (Parijat 11) and talking to an unknown man very frankly are relatively uncommon for a Nepali woman of that time. She smokes excessively, as Suyog Bir comments, "Instead, I always found her with a cigarette in her hand. Sometimes, I teased her, "You will get cancer this way, Bari" (Parijat 32), but Sakambari takes it too easy and retorts him, "It will be welcome" (Parijat 32) despite the fact she already suffers from bad health.

On the other hand, going to a bar and drinking there is a kind of cultural displacement for Nepali people. Brahmins and Kshertriyas are generally not supposed to drink alcohol, and drinking in public places is taken as a cultural deviation. Drinking alcohol is common for ethnic groups and Mongol communities, but even they are supposed to drink at home. Nevertheless, Suyog Bir and Shiva Raj spend most of their evenings at a bar and go home only late at night after they get drunk. A soldier is not trusted in society because people think that they have cruel manners in personality and sexuality, especially being part of homosexuality. The soldiers are regarded as the source of cultural deviation in Nepali society through the practice of smoking, excessive and open drinking, and homosexuality.

Lahure as a Symbol of Colonial Residue

Suyog Bir is a war veteran and survivor, but his life is as disorganised as the war that devastated human societies. He is already forty-six years old but has not been able to get married and settle in a family. He indulges in unhealthy habits like excessive drinking, smoking, and regularly visiting bars. He is attracted to the girls but not the normal, homely ones. He prefers Sakambari instead of Mujura, a humble, homely, and normal Nepali woman because he has seen the

kinds of ladies like Sakambari who are supposed to be forward and modern. His life is as meaningless as a war when he expresses his pain, "Simply to suffer in life does not make life meaningful.... All lives are meaningless.... We suffer until we die" (Parijat 7). He adds, "I came back empty" (Parijat 7), and that war has left him just like a meaningless, useless dregs. War has spoilt his life; he realises this when he says, "Now,... what interest do I have in love or woman? What use" (Parijat 15)? because he does not have the experience of being loved, cared for, and looked after warmly.

When he thinks of getting married, even falling in love with Sakambari or Mujura, he hesitates even to propose to marry him because he knows "How easily she calls me first soldier and the old man" (Parijat 17) because Sakambari says openly that soldiers cannot be trusted. He feels that his life is fading as the "... mimosa flower is fading too (20); he realises that he is good for nothing and no one and adds, "Suyog Bir Singh, old man, drunkard soldier... " (Parijat 25) is the identity he carries on his shoulders. When he finds a void around him, he feels, "Having grown up accustomed to meaninglessness, I as indeed afraid of life" (Parijat 30) because living is useless, and it is not easy to die. The war has made Suyog Bir unfit for anything. He laments, "I wanted to find out whether my life had any value or not... whether I had grown old for nothing... I wondered, who can give me any value, who can give me importance?... What reward at the hands of mankind? Where is my refuge?" (Parijat 51) The war has left him good for nothing; he cannot do anything good for anybody, even himself. In this regard, he memorises the time of coming out of the Jungle during the war, "By my body almost a corpse, kept on crawling" (Parijat 66). The subedar's life has become a useless residue of colonial hypocrisy.

War as a Tool of (Colonial) Exploitation

War does good for nobody. It is just a tool for exploitation and destruction. Although Suyog Bir is an army officer and draws a good pension to make a living, he feels he is wholly exploited. He lives like a living corpse and resents it. People think he gets a lot of money and leads a luxurious life with the money he draws, but in reality, he suffers; he is entirely hollow inside. Wearing a uniform and carrying a gun does not make one strong, and being able to use power on

others does not make a person powerful and happy. Suyog Bir recalls his life, "You all think that you can have a 'good time' in the army. But there is a 'good time' is only folk songs and rum. There isn't anything else" (Parijat 7). The soldiers are constantly living under terror of being killed. They drink just to forget the terror because, as Suyog Bir says, "War means cutting up men who are just like us, that's all it is "(Parijat 7); the ones who can cut others are valorised as the brave soldiers that is just a futile an experience, "... it was just their duty, to cut went on be leading enemies already killed by bombs" (Parijat 8). People think killing the enemies is an act of bravery, but they forget that the one who is killed also is a soldier like the one who cuts. Even the soldier who survives the war feels empty, good for nothing, as Suyog Bir feels sorry for himself, "What do I have now? I am an empty urn. I am an absurdity" (Parijat 17), just meaningless, useless.

War is a crime against humanity, but the irony is that the one who calls for war does not go to the battlefield, and the one who fights on the battlefield has no power to call off the war; that is how war exploits the people, "The war we fight in someone's name, under someone's orders, is a crime committed by one individual against another. Every killer ought to write his crime on his forehead" (Parijat 27). It is how ordinary people judge the soldiers, but soldiers are the ones who are more exploited than anybody else. Suyog Bir says the soldiers are made to kill and get killed, "In the name of heroism we die, we sacrifice and are sacrificed" (Parijat 27) as if human life has no value, no meaning. The lahures are not only exploited, but they also exploit the weaker section of humanity, especially women. Suyog Bir memorises himself raping the young ladies in the Burmese Jungle; in the course of quenching sexual thirst and also perhaps proving heroism, "I plundered her to my heart's content. She looked helpless" (Parijat 58). It is reported in the roll call, "A Kachin buffalo herding girl was found on the ground, bleeding profusely; she was covered with bruises" (Parijat 59). It is what the war has taught the soldiers; it has taught them to be cruel. Suyog Bir gives another example of colonial cruelty exercised upon Matinchi, a Burmese farmer's daughter, "On her breast the bruises would still be painful but she would love even the pain of the Gurkha soldier's boot... " (Parijat 64). It is an example of the extreme inhumanity war has presented as a

gift to humanity. Suyog Bir, the veteran, exercises another exploitation on Sakambari by kissing her forcefully with his blue lips, and he eventually kills the protagonist. Suyog Bir's activities and their results are examples of colonial exploitation of the victims and the offender as well.

Women's Suffering in "Lahure Phool"

War destroys everything; the soldiers are killed or mutilated, and those who suffer the most in the war are women and children, the mothers or wives and children of the soldiers. The poem 'Lahure Phool I want to Change Your Name," written by Tirtha Shrestha, reminds the killings, destruction, and the worst effect of colonial hegemony that caused war in the world. The poem also reminds us of the 'Lahure' culture that has developed in Nepali people and the dreadful impact caused on the women, who are dependent on the soldiers and their earnings. The lahure flower is the dahlia, and it symbolises a soldier standing upright with his head high, wearing a special cap on his head, and guarding an army camp. The Nepali name Lahure Phool is believed to have originated either from the plant's soldier-like appearance or from its introduction to the mid-mountain regions of Nepal by lahures (soldiers), as many of the Gurkha soldiers in the British and Indian armies hail from this area.

The poem's speaker is a war widow who has lost her husband in the war, but the dahlia flower (Lahure Phool) in the yard stands upright as if the flower were a soldier guarding the house. She reminds her of her husband and feels infuriated by the flower because it reminds her of the war and killings caused by it. She reminds the time when she received the information of her husband's premature death through a letter bound by a cotton thread. She feels terrible herself when she realises that she depends on the pension of her husband, a lahure killed in the war; she feels sorry for herself, when she says:

> I can hardly think of a letter
> bound by a cotton thread, and
> my husband's lifelong earning- a pension
> reeking of corpse on which my life leans heavily
> Facing the door of this shelter where
> a poor widow like me lives
> how you bloom so shamelessly
> O Lahure flower! (Shrestha)

She is reminded of her stout and young husband when she looks at the flower and addresses it: "No more opening wounds, no more salt to injury" because her husband's death has caused her an incurable, lifelong injury in her heart. The most humiliating instance of the lahure life that is exercised on their wives is that it forces them to live a lonely life and makes them dependent on their dead husband's pension. The speaker wants to change the war scenario, the war caused by British colonialism at that time, or any other force worldwide. She does not want the recruiting of young boys like her husband and sends only the information of the lahure's death and declares intends to change the terms and conditions of the Sugauli treaty of 1816 between the government of Nepal and East India Company in which Nepal had lost a massive chunk of her land, had lost so many of her brave sons and the lahure culture began since then as Nepali youths began to be recruited in the British Gurkha army. The speaker represents all the war widows who lost their husbands during the war and expresses the desire on behalf of all the victimised women when she declares:

> Turning the folds of the wound, I want
> to change the history of treaty
> by easing the gapes of wound I want
> to stop this blood-trafficking,
> tear this black page of history and throw away
> Wait, o Lahure flower
> I want to change your name. (Shrestha)

Here the poet expresses the Nepal people's contempt for war and the people who signed the treaty but also condoms the Lahure culture that has not only sucked the blood of Nepali people but also has developed colonised, dependent mentality among Nepali people. The war widow cannot stand the presence of the "Lahure Phool" at her doorstep, which reminds her of the most significant loss in her life; instead, she changes the flower's name and calls it by some other name instead of "Lahure Phool."

Conclusion

The novel *Blue Mimosa* and the poem "Lahure Phool" I Want to Change Your Name share the legacy of the loss and lament the adverse effects of war in Nepal and among Nepali people. Nepal was never physically colonised by any colonial power. However, the colonisers developed feelings of dependence, subordination, and subjugation among the Nepali rulers through the wars and had an

unequal and unjust treaty signed. It created a kind of craze among Nepali youths to join the British or Indian Gurkha army in search of earning a livelihood and making families utterly dependent on the salary or pension paid to the soldiers. Nepali people slowly developed a mentality that they could not even make a living without joining the foreign army and serving foreigners, whether in the form of a room boy/girl (kanchha/kanchhi) or a doorkeeper (bahadur). This Lahure culture has developed servility and a lack of self-dependence among Nepali people. On the one hand; on the other hand, it has created frustration, alienation, cultural division, and cruelty among the survivors of war. The worst and most long-lasting effect of this influence of the colony and colonisers on Nepali people is that they have forgotten their glorious history; they do not believe that they can do something by themselves. Nepali people enjoy serving foreigners for a living who exercise political, economic, or cultural hegemony over them by making Nepali people and Nepali nationality completely crippled, hopeless, and helpless.

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