

LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN MODERN NEPALI LITERATURE

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This paper will attempt to examine the way in which modern Nepali writers have treated the subject of marriage, a topic which has dominated the minds of authors, who belong to a society where marriage, family relationships, the obligatory procreation of offspring and a smooth-working harmony between husband and wife, wife and in-laws, son and father are the most important events of one's life.

Nepal is a country of villages. Even in Kathmandu, the affairs of one's family can hardly remain secret. It is assumed that children will marry, preferably as soon as possible; the choice of the partner will be made by the parents and the decision of elders is never open to question. Although rituals may differ, the system is the same as in other parts of the subcontinent. The wife will be taken to her husband's home, shedding tears of separation from her own family. She knows that her every movement will be summed up by her *sāsū* (mother-in-law). She will cook for her husband, massage his feet, serve him dutifully in every respect, coat his porch with a mixture of cow-dung and water (the Nepali expression *dailo lipnu* 'to coat with cow-dung' could almost be translated as 'to lead a normal, happy married life') and within the year, she will bear the first child. According to the Hindu *dharma* a childless (*aputo*) man will never reach Paradise.

The husband will go about his daily affairs, tilling his fields, watering his buffaloes, attending the meetings of his elders and peers of his village. In the city he may work in his office, talk until late in the evening with his friends, arrive home at any time and never expect to be questioned about his activities. The wife knows her duty and he knows his. He will eventually establish his social position; she aspires to become a mother-in-law herself and looks forward to all the privileges that her position will bring her.

On the surface, such a system appears deceptively automatic. Relationships between man and wife, closely supervised by the older generation which brought the union about, can become complicated. In Nepalese society divorce is almost unknown;

partners often fall in love with each other after the marriage has been consummated; one suspects that most couples, as in any society in the world, just get used to each other to the extent that they would never think of separating. Marriage is, therefore, the initial joy of sexual awareness, the gradual process of learning to live with one another, the comfort of having children -- the insurance for old-age -- and the feeling of well-being when you are living like everyone else in your small society.

But problems can arise. The husband may find himself a widower or even worse the wife may find herself widowed. (The Nepali language has many colourful expletives and the word *rānr* 'widow' features in many of them.) By force of economic circumstances, a man may be obliged to leave his family and seek employment far away from his native village. Many Nepalese, with apparent equanimity, seek their fortunes in the Indian or British army and may serve for many years with only occasional visits to their home. A Brahman, closely attached to his *jīvan-sāthī*, the Lakṣmī of his household, may find himself childless and in the embarrassing position of asking his wife's permission to take a co-wife, a mere convenience to clear his path for salvation. Less seriously, couples might quarrel. The inevitable result will be that the wife will run off in tears to her father's home and stay there until her man swallows his pride and goes to fetch her back home.

Nepal is a country which over the last thirty years has remained a great attraction for anthropologists, sociologists and scholars of all kinds. The elaborate rituals of the marriage ceremonies of the Sherpas, the Tamangs and the Gurungs have been well-documented. Nepali writers, however, go a great deal farther in describing what the ordinary Nepalese, whether a villager or a more sophisticated city-dweller, actually feels, and their works, largely neglected by western commentators, are to be commended to those who would seek to understand the people of Nepal better.

As I have said earlier, marriage and its consequences form a major theme of modern Nepali writing. It is, after all, a subject of which everyone has had his or her own experience.

At this point, it should be noted that Nepali literature, in the real sense of the term, is a very late starter, compared to many others of the subcontinent. Although the language was recorded in inscriptions more than three-hundred years ago, the political situation which prevailed in Nepal was hardly conducive to literary effort. The Rānās, who ruled autonomously for over a century, were in their own interests definitely hostile to writers who might promulgate new ideas and until the middle of this century, the rate of illiteracy in Nepal remained at ninety per cent. From the thirties to the fifties, as the Rānā regime was declining and was eventually ousted, an upsurge in literary endeavour, largely

inspired, one suspects, by similar trends in India, brought about a truly remarkable number of good quality short-stories, poems and to a lesser extent novels.

The romantic aspect of marriage is treated by one of Nepal's greatest poets, Lakṣmī Prasād Devkotā in his verse tale, entitled *Munā Madan*, which because of its simplicity and delicacy now ranks among the most popular Nepali compositions. The story episodically tells of the love and subsequent separation of Muna and her husband Madan.

Madan, a Kathmandu trader, decides to make the long arduous journey to Lhasa, in order to acquire enough wealth to repair his home and build for his elderly and ailing mother a water-spout -- a meritorious act in Nepalese eyes. Munā has a premonition that Madan will not return and the poem opens with her plea:

My darling do not leave me all alone.
The anguish that I feel when we're apart
Is like a fire that's kindled in the wood;
It ravages the forest of my heart
You are my only love, my star, my eyes.
You leave me, but if you should not return,
If you forgot me, if you ceased to care,
This poison would my aching spirit burn.

Madan, however, is obliged by the duty he feels towards his family to undertake his mission and replies:

Your words my dear stick deep inside my heart
But, Munā there is nothing you can do.
I love you, but the sinful wealth I crave
Means much to me, Although I think of you,
I must pour milk into my mother's throat
And build a resting-place. That is her due.

He departs and eventually reaches Lhasa, where he is beguiled by the beauty of the monasteries, the splendour of the Potala, the gleaming teeth and flashing eyes of the Tibetan girls and the chanting of the Buddhist monks. Temporarily, he forgets Munā, who like many *virahnis* before her pines in separation for her husband.

Muna like the blooming lotus spends her nights alone.
The clouds are bathed in moonlight's silvery glow.

Her gentle lips are parted and her smile sheds glistening pearls.
She weeps, she wilts, a flower in the snow.

As a dutiful wife, she tends to her sick mother-in-law, dreams and thinks only of her husband, gazing out of her window, only awaiting his return. There she is seen by a rascal, who has designs upon her. He realizes that she could never be unfaithful, but thinks of a way to ensnare her.

Meanwhile, Madan prepares to return to Kathmandu but on the road is stricken by cholera. His life, however, is saved by a kindly monk but months pass by in his care.

Munā's unprincipled suitor spreads the rumour that Madan is dead. His plot is successful and the mother, shocked by the news, dies in Munā's arms. It is not long before Munā also loses her zest for life, and falling sick, she dies a few hours before Madan's return. It is left to Madan's sister to break the awful news:

Munā lives within the earth
And Munā lives beyond
Her smile is in the flowers
And her dance is o'er the pond.
Her face is on the firmament,
Her tears are in the rain.
Munā no more walks the earth
Her world is free of pain.

The tale of Munā and Madan, romantic and lyrical, achieves such popularity in Nepal largely because it reflects a very familiar situation. The household is typical, the wife's feelings for her husband are natural, the reaction of the husband, torn between his love for his wife and his duty towards his mother, is instantly recognizable. So many Nepalese men have been forced by economic circumstances to leave their home and work for years in distant lands, only returning to find the situation at home quite altered.

In complete contrast to *Munā Madan* is the cynical short story, entitled *Bihā* 'Wedding' by Vishveshvar Prasād Koirālā, a fine writer who is perhaps more famous for his role in Nepalese politics. His theme is the enmity of the marriage of a child bride to an elderly widower, who simply needs a new wife to look after his household.

The story begins with the terse statement:

Subbhā Katak Bahādur married a fourteen-year old girl and brought her home.
This is all there is to say, and those who do not know him would not even want to hear more!

It is after all not a very uncommon occurrence, the author argues, and most people would be totally uninterested in the affairs of this newly married couple. However, further reflection on the part of the author reveals a number of interesting facts.

Katak Bahādur was a widower, left with several children. Joking with his friends at his office, he decided the time had come to remarry and thought that a fourteen-year old girl would suit him well. The girl's feelings were not taken into account. The facts that she had hardly attained puberty, that she was uneducated, that she would be totally bewildered in the strange atmosphere of Katak's house were not important. The author is reminded of a similar occasion when he had been invited to the wedding of an elderly friend.

But what sort of bride would he have? She'll certainly be getting on, otherwise how will she run the house and look after his children? I was satisfied that this would be the case, and I wholeheartedly joined in the singing and dancing and the general excitement. The pavilion was surrounded by all the women from the village. They also must have imagined the bride would be in her thirties, experienced in managing a household. That's the kind of bride I imagined, when some women arrived tugging and pushing a little girl dressed from head to toe in red. Here, as well, my imagination deceived me and I removed myself from the festivities. I began to think about the girl -- what sort of relationship will she have with this elderly man? What on earth can she be thinking of? After that I have never again had the courage to attend a wedding, and even now have not the slightest desire to see a marriage.

On the surface, Koirālā's story is amusing; the short, staccato sentences and the well-chosen descriptions of the rough and tumble of a Nepalese wedding add greatly to the humour. But the comment on this least attractive aspect of the society, where children are 'purchased' by insensitive men, is serious and one feels the concluding words are spoken from the heart.

Comment on the state of childlessness in an otherwise perfectly successful marriage which unfortunately has produced no issue comes from a story by Guru Prasād Mainālī, entitled *Nāso*, 'The Pledge'. Mainālī was a lawyer by profession and had much opportunity to travel in Nepal. His closely drawn observations on the life of his own people are of great value to all who wish to study the country and give much insight into the real problems which confront seemingly uncomplicated individuals.

The story *Nāso* concerns Deviraman, a Brahman who could not have wished for a better life. He was rich, successful, correct and respected by his fellow villagers. He was

happily married to his wife, Subhadra, who served him without fault. In fact he had everything in the world -- except a child. For him, this situation was incomprehensible. After all, he had done his duty to heaven by erecting a resting-place for travellers, constructing a path to his village, and had even paid for a thousand butter-lamps to be lit in the holy temple of Pashupatinath, and all night long at his expense the Brahmans had read the Harivamsha Purāṇa. He was a man of old-fashioned ideas and to hear the word *aputo* 'childless' applied to him filled him with shame and remorse.

Subhadra suffered as much as her husband. When she saw the other women of the village playing with their children she became green with envy. In the vain hope for a child she visited the medicine-men, tied on amulets, made vows to the local gods and goddesses, but heaven turned a deaf ear, and there was nothing to be done.

Deviraman consulted the astrologers, who advised him to take a co-wife. But how could he do this without Subhadra's consent?

Subhadra had been the perfect wife and as far as Deviraman could remember had never done anything to displease him. She knew and understood her husband well. As Deviraman thought back to the time when Subhadra had come into his house, a timid and trembling bride, his eyes filled with tears. She had shared all his pains and pleasures and made him happy and rich. How could he show her such ingratitude now, just for the sake of having children?

Somehow or other -- he hardly knew how -- he persuaded Subhadra to allow him to take a co-wife, a small twelve-year old girl, called Lakṣmī, and as he sat in the brightly decorated pavilion with his new 'bride' at his side on a cold morning in the month of Phalgun, he was assailed by remorse.

'What else could I have done?', he thought. 'They say that according to the Hindu faith, the way to Paradise is barred to a Brahman who has no children. It is not that I am marrying for lust. It is my religion that bids me to do so.' With such thoughts, Deviraman sought to ease the burden of his conscience.

When the guests are dismissed and the musicians paid off by Subhadra, who had organised the proceedings, Deviraman, ashamed and dejected reflects:

'Why, Subhadra is a goddess from heaven! What a fool I was to doubt her. Men can be scared of their own shadows sometimes.'

Needless to say, a child is born to Lakṣmī, a beautiful boy who is left in the care of Subhadra. Lakṣmī had merely given birth to Sushil, but Subhadra brought him up. He called Subhadra 'mother', and like everyone else in the household called Lakṣmī (his real mother) 'the little bride'.

Deviraman now had the best of both worlds, accepting his happy situation with growing indifference. When the time came for pilgrimage, Lakṣmī insisted on accompanying him and he forgot to ask Subhadra if she would care to join the party. This small incident led to friction in the household.

It was not that Subhadra really cared about the pilgrimage. But if only she had been asked! Just a word would have been enough to dry her eyes. But Deviraman was no psychologist. He had no idea of the power of a few simple words said at the right time. It takes only a small incident like this to sow the seed of rancour, which in no time at all blossoms and grows into a thickly-leaved tree.

The constant bickering at home between the two women perplexed Deviraman. He was completely at a loss how to solve the problem.

A man's wisdom is always effective when it comes to giving others advice, but useless when one needs advice oneself.

Unable to bear the situation, Subhadra left the house she had tended with such love and affection and 'as she looked back, said a tearful goodbye and disappeared into the night. Only the wise gatekeeper of heaven was awake to witness this pitiful sight.'

The story ends in a satisfying if not completely happy way. Subhadra is eventually summoned back from the Kathmandu hovel, in which she had been staying, by her slave servant and childhood companion, Nauli. Lakṣmī is dying of tuberculosis and as the lamp glitters she hands the boy over to Subhadra as a 'pledge'.

Deviraman has his former life restored to him with the addition of the child, which will ensure his place in heaven, and gain the approval of his ancestors, who observe the scene from the parapets of Paradise.

Deviraman is, of course, not an insensitive man. He is happy with his wife but driven on by his *dharma* to take the only course open to him. On the night of his wedding, he finds it hard to understand why Subhadra has moved her bed to another room and naturally expects that his feet will be massaged in the normal way. He treats Lakṣmī as a child, because she is a child and gives into her caprices as if she was his daughter. In a society where values are, so rigidly fixed, can one really blame him for his attitude?

Mainālī makes no judgment. He prefers, as always to state the facts as they are.

One of Mainālī's most entertaining stories, *Parālko Āgo* which can be translated into English as 'A storm in a teacup', concerns the young farmer, Chāme, who has a pretty but petulant wife. One evening after a back-breaking day in the fields he returns home to find that his wife has taken herself off to see a wedding, and no food is ready in the house. When she finally returns, he is furious with her. After the ensuing row, in which Chāme grabs her by the pigtail (the ultimate insult), Gaunthālī runs off to her father's house, leaving her husband to fend for himself. He is determined not to fetch her back.

There are problems, however. He cannot cook and the buffalo, accustomed only to the hand of his wife, will not let him near. The animal kicks out at him and dashes into the neighbour's field, trampling the whole harvest. That evening Chāme goes to bed, nursing the bruises inflicted upon him by his irate neighbours.

In contrast, his friend, a low-caste tailor has an ideal relationship with his wife. They walk together around the villages gathering the clothes of the local gentry, he bringing tears of laughter to his wife's eyes with his funny antics. On festival days, they light their lamps and read the *purānas* in the comfort of their home.

When Chāme can bear this miserable situation no longer, he swallows his pride, and cursing his wife for being so negligent with his best clothes, that lie in the cupboard unmended and stained, he arrives outside her village just in time to see her returning from the fields. Her dusky complexion, her heaving bosom and swaying hips fill him with desire, and as he lies down on his bed at night, he is sure that she will come to him. Eventually the door creaks, but it is only his elderly father-in-law going to the lavatory. Gaunthali is not so easily won over.

The next day, Chāme shyly approaches her with the words: 'Better get going. The buffalo has to be milked'.

Making no response, she gathers her bundle and, swinging a pot of yoghurt in her right hand, follows him home. On the road they are met by the tailor and his wife, who, sticking out her tongue, exclaims: 'Look at them! Just like turtle doves! A lover's quarrel is just a storm in a teacup!'.

As stated above, modern Nepali writers are obsessed with the basic issues of marriage and the relationships between husband and wife. The works discussed in this short paper are some of the best of their kind and are equally worthy of the study of western anthropologists who look at such relationships in a more detached and scientific manner.