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Betrayal and Redemption in Rajan Prasad Pokharel's *Beyond the Life Lines*

Dr. Sanjay Kumar Mishra

Associate Professor, Department of English, Patan Multiple Campus, TU, Nepal

Abstract:

Guna, a hill-bred Nepali youth runs away to Madhes, Biratnagar, leaving behind his ageing parents and young wife, Apsara, in the hilly hinterland in pursuit of easy life and material prosperity. His poverty makes him an easy prey to the lust of the landlord's daughter. He marries her being tempted with the girl's father's high post without knowledge of his first wife. He further degrades himself by abandoning his illiterate and innocent wife on the train across the Indian border. Fate and coincidence play a dominant role in the narrative and bring Guna and Apsara together after almost twenty-five years, and allows Guna to attain salvation from his vicious deed by dying in the arms of Apsara who appears larger than life by showing compassion and human sensibilities.

Keywords: *Betrayal, redemption, human sensibilities, political establishment and People's War*

Rajan Prasad Pokharel's *Beyond the Life Lines* (2011) depicts a realistic socio-economic caste and class based patriarchal Nepali society amidst fragile and turmoil political establishment. The narrative blends reality with imagination, and shows how humble hill youths get corrupted with their migration to the plains in pursuit of worldly gains.

Guna and Apsara get married in their early teens in accordance to the practice prevalent among the hill people. Early and underage marriage is rampant among the people living over hills in Nepal. It has both socio and economic implication. Most of the people living in hills are below poverty line, and believe that early marriage brings free laborers in form of daughter-in-law who will take care of both field and household work: "Economically the family needed workers, and when the sons grew young, they were married as soon as possible" (p. 11). Many minor couples are not aware of being married as they are never asked for their consent. It is the parents, particularly father, being the head of the family who decides when their children should get married. Parents take their daughters as a burden. Moreover, they believe that "it would be pious if the daughter was given away by her parents to her husband much before her age of menstruation" (p. 11).

The hills of Nepal lack colleges and have a few high schools, and most of youths end up with matriculation, and parents feel privileged if their children get a teaching position in the local school. If their children get a job in the village school, they can help their parents in cultivation and earn both money and social status. Guna is ambitious. After matriculation, Guna wants to go to the plains, the only option for him to get college education. However, for that he needs to seek the consent of his father who is "the supreme" (p. 11) in the family, and whose decision is final and binding in every family affair. Like other rural Nepali hill fathers, for Guna's father, matriculation is enough to get a job of a primary level teacher in the local school. He outright rejects Guna's request to allow him to go to Madhes to take admission in college:

- See, why do you think like that? Ten-pass is sufficient for you. If your brothers too study to your level, I will be happy and I think my duty to my sons is well fulfilled. I have talked to the head master of local primary school to give you the job there. He has promised me to give you the job. I will ask the school management committee to decide about it. They too must be positive that you are the first person from the village to teach in the local school . . . Having the job in school, you can have time to look after your family affairs, the management of the works, and the cattle and land cultivation. (p. 12)

Pokharel shows an explicit dichotomy between old generation and new generation. Old generation, represented by Guna's father, lead humble life and depend upon their limited cultivation for their living. They enjoy a close extended family. In contrast to them, new generation, manifested by Guna, are dreamers, and wish to cross their formidable life lines. They long to migrate to the plains where they have access to higher education and material prosperity. Guna refuses to shatter his dreams and defies his father. Apsara stands by him, and provokes him to run away to Biratnagar, the plains to fulfill his dreams:

- If you really want to continue your study, I will help you. You should run away at night. I will give you my jewelleryes . . . I will work so hard at home. They [Guna's parents] will be pleased by my work, and will send you the money definitely. (pp. 12-13)

Apsara, well trained in the traditional role of a Nepali married woman, perceives her husband's happiness as her own. She gives her husband all her money, and rejoices awaited prospect of him with her:

- Apsara prepared everything for Guna without any body's knowledge. She had a dream. She thought, "My husband will study more, and he will have a job in Madhes. Thereafter, he will take me to the place of his job, and I will be free from these hard works of the hill village forever. (p. 18).

Guna escapes and descends into Biratnagar, a major city in the eastern part of Nepal. He takes admission in Morang College. He secures free lodging and earns some money to meet with his expenses by giving private tuition to a government official's children. The land mistress is worried about their young, immature daughter Samita's marriage. Guna establishes sexual relationship with Samita and weds her without the knowledge of his first wife to exploit the approach of Samita's father to secure a government job for himself:

- A feature of the Nepali bureaucracy is the permeation of ascriptive allegiances at different levels of administrative hierarchy . . . when a member of a family attains a high status then the whole family including the members of his clan receives some benefits either in the form of appointments, promotions or transfers in the government or the quasi-government enterprises . . . Nepotism and favoritism within the bureaucracy is not regarded as a malpractice, but as accepted social behaviour. (Upreti, 1994, p. 48)

Nepotism is very high in Nepali society. The people in bureaucracy often practise high level of nepotism, and secure government position for their kin and kith irrespective of their ability: "In those days the government officers could employ their kinsmen in the government offices quite easily" (p. 50). Pokharel in a personal interview with the researcher highlights:

- Nepotism is deeply rooted in the Nepalese society. The persons in power and high level offices favor their relatives for any entry, admissions and appointments. They protect their relatives from the troubles and crises. I have tried to show in my novel *Beyond the Life Lines* through some characters as the realistic and representative images of Nepalese politics and bureaucracy. (Personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Guna gets fascinated with the promises of a government job and a shelter in Samita's parents' house. Moreover, he takes his second marriage not offensive as polygamy is practice in his hill village:

- If Apsara lived in the hill side village, he would manage them well too. It was not so unnatural to have two wives . . . The male domination, patriarchal justice system, and matrimonial hierarchy had no challenge. A man could have two-three wives on the strength of his property." (pp. 50- 54).

Guna gets a job together with Samita in a post office. He takes every precaution not to let either Apsara or Samita know that he is twice married. He keeps fooling Apsara that he is busy with his undergraduate studies.

Nepali society clearly demarcates the gender role between man and woman. Women are subjugated in the highly Patriarchal Nepali society: "In Nepal, women's oppression is rooted in the feudal and semi feudal system of production. Women have not been able to inherit land on equal terms with men" (Onesto, 2005, p. 219). Onesto further highlights the social position of Nepali women that "It is said in this society that women should work according to the wishes of their fathers, their husbands, and their sons. This is how society treats women. Capitalism exploits women and gives them no equal rights in property and in other aspects of society" (p. 167). A married woman must conform to her husband, and she should not let her laws to have grievances upon her:

- There are narratives and grand narratives for the women to consider their husband as the god figures. The stories of Swasthani, Purana and other stories of the religious ceremonies were basically focused on the idea of the submissions of women to their husbands. (p. 56)

Pokharel discusses the role of Patriarchy in Nepali society and subjugation of women who are forced and trained to accept males as their custodian:

- Another deep-rooted anomaly of Nepalese society is patriarchy. The male in the family is dominant and decisive. The whole society moves around the axis of male centered concept. Females are just subservient to the males. Some years ago, a man could marry as many wives as he could keep, but a woman could never show any slight intimacy with any other person. The men's power to suppress women made men arbitrary, unjust and cruel toward women. I have tried to show this harsh reality in my novel through the creation of oppressive characters. (Personal communication, December 15, 2016)

Apsara acts at the prescribed gender role and her maternal upbringing that she should always be loyal to her husband. She plays her gender role sincerely:

She had to cook meal, grind the corn and millet flour, and brush and wipe the floors and walls, shun the cattle for grazing and bring a basketful of grass and again prepare the meal and clean the pots and furnace. (pp. 52-53)

Apsara feels lonely in the absence of Guna. She misses Guna and finds separation from him unbearable. She does not feel being betrayed by Guna. However, she is unable to understand why he is indifferent to her. Unable to bear separation any longer, Apsara arrives at Biratnagar with her brother, Tirtha. Guna asks her to go back to the hill, but Apsara refuses. She emerges a strong feminist who wants a share in her husband's prosperity:

- She had a very strong desire to live with her husband when he wanted to study further. She supported him with money, with her moral, and with her mind and heart. Her husband for her was everything, so that she would not accept any proposal of separation from him anymore. (p. 57)

Guna gets in trouble. He manages to cope with both wives by accommodating Apsara in a separate apartment. He tells Samita about Apsara. Samita gets into temper and makes it clear that he must leave Apsara: "If your first wife did not go to the hill side home, don't you come to live with me?" (p. 58). Guna does not want to lose his prospect being with Samita. He takes Apsara as an obstacle in the way of his success, and decides to get rid of her. He takes her to India on pretext of visiting pilgrimages, and abandons her in the train while she is asleep. Apsara horrifies when she wakes up. She finds her in an alien situation not knowing the Hindi language. Rajaram Yadav, who speaks some Nepali language, appears for her help. He promises to find Guna out. Having left with no option, Apsara accompanies Rajaram in the alien place. Human sensibility plays a dominant role in the narrative, and establishes the fact that it crosses beyond the artificial boundary:

- Another most important thing I have tried to present in my novel is human sensibility. I know that it makes the fiction writing powerful as well as universal. The delicacies of heart and mind, the intimate feelings between persons, and the evocation of sympathy and empathy are some of the aspects that my novels try to manifest. I claim, the distinct features of my novels are that they touch the people's sentiment and move through the depth of social reality without any superficial notion and unnatural presentation. In my novels, human sensibilities cause everything to move. (Pokharel, personal communication, December 15, 2016)

To Rajaram, Apsara resembles his departed wife: "Rajaram deeply looked into Apsara's face which resembled the face of his wife. The memory of his dead wife overpowered into his mind" (p. 70).

Rajaram and Apsara look for Guna in Bangalore, Puttapparti, and finally return to Biratnagar where they find Guna married to Samita: "Apsara had guessed that Guna was lost in India, but surprisingly enough in Biratnagar she suddenly caught sight of Guna walking together with another lady in perfectly smiling mood" (p. 74). Apsara gets disillusioned and enraged to see how far a man can fall from virtue: "She realized to what extent a person can be so selfish. Her respect to Rajaram doubled and finally decided to accept him as her new husband" (pp. 74-75). Apsara marries Rajaram, and they return to India.

Guna makes a story and tells Apsara's family that she has eloped with her secret lover on pilgrimage. Apsara's brother, Tirtha, does not believe Guna, and lodges a complaint to the police against Guna accusing him of deliberately abandoning Apsara to live with his second wife, but the complaint is nullified by Samita's father: ". . . Guna's second wife's father gave a pressure on the police administration to deactivate any of such complaints against him" (p. 77).

The novel reaches a turning point after a span of twenty-five years. Guna and Apsara meet in Bangalore when Apsara's son, Suman by Rajaram and Guna's daughter, Samira from his second marriage get married with each other. Guna, now a widower tries to get back Apsara who is a widow. He cunningly tells Apsara that he has lost her by an accident:

- I lost you in the train. I missed you. I had gone to fetch water, but the train moved away. I could not catch it back. I missed the train. You cannot guess how much I searched you. When I failed, I went back frustrated. I was really sorry to have lost you. Now I still repent that I should still have searched you some days and weeks more. (p. 92)

Apsara sees through his deception, and retorts him: ". . . you fabricated the news that I ran away from you. I escaped from you. Do you know how much I suffered? . . . Darkness prevailed everywhere around me even in the brightest sunny day" (pp. 92-93). Apsara further counters Guna:

- I worked so hard for your family right from my age of fourteen. I sacrificed everything for you. I saved every penny for you and for your studies, I had a dream. I had a dream. I loved you very much, more than myself. In return as a reward from you for all those devotions and sacrifices of mine, I was left in the train (p. 94).

Guna asks for forgiveness about abandoning Apsara on the train and asks her to be with him since Samita died of breast cancer. Apsara refuses Guna's offer but promises to care for his daughter like a mother: "No, we cannot live together. We cannot regain that old relationship now. We are on a new relationship now. I am in the responsibility of my son and your daughter" (p. 95).

The narrative turns to the Maoist People's War which "[. . .] was initiated on 13 February, 1996 . . . in the wave-like forms horrifying the domestic and foreign enemies and creating hurricane to shake the world" (Pasang, 2008, p. 2). The war against the old feudal establishment is waged to end caste, gender and ethnic based discrimination and oppression, and initiate social and welfare programs and change. The Maoist People's War aims to overthrow the government and establish a people's republic against the backdrop of a socialist society: "The People's War was aimed at overthrowing the government, doing away with the monarchy, and establishing a people's republic" (Bhattarai, 2008, p. 71). The Maoists get support from commoners frustrated and disappointed by widespread corruption, extreme poverty and social discrimination: "Many members of the marginalized groups actively participated in the insurgency, which grew rapidly and spread to most parts of the country. More than 13,000 people died, tens of thousands were displaced, and thousands were hurt and maimed" (Lawoti, 2007, p. 3).

Nepal has a long history of feudalism, nurtured by the Rana Regime and Shah Dynasty that nurtures a handful oligarchy that monopolizes the political, economic, social, and cultural powers. The centralized political system also fails to address the genuine grievances of people even after the 1990 political changes, and the country remains politically unstable, socially divided, and economically deprived: "The post-1990 years also saw the continuation of cultural discrimination and political exclusion of marginalized . . . The caste hill Hindu elite males overwhelmingly dominated influential position in the state and society" (Lawoti, 2007, p. 2). The multi-party system disillusioned Nepalis who were aspiring for a better life and opportunities. The gap between the haves and the have-nots widened. The gap between the rich and the poor is widening. The majority of the population does not have a share in the governance; only people in the urban areas and close to power centers have access to the state resources. Many youths get attracted to the revolution and see the need for class struggle to achieve equality. Majority of people feel being betrayed by politicians: "the political leaders in the government had become corrupted and did not represent the people . . . the main source of corruption and repression and problem in society is because of the reactionary state power and system. And unless we get rid of it we cannot true" (Onesto, 2005, p. 19).

The Maoist People's War addresses extreme socio-cultural inequality among numerous linguistic, ethnic, religious, racial, caste and regional groups, and succeeds in attracting hundreds of margins. The Maoist Insurgency also springs from the frustrations of commoners resulting from irresponsible and visionless post-1990 democratic leaders, and corrupt bureaucracy. The insurgency transforms the psyche of both the nation and people. The People's War reaches its apex as it addresses the marginalized issues of the nation. The marginalized populations for the first time demand their agendas to be heard.

The Maoist Insurgency addresses the grievances and angers of Nepali people being divided exclusively into the high and low classes, the haves and have-nots, the high and low caste by the feudal monarchy for over centuries. The fierce Maoist rebellion was a by-

product of the dissatisfaction and suppressed angers of majority of Nepali who were exploited by the monolithic, centralized oligarchy: “The rulers of Nepal never thought about these possibilities? They exploited the hills and the hill side people, but never distributed the significant number of national budgets on the developmental projects over these wavy lands?” (p. 111). Scores of Nepalis from different ethnicities— Madhesis, dalits, Moslems, Tharus, women and other oppressed populations— stand against the old regime which oppressed them for centuries without hearing “the voices of the people of the distant hills and plain lands,” and remaining “deaf to the moans of the minorities, ethnic communities, women, oppressed areas and exploited classes” (p. 137).

The People’s War gained tremendous mass support: “The Maoist insurgency is a product of Nepal’s failed governance, feudalism and backwardness . . . The guerrilla movement began with just two guns and a dozen armed cadres, but within a few years, the movement had spread throughout the mountainous country, controlling nearly 80 per cent of the territory” (Roy, 2008, p. 2). The war between the autocratic state and the deprived populations was inevitable: “Conflict is inevitable when there is leadership bankruptcy and poor governance, which is related to the structure, function and policies of the state, and, above all, about the socio-economic injustice in a plural society” (Gurung et al., 2009, p. 3). Pokharel (2011) says in another narrative *Rebels of the Mountains*: “The People’s War attracts common masses as “all sectors of life have become weaker and weaker, and the traditional democratic forces are plunged into more and more corruption and anti-people and anti-activities” (p. 80).

Tirtha joins the Maoist Movement to avenge Guna for deserting Apsara: “After realizing that his sister was mercilessly left in India by his so-called brother-in-law, and the complaints were not heard by any level of state judiciary, Tirtha had left home for joining the rebel group almost for the same cause” (p. 104). Another purpose of Tirtha to turn a Maoist rebel is to fight against the autocratic monarchy to eliminate class and caste discrimination in Nepali society deprived of the social, economic, and political rights:

- The excessive conservativeness in culture and tradition in the old Nepalese society almost kept every possibility of development intact and motionless. Moreover, the injustices, dominations and oppressions upon the innocent people pushed the society back to the old ages. There were some flickers of tussles appearing sporadically on occasions. Once an iron smith was badly beaten by the high caste men in an eastern hill village on an accusation of that he drank water directly from a tap, which was being used by the high caste men. (p. 81)

The low caste, women, poor and other margins join the Maoist party and wage an armed war against the system: “The revolutionary party promised to support them with physical and moral strength. Then the revolutionary cadres trained the villagers of the untouchable castes and indigenous races. Some young men of the high castes with the positive thinking too joined it” (p. 86). The Maoist movement gains high popularity:

- The revolutionaries gained more and more popularity and people’s power. And thereafter, it took a height in the full swing of a violent war between the government’s armed forces and the revolutionary army with attacks and counter attacks continuing for some years. (p. 88)

Guna gets a new government position as District Magistrate and is transferred to a Maoist affected rural area. He is taken into custody by the rebels and sent to a labor camp. Tirtha is the vice-commander of the rebels. Guna does not give up his possibility of escape and a new glamorous life with yet another wife: “If I escape from here from their grip, I have got a lot of property, two buildings, the rent and the prestige. I can still enjoy my charismatic life. I can still marry and live a life” (p. 104). Tirtha physically assaults him, and Guna’s health degrades: “Guna in the rebels’ health shelters too did not recover his health. He suffered from one after another problem. He had a continuous cold, cough and fever” (p. 107). The rebels contact Samira who sends Apsara to free Guna from the Maoists. Basu, a young rebel and former lover of Samira, carries Guna across the hill on his back to handover him to Apsara. He takes a great risk as the Royal Army is patrolling the villages looking for Maoist rebels. In response, the Nepalese government launched major campaign to try and stop the insurgency. According to a 1998 US State department report, “Police reaction to the People’s War insurgency led to incidents of unwarranted force against prisoners and noncombatants, and police committed numerous human rights abuses . . . more than 600 guerrillas and villagers had been killed by the government in the first three years of fighting.” (Onesto, 2005, p. 13). Basu asks Guna to tell the security forces they are father and son in case they are detained. However, Guna, “the agent of the state power” (p. 113) does not want to help Basu:

- If the Royal Army finds me and I will identify myself as the government officer in the rebels’ hostage and ask them to lift me in the helicopter for my treatment. I will then safely escape from the rebel’s capture. But what will happen to this man who is carrying me on his back? If they identify him as a member of the rebels’ group, they will either kill him or send him to their custody. I don’t care what happens to him. (p. 117)

The battle between the rebels and the Royal Nepal Army grows fierce, and the civilians get trapped in cross firing. The rebels storm the district headquarters, set government offices on fire, raid banks and kill many security personnel. In retaliation, the security forces kill many rebels. The battle causes huge causality: “Beginning in February 1996, and lasting until just last year, 2006, Nepal experienced a revolution resulting in the transformation of hundreds of thousands of lives and an entire political system. The cost in human lives as of February 2006, has been estimated at approaching 15,000 mostly non-combatants” (Dixit, 2006, p. 3).

The narrative has a dramatic turning as Apsara runs into Guna, and Basu handovers Guna to her. Guna realizes his nearing death. He confesses his crime and begs Apsara for forgiveness: “. . . I confess. Forgive me . . . You projected me. You raised me. But I deceived you” (p. 132). Guna offers Apsara some portion of his property as compensation. He asks her to donate the property earned by corruption to charity organizations. Apsara forgives him for his sin: “I have forgiven you long ago. I forgive you forever” (p. 133). Guna dies in Apsara’s arms. Apsara hangs Guna’s photograph next to Rajaram’s, hence marking reconciliation through redemption.

Thus, the narrative shows how earthly temptation makes a pure soul to fall from his virtue. It points out that material hunger demeans a virtuous soul. It does not assume happiness. It may look attractive in its appearance, but it gradually degrades human virtue and makes him do vices. The novel illustrates that human sensibilities heal all the wounds and make it possible for two souls to reconcile

with each other even if irreparable damage is done to one party. It transcends race, linguistic, hatred and worships humanity. Guna is an example of how he falls from a pure soul to a degenerated individual who deserts his illiterate loyal wife in an alien place in order to secure materialistic gains for himself. However, material prosperity does not give him stability, and he dies peacefully in the arms of the abandoned wife who turns out to be his savior, and helps him attain redemption.

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