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Banira Giri's "Kathmandu": The Dream and the Reality of a City

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"Living to live in a world of time beyond me"
---("Marina")
T.S. Eliot

Kathmandu, an ancient city in Nepal, has enjoyed great popularity perhaps due to its strategic location. It serves as the important connection between India and Tibet, or India and China, too and is a place to reckon with in South-Asian history and cultural discourse. Political disturbances in Nepal affected citizens' lives to a considerable extent in recent times and the socio-economic conditions too suffered greatly and the subcontinent in particular. Although devastated by the massive earthquake in 2015, the city has, however, made a quick restoration in the past couple of years and has not lost its enduring appeal. A tourists' paradise, it has amplified its spatial limits in combining the ancient with the modern and the material with the sublime for ages and upholds a tradition that speaks in favour of the infinite charms of the orient.

The paper attempts to take a look at "Kathmandu" (1982) a poem by Banira Giri. The literal and metaphoric elements that are contained in the urban landscape possess variable meanings. A city in the day is seemingly the same at night since there is no significant change in terms of its topographical or physical importance. Yet when one observes the same city under the dark skies or at winter dawns, one is bound to reform one's views. Baudelaire's "Le Crepusule du Soir" and "Le Crepusule du Matin" (*Fleurs du Mal*, 1857) may help to sustain my argument.

Banira Giri, who spent her early years primarily in West Bengal, hails from a Nepali family that was compelled to leave like many others, their native place. A chaotic condition resulting in great political and social turmoil caused many such families to try their luck elsewhere. Growing up in Kurseong, Giri could associate her Nepali origin with the local clime and the people at least partially. The mountainous terrain of the Himalayas reminding her more acutely of home, her father's lost origins and instilling in her a rather pathetic sense of exile in her early years. The landscape of Kathmandu continues to allure and inspire her. In the later years, following her visits to her native land she could feel its undeniable presence and identify her existence in close correspondence to its growing woes as also its inherent spirit of tolerance.

Of the western modern poets who display a direct obsession with the conceptual nuances of urbanity and developed it serially in the poetic creed of the previous century, I would like to recall a number of instances from T.S. Eliot. In his "Preludes" (1917) he asserts "You had such a vision of the street / As the street hardly understands" (l. 33-34) and in his "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) the street moves on with the sterile mobility of those who traverse it night and day. The yellow fog "curled once about the house and fell asleep" ("Prufrock", l. 24) in a city where streets pursue its inmates with "a tedious argument/ of insidious intent…" (l. 8-9). Stressing on the drudgeries of modern life with its measured spans and limited scope for expansion of imagination, *The Waste Land* (1922) interrogates the "Unreal City" that has undone thousands of lives and waits to cause still greater devastation. The immortal lines recall the hollowness that precedes all human efforts for revitalization:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many. (l.60-63)

To speak of urban squalor and not to mention Joyce's *Dubliners*, (1914), would perhaps be an unpardonable error. The stories of Joyce reveal urbanity lost in the dark alleys, colourless buildings, miseries of loss, pain and poverty striking the people of Ireland who were to suffer for reasons that were far beyond their control. The religious aspects were often to be borne by followers in the same strain that the laws had to be observed without complaint. Observing the "spots of time" (to borrow from Wordsworth's The Prelude) through which the characters may hope to recover and find sustenance, urbanity continues to pose as a curse and spell death for millions. And it is perhaps not without reason that the last and final story is titled "The Dead" is also the longest and possessing perhaps the most psychologically disturbing plot in the whole collection. For Joyce, Virginia Woolf and other authors including Mansfield in the later years, cityscapes have been portrayed as reflections of dismay, hopelessness and lacklustre ambience that is semblative of the twin forces of alienation and absurdity interwoven into the minds of the multitudes that inhabit these spaces.

Giri begins with an overt reference to female sexuality and exploitation of girls in the city. With a large number of foreign tourists thronging the city, the increasing commercial activities and a widening gulf between the rich and the poor, girls from the weaker economic sections strive to make two ends meet. Prostitution offers them better prospects and they are unable to refuse to enter its snare. Comparing the city to a "blazing heater" and the girls to myriads of Sitas being tried by fire, the poet is cynical in her outburst:

> "The capital's orphan girls
> Are … ready
> To brand their golden bodies;
> They are trapped by the noose of its love" (ll.4-7).

The theme of betrayal is more than apparent. Being held by the clutches of "love" the girls are unable to free themselves of its charm and are falling prey to its outward show of glamour. fetching a good price for their services they are allured to stay on in the city and accept the ignominious existence.

Kathmandu does not propose relief to a tormented mind driving the onlookers to contemplate a claustrophobic ambience: "There is a prison in every citizen's eyes" (l.10) Disreputable dark worlds of smugglers and criminals form an integral part of this ancient city where the waters of Rani Pokhari serve to purify all sins and cleanse all sinners:

"Fat hypocrites
Frightful liars and cheats, are made pure" (l. 13-14).

Assembling all elements of notoriety in one long sequence, the conclusion is suited to the orientalism that the place has always been recognized for and that comprises its alignment to the cults of the occult practices. An offshoot of mainstream Hinduism, these northern Himalayan ranges continue to harbour an "otherness" in terms of religious philosophies in theory and practice. Although the original Nepali phrase applied by Giri is "tantra ra mantra" indicative of the presence of peculiarity abounding with seeming illogicality, the translator Michael Hutt has substituted "hocus-pocus" (l.20) for the Nepali expression. I believe that the combination of the element of magic involved in such mystic, preternatural, pagan forms of worship may have inspired such a translation, but I cannot resist stating that it is a rather weak translation for its inability to include the sentiments of a theological school that the western critic may not be comfortable to contemplate. Anyway, the merits of controversy being set aside, we are ready to participate in the argument that the city in spite of all its featured urbanism, continues to remain inclined in favour of a spiritual manifestation for many of its dwellers.

With posh cars plying the streets and leaving marks of tyres on the roads, the poem surmises that the plight of the women whose husbands return late and drunk from work, must be quite similar. Does this draw the conclusion that the city possesses a feminine identity? In supporting such a comparison, Giri unlocks her opinions of masculinity. The Toyota Corolla ceases to be a car. It is a signifier of the luxuries that only a few can afford for themselves, and juxtaposed to this is the notion that the car is a western popular brand, a neo-imperialistic product that enslaves the eastern man. The marks left are the bruises that the orient unconsciously but painfully bears. The colonized subject who cannot but obey must suffer in constant imprisonment. Power hegemony develops such conditions and makes it appear most natural for the subject and the master alike. The Ram Bahadur who tortures his wife, too, is under a preconceived notion that it is a man's right to beat his wife and assert himself and it is the virtue of a woman that teaches her to proceed onward silently. issues of social decorum permit the abusive car or the bullying man in the city's spatial limits. speaking for the hidden miseries of women, Giri laments, "Green bruises from blows struck … All over the women's bodies … daily accomplishments, perhaps, of Kathmandu" (II. 29-31).

What appears as a routine schedule of domestic violence against women in a twentieth century locale provokes readers to question the existing law and order issues of the state of Nepal. It addresses the plight of married women who must never be prompted to redress their wrongs. The initial reference to Sita, Rama's queen and consort now becomes more transparent. Sita's gesture of acceptance raises her to the status of the divine. Her chastity is emblematic of the prototype of the Indian/ eastern bride who must acknowledge the supremacy of her husband as master and lord and wait upon him in all passivity. Giri's analogy is truly multilayered as she moves on from the myth of divine femininity to the quotidian reality of struggle and survival further to the literal tyre marks left on the land by a sophisticated imported vehicle. Coercion in various forms is underlined in each instance in the poem.

Inward introspection into the self leads the persona to declare "I want to hear every moment…" (l. 35). Complex visions and myriad sounds combine to form a complete picture of Kathmandu that is recounted as indispensable and unavoidable in spite of the numerous negatives that confine its spirit. The city's pulse enters into the inhabitants who note, "Though I am living in Kathmandu/ Has Kathmandu not somehow come to live in me?" (l. 41-42) sparking off a series of answers that inmates may offer, the poem reveals "[t]he countless processions of Kathmandu's streets" (l. 43), the silence engulfing "old mornings" (l.48).

Giri fondly calls Kathmandu, "this great epic poem" (l.52) perhaps to remind readers of its unique beauty and exalting magnificence. Witness to numerous historical incidents, the rise and fall of empires, and cherishing the dreams of tribes and races to attain liberty, the city recognizes the impoverished souls whose "communal song" repeals with "want and poverty". The stereotypes of poor wages and high prices affect the commoners here as in any other country suffering from the gross disadvantages of a dwindling economy. To ask "What is lacking here?" (l.59) seems redundant since the losses keep growing with each passing day. Such an interrogation is however crucial to conceptualize the inefficiencies of governmental reforms and measures introduced with the purpose to ensure the improvement of the condition of the masses.

Coterminous with the vices, the increasing crimes and molestations, "wretched Kathmandu" (l. 60) breathes its own monotonous air and "receiving abuse from all" (l.62) remains "dear to everyone" (l. 61). The last and final tribute is paid to the residents of this place who are actually responsible for transforming it to its present state "Always walking the same alleyways, … keeping the same feastdays, …filling the same fairs…" (l. 67-69). Love for Kathmandu seems to surpass every other concern, since they clearly betray their obsession for the city irrespective of the avarice or the offences that are committed in its spatial limits. "They are Kakakul birds," (l. 71) writes Giri "chanting Kathmandu, Kathmandu, Kathmandu, Kathmandu" (72-73). I go back once again to the original Nepali version where the word "nirantar" has been used with reference to the chant. The word, as I understand it means "relentless" or "endless" and refers to the stream of thought which identifies Kathmandu as the locus of all attention, the magnum opus of the creative genius. The translator has omitted the word in his transcreation perhaps because he did not find it significant or perhaps because he felt that the repetitive chant is more than suggestive of Kathmandu's mystic temperament.

Material consumerist traditions may have seeped through its walls and occupied a large territory of the city's sensibilities. The consciousness of the masses however is mapped in the one sovereign idea of Kathmandu. This native land assumes an omnipotent power that is unified and resolved against breakage or fragmentation of its original form or

content. The crises of urbanity are a reality and one must learn to live with its administrative flaws or manipulative demands of political governance and oppositions. Fortune and misery are equal co-sharers in this ancient city and repeat the same old tales to the generations of those who patiently wait to listen to its old glories or its unending woes.

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