

Interdisciplinary & Transdisciplinary Approaches



International Journal of Fear Studies
Vol. 2 (1)
2020

Published by the In Search of Fearlessness Research Institute
& The Fearology Institute ©2020



Fear in Bhutanese Nepali Diasporic Poetry

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Abstract

Fear is a major emotion in diasporic society and its literary creations. This article explores how Bhutanese Nepali diasporic poetry exhibits fear of different types that the society of the creators is compelled to live with. The concept of fear in literature as discussed by Wayne A. Davis, Lisa Hinrichsen, Joyce Carol Oates, and Kate Schick has been used as the basic theoretical perspective for the analysis of selected poems. The Bhutanese Nepali poets who have been living in the diaspora and their poems published in English have been used as the primary source of this research work. Using the interpretive approach this study has found out that these poems were composed with the mentality of terror and so they exhibit different types of fears the society has been experiencing in last three decades, after their forceful expulsion from Bhutan to the present day life in the West. The study shows that those who are hopeful to be free from fear have more balanced view on life than those who worried about such a release. Their literary creations play a significant role in this connection.

Keywords: Fear, diasporic poetry, release, identity, existence.

Fear in the Diaspora

Fear is one of the primal human emotions. Scholars from the East such as Bharat Muni discussed it about two millennia ago. With the development of modern psychology and its theorization, there is ample discussion on its use and misuse in the West, too. Wayne A. Davis, a philosopher on fear, defines fear as the accumulation of “several different, though related, psychological states”; and he explains the idea:

The state of fear takes many forms differentiated in part by the propositional fear that produces the state. Thus fright results from the sudden fear that one is about to be injured or even killed. The subject typically has a disposition to flee, but occasionally

freezes. Terror involves the intense fear that one may be killed or seriously injured at any time, accompanied by a sense of helplessness. Dread is caused by a wider category of often long lasting fears, such as the fear that one will fail an exam. (287)

There are different conditions and types of fear. As I grew in Nepal and lived through the destructive decade-long civil war, I could, personally, experience what being fearful mean. At the same time, I studied diasporic Nepali life and its literature that showed me the fear of uncertainty in diasporic life. In the same process, I started my exploration into the connection between fear and diasporic poetry. The Bhutanese Nepali Diaspora is found to be one such a field where the connection among fear, diaspora and poetry could be explored since their life as refugees in Nepal and the diasporans in the West is the background for the experience and consequent literary creations. Different types of pains the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans have been undergoing and the use of the pain in their literary creations attracted me to study the use of fear in their poetry. Diaspora is mostly the space of uncertainty. And the uncertainty of any type is related to fear and anxiety.

Connection between Fear and Literature

Literature deals with human thoughts, existence, emotions and politics. One of the primal human emotions that are frequently used in creative works is fear. H.P. Lovecraft in "Supernatural Horror in Literature" argues: "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." (qtd in Oates 176). Once fear is used in literature, it takes the form of aesthetic fear that is "not an authentic fear but an artful simulation of what is crude, inchoate, nerve-driven and ungovernable in life". Its "evolutionary advantage must be the preparation for the authentic experience, unpredictable and always imminent" (Oates 176). Oates connects aesthetic fear with humanity: "The aesthetic of fear is the aesthetic of our common humanity" (185). This is the reason why the literary creation that uses fear appeals to wide audience.

Poetry uses fear; and gives it an aesthetic state. In the process of using it, "poetry itself approximates the creative play of the boy's game, substituting word for thing, and overcoming absence by positing presence" (Hinrichsen 47). This way, poetry gives an outlet to pent-up

emotion of fear and helps the person or the community feel fresh: “If there is not a hole or a breach, libidinal energy (the “whatever”) is dammed without the possibility of release, resulting in anxiety’s overflow” (51). Here is the connection between social role of poetry and fear.

Many programs that concern with the refugees and their trauma (heightened and engraved fear) use poetry and other forms of art to enable them to release the fear that constantly haunts them. One such program is the Harvard Program on Refugee Trauma that

. . . uses the healing power of the arts to help refugees work through trauma. Richard Mollica, director of the programme, maintains that artistic beauty can help people come to terms with pain. . . . He argues that one aspect of the violence perpetrated against refugees has been the destruction of beauty and culture and that part of the process of recovery is reconnecting with that which was lost. (Schick 1849)

Schick argues that “such writing exposes both the writer and reader to empathic unsettlement that encourages practical ethical response while remaining open to Utopian ideals and hope” (1851). This discussion shows that once put in poetry and other forms of art, fear works as the means of remedy of trauma of both the creator and the audience.

Background of Creation: Atmosphere of Fear

A literary creation with the use of fear also deals with a background that causes the fear. “A fearful subject must perceive some danger” (Davis 300). And the fear causes an anxiety in the experiencer. The background always has some type of loss and the people who suffer it “often search for meaning in the losses they suffer”; and so their literary creation is “an attempt to attenuate the pain and bring comfort” (Schick 1843). The Bhutanese Nepali diasporic poems reflect such a background. Poet Chakra Acharya’s poem entitled “Horror of Living” is one such example.

The poem starts with the imago-symbolic depiction of the atmosphere that is full of terror, uncertainty and destruction. The first line “A passel of greyhounds have concealed in the hovel of termites” shows how the people with destructive mentality (greyhounds) have taken shelter in the space of common people (hovel of termites) and have replaced them. As a result, the beautiful garden of common people has been destroyed: “Ah, the blossom of garden—

broken and wounded with appalling bites” (l. 2). This scene symbolizes the destruction of the beautiful life of the Bhutanese Nepali people with the bad intentions and consequent discriminative deeds of the rulers there. The first line is repeated as the third line to emphasize this theme of planned devastation of Nepali speaking community in Bhutan.

This atmosphere has created hopeless mentality and fear in the affected. Even the green meadow is perceived as the space of “heated wounds” where nothing meaningful is believed to be present (l. 4). It is the iron arrow that is seen to be present all around:

Pinching and piercing into the chest of Her like the ironed arrow—

Fettering, wincing and taking in the deer’s bow.

Where is the windup of arrow’s pain?

Where is the end of grenade’s lane?

Where is the extreme of wild dread and where is the bound of grotty drama? (ll. 5-9)

The result is the extreme pain and trouble in their life. They do not know when this sad fate may come to an end. The path they walk is like the grenade’s lane that does not have any final point: They simply have to bear all these harsh realities of the situation. This “grotty drama” that the rulers have created, they think, is not going to end. This creates uncertainty in the days ahead; and gives rise to both the fear and anxiety.

They want the end of this situation; but are not sure that it would take place:

Where is the end of havoc and where is the end of killings?

Where are the instruments of thought for humanity and heart of feelings?

Where does humanity outflow?

When lightness dark generosity dimly grows . . . ! (ll. 11-14)

They are not sure whether such a cruel act comes to an end or not; whether the Bhutanese rulers can think humanely and feel like human beings or not; and whether the world can deal with the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans with humanity in the true sense or not. These uncertainties and hopes attached with them are the causes of their fear and anxiety.

Rulers' Role in Creating Fear

Bhutanese Nepali diasporans were compelled to leave their nation due to political reasons. The cultural difference of the Nepali speaking people from those of the Dzonkha speaking Bhutanese rulers was the major cause of their expulsion from Bhutan. The nation that is traditionally established for and believed as the provider of security has changed its face: "Traditional notions of security, which reify the state, have been challenged in recent years by the emergence of the (multifaceted) concept of human security, which places individual rights and development at the centre of security" (Schick 1838). Thus, when the Nepali speaking community began to grow conscious of the discriminations and was aware of their rights, this tragic fate of the community started. Poets such as Jiten Muskan, Devi Subedi, Prakash Dhamala and R. N. Pokharel have portrayed the picture of the atrocity that the Bhutanese rulers put upon the Nepali speaking community.

Jiten Muskan in his poem "Write My Histories with the Blood" digs out the history that the Bhutanese rulers created with the inhuman activities meted out to the Nepali speaking community. Even now they blame many Nepali speaking Bhutanese people living away from Bhutan as terrorists. The poem details out the situation:

You blame me as a terrorist
You name me as a terrorist
You have killed my ox
I was arrested
While I was tilling
the golden sand
You had gun in your hands
You forcefully evicted me
You have written only your histories
making my stories incorrect
-seized my properties
-raped my mum and sister
-snatched my citizenship (ll. 1-14)

Remembering the past with these realities, these diasporans fear the rulers and their own future. Muskan, in his next poem “Oh! Tiger King”, details out such a fear:

You may rap my smile
You may grab my breast
You may stab my chest
You may castrate my rhymes (ll. 1-5)

The past was a terrible time when the rulers romantically rapped their cries

jumping in different parts
delivering minds to minds
penetrating into the world of blind
whistling in the wind (ll. 17-20)

Similar pain that they had to bear in the past is portrayed in Devi Subedi’s poem “Agonies of Being Exiled”. The poem uses the historical incidents of the year when the poet was a four-year child. Back then, the government first seized his grand parents’ citizenship; and then it started to torture the parents. The reason was the Bhutanese government’s policy of “one country, one race” that treated the Nepali speaking community as an outsider one. This resulted into the atrocities such as “kidnapping, raping and killing many young ladies, / thrown in the river many saplings and babies / Our parents’ bank accounts were seized” and consequently made them “penniless and treated as wild beast” (ll. 11-14). Being unable to bear all these insults and tortures, they left their birth place; and they made a camp in Assam and northern India. Indian police did not let them stay there, too. So, they were loaded in trucks and were finally dropped at the border of Nepal. It was followed by series of troubles in the refugee camps in Nepal before many of them chose the third country resettlement. At present the memories of all these troubles work as the source of fear.

Prakash Dhamala’s poem “Standing on the No Man’s Land of Life” also recounts similar experiences and tries to establish that the Bhutanese rulers created fear in the Nepali speaking community. Ultimately, their dreams were disastrously shattered as they were “given a cold shoulder” that let their “passion of mankind [. . .] let down”; and as a consequent, the

individuals like the speaker were “executed for [their] voice of equality” and they were “banned from dreaming” (ll. 10-14). Despite all these difficulties and atrocities, they are still continuing their life.

R. N. Pokharel’s “I’m Still Alive . . .” also captures this theme. It depicts the scene of the time they left their homestead in Bhutan:

My pa looked toward his hard earned land,
Hard earned orange trees his hand hath planted.
My ma cautiously with a wish
-left the door open and wept,
And we set steps . . . to unknown destination. (ll. 10-14)

All the examples above show how the rulers induced fear in their people. It has been engraved deep down in their psyche. It works as the base of the other types of fear they have been living with.

Causes of Fear in the Host Land

Despite the early confusions, most of the Bhutanese Nepali refugees in the camps in Nepal chose to resettle in the West. It changed their status from Bhutanese-diaspora-refugees to the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans. At the time they chose it, they cherished a dream of good future in the new lands. This desire was accompanied by the fear of uncertainty and the resultant anxiety on them. As “[d]esire is essential to fear” (Davis 296), in such a situation, “the subject experiences fear, even intense fear, but cannot specify what he is afraid of” (298). Saroj Budhathoki’s “Fling to the Odd Land” is one of such poems that deal with the causes of the diasporans’ fear in the host land. The poem symbolically presents their existential situation:

A dark day rode, tempest erodes, and all wreckage left
Rumpled my blissful past, and dashed into a foreign land.
Land so odd, tongue so unique and culture so unlike
Brownie I look, thick accent I sound, but all we pain
Like them, and hurt so easy when cast-off by kind alike
Did I admit all odds as mine; near my bosom so tight? (ll. 3-8)

This is not the poet's original land or homeland; it is only a host land where he looks like an outcast. Though people outwardly praise him, and he, too, smiles back at them, he fears a lot: "Fear so real, threat so genuine" (l. 11). He does not find a bright light in life. Merely "a light so dim and distant" (l. 12) cannot make him feel good in the new land. Though he looks at the world "with the worthy virtue of love and / Empathy, the kindness I preach to the world" (ll. 14-15), his own life is not so. He feels: "Alas! The world sinks under my feet so rash / Explodes this world in my eyes, left no or less drive" (ll. 16-17). He has never doubted the love and care of the new land. But the land always scorns him. As a result, he lives with "[a] soul so crass, builds a rift, and abounds a poison" (l. 19). He finds the condition of humanity blurred:

What a shame human I belong, the crook it begets
The world deep in my feet, feel in my drenched hearts
The sorrow I take, abyss I land with such a shameful soul!
Though I accept all theirs as mine; near my bosom so tight? (ll. 20-23)

These lines show not only the predicament of the speaker's present situation, but also a worry full of fear about the days ahead. The existential condition of the diasporans and their relation with the mainstream society in the host land is not so good. As a result, even the behaviour of the mainstream society in the new land makes them fearful of the future. The following section further highlights the fear related to future.

Fear of Future Life

Fear, for the diasporans, is primarily a futuristic concept. One experiences it in the thought of future possibilities. "Fear, in other words, entails aversion and uncertainty" (Davies 289). Davies reports what Gordon (1980) has shown, in his research: "fear does require a special kind of uncertainty, which he calls non-deliberative uncertainty". Thus, Davies concludes: "Fear is possible, though, as long as the uncertainty is not due solely to indecision" (290). Poems by Rup Narayan Pokharel, Ramesh Gautam and Welkin Siskin have presented such a situation and consequent fear.

Welkin Siskin's poem "I Give this Life to Thee" presents such a fear of future life with uncertainty and difficulty. The speaker in the poem fears to have his future very dark and

desolate: “Morrow is precarious, and we may not run across each other” (l. 6). He finds the way ahead full of troubles; and it whispers the symphony [really the cacophony] of the groaning skies (ll. 9-10). His chants are also filled with the sense of separation with the lovely people, places and things and the consequent pain on both sides (ll. 10-11). The speaker wants to give life to the separated beloved; but it is not possible because of their situation: “For the night is darkening hurriedly / And times are fleeting / Carrying the weight of our departure” (ll. 3-5). At the moment, he realizes that life is “transient and perishable as the time” (l. 7). He fears that his future life may be full of sorrow; and he may have to listen to “the walls of the room and canopy” that spreads the song of their separation (ll. 14-15). He imagines that even the stars will weep in their separation (l. 16); but it cannot provide any sign of hope ahead. As the time ahead is like the night that “is darkening hurriedly” (l. 3), he is fearful of his future life.

Similarly, Ramesh Gautam’s poem “How the Life Feels Again” paints the picture of desolate present and uncertain future in the new land they have settled. The Bhutanese Nepali diasporans find that the hope they had cherished before resettlement could not be materialized. The result is their fearful present and possibly the similar future. The poem begins:

The days are screaming
And the night waiting,
For the life deserving.
I am scared
I am bewildered
The life we dreamt of
The moments we painted in colours
I believe, are only the sentiments. (ll. 1-8)

After this portrait of present life and the recollection of the past, the speaker expresses his fear for the future:

The way ahead
I see—

Is twisted and scrappy
Is desert-like and is dusty.
I see—
The image you and I cared
Is gloomed by the moment now.
The heart I have
Questions the facts in pains (ll. 9-17)

The speaker has grown so hopeless that he questions himself and asks every one like him to question themselves: “If the earth is for us, / If the heart are ours” (ll. 25-26). This situation, on the one hand, is the result of the fear of present and future that is generated on the basis of the life they had to live in the past; and on the other hand, it causes additional fear about the future.

The next poem that presents the fear of terrible future is “Unstated Triumph” composed by Rup Narayan Pokharel. Here, the speaker imagines and fears his possible pathetic life in future and probably a terrible end. The poem begins with the line:

I may be in a trench
When you hear of me,
Probably;
With half-filled belly,
And unquenched thirst (ll. 1-5)

Along with the fear, the speaker exposes the reasons behind the creation of the fear. If he were satisfied with his own life in whatever condition it had been, his life would not have been in the threat it is now. He dreamt of good future of the next generation so that he had to do many things for their benefit: “Framing a lawn for you all and the like / To rescind you out of muzzy days” (ll. 6-7). As a result, both his present and future are difficult; and the same difficulties cause his fear. He has further described the fear:

I may be staggering
When you know of me

Perhaps;
With swollen heels
And maltreated, pus-filled cracks
Soothing apostles to live at ease
Lending the gun relic from league. (ll. 8-14)

All these fears are not only the fear of the poet and the speaker of the poem, but also that of all Bhutanese Nepali diasporans who have been compelled to live away from both Nepal and Bhutan. These poems indicate the extent to which they suffer and the consequent fear they live with.

Existential Condition and Fear

What a man values the most is the personal existence. That is why; they fear the loss of the same. This is also connected with the possibilities of the loss of the meaning of existence. Joyce Carol Oates asserts:

What we fear most, I suggest, is not death; not even physical anguish, mental decay, disintegration. We fear most the loss of meaning. To lose meaning is to lose one's humanity, and this is more terrifying than death; for death itself, in a coherent cultural context, always has meaning. (185)

In the diaspora, though the diasporans exist physically, what they believe and fear is the existence of their meaningful life. Poems by Dona Acharya and Welkin Siskin display this theme.

Siskin's poem "Struggling in the Silence" presents the trauma of bizarre existence of the Bhutanese Nepali diasporic community. The persona of the poem depicts his situation in such a way that it reflects the condition of his community as a whole. The poem begins with the line: "My bereft aura that bethinks me of my art is lost" (l. 1). It is followed by the lines that talk of how the cockles of his heart "whispered and sounded off like the bravery of the Jesus' Cross" (l. 2). He finds himself facing "the horror of the grievous like the roots of the trees stretching its arm holding up the glades" (l. 4). He finds that his life is bereft of childish happiness, voice of silence and present happiness. He finds, around him, cruel human world that is filled up and moved with the age old dogmas. As a result, "the noble and the honest, the virtuous and the

upright lost their souls” (l. 13). This poem is, thus, an expression of hopelessness that is resulted from the life full of fear and troubles.

Siskin’s next poem “My Many Ways” has presented, through bizarre images, the effect of trauma on their life and existence. The speaker finds himself “a bare book, a wallet penniless!” (l. 16). He has reached to this realization about life when he had to undergo many troubles in his life. They have been reflected in the lines that talk of his “long blackout in [the] soul” (l. 2); the breaking of life “befalling beyond remedy” (l. 5) after being dragged to “the gravel-lane” (l. 3); sleeping “under the hatch” and seeing “wolf at the door often / Glutted and its limbs even-tempered” when he finds himself “enkindled in the coffin” (ll. 13-14). All these situations symbolize the existential crisis and the consequent fear in the speaker and his community.

These poems also show how “the human subject comes into being through a series of attractive and repulsive maneuvers with respect to this Janus-faced force.” They further display that “[t]he identity of the “I” is founded upon an economic relationship with jouissance, and it is the endless play of jouissances bivalent difference that constitutes this identity” (Hinrichsen 46). The fear created with the possibility of identity-less-ness has made these poets and their community feel insecure in the host land. It shows that the condition of existence plays a role in the creation of certain human psychological states; and fear is one of them.

Other Fears

The diasporans are nostalgic of their homeland where they were born and grown up. But when they cannot do anything about that land and have to concentrate only on their present day existence in the host land, they sometimes feel that they are betraying their homeland in their race of existence in the new land. This feeling of regret has also got expression in Bhutanese Nepali diasporic poetry. One such example is Yeshey Pelzon’s poem “I am only a Child”. It talks of how being a diasporan one feels the fear of being the betrayer of the homeland:

O mother, did I betray you?
I have offered my cold fingers
Onto the warmth of a new hand,

She promises I will not fall again.
I know she is not you—
But I am only a child! (ll. 7-12)

Here, the speaker accepts that he has got the help in the new land. It has promised him good days ahead. He is trying to adjust there. But he does not feel very good because this new land is not his original mother (motherland). So, time and again, he realizes his inability to work for the land where he was born. He worries whether he is a betrayer or just someone who is compelled to do it. This is a common feeling and fear of every diasporan anywhere in the globe.

Fear of separation is another fear that the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans live with. Primarily, they are fearful of their permanent separation from their land of birth. Similarly, in the third country resettlement they have been scattered to many countries in the West. This has separated them from their relatives and friends. With these experiences on the background, they fear separation from anyone they are together at any time of their life. "Because You Complete Me" by Devi Pokharel has given expression to such a fear of separation and its consequences. The speaker fears: "I'm too scared to let you go / I am afraid to lose you" (ll. 17-18). He feels it because he thinks that he "wouldn't have lived till now / If you hadn't come to me" (ll. 1-2). He is sure that he "would have been lost elsewhere / On the odyssey of misery of life" (ll. 3-4). These are symbolic expressions that mean the presence of fear in the depth of their psyche.

Retaliating Fear

Fear is a problematic psychological state. One needs to be free from it to live a normal everyday life. Scholars have discussed on how it can be done. Relating the fear with trauma Kate Schick observes that it should be acted out for release that "involves a compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma". For this the individuals who act out "have difficulty distinguishing between the past and the present and struggle with notions of future. They are haunted by their experience and trapped in the past that wounded them." (1842). Some Bhutanese Nepali diasporic poets have dealt with this issue of their life. In the state of trauma,

they even go to the state of retaliating fear itself. Yati Raj Ajnabee's poem entitled "Fear Fears with Fearlessness" is one such example.

The poem, at first, recounts the wounds and troubles the Bhutanese Nepali diasporans underwent in the past. Then it goes on showing the sufferers as blind people though they have eyes, deaf though they have ears because they "never heard cries / And never rubbed mother's tears" (ll. 11-12). The poem then inspires them to wake up from this careless slumber, and urges them to understand their proud history and great capability. Finally, the speaker wants them to "[g]o, face, fight with storm" (l. 29). It is now their duty to their motherland, the people there and even for their own existence. For this, they need to make their mind "hard and firm" because "[f]ear fears with fearlessness" (ll. 31-32). This idea of retaliation against fear itself is very crucial in the fight against atrocity and its consequent fear.

Conclusion

Life of the diasporans is full of struggles, troubles and fear. Diasporic literature gives expression to the suppressed fear of the creators and their society through different literary genres. The poems discussed in this article have displayed how the poets were and are compelled to live in the atmosphere of terror so that their creations were filled up with fear. The rulers of Bhutan created such an atmosphere with their inhuman policy of 'one-nation; one race' that treated the Nepali diasporans in Bhutan as the outsiders; and so they were inhumanely expelled out to become Bhutanese Nepali diasporans. This historical incident made them fearful throughout their existence.

Once they were in the refugee camps in Nepal and even after their resettlement and rediasporization in the third country, the systems there made them fearful. The uncertainty and new ways of life created new types of fears in them. They were mostly fearful about their future. This is connected with their existential situation and the consequent condition of identity. Along with the fear of future, they feel the fear of being a betrayer of their motherland as they could not do anything for its progress and good future. All these types of fear are the result of their separation from the homeland. Some poems also indicate the ways to retaliate to fear. Thus, this study has shown that fear is a major emotion in a diasporic society; and so the

same is expressed in the diasporic creations. Further detailed studies are necessary to explore this issue in detail.

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