

**Ann Hunkins, trans. 2017. *Voices in the Dark: A Century of Classic Nepali Short Stories about Women*. Kathmandu: Vajra Books.**

This book is primarily about metaphors. It deals with not only metaphors as literary devices but also metaphors as tools that carry the burden of comparison while expressing the social conditions and their influences on the characters as imagined by the literary writers whose writings are included in this volume. Who uses metaphors to describe whom in a specific plot carries huge significance because metaphors reveal feelings that may be abstract and complex. They help the reader to grasp the complexity of a thing by relating it to something simpler and easier. In her collection of translated short stories, *Voices in The Dark*, Ann Hunkins opens the door for readers

of English language to be the part of the multifaceted lives of Nepali women representing different cultures, places, and ages.

The collection features eighteen popular short stories by distinguished Nepali writers beginning from “Naso” by Guru Prasad Mainali to “The Scream” by Dhruba Sapkota. “Pabitra” by B.P. Koirala, “The Son Who Was Not Mine” by Parijat, “The Yellow Rose” by Prema Shah and “What Are You Doing, Shobha?” by Govinda Bahadur Malla “Gothale” are some of the well known stories from the world of Nepali literature included in this collection. The stories present the dreams, the desires, the guilt, and most importantly, the sorrow experienced by Nepali women during the twentieth-century. Hunkins calls this collection “a valuable tool for studying the history of attitudes towards Nepali women” (p. xii).

The title of the book *Voices in the Dark* itself is a great metaphor pointing the readers to the grimness overshadowing the lives of Nepali women and suggesting how little has changed over time. Nepali women have been represented as characters with various names in different stories but very few of them have been made into powerful characters. Of course, the selection process of stories is itself political by nature, but at least in the stories that have been included in this collection, the voices of women characters seem lost. Many are confined to their homes and the darkness in their voice may be one of the defining metaphors in conveying the place of Nepali women in the history of fiction. Their voices are either lost inside their throats or inside their houses and communities. There is always the curtain of patriarchy in front of them as Padmavati Singh states, “the tree takes on the form of man” (p. 95, in “The Peach Tree”).

It is noticeable when reading through these stories that there are some similarities in the way the metaphors are used. One is the metaphor of the “window.” In various stories including “The Peach Tree,” “The Son Who Was Not Mine” and “What Are You Doing, Shobha?” the female characters are linked with the window through which they observe the happenings in the street. It is almost as if to say that confined women have been gazing at the world through windows for years and years. As readers proceed through the book, they expect women’s engagement with the world to widen up but that doesn’t happen.

Parijat’s story “The Son Who Was Not Mine” presents the ever-going struggle of a woman against her womanhood. The unmarried narrator in the story says that she “never fell in love with anyone, and had no desire to get

married, no interest in becoming a housewife” (p. 86) but when she sees a particular boy in the street her desire for motherhood becomes so immense that she starts assuming the boy as her own son. She gets hurt when the boy makes vulgar comments about her but as a response she cannot gather her “strength” to scold him back and thus ends up describing herself as a “coward.” Here the narrator’s voice is lost in the dark. In this story, the metaphor “window” gets repeated time and again. Earlier in the story, the narrator used to consider peeking out of the window “an absolute sin,” but now, after the revolution of 1951, her father’s death, and the completion of her own education, she has “grown intimate with the window” (p. 84). However, she started enjoying sitting at the window only when she noticed the school boy on the street. This happiness vanishes when the boy hurts her and at the end of the story she says, “Now I don’t look out from the window. I no longer study the street” (p. 90). This echoes the earlier notion about women being confined inside the house.

The window reappears in the story “What Are You Doing, Shobha?” where somebody remarks, “a girl from a high-class family should not sit in the window like that” (p. 50). This shows that the condition of women is fundamentally the same, irrespective of her class.

Sometimes metaphors used in the stories collected in this anthology allude that it is the men who make women weaker. In the story “Pavitra” for example, the protagonist describes the newly wed wife of her master as a “bundle of shyness in her wedding clothes” (p. 23) when she is beside her husband. In the same story, the protagonist sometimes looks like the “rascal...pigeons” who are there just to get fed. This comparison is used somewhat masterfully. This shows how social institutions are creating the adjectives that women can never deny. The metaphors used in the stories are sometimes disturbingly violent: “I was like a villain chasing the innocent virgin” (p. 70). This shows the violent attitude of men over female sexuality. In Guru Prasad Mainali’s “Naso” a similar metaphor is used as a system of enslaving women: “Subhadra is the goddess of my house” (p. 17). And even today, practically many women have not freed themselves from the chains of oppression: men continue to dominate them at times by portraying women as godly beings. In “The Scream,” a grandmother’s hand is described as “the hands of others are not like hands at all, but rather like pincers” (p. 152). This sentence weighs in the burden of metaphors our society has carried till date and one comes away with the feeling that these burdens will remain forever.

Some metaphors denote men as the direct oppressors. Dev Kumari Thapa writes the future of Makhmali “has become as empty as the dark night of the moon” (p. 131) when she is forced into prostitution by her newlywed husband who sells her to a brothel in Bombay. In “The Yellow Rose,” Prema Shah plays with the yellow flower as a metaphor. She writes “caterpillars on the roses again” (p. 78), a metaphor that shows repeated male exploitation of females. In “Nausea,” Manju Kanchuli uses “the man is as cruel as an iron wheel” (p. 143) as a metaphor to depict the brutality of men for forcing women to give up their public careers and confine them within the four walls of their houses as family slaves.

The metaphors used in these stories walk us through each stage of the Nepali social journey for almost a century but still we find recurrent metaphors used around women as fragile, weak and indecisive. This indicates that our society has not been able to find much of a corrective measure on gender relations. The attitude towards women must change, and this book makes an important contribution in bringing the voices out from the dark and making them heard.

To sum up, the book narrates the transformation of Nepali society through the metaphors of cultural significance. The writers who made into this collection are the ones who contributed to bringing different styles into Nepali storytelling. As one proceeds through this book, it becomes clear that the stories in this anthology seem to primarily deal with internal conflicts that sometimes come out as outbursts. Such a method contrasts with the soothing and submissive characters found in the early stories. This is perhaps symbolically reflected in the titles of the stories chosen in this anthology. If we compare the title of the first story, “Naso,” and the last one, “The Scream,” we can imagine the journey of expressiveness involving the women being represented in the stories in this book. This comes with a reminder that women in Nepal, even to date, have not been able to achieve substantial change in their lives. Issues such as these linger in the readers’ minds as they finish reading this book.

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