

Michael Hutt. 2012. *Eloquent Hills: Essays on Nepali Literature*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

What does it mean to venture into the language and literature of another nation which you accidentally encounter while you have ample and more convenient options for your academic pursuits? Would you wish to sustain your interest when your contemporaries view the planned area of interest with high degree of cynicism? Generally, the answer to the second question can be “yes” when there are ulterior missionary intentions. Should exceptions be denied, then? No. In the case of the interest of “a 20-year old Englishman in 1978” which was initially viewed “as an eccentric obsession” (p. 2), the answer should be no. The venture for him would mean one leap and no second thought to get engrossed into the rich texture of Nepali language and literature. 1988 was the first ripening year to continue life-long pursuit and eventually reach the literature among “a scholarly Euro-American readership” (p. 8). In 2012, the scholar has again come up with *Eloquent Hills: Essays on Nepali Literature*, an anthology of already published articles to orchestrate the scholarly lineage that was initiated three decades ago.

The introductory chapter briefs the content of the anthology at the backdrop of “autobiographical reminiscences” (p. 2) and makes an appeal for its reception, “...I hope you (*Nepali readers*) will find something of interest in them (*the essays*)” (p. 8). Nine chapters following the introduction address multiple facets of Nepali literature ranging from eminent litterateur to recurrent themes. The readings perform multifarious function: ruminates over the theme of *lāhure* in purposively selected writings across two genre—fiction and poetry—to argue that the figure appears in ambivalent light (Chapter 1); historicizes textual representation of ideal Nepal in 20th century Nepali writings to conclude that ideal Nepal should hear and attend to all the voices of Nepali writers (Chapter 8); presents nuanced reading of the theme of going to Muglan to suggest about the potential of these texts to “cast new light on much that remains largely hidden from view” (Chapter 6); analyzes the nature of discourses on Shangri-la to postulate that they assist in, what Edward Said would say, “orientalizing the orient” (Chapter 5); and provides an overview of literature during the 1990s to schematize literary endeavours of “time-manufactured” authors during the turbulent time (Chapter 3). Similarly, Chapter 2 elucidates Mohan Koirala’s poems as they have evolved in three distinct phases and concludes that the poetry of Koirala contributed significantly to enrich literature in Nepali; Chapter 4, after providing

précis of Devkota's life, performs an incisive reading of *Munā-Madan* in terms of themes, content, source, structure and meter, and remarks that the poem occupies "a cherished place in the hearts of its readers"; Chapter 7 discusses B.P. Koirala's *Sumnimā* setting the novel against "the circumstances in which it was written" and observes that the burning of the book is a legacy of "burnings elsewhere" (p. 7); and Chapter 9 presents contextual and textual analysis of Bhupi Sherchan's poems, and makes Bhupi's early life an open book.

A common denominator exists in most of the readings included in the anthology, *i.e.*, anti new-critical stance. Except in the analysis of *jhyāure* in 'Devkota's *Munā-Madan: An Introduction*' and 'Bhupi Sherchan: From Schoolboy to Sarvahara,' nowhere does Hutt pay attention to the formal elements in the texts. Even in these two essays, he does not second the idea of authors being amnesiac about and incubated apart from the happenings in and around their society to campaign a close reading of selected texts. Instead, he confirms that reading literary elements of any text needs to pay attention to context so that the critique can account dialectical relationship between writing and society. The take, as apparently observable in most of the essays, seems to propel Hutt to expose readers to comprehensive contextual information before the presentation of analytical part.

One of the offshoots of the author's acknowledgement of the importance of context is the tone of didacticism. In 'Ideal Nepal and the Voices of Nepali Writers,' he emphasizes the need to discuss Nepali literature "outside a purely literary frame of reference" so that not only the foreigners but also Nepali themselves can find appropriate referent. He suggests, "I do not see why Nepalis should not use the names of their own writers to coin their own formulations" (p. 161). This concern needs special mention also because it speaks about the author's intended audience, *i.e.*, Nepali critiques who have been accustomed to slavish borrowing of nomenclatures in their assessments.

No question that *Eloquent Hills* will be invaluable as a reference material for foreign scholars of Nepali literature. Because of the comprehensive and nuanced texture of analysis, readers can equip themselves with the figures in Nepali literature like Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Bhupi Sherchan, Mohan Koirala, B.P. Koirala and their canon setting writings. They can also acquire understanding of the context in which the authors produced their literary art. Besides this category, Nepali scholars who have been gradually shifting their enticement from English language and literature to Nepali literature due to various reasons will

find the book an eye-opener to the richness of the latter. Similarly, students in English departments of Nepal who have been obliged to get their teeth into Nepali literature due to course requirements and dissertation obligation will find the book useful.

The wider scope of readership, beyond the author's initial targeted audience, counts as one of the major strengths of *Eloquent Hills*. Indeed, the anthology deserves appreciation for many other reasons. Nevertheless, I have a few reservations. First, the articles in the anthology could have been arranged in an identifiable pattern. The order of any texture such as chronological or genre-wise would have made the collection a coherent book instead of an anthology of random essays. Second, the author could have made amendments in the flawed parts instead of making excuses, "I have made no efforts to 'update' these essays apart from adding a citation or two where relevant. The book also includes several factual errors" (p. 8). Third, the spaces spared for describing context while examining any particular text emerges so prominently that the readers may find the detail inapposite. For instance, when readers wish to get introduced to *Munā-Madan*, they need to wade through a four-page biography of Laxmi Prasad Devkota before they reach the desired section. Moreover, as the author does not compromise in providing context, many spaces in the anthology have reiterated information. For example, the content that has been a significant part in the analysis of *jhyāure* in Devkota's *Munā-Madan* appears almost in the same magnitude in the chapter on Bhupi Sherchan. Fourth, the analysis, due to the prominence of context, carries potential to impart impression among foreign scholars that Nepali literature is also "national allegory," as remarked by Raymond Williams. Fifth, the content of some articles spill away from the scope of the title. At the end of chapter 9, for example, we read Bhupi beyond his status of Sarvahara despite the limitation created by the title.

These reservations aside, the book makes it indispensable for any scholar whether foreign or native who is willing to understand Nepali literature. By rending both synchronic and diachronic history of Nepali literature through the textual and contextual analysis, the author successfully exposes the richness and importance of literary figures and literature in this part of the world. I find all the articles commendable.

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