6 The Half-closed Eyes of the Buddha and the Slowly Sinking Sun

Shankar Lamichhane

Before reading

Discuss the following questions.

a. What does a Nepali tourist guide think about foreign tourists?

b. What do common Nepali people think of a fair-skinned foreigner?

c. Why do you think foreign tourists visit Nepal?

Shankar Lamichhane (1928-1975) was born in Kathmandu but lived in Banaras with his uncle at a young age. After receiving college education at Tri-Chandra College in Kathmandu, he took his first job at the age of twenty-two and worked for a number of governmental and cultural institutions in the capital. In his later years, he became the manager of a handicrafts store. Lamichhane was an admirer of modern American fiction and frequently mixed with foreign visitors to Nepal. His stories are heavy with symbolism, often lacking a conventional plot and more closely resembling essays, but his prose is rich and poetic. This story is taken from *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Nepali Literature*, translated and edited by Michael Hutt.

The story deals with the monologues of two characters a tourist guide in Kathmandu valley and a foreign tourist. The story is different from conventional stories and, instead of showing actions and events, the story records what the two characters think in a stream of consciousness technique.

Oh guide, you do not, you cannot understand the joy we Westerners feel when we first, set foot upon the soil of your country!

As the Dakota crosses the Four Passes, we see this green valley with its geometric fields, its earthen houses of red, yellow, and white. The scent of soil and mountains is in the air, arid there's an age-old peacefulness in the atmosphere. You were born amongst all of this, and so perhaps you feel that the embrace of these blue hills' outspread arms confines you. But we live in the plains or beside the sea. Our vision founders on a horizon of land or sea, and so we know the affection with which the breast of these hills forever clings to your sight. You have never had to suffer the feeling of insignificance that is caused by a vast distance. Perhaps we are always adrift in vastness, my friend; perhaps that is why this, your enclosure, appeals to us! Has it ever occurred to you that the half-closed eyes of the Buddha seem to welcome you, even at the airport? It is as if one acquires a calmness, as if one is returning once more to a resting place.

You have always known only how to give to the West. You've given us religion arid

the Puranas, images of brass and ornaments of ivory, manuscripts of palm leaves and inscriptions on copperplate. You gave us a civilization and its wisdom and garlands of jasmine flowers around our necks. You have continued in your giving, ignorant of what others call "taking," innocent of the notion of ownership. The very word indulgence is unknown to you. My friend, I know your history. Before I came here, I spent several years in our libraries, leafing through the pages of your priceless volumes. You are a guide who will lead me down the streets and alleyways of the present, but I could take you along your ancient ways. Even now I can see it clearly: the valley is filled with water, and a lotus flower blooms where Swyambhunath now stands. Manjushri strikes with his sword at Chobhar. I see monks and nuns receiving alms and spreading the law in the nooks and crannies of the Kasthamandap. Behold the eyes of these shaven-headed monks. You cannot meet their gaze! It is called the samyak gaze. Do you know what that means? It is perception, pure and without contamination; sight that perceives everything in its true form. I'll have just one more drink before dinner....

You live in a house like a temple, but you are unaware of its beauty, its enchantment. In these wooden images, these multifarious ornamentations, these many styles, there is the flowing music of a chisel in the hands of an artist. Do you not feel it? Tell me about those happy, prosperous young artists working in the fields all day and creating beautiful images of their personal deities in their spare time, who are now covered by the dusts of the past.

Once, an artist was adding the finishing touches to a wooden image when his fair, tiny wife came by, carrying her baby on her back, and poured him *Raksi* from a jug. The foam bubbled over and congealed. Is it true that it was that foam that inspired the artist to construct a roof of tiles? Oh, your land is truly great, this country where so many different cultures found their home. Aryans, non-Aryans, Hindus, and Buddhists all came and obtained a rebirth here. It must be the effect of your country's soil, my friend; it was the soil that enabled all these races to flourish together here. Come, I'll drink one more small one, it's not dinner time yet...

I am greatly indebted to you for you have served me both Nepali and Newari food. Ah, *mo-mos*... Just picture the scene: it is winter and an old man sits in the upper story of his house, lit only by the fire. Perhaps the smoke is filling the room like fog from floor to ceiling. Perhaps he is telling his grandson about each and every Nepali item that Princess Bhrikuti took with her when King Amshuvarma sent her off to Tibet. The old lady smokes tobacco from a bamboo *hookah*, and, mindful of the old man, she carries on making fresh mo-mos. The son's wife puts some of them onto a brass plate, and the old man's words are garbled and obscured by his mouthful. The grandson laughs, and the old man tries to swallow quickly, so he burns his tongue and, unabashed, pours out a stream of ribald curses. . . . These are scenes that cannot be read in an old book in a library, and that is why I've had to come to Kathmandu and soak myself in its atmosphere, for which I'm greatly obliged to you. . . . Now, cheers once again, to your great country, and to mine!

Oh, and another thing that is not to be found in any book is the smile on the faces of these people. It is a smile of welcome, as if our meeting were neither accidental nor our first. It's as if I was the farmer's eldest son, coming home after a long day's work in the fields, as if my labors had been fruitful and I was content and at ease with my father. It's as if I have taken the world's most beautiful woman for my wife and have brought her along behind me, and my mother is smiling a welcome from the door. It's as if my sister's husband and I were the closest of friends and we, her brother and her husband, were coming along with our arms around one another, singing songs of drunkenness. It's as if—I cannot explain; however much I try, I cannot describe it fully. That smile is full of wisdom; it is a smile from the soul, a smile peculiar to this place. . . . One more drink, to your Nepalese smile, that sweet smile!

And then there are the eyes. The eyes of the carved lattice windows, the eyes painted on the door panels. The eyes on the stupas, the eyes of the people. And the eyes of the Himalaya, which peep out from the gaps between the hills like those of a neighbor's boy when he jumps up to see the peach tree in your garden. This is a land of eyes, a land guarded by the half-closed eyes of the Lord Buddha.

Even if all of the world's history books were destroyed today, your eyes would build a new culture; they would reassemble a civilization. My appetite for eyes is still not satiated. Tomorrow I shall go to a lonely place where there is a stupa with eyes that are clear. There I want to see the pleasant light of sunset reflected in the eyes of the Buddha. Show me beautiful, full eyes, eyes without equal, eyes whose memory will make this journey of mine unforgettable.... Come, let's go to eat dinner.

Come, my guest; today I am to show you some eyes.

This is Chobhar hill, where you people come to see the cleft that was made by Manjushri's sword and the outflow of the Bagmati River. Today I'll take you up the hill where few of our guests ever go and no tourist's car can proceed. There (in your words) the dust of time has not yet covered the culture of the past. Do you see this worn old rock? A young village artist has drawn some birds on it. Nearby, he has sketched a temple, leaving out any mention of the religion to which it belongs. Further up the hill, in the middle of the village, stands the temple of Adinath. In the temple courtyard there is a shrine of Shiva, several Buddha images, and many prayer wheels, inscribed *Om mani padme hu*.'-' You say it is a living example of Nepalese tolerance and coexistence. Children play happily there, unconcerned by the variety of their gods, religions, and philosophies. But my guest, I will not take you there.

You have already seen much of such things, and you have understood them and even preached them. Today I'll take you to a house where I feel sure you will find the pulse of our reality. They are a farmer's family, probably owning a few fields here and there, where they work and sweat to pay off half the proceeds to someone in the city. There is no smoke to fill their upstairs room, they cook no mo-mos in their hearth, nor do they discuss Bhrikutl's dowry in their winters. There is a child in the home,

who is certainly no divine incarnation, either. Attacked by polio and born into a poor farmer's household, the child is surely incapable of spreading the law or of making any contribution to this earth. He has taken birth here in one of his maker's strangest forms of creation.

And moreover, my friend—oh, the climb has tired you; would you like some filtered water from the thermos flask?—my intention is not to show him to you as any kind of symbol. Yesterday you were swept along by waves of emotion, inspired by your "Black and White" whisky, and you urged me to show you eyes that would forever remind you of your visit to Nepal. So I have brought you here to show you eyes like that.

The child's whole body is useless; he cannot speak, move his hands, chew his food, or even spit. His eyes are the only living parts of his body and it is only his eyes that indicate that he is actually alive. I don't know whether his eyes have the *samyak* gaze or not. I don't even understand the term, but his face is certainly devoid of all emotion. His gaze is uninterested, without resolution or expression; it is inactive and listless, unexercised and lacking any measure of contemplation. (Perhaps I have begun to speak unwittingly in the terms of the Aryan eightfold path, which will either be your influence or a virtue bestowed upon me by the child.)

My guest, these are the eyes you wanted. A living being accumulates many capabilities in one lifetime. It feels happy and it smiles; it feels sad and it weeps. If it feels cold, it seeks warmth, and if it is hungry, it prepares food to eat. It seeks to learn what it doesn't already know, and it succeeds or it fails. It has many experiences, some bitter, some sweet, and these it relates when company, occasion, and mood seem suited. How commonplace all of these actions are! My guest, yesterday you said that we Eastern peoples were always making contributions to the West, did you not? (Shall I give you some water? Are you out of breath?) Here is a child who can neither give nor take anything at all. Just put yourself in his position for a moment. You want your finger to do something, but your finger refuses. You want to speak, but speech will not come to you. Every vein, nerve, and bone is powerless to heed the commands of your brain, and yet . . . you are alive. I know that this disease occurs in your country, too. But the ability to endure it and to maintain a total indifference in the eyes, even, perhaps, to foster the samyak gaze, this capacity for remaining speechless, inactive, powerless, and immobile, and yet to survive without complaint . . . this can surely only be found in an Easterner!

Come, come closer. I have lied to his parents; I have told them that you are a doctor. Look . . . their faith in you shows in their eyes. There is intimacy, kindliness, and gratitude in their eyes, as if your coming here were preordained. That smile you described is on their faces, as if you were their eldest son who has brought a life-restoring remedy across the seven seas for your brother. The old peasant woman is smiling, isn't she? It's as if she's rejoicing at the birth of her first grandchild from your wife, the beauty of the world. I know that this same smile will remain on their faces

as long as you are here. I know that it will be extinguished when you turn to go. Once you've gone they'll sink back into the same old darkness.

The child has a sister whose body functions properly. He watches her as she crawls around, picking up everything she comes across and putting it into her mouth, knocking over the beer, overturning the cooking stone. Just for an instant, the ambition to emulate her is reflected in his eyes, but then it is reabsorbed into the same old indifference. Once his mother was scolding his sister, and a light gleamed in his eyes. I couldn't tell you to which era its vision belonged, but I realized that he wanted to speak. With a gaze devoid of language, gesture, or voice, he wanted to say, "Mother, how can you appreciate what fun it is to fall over? To crawl through the green dub grass and rub the skin off your knees, to shed a couple of drops of blood like smeared tears, and graze your flesh a little. To feel pain and to cry, to call out for help. That pain would be such a sweet experience. She can rub her snot or spittle into her own grazes, or pull out the thorn that has pricked her, and throw it away. Or she could pull off a scab that has healed over a buried splinter of glass or spend a few days resting under her quilt. She can climb up onto the storage jar to try to pull a picture down from the wall, and when the peg slips out and the picture falls and the glass smashes with a wonderful noise, she feels a wave of fear as she realizes her guilt. She has grown up, learning from experience the facts that fire can burn her and water makes her wet, that nettles cause blisters and beer makes her dizzy. That if she falls she might be hurt or break a bone that if something else falls it will probably break. That if someone dies, she is able to weep, and if someone laughs, she can laugh right back; if someone makes fun of her, she can strike them, and if someone steals from her, she can steal from them. My sister, who learns arid remembers each and every new word she hears, is the result of the self-sacrificing practice of thousands of years of human language. She embodies a history, a tradition, and a culture, and it is in her very ability to speak that the future is born. But not in one like me, who cannot even move his lips. In my body, in its strength and gestures, an unbroken cycle of historical and human development has come to its conclusion. A long labor, a chain of events, a lengthy endeavor, and an endlessness are all at an end. The future ends and is broken abruptly."

And these are the eyes, my guest, that look at you but see nothing; this is the gaze that is incapable of self-manifestation. This is beauty that is complete and has no other expression.

These are eyes surrounded by mountains; their lashes are rows of fields where rice ripens in the rains and wheat ripens in the winter.

These are the eyes that welcome you, and these are eyes that build. And in these eyes hides the end of life. Look! They are just as beautiful as the setting sun's reflection in the eyes of the Buddha!

Glossary

Four Passes (n.): Older name of the Kathmandu Valley, *Char Bhanjyang* in Nepali

adrift (adj.): a boat moving on the water uncontrolled

multifarious (adj.): many and of various types

Adinath (n.): a name of Lord Shiva

Understanding the text

Answer the following questions.

a. How does the tourist describe his initial impression of the Kathmandu valley?

b. According to the tourist, why is the West indebted to the East?

c. How does the tourist interpret the gaze of the monks and nuns?

d. Why do the tourists think Nepali people are wonderful and exceptional?

e. What are the different kinds of communities in the Kathmandu valley and how do they co-exist with each other?

f. What does the tourist feel about the temple of Adinath?

g. Why does the guide take the tourist to the remote village?

h. What does the innocent village couple think of the doctor?

i. What are the differences between the paralyzed child and his sister?

j. Why does the guide show the instances of poverty to the tourist?

Reference to the context

a. Which narrative technique is used by the author to tell the story? How is this story different from other stories you have read?

b. How is the author able to integrate two fragments of the narration into a unified whole?

c. The author brings some historical and legendary references in the story. Collect these references and show their significance in the story.

d. The author talks about the eyes in many places: the eyes of the shaven monks and nuns, eyes in the window and door panels, the eyes of the Himalayas, the eyes of the paralyzed boy, the eyes of the welcoming villagers and above all the half-closed eyes of the Buddha. Explain how all the instances of eyes contribute to the overall unity of the story.

Reference beyond the text

a. Write an essay on **Living Proximity to Nature.**

b. The story talks about ethnic/religious co-existence of different communities in Nepal, where the Buddhists and the Hindus and the Aryans and non-Aryans have lived in communal harmony for ages. In your view, how have the Nepali people been able to live in such harmony?