

‘No Land is Her Land’

By Prajwal Parajuly

Themes

Displacement, Exile, and the Search for Home

‘Displacement, Exile, and the Search for Home’ forms the emotional and structural core of Prajwal Parajuly’s short story ‘No Land is Her Land’ from *The Gurkha’s Daughter* (2012). The title itself is a powerful declaration: no land truly belongs to the protagonist, and she belongs to no land. The story is grounded in the real 1990s ethnic cleansing of the Lhotshampas (ethnic Nepali-speaking Bhutanese) by the Bhutanese government. Anamika Chettri and her family are expelled from Bhutan due to her husband’s activism—he wrote anti-monarchy pamphlets and resisted cultural assimilation policies (e.g. refusing to wear only Bhutanese national dress in offices).

This forced migration scatters thousands into refugee camps in Nepal such as Khudunabari. The displacement is not just physical but existential: people who had lived in Bhutan for generations, often considering it their only home, suddenly become stateless. Parajuly uses Anamika’s story to humanize this historical trauma without heavy dramatization, focusing instead on its lingering everyday effects.

Anamika experiences layered alienation- she was born and raised in Bhutan, and memories of happiness remain tied to its landscapes and life. Even after expulsion and the injustice inflicted on her community, part of her heart stays in Bhutan. Returning is emotionally and practically impossible—she opposes the idea of going back after being “discarded so unceremoniously.” Bhutan represents a betrayed home: a place of belonging that violently rejected her ethnic identity. Despite shared Nepali language, culture, and heritage, Anamika and other Lhotshampa refugees are treated as outsiders in Nepal. Locals view them with suspicion or superiority. In the refugee camp, they face othering, humiliation, and a lack of genuine acceptance. Nepal is not a welcoming motherland but another site of marginalization. This highlights the fragility of ethnic identity—being “Nepali” in Bhutan vs. “Nepali” in Nepal creates a profound disconnect.

Labeled a “loose woman” due to two failed marriages, Anamika faces moral judgment, lecherous advances in the camp. She lives with her two daughters and aging father, navigating survival, domestic struggles and societal scrutiny. Her personal life compounds the political displacement, making ‘home’ feel impossible even in intimate spaces. Parajuly portrays displacement not as a one-time event but as a chronic condition affecting identity, belonging, family, and gender roles. The story avoids romanticizing any location (Bhutan, Nepal, or the West) and instead captures the resilience of refugees who continue searching amid rootlessness. The theme resonates with questions of what “home” really means when nationality, ethnicity, and personal history pull in conflicting directions.

Refugee Experience and Bhutanese Nepali Crisis

In Prajwal Parajuly’s story ‘No Land is Her Land’, the Bhutanese Nepali Crisis (also known as the Lhotshampa expulsion) forms the historical backbone of the narrative. The Bhutanese government enforced a strict “One Nation, One People” policy to promote cultural uniformity. Ethnic Nepali-speaking Bhutanese, known as Lhotshampas, were suddenly branded as illegal immigrants. They faced discrimination, denial of citizenship, forced cultural assimilation, arrests, and violence. As a result, they were expelled from Bhutan and fled to Nepal, where they were placed in refugee camps. The protagonist, Anamika Chettri, represents the personal face of this collective trauma. Born and raised in Bhutan, she is forcibly displaced along with her family because of her husband’s activism. In the refugee camp in Nepal, she lives a life of statelessness and uncertainty. Despite sharing language and culture with the Nepalis, the refugees are treated as outsiders and burdens. Daily existence in the camp involves dependency on aid, loss of dignity, overcrowded conditions, and a painful sense of no longer being Bhutanese, yet they are not accepted as Nepali either.

Through Anamika's story, Parajuly highlights the emotional and social cost of this crisis: the betrayal by their homeland, the alienation in the supposed motherland, broken families, and the constant struggle for survival. The narrative also captures the fragile hope that many refugees placed on third-country resettlement, mainly to the United States, as a chance to rebuild their lives and finally find a place they could call home.

Female Agency, Resilience, and Survival

In Prajwal Parajuly's *'No Land is Her Land'*, the theme of female agency, resilience, and survival is powerfully embodied in the protagonist Anamika Chettri. As a Bhutanese-Nepali refugee woman, Anamika navigates multiple layers of hardship — displacement, broken marriages, single motherhood, and social stigma — with remarkable grit and practical intelligence. After two failed marriages, including one marked by pressure to produce a son, she refuses to be defined solely by victimhood. Instead, she actively makes choices to protect her two daughters and secure a better future for them, even when those choices expose her to gossip and moral judgment within the conservative refugee camp.

Anamika is portrayed as a strong woman who confronts morally corrupt men, economic difficulties, and the daily uncertainties of camp life. She carries the responsibility of caring for her aging father and her children while dealing with the emotional weight of exile. Her resilience shines through her willingness to bend social norms when necessary, such as participating in the staged family photograph for immigration officials, demonstrating her pragmatic approach to survival. Rather than waiting passively for rescue, Anamika exercises agency by seizing whatever opportunities come her way in the hope of resettlement. Parajuly presents Anamika not as an idealized heroine but as a real, complex woman whose survival strategies often invite criticism from society. Through her character, the story highlights how refugee women face added burdens of patriarchy and moral scrutiny on top of political displacement. Her quiet determination to rebuild life for her daughters, despite repeated setbacks, underscores the extraordinary resilience required to endure statelessness and rootlessness.

Cruel Optimism and the American Dream

In Prajwal Parajuly's *'No Land is Her Land'*, the theme of cruel optimism and the American Dream captures the fragile and often illusory hope that sustains the protagonist Anamika amid prolonged displacement. After years of stateless existence in the refugee camp, she pins her hopes on resettlement, particularly to the United States. This dream of a better life — with security, dignity, and a real home for herself and her two daughters — becomes her primary source of motivation as she navigates the uncertainties of refugee bureaucracy and daily hardships.

Parajuly portrays this hope as a form of cruel optimism: the attachment to a future that keeps Anamika going, yet may ultimately prove unattainable or disappointing. The story highlights this through moments like the carefully staged "perfect family" photograph for immigration officials, where Anamika's estranged second husband reappears opportunistically to improve their chances. Such acts reveal the compromises and performances refugees must undertake in pursuit of the American Dream. While the West represents an imagined Promised Land offering escape from camp life and social stigma, the story subtly questions whether any land will truly deliver the belonging Anamika seeks.