



Michigan State University  
Fulbright-Hays Group Study Abroad 2009:  
Nepal in the Contemporary World



Lesson Plan  
from

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**Title:** Nepali Poetry as a Reflection of Culture

**Subject Areas:** English – World Literature

**Grade Levels:** 11-12

**Length of Lesson:** Two 55 minute class periods

**Summary/Overview:**

Students can learn specific qualities and characteristics of a culture by studying the literature of that culture. Students will work in small groups to study Nepali poetry. By using guiding questions as well as their own deductive reasoning, the students will then teach their poem in another small group (as a standard jigsaw). Students will engage one another in discussion over the poetry. The teacher will then summarize the major points of the poems. Students will also respond to a short essay prompt concerning the themes and ideas in the poems.

**Primary Objectives:**

Students will read poetry that is written from a new perspective. They will study parts of the Nepali culture as seen in the literature of that culture. Students will also work on oral and written communication skills in response to the cultural poetry.

**Required Resources/Materials:**

- Copies of the poems listed below:
  - “The Women at the Water Tap,” by Tirtha Shrestha
  - “In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks,” by Pratisara Sayami
  - “Mother,” by Susmita Nepal
  - “Cycle,” by Bimal Nibha
- Several 3x5 notecards

**Procedure:**

1. Welcome the class, and have this journal question on the board, “What ideas/images come to mind when you think Nepal?” Give students five minutes to respond. Discuss with the class the ideas/images that came to mind. Students will probably have a very limited view of

Nepal and its people. Explain to students that a teacher could very easily find a history book to explain the place where Nepal once was. A teacher could very easily “google” all sorts of information about the people and culture of Nepal, and just hand it out in class. Or... a teacher could allow his/her students to experience part of the Nepali culture by reading the literature of Nepal. The authors of these poems are from Nepal and they live in Nepal and they write about Nepal. Without going to Nepal, the most authentic experience a teacher can give a student is the opportunity to read the stories of Nepal.

2. Explain that students will be working in small groups to learn a specific poem. Then students will switch groups in a jigsaw and will teach the poem to three new people. Each group will have guiding questions to use while learning the poems. Students are also expected to go beyond the guiding questions to find other interesting aspects to the poems. The people who are acting as the students in the second group will also have the responsibility to grade the teacher.

3. Number off or use notecards to have students choose poems out of a hat. The groups should have four students each. Once students have their groups, pass out the poems and guiding questions to the groups and inform students that they have until the end of the class period to learn as much as they can about the poem in front of them.

4. To begin the second day of the lesson, have students get into their original groups for five minutes to finalize any ideas or changes from yesterday’s plan. Hand out the grading evaluation form to teach student, and create the new groups by numbering off or pulling numbers out of the hat. Make sure that groups consist of four students, and that each group has all four poems represented.

5. Once all of the groups are in place, give the first person/poem seven minutes to teach the poem. Repeat process until all four students have taught their poems. Make sure you are reminding students about the grading evaluation every so often during the process. Once the 28 minutes are up and each student has had a chance to teach, have students move back to their original seats. Students should finish filling out their evaluations and turn them in.

6. For the last fifteen minutes of class, go over the poems as a class and point out any missing pieces or any information that needs more attention. Follow the information that is given at the end of each poem on the following pages. As homework due the next day, give the students the hand out at the end of this document.

### **Assessments:**

1. Discussion
2. Student to Student Grading Evaluation
3. Homework Writing Assignment

### **Michigan Content Expectations Met:**

- CE 3.1.7 Analyze and evaluate the portrayal of various groups, societies, and cultures in literature and other texts.
- CE 3.2.4 Respond by participating actively and appropriately in small and large group discussions about literature (e.g., posing questions, listening to others, contributing ideas, reflecting on and revising initial responses).
- CE 3.3.5 Demonstrate familiarity with world literature, including authors beyond American and British literary traditions.

### **Bibliography Unique to this lesson:**



5. What aspects of the Nepali culture are evident in the poem? Explain.

The Women at the Water Tap, by Tirtha Shrestha

The women at the water tap  
are more frolicsome than water  
their lips move more rapidly  
than the liquid lips  
of water

The women at the water tap  
fill their jugs  
singing  
songs of dissatisfaction  
Sometimes they become  
more licentious than  
the crests and ripples of water  
Sometimes they appear  
more peaceable than a pool

The women at the water tap  
are most of all like water  
They mostly spend their time  
murmuring like water

Teacher notes on “The Women at the Water Tap”

Traditionally, women in Nepal have been the ones to collect the water. Most of the Nepali population lives in rural villages in the foothills of the Himalayas. Most water is found in the valleys of these foothills, so someone had to go down to the valley to collect the water and bring it back to the family farm. Some of these journeys would take half of the day, depending on how far the family lived from the valley. With modern technology, water pumps have been installed in some villages. The water can now be pumped much closer to family farms. Rather than going all the way down to the valley, the women may only have to walk to the nearest water tap. One water tap may supply water to several different family farms. The water tap becomes a place where news and gossip is shared among the women who gather there to collect the water. In this poem, Shrestha compares the women and their gossiping ways with the water itself. The water ripples and reaches other water particles in the same ways that the women’s words reach one another. Shrestha uses the word “licentious” to describe their ways, describing them as sexually promiscuous because of their words and how they are used

to share with one another. Shrestha also mentions that the women discuss their dissatisfaction. These women live very difficult lives and the poet is making a commentary on the difficult situations that many Nepali women find themselves in on a daily basis. Perhaps this time at water tap is a type of group therapy for these women, which allows them to release some of their burdens.

In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks, by Pratisara Sayami

Next to the road I had reached:  
green, quivering paddy stalks  
As soon as the breeze started  
they laughed and tittered in play  
pushing and shoving each other,  
these young women  
so full of life

After five or seven days:  
those same stalks, now bent in abashment  
decked with golden flowers  
like brides arriving at their new homes

After some time:  
how they had stooped, these stalks  
like trees burdened with fruit  
like a wife preparing to bear new life

Today again I saw the same stalks  
turned into straw  
and laid out on the fields:  
like a woman just through  
with delivery

like the bloodless face  
of an anemic woman

Teacher notes on “In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks”

This poem traces the steps of a Nepali woman. Traditionally in Nepal, the women have been given the role of planting the rice seeds in the paddy. This tradition continues today. The men generally plow the fields and prepare them for the seeds, but the women are the ones who spend backbreaking hours planting each rice seedling by hand. This poem uses the planting of rice seeds and the life of the rice plant as a symbol for the life of a Nepali woman. The first stanza shows how a young girl is full of life and laughter without a care in the world. The rice seeds sway in the breeze and appear to be having as much fun as a young girl just starting her life. The second

stanza shows the rice seeds starting to bend over, and Sayami compares this motion with the idea of a young Hindu bride covering her face in embarrassment as she meets her husband. As the rice plant gets older and grows, it continues to take on the characteristics of a Nepali woman. The third stanza illustrates the rice plant stooping and “burdened with fruit.” The young bride from the second stanza is now carrying new life within her and she is hunched over with this burden. The fourth and fifth stanzas show the rice plant at the end of its life, yellowed and straw-like. The woman has now given birth to her child and she lies there pale and weakened from the delivery. The poem ends with the harvesting of the rice plant and now that the Nepali woman has delivered her child, what happens to her? Does she die? Or, is it symbolic of the purpose of her life coming to an end? She has given a child to her husband, to her country, what else is left for her? The poet is making quite a statement here. Perhaps the woman does die, and the poet’s statement pertains to the mortality rates of women in Nepal. Or, perhaps the woman doesn’t die...

Mother, by Susmita Nepal

Mother cuts each morning  
with the edge of a sickle  
with all her strength she bundles life  
into a heap of grass  
then lays it down  
before the hunger of cattle

While milking cows,  
in each stream she sees  
the white teeth of laughing children  
She is puzzled by the way pots and plates  
stare at herself, ablaze at the stove

Sorrows appear before her  
and dance rhythmically  
She just gazes at them  
Unspoken words she gathers  
for her unmarried daughter  
She wants to hide the rising moon  
in the folds of her clothes –  
a snack to erase her hunger  
sharpened by loneliness

Memories of her son gone abroad  
become a thousand days and vanish  
Each time, Mother plants seeds of hope  
in the folds of forty year-old scarcity

But these seeds never grow  
It can't be said when he'll return  
to fix the broken dam in her heart –  
her son gone abroad  
Teacher notes on "Mother"

The poem begins by showing a Nepali mother doing her usual daily tasks. She cuts grass to feed to the cows and she milks the cows and she washes the dishes. While she is doing her work she is also thinking about her life and her children. She feels sorrow when she thinks about her unmarried daughter and her son who has gone abroad. The unmarried daughter is just a fleeting mention in the poem, while the mother seems to dwell on her son who has gone abroad. In traditional Nepali culture, the society is a patriarchy. Sons are honored and esteemed much more than daughters. Sons are sent to private boarding schools while daughters are allowed to go to the poorly funded public school. Sons have more opportunities in Nepal because of their status. This mother is more worried about her son than her daughter, probably because if the son fails it will bring more embarrassment to the family than if the daughter fails. In more recent years, there has been a trend of children who are educated going abroad to study and/or work. Because Nepal is such a poverty stricken country, many people go abroad to the UK, the USA, or Australia in order to increase their opportunities. Many mothers throughout the country grieve the presence of their children after they have moved abroad. Although the mother knows that her son is becoming successful abroad, she misses him and is now lonely.

Cycle, by Bimal Nibha

It's been a few days  
my bicycle has vanished  
Do you know where I might find it?

It's true that my cycle is small  
its tires are bald  
they have too little air  
the color is faded  
the stand is broken  
the kinetic light is faulty  
the bell trills softly  
the peddles move slowly  
the chain is old  
the handlebars are askew  
the wheel is bent  
it has no carrier  
and no lock

No matter what  
even if it's small and defective  
even if it's shabby  
no matter what it's like, that cycle is mine

The weight of my body lies on its seat  
The measure of my feet fills its peddles  
The print of my hands marks its handlebars  
My breath rests in each part of that cycle  
I am there  
In summary that cycle is my life

(What kind of place is this  
not unknown to me, my own village  
where in the bright light of midday  
while life has vanished  
Do you know where I might find it?)

It's been a few days  
my bicycle has vanished  
Do you know where I might find it?

#### Teacher notes on "Cycle"

In this poem, a child has lost his bike. Although he knows that his bike is not the best, he also realizes that it was his one important possession. He refers to his cycle as his "life," indicating that there is nothing in his life as important to him. He also mentions that he lives in village. It's where he has always lived and he thought that he knew the people in this place. He thought his bike was safe, and now it has been stolen from him. Even though the bike is worn and tattered, someone else saw it as valuable enough to steal it. This child had more than some other kid. A broken, rusty bike is better than no bike at all. The word "cycle" also refers to more than just a bicycle. This boy has pride in something that is probably worth a very small amount of money, but because it is his, he is proud of it and it means the world to him. He is distraught over the loss of it because of its meaning more so than its worth. In Nepal, the average per capita income is less than \$400 USD. The majority of people are very poor, and this village boy is most likely no exception. He is not so concerned about the monetary worth of the bike, but this bike allowed him to visit people, it was a form of entertainment and transportation. The loss of it costs him much more than just the bike itself. It's almost as if this boy has had a moment of realization. The village that he thought he knew, he never really knew at all. The readers are witness to this boy growing up. It is not necessarily a process that he enjoys, but every person who reads this poem can understand the feeling of loss this boy experiences.

Student to Student Grading Evaluation

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Each person must evaluate three other people. Circle the number that fits the best for each category.

1. Evaluation #1 – Name\_\_\_\_\_

Presentation	1 Unprofessional	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Professional
Content	1 Too Simple	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Thorough
Overall	1 Lacked Effort	2	3 Average	4	5 Great

2. Evaluation #2 – Name\_\_\_\_\_

Presentation	1 Unprofessional	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Professional
Content	1 Too Simple	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Thorough
Overall	1 Lacked Effort	2	3 Average	4	5 Great

3. Evaluation #3 – Name\_\_\_\_\_

Presentation	1 Unprofessional	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Professional
Content	1 Too Simple	2	3 Average	4	5 Very Thorough
Overall	1 Lacked Effort	2	3 Average	4	5 Great

Homework Writing Assignment

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Required Task –

1. Write at least two paragraphs explaining what you learned about Nepali culture by studying these four poems. Examine several aspects of the culture, and analyze how these cultural attributes were displayed in the poems.

Choose ONE of the following tasks –

2. Create your own cultural poem. Think of American customs, traditions, festivals, holidays, etc. and write a poem that reveals the idiosyncrasies of American culture.

3. Write at least two paragraphs comparing and contrasting the cultural attributes of Nepali culture with the cultural attributes of other cultures you have studied. You may include knowledge about American culture, but you should include at least one other culture as well.

In order to get full points, each task must exhibit substantial effort and knowledge.