

Ranahar: Textuality of History, Culture and Politics

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ABSTRACT

The question of the relation between the history and the literature is a central question of historicism and new historicism. Literature is not possible without the influence of the time; past or present. The depiction of the past is the picture of history in the text, and the portrayal of present becomes the history in the future, hence the literary text is not free from the history in any way. Furthermore, some texts intentionally present the history, not as exactly as the history, but as the interpretation of the history, hence the mode of new historical way of understanding the text. Yogesh Raj's *Ranahar* provides the lost history of Malla dynasty, primarily the history of the last Malla king, Ranajit. The book is not a pure imagination, neither is it a pure history, but it has the combination of the historical facts and his imagination. Reading this novel, as a fiction, just as pure imagination is an injustice to the veiled part of its history. With the background of the history of Bhaktapur, this article examines the novel *Ranahar* from historical and new historical perspective on how literature has become a medium to reveal the lost history, the textuality of history.

Keywords: Historicism, new historicism, textuality, ambiguity, cultural politics

Introduction

Mentioned or not, cultural and historical factors guide the human activities and so does the literature, and at the same time literature inherently becomes the part of the historical and cultural heritage. The history provides the foundation of writing literature and literature gives the way out to the history to be exposed. Literary works can be narrative, descriptive, imaginative, persuasive, tragic, comic, informative, but the main purpose of literary work is to provide pleasure and delight irrespective to its form or mode of expression. The literary works bring the readers back to their experiences or even beyond. They provide the deeper picture of the society and experiences; the literature affects people and people affect the mechanism of the literature. On such situation, history, as the fact of the past, plays fundamental role in shaping the work of literature; either as the direct connotation of the fact or as the denotation of the fact.

The role of history can have overt or embedded in the literature. In the overt type of writing, history itself is adopted as the purpose or the theme of the literary creation, or in many other types of writings, history remains silent and hidden but other issues are highlighted with the embedded historical impact. Sometimes, the literary works may combine both the history and the culture as the central issues to revive the past at present. Composed in throughout third person narrative, *Ranahar* is a novel by Yogesh Raj with the theme of the history and culture. This article aims to research the historical, new historical and cultural elements in the novel; and it also observes how the history has come into textuality.

Statement of Problem

The Madan Prize winner novel, *Ranahar* has depicted the picture of the history of Kathmandu valley and the relationship of the kings. Reading this text purely as a literature has a drawback in understanding the history, and reading this text purely as a history does not make justice on its textuality. So, the central problem of this research work is that it is necessary to make a link between these two domains at a time- connection of history with literature.

Research Questions

This article focuses on these research questions: what historical facts are addressed in the novel? How these historical facts have been enriched into the textual decorum? Why Yogesh Raj has metaphorized the defeated war as the victory over the human desire and satisfaction? What typical modes of histories have been modified into

literary presentation and interpretation?

Theoretical Modality

Purely as a literary and library research, this study focuses on the literary analysis. *Ranahar* is a novel based on the history of Kathmandu valley, especially how King Ranajit has undergone different modes of war. Observation of the history in literature and the literature in history is the best way to make a connection between history and text. The theoretical approach applied in this research is New Historicism, which tries to examine the historicity in text and textuality in history. Historicity is the property of being in history. Historicity is the condition of the possibility of history, in which “one can distinguish between three levels of historicity: historicity of human existence, historicity of a culture; and historicity of scientific thinking and, in the long run, philosophy. (Mohanty, 2010, p. 334). A mere fact or an event does not have historicity. It is the combination of the historical fact with the textual quality.

The “Historicity of texts” suggests that writings are produced within specific social, cultural, and economic conditions, and that at some level they are determined by those conditions, even as they contribute to their formation. The “textuality of history” emphasizes that history itself can be apprehended only as a collection of representations, open to multiple mediations, renarrations, and interpretations. (Taylor, 2010, p. 485)

New Historicism aims to produce a “poetics of culture”; reading canonical texts within, and as part of, multiple forms of Writing, cutting across the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in exploring the formation of specific discourses and institutions” (Taylor, 2010, p. 484). Hence, as the theoretical discourse, New Historicism focuses on generating diverse modes of understanding the literary text with historical patterning, not as pure history, but as the interpretation of history in the text.

Ranajit, History and Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a linguistic device in expression. It befalls either with the use of a word or the statement that has many possibilities of meanings. Traditionally, ambiguity, in language, was supposed to be the linguistic flaw, but the understanding of the word and expression has undergone a change that ambiguity a literary tool of expression to allow readers to understand the works in a variety of ways, giving them depth and complexity, “in pre-twentieth-century literary criticism, ambiguity is usually seen as a flaw, but in modern criticism it becomes a term of praise” (Payne & Barber, 2010, p. 27). Ambiguity, in literature, serves the purpose of offering a deeper meaning to a literary work. By introducing ambiguity in their works, writers give freedom to readers to use their imagination and the space to explore multiple meanings.

Leaving the possibility of multiple interpretations, ambiguity is invited intentionally or befalls accidentally. If it occurs unintentionally, it may indicate writer’s inability to handle the language. But if is used intentionally, it leaves the space of criticism, interpretation and debate through writing. It is a mode of discussion in deconstructive criticism or every reading is an ambiguous reading in poststructuralist reading. Unlike deconstructive reading of every reading as no reading, the meaning of the word as no meaning and every word having many meanings, the ambiguity in the name of the central character, Ranajit, and the title of the book *Ranahar* have intentional ambiguity. The writer appears to be intending to exhibit on how the name of a person does not match to the action, though being a *Ranahar* was the situation around him however Jaya PrakashMalla has realized at the last moment of Gorkhali’s attack, “the failures in the war due to own reasons and the victories are also due to own reasons” (Raj, 2018, p. 7)¹. Whether Ranajir lost the war due to his own failure or not is another mode of discussion, but the name and the meaning really does not match with Ranajit. The word ‘Rana’ refers to ‘war’ and ‘Jit’ refers to the ‘victory’. His name hence has the meaning that he should always become victorious in the wars, but the paradox is created in his name and the history is that he became the last King of Bhaktapur; he lost the war and the country as Bhaktapur got collapsed with him. How can he become a Ranajit since he has lost the war, the dynasty and the power? So, the name Ranajit has the ambiguity.

Similarly, the title of the novel has the ambiguity in meaning. The title, ‘*Ranahar*’ has the etymological meaning as a person who loses the war or who becomes failure in the war. What is victory or not is the matter of perception. As the history shows, the king of Gorkha, Prithivinarayan Shah conquered Bhaktapur lastly among other three kingdoms of Kathmandu valley. From the point of outsiders, Ranajit is a *Ranahar*, but he himself has not felt

1 The texts from *Ranahar* to English are my translations.

as such. Widely speaking, he has felt neither as loser nor as the winner/victorious, “he did not have the regret of the loss, nor any desire to get victory, nor any inspiration to war, but the world was still mingled with the victory and loss” (Raj, 2018, p. 139). In comparison to other kings of the valley, he has no desire of kingship, no passion of war, no desire of the material life, and he has chosen to go to Kashi for the peace at his rest of his life. Furthermore, he has ruled for about fifty years (1722 -1769), how can he be failure? Since, Ranajit has risen himself above the level of the triumph and defeat, he can't exact be the Ranahar.

History, Historicism and *Ranahar*

Begun from Europe during 18th and 19th century, historicism is a theoretical movement giving the priority on the historical aspect of any text. It is a position that holds that all knowledge and cognition are historically conditioned. Historicism is an “approach to literature which sets it in the context of the ideas, conventions and attitudes of the period in which it was written” (Childs & Fowler, 2008, p. 108), and the connection of the text to any period of the history. Although good literature is ‘not of an age, but for all time; Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is ‘an all time text’, the text speaks the voice and the idea of certain social, cultural and spatial patterning, hence the text ultimately has the connection with the history. The writer as well as the readers may “bring to the literature of the past assumptions and associations that may be quite alien to the frame of reference from which that literature derives its form and meaning” (Childs & Fowler, 2008, p. 108). The historicism aims to make works connected to the history for the proper understanding and judgment of the work.

Historicism does not see the literature just as a history or just the description of the past events with potential interpretation, “literature is not, however, simply a medium for the expression of the historical knowledge. It is an active part of a particular historical moment” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 3). It includes diverse disciplines to designate an approach from a historical perspective. It has challenged a progressive view of history that sees history just as an orderly sequence of events; linear, uniform process that operated. It focuses the unique diversity of historical contexts and stresses the importance of developing specific methods and theories appropriate to each unique historical context.

New Historicism is a literary critical movement, which first developed in the 1980s. It “focusses on the intertextuality of (literary and non-literary) texts and the presence of diverse culturally specific discourses within and around the text under examination” (Childs & Fowler, 2008, p. 109). As an approach, it emphasizes the cultural and historical context, rather than focusing exclusively on the formal structure of the text itself. It postulates that literary works are not singular or solitary forms, but, instead, a product of different networks of socio-cultural practices known as the history. As such, literary works should be interpreted, not for their universal themes or just the historical content, but for their meaning as objects embedded in a certain socio-historical milieu.

The story of Ranahar and the history are closely connected. Because the author has admitted in the epilogue part of the book, “this book is not a pure history as all the historical novels. It has got the combination of the facts and the imagination” (Raj, 2018, p. 157), the novel is not a pure fiction. Relating the historicity in the novel, *Ranahar*, we see the close connection of the narrative with the history of Bhaktapur, an influential kingdom within the valley, which was ruled by King Ranajit for almost half a century. With the basic information about Ranajit's father, Bhupatindra Malla, the narrative particularly focuses on the life, from child age to the end of his kingship. Failing to foresee the impending danger from the Gorkhali King, the last Malla kingdom and hence the Malla era lost to the Shah kingdom. The book revolves around the historic situation of that period.

The narrative elaborates the events leading to the defeat and the ultimate surrender of the Mallas to the Gorkhali King one after another and Ranajit is the last among them. Kings related to each other, Mallas, the rulers of the three kingdoms within Kathmandu Valley would share the same origin and base, and they had the same language, culture and pattern of life style with art and artifacts.

By the time Ranajit Malla realized the danger of an attack by the Gorkhali King, it was already too late. Defeat was inevitable, and he could do nothing to protect his dynasty. However, he had some time before the final conquest took place. What did he do during this period? The book does not give the whole history of Ranajit Malla, neither it provides all the events that took place in his life; rather it evolves around the particular time frame.

History can be understood in two modes: the events of past as the facts and the narration of the events of past. As literature cannot be the event of past, but the narration of the past events, *Ranahar* includes the narration of selective events in the life of Ranajit, and also includes writer's imagination to empower his intention. The history

tells exact date and events objectively, but not the literature. Obviously literature includes the imaginative quality, and so has happened that the history of Bhaktapur, the history of Bhupatindra Malla and the history of Ranajit Malla has taken the textual mode in the novel, *Ranahar*.

Textuality of History, Truth and Politics in *Ranahar*

Is truth only one and unchanged? And what about fact? Fact and truth appear to be the same but sharing the similarity, they are different. Fact is unchanged, but the truth can be changed truth because it is conditioned by human history. History, therefore is not the truth, but it is the fact of past or it is about the fact. Ranajit was defeated can be a fact, but it can't be the truth. We can tell about the fact, but we cannot tell about the truth because today's truth may not be the same tomorrow; rather truth can be interpreted. The defeat of Ranajit is a fact in history, but whether it is truth or not is the interpretation in the text. If only the facts were included in the book, *Ranahar* would be a history, and if it has included the interpretation of the truth, it certainly becomes a text in literature. Tyson argues that even the writing of the history is not a pure history, but the interpretation of the history, "all historical accounts are narratives and can be analyzed" (Tyson, 1999, p. 287). The novel, *Ranahar* ends in the point where it opens as it starts with the reference of three Malla kings' surrender, Ranajit's desire to go to Kashi in his last days and ends with the same point, "defeated in the war, Ranajit kept on looking out through the window" (Raj, 2018, p. 139). The writer has included many other events of Ranajit's childhood, prince-hood, kingship, man with passion and many others, but all these events are not presented chronologically because "history is neither linear nor progressive" (Tyson, 1999, p. 287). It means the major focus of the plot is the pure history, but the interpretation, analysis and imaginative outlooks on the events as the creative force.

Textuality of the history is the process of entering the history into the text and observing the history from an individual point of view: history as an individual and individual interpretation of the events of the history. Each historical period and culture contains a unique value system, and the conceived history cannot be the aggregate of the history in general, but the individual or unique history. Understanding the unique context of each historical period is important in order to make an authentic interpretation of the past. So, understanding this text needs to understand the context in which Ranajit has come to accept his defeat and has realized it as no defeat at all. Presenting Ranajit just as the defeater, Yogesh Raj has tried to ignore the context. Being the king, a ruler and the leader of a dynasty, Ranajit should have made a plan from the very beginning but when he realized the actual condition, the situation was out of his control. Another point is that it is not only Ranajit who has been the defeater, but all Malla Kings of the valley. Furthermore, there was not a good relation among the kings of the valley, which has led him to that condition.

The novel, *Ranahar* also presents the politics silently as majority of the history is the history of politics and in Foucault's idea, majority of the history is the history of power, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). And the power "must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate" (Habib, 2008, p. 771) and always the power equals to the politics. The king of Gorkha, Prithvi Narayan Shah has made all sort of political preparation to trap Kathmandu valley with the political motif of unification. Even if Ranajit had made any preparation, it would have created a great disaster and death. Better he surrendered and thought about the life of the people and citizen rather than preserving his power.

As early as the king Ranajit is a little prince of nine, he has been kidnapped, a politics in a different way, as he has been sent to Nagadesh, "but the child Ranajit did not have any concern about this politics" (Raj, 2018, p. 15). Then, politics has ruled over him, but he has not ruled the politics. The defeat of Malla kingdom has many causes; they are the political causes- Mistrust among Malla Kings of the valley, Gorkhali king's strategy to make them separate, boarder seal from around the valley and Gorkhali king's ambition of unification. These all are the reasons why all-powerful Malla kings have become powerless, but in case of Ranajit, "he could not recognize the friends and enemies of the kingdom" (Raj, 2018, p. 128). Victorious Gorkhali King has behaved three Malla kings differently after they have been defeated- "Tejnarsingh spent all his life in prison, Jayaprakash wanted to regain the kingdom" (Raj, 2018, p. 131), but Ranaji tMalla is offered a small kingdom/village to rule over. Ultimately, at the age of seventy-five, he has chosen the spiritual transition leaving all the prosperity of the kingship. As there is no difference "between cultural texts that are social and political and that are not" (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 2) in the historical perspective, these different modes are the representative events on how the novel has observed the history, culture and politics of the past from the present lenses.

Ranahar: Myths, Cultural Politics and History

History, myth and culture are interlinked, and history, in many cases, is the history of cultures. Ranahar is not only the history of the king Ranajit and his defeat, but it is equally the history of the cultures at Kathmandu valley. It is a literature as “one discourse among many cultural discourses” (Habib, 2008, p. 762) as the historical discourses. No history is separate from culture, and no culture becomes different from the history; culture is as important as politics in the depiction of the history in the text, and literary texts are “equal sources with other texts in the attempt to describe and examine the linguistic, cultural, social and political fabric of the past in greater detail” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 12). King Bhupatindra Malla has sent his closest man to the kingdom of Makawanpur to ask the daughter/princess for Ranajit where the marriage is a cultural politics however that politics has not come to the positive end.

How the temples were established and how people’s attitudes were centralized in the name of the culture is an important message of the text. It has included the information on the establishment of the temple of Bhadrakali and the temple of Siddhilaxmi (Raj, 2018, p. 58) with beautifully decorated statues. The novel has set an essential departure in depicting the cultural politics of the valley through the reference of Newari culture of different Jatras; Indra Jatra and Ghode Jatra. These traditions have become the myths and cultural values in the generations to come.

Culture, in the form of religion has entered into the politics, “he bought the house to the Christians to make a church, he allowed them to make religious publicity” (Raj, 2018, p. 128) that the culture and religion have become the causes of the political transformation and the causes of the defeat of Ranajit, hence religious culture as the determining factor of political change.

The myth of the relation between Bhairav and Bhadrakali (Raj, 2018, p. 40) has created a remarkable cultural history among the people of Kathmandu valley. Impressed by the physical strength and beauty of Bhairav had to wait for two years passionately to achieve him, and the temples of Bhairav and Bhadrakali were established. This myth has ruled the consciousness of the people even today. Similarly, the myth of Bhajukas (Raj, 2018, p. 22) and the punishment drowning him alive is they myth of politics, brutality and anarchy.

Hence, the novel explores the history of Malla kingdom of Bhaktapur in connection with the cultural politics and mythical politics combining some of the mythical history and cultural history of the kingdom with his interpretation.

Conclusion

Yogesh raj, not as a historicist, but as a narrative writer has analyzed the history of Bhaktapur Kingdom and the history of the last Malla King, RanajitMalla in literature taking into consideration of the cultural, social and historical events that make up the core content of the text. The whole narrative has presented the historical theme with keen interest in recovering lost history with a shift of an individual (Ranajit) up to the social and cultural hierarchy. The story of Ranajit comprehends the historical and cultural context at the time it tries to analyze the cultural and intellectual history portrayed in it. The history of Ranajit and Bhaktapur in the novel focuses on interpreting the social, cultural and political factors and these elements have heavily affected the author thus influencing the context in which the writer has written the text.

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