

Devkota's The Lunatic: A Master Piece of Modern Nepali Literature

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Abstract

This study analyzes Laxmi Prasad Devkota's "The Lunatic" as a master piece of modern Nepali literature. Objective of the study is to examine the key modern literary characteristics of the The Lunatic to exemplify The Lunatic as a master piece of modern literature. "The Lunatic" by Devkota uses modern literary characteristics such as experimentation, stark imagery, individualism, societal change and stream of consciousnesses. These modern poetic styles help the poet in expressing experiences and feelings of the period in the wider cultural context of Nepal moving towards modernity. Qualitative method guided discourse analysis is used to analyze the key modern literary characteristics of The Lunatic.

Keywords: modern, literary, characteristics, modernity, poetry.

Introduction

Devkota got an outstanding space as a modernist writer with modernist characteristics in his poem "The Lunatic" in Nepali literature (Shahi, 2024). Through these poetic writings Devkota gave a new turn to Nepali poetry expressing feelings and experiences of the period. His leading involvement in the project of initiation and development of an alternative literary enterprise in Nepali literary history is huge and visible (Shahi, 2024). Of course, as the time, nuclear power forced many countries such as Britain, German, America, Japan, Italy and Russia into world war II destroying many cities, killing million people and changing long established western social order with fall of British imperialism and dismantle of Germany into two separate states; east and west, rise of America and USSR as two super power of the world, and industrial revolution paved a way to rapid advancement of information technology, Devkota was able to pave a way to Nepali literature, producing literature of modern aesthetics and characteristics; rebellion in The Lunatic, societal change in the Yatri, realistic experience in the Bhikhari, and experimentation in all of these poems. Experimentation, stark imagery, individualism, societal change and stream of consciousnesses are main literary features readers can find as typical modern features when reading these poetic writings. Apart from these, as Shahi said, in between 1935 and 1947 when Nepal was in the grip of Rana autocracy, Devkota wrote pre-modern literature characterized by romantic notion of art. Shahi argued that *Muna Madan*, published in 1935, began a decent starting point of Nepali Romanticism with focus on organic and

inclusive pattern of seeing life and nature, which refutes exclusive classical view of art led by Lekhnath Paudel (2024). Shahi (2023) said that Devkota's romantic literature is dominated by stylistic technique to express the moment of the time. Figurative speech governs his poetry and creative writings. Shahi (2021) argued that quest for spirituality, seeking order and peace in nature, worshiping nature as universal soul and description of dynamics of cultural violence and natural harmony some of the literary elements in Devkota's pre-modern literary trend. During his life time, Nepal witnessed abolition of one hundred four year-long Rana family rule, independence of India from British colonial power, institutionalization of communism in China in 1949 and rise of many new nations in South Africa. This historical break-point inspired Devkota to produce modern literature filled with quest for political transformation, establishing Nepali literary discourse as revolutionary artistic project to question tradition and institutionalizes what comes as new for the betterment of mankind. A few common features that characterize Devkota's romantic and modern tradition are break with convention, lyricism, linguistic experiments, and use of diverse subject matter ranging from ethnicity to liberal democracy and communism that transform exclusive Nepali literary tradition into dialogic and open form of expression.

Literature Review

Devkota is a master of using modern features. In *Laxmi Prasad Devkota From Romanticism to Modernism*, (2017) Shahi mentioned that apart from Devkota's aesthetic quality his literature is also product of intense observation of major historical, political, economic, and social events which took place during 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, sweeping conventional perception about life and having impacted the writers' style of literary composition. This means his literature is literature of aesthetic pleasure as well as literature of historical condition advocating revolution for equality, justice and freedom. One of the formal schools of thoughts is of Basudev Tripathi who, for the first time, in Nepali academia, classifies modern Nepali literature into four folds: Classicism, Romanticism, Experimentalism and Common Trend. Tripathi argues that Lekhanath Paudel founds base of modern Nepali literature by leading classical movement in Nepali literary tradition with emphasis on rigid style and rules that balances reason and emotion. According to Tripathi, Devkota initiated Romantic Movement in Nepal by making poetry medium of expressing individual feeling and imagination (Shahi, 2017). At the same time, Tripathi provides a list of Devkota's literary characteristics such as the poet's love for nature, focus on humanity, antiquity, imagination, aesthetic beauty, lyrical tone, radicalism in themes, awareness of nationality and internationalism (*Nepali Kavita*. Vol.2. 186-189). These features testify Devkota's success to be a great romantic writer in Nepal. But problem with Tripathi's analysis lies in his inadequate critical adventure into the world of Devkota literature which is made of sloppy mountain ranges of feelings, pointed peaks of imagination, plain valley of aesthetic beauty, long river of and cliff of thoughts. Tripathi seems to write a hypothetical summary of Devkota without making critical effort to exemplify a list of features he made on Devkota literature in relation to an individual work by the poet. Identified literary traits should be analyzed thoroughly in order to illustrate where and how Devkota's poetry contains these elements. Furthermore, Tripathi points out that Devkota's study of British romantic writers such as William Wordsworth, P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, and St Coleridge, at Trichandra College resulted in the development of his Romanticism. In contrast, Tripathi is not interested in providing adequate details on how Devkota was influenced by British romantic poets to create history of Nepali Romanticism. Here Tripathi seems to have suffered from lack of systematic analytical framework to illustrate affinity between Devkota and British Romantic Movement. Rather, Tripathi employs top down approach associated with traditional method to examine Devkota from

more elitist point of view. Though Tripathi argues his approach to Devkota and Nepali literature is developed out of Nepali context, he lacks critical zeal with stress on objective observation and appears parochial and monolithic when reading Devkota. Having stated Devkota as a great romantic without making critical observation of the poet from ground reality is merely like philosophical assumption or hypothesis without experiments.

In his work *Laxmiprasad Devota Khandakavaya Karita*, published in 2004, Avasthi elaborates Devkota's long poetry chronologically in connection of each long poem's relation with textual elements and contextual condition. Of course, Avasthi makes an effort to describe Devkota from different angle that enriches people's perception about the poet through detailed observation of the poet's *khandakavaya*. Besides, Avasthi gets caught into Tripathi and Bandu's statement that Devkota is nature poet with love for nature and thrust for flow of imagination. Joshi also could not go beyond notion that Devkota is romantic while understanding Devkota in text and context. As these critics focus on aestheticism and their appreciation does not highlight discursive power of Devkota literature, Marxist school of criticism emerged in recent past to present how Devkota was influenced by major and minor historical and political events of the time he went through in order to write literature of revolutionary spirit. Some of these Marxist critics are Modhnath prasidh, Mohan Bikram Singh, Ninu Chapagai, Rishiraj Baral and Tarakant Pandey. Modhnath and Chapagai sound more orthodox Marxists who argue that their method is historical and fact-finding to uncover wide range of Devkota literature in Nepali political context. They have found Devkota Marxist but argue that Devkota is not grown as a revolutionary leader of people in Nepal. Obviously, Marxist critics such as Prasad and Chapagai have made break away from traditional method founded by Tripathi to give a political reading to Devkota to show how he was influenced by history of the days when India got independence, China emerged as communist nation, America and USSR became superpower in the world (Shahi, 2017). Surprisingly, Prasad and Chapagai limit themselves to old fashioned Marxist overview of literary writing. Another group of Nepali Marxist critic such as Tarakant Pandey and Mohanbikram Singh is more close to neo-Marxist thought. Pandey, Singh and Baral approach Devkota from both cultural and materialist economic and revolutionary perspective. However, both school of thoughts; aestheticism initiated by Tripathi and Marxism founded by Prasad do not show their awareness of what is going on in international academic field to promote Nepali critical scene and read Nepali literature from more refined critical perspective. At the time, Tripathi begins his school of aesthetic appreciation; there has been massive change in western literary criticism. New Criticism that was flourished out of Immanuel Kant's concept "art for art's sake" has been challenged by North Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) which focuses on archetype, constructing theories of symbols, myths, and genre and viewing poem as organic entity and one's literary experiences as a whole (Daniel Hoffman 65). English literature has already received critical insight from neo-Marxist, feminist and psychoanalyst. Even post structuralism and Postcolonialism have become immediate concern in the western literature to address issues of race, ethnicity, diversity and changes in modern world. On the contrary, Nepali Marxist critics and aesthetic critics living and writing scholarly document in the twentieth century have become victim of inaccurate information about advanced literary culture and zeal to liberate themselves from their own parochialism and leaning towards political influence and narrow nationalist attitude. Even while undertaking research project on Devkota they have not traced origin of Devkota scholarship and its shift from oral to written culture in Nepal. Therefore, it is intellectually meaningful and necessary to make an effort that could recover entire history of Devkota interpretative tradition to visualize multiple facets of the poet's creativity at home and abroad. For this theoretical framework should be flexible with cross-disciplinary orientation

but such approach needs to grow out of study of Devkota whose literary sensibility creates cultural world that celebrates diversity and pluralism with modern consciousness.

Yet to scrutinize critically Devkota literature and scholarship, this research project goes on to trace informal and formal critical tradition from the poet's days to the present. Indeed, like English literary giants T. S. Eliot and William Wordsworth, Devkota was too and is capable of attracting and bewildering readers and critics during his life and after his life in the contemporary intellectual society. Only common consensus among all critics from different cultural background and time is that Devkota literature is panorama of Nepali cultural life which is not just nurtured in beautiful texture of Himalaya and eastern Sanskrit heritage but it also reflects western literary features and vision of democratic society shaped by advancement of science and technology and use of nuclear energy for power. It is very difficult to point out an exact dateline from where people began to appreciate Devkota as a poet of visionary power and cultural wisdom. In fact, Devkota, as Kumarbahadur Joshi (2000) argues, received praise from his school life when he wrote poem and recited before his fiends in *Devkotaka Kabita-Yatrako Bisleshana Ra Mulyankana*. He became spark of Nepali heart with publication of *Muna Madan* in 1935. *Muna Madan*, written in folk meter, touches people's heart with focus on experience of common Nepali life rooted in poor Nepali economic realities and dominated by Rana oppressive social system. Development of school education during 1920s and 1950s promoted oral tradition on Devkota scholarship by including the poet's work as part of school teaching and learning. Consequently, Devkota received reward of great Nepali poet from people who found his literature mirror to their day to day life experiences in the most difficult period of Nepali history. Even today this trend continues among majority of common Nepali people who find Devkota still alive, speaking their voice for basic needs; shelter, food and cloth without threat to live peaceful life and rights to education and justice. Obviously, such oral appreciation of the poet is not directed by awareness of critical tendencies to describe his work from academic standard. It is a kind of heart felt response which comes all of sudden when reading Devkota and hearing people talk about the poet's life devoted to creating the vast literary panorama. But if readers try to look into oral tradition with critical mind, they can easily notice similarity between it and western mimesis approach propounded by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) (Adams, 1972). Then common folk read and understand Devkota in terms of mimesis which defines literary art as imitation of cultural life lived in specific geography and influenced by cross-cultural diffusion through trade and politics.

Madupark brings the same idea of Marxist ideology given by Modhnath Prasad, Ninu Chapagai and Dr. Tulsi Bhattarai. Shastrimarg Smarika just reads Devkota without critical effort. It depicts the poet as writer of bold heart without providing analytical insight into the poet's literary world. Devkota has also got space in the critical discussion of English scholar Michal Hutt who has translated *Muna Madan* into English and gave a critical look into it, describing *Muna Madan* as pioneering modern literary work in Nepali literature. Hutt (2001) finds the poet modern in terms of use of folk meter and local theme related with common people. Although Hutt tries to verify Devkota as modern Nepali poet, his analysis is limited to a kind of bird's eye-view which neither traces genesis of Devkota modernity in complete framework nor fully describes Devkota literature to provide all encompassing map of Devkota's modern literature.

Yet, it is an urgent need to look at "The Lunatic" to reflect upon some key modern characteristics in Devkota's poems.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual framework provides insights into research questions, objectives, methods and discussion.

Modern literary characteristics

Devkota's modern literary characteristics in "The Lunatic"

Qualitative research design

Research Questions

1. What are modern literary characteristics in "The Lunatic"?
2. How do Devkota's modern literary characteristics reveal feelings and experiences of the period?

Research Objectives

1. To identify modern literary characteristics in Devkota's "The Lunatic".
2. To analyze Devkota's "The Lunatic" in terms of feelings and experiences.

Research Design and Methods

Research design employed in this study is a qualitative research design. The qualitative research design has shed light on epistemology of interpretivism and ontological orientation of constructionism. A discourse analysis based on textual interpretation in the context is considered. Data collected were qualitative which includes words, sentences and narratives. Sources of data were primary texts written Devkota and secondary texts by widely known critics from Nepal.

Results and Discussion

Analyzing modern literary characteristics in Devkota's "The Lunatic" is meaningful act to understand how Devkota used modern literary characteristics to compose poems. His poetry contains modern features which make his writing modern in the Nepalese context and global context. Shahi said (2017) Devkota's "The Lunatic" is writing of pre-modern trend.

Stream of consciousnesses.

The Lunatic marks the beginning of modern Nepali literature (Shahi, 2024). "The Lunatic" breaks away from established tradition of composing poems and gives a new turn to stream of consciousness and experimentation. A stream of consciousness is a key characteristic of modern literature. As a poetic style stream of consciousness leads the poet to reveal mental process showing individual feelings and experiences. As a vital poetic diction, Devkota used stream of consciousness in "The Lunatic" to express mental and individual thought process of the poet as well an individual of the modern society. Without any feeling of sorry, the lines of "The Lunatic" clearly display individualistic feelings and experiences employing modern literary technique as:

Surely, my friend, insane am I!

Such is my plight!

I visualized sound,

I hear the visible,

And fragrance I taste.

And the ethereal is palpable to me. (*The Lunatic & Other Poems* 47)

These poetic lines drive the poet to express mental process. He offers a beautiful picture of the thinking process which does not have coherence and structured thinking. But the poetic lines reflect fragmented mental structure of the man who is undergoing the modern age filled with multiple social experiences. Stream of consciousness used in “The Lunatic” aims to reveal an individual feelings and experiences related to bitter and challenges of modern man living around selfish people:

In the frigid winter month,
I basked in the first white heat of the astral light,
They called me crazy.
For me Buddha, the enlightened one,
Touched me in the depths,
And they called me one distraught,
When I danced to the basting notes of the harbinger of the spring,
They called me one gone crazy.
I sang with the tempest one,
And the wisecracks of the world despatched me down to Ranchi.
(*The Lunatic and Other Poems* 45-51).

Above lines are show Devkota’s use of stream of consciousness style.

Experimental Style

The Lunatic is also presents an evidence of experimentation. Experimental style of the modern literature refers to a literary diction that drives the writer to express freely. “The Lunatic” is expression of freedom. Devkota is not bound by any rules and regulations. Rather, he freely expresses what he feels. The following lines are examples of the free expression:

Look at the strumpet of the tongues a-dancing of shameless
Leadership!
At the breaking of the backbones of the people’s right!
When the sparrows-headed bold prints of black lies on the papers,
Challenges the hero in me called Reason,
With conspiracy false, (*The Lunatic & Other Poems* 53)

Indeed, the poet is free human being. He is a modern individual who expresses his own personal feeling and ego. He does not care who says what about him and his expression. He is free and open to share his thoughts to audience. This quality makes the poem a piece of modern literature using experimental style. Due to sue of this style Devkota breaks with the tradition and establishes himself as a modern writer in Nepal.

Stark Imagery

Stark imagery is another use of modern poetic diction in “The Lunatic”. Stark imagery refers to unusual sue images to explore trapped and blocked individual. The lines below show Devkota’s use of stark imagery:

My brain is in a blaze,
Like a wild. Wild conflagration.
I am infuriated like a forest fire,
Frenzied, my friend,
As one who would devour the world immense

Surely, my friend (*The Lunatic and Other Poems* 55).

Above line present images filled with ideas of fragmentation, trap, fury, and anger. Images are black and bitter. The poet brings beauty and ugliness together:

I am the moon-bird of the beautiful,
The iconoclast of ugliness !
The tenderly cruel !
The bird that steals the celestial fire!
The child of the tempest!
I am the wild eruption of a volcano insane,
Surely, my friend, whirl-brain,
Such is my plight !(*The Lunatic and Other Poems* 55)

Images of beauty, ugliness, cruel, tempest, insane, whirl-brain and plight of an individual are of stark imagery. Use of this style makes Devkota a modern poet. The variety of poetic styles employed in *The Lunatic* exemplify that “*The Lunatic*” master work of modern Nepali literature expressing societal transformation and changes.

Societal Changes and Individualism

“*The Lunatic*” widely read and discussed poem beautifully offers a series of political questions in the voice of revolutionary spirit and agenda expressing anger against existing social system. Main question that dominates entire poem is what does society know about reality? Answer is society knows nothing about reality. What society takes as real is illusion in the eye of people like poet. In the mean time, speaker answers other questions to show in what way he is different from normal practices with focus on six senses that helps the poet to understand life and society differently in order to relocate man’s relation in democratic way. Like post war American and English fictions, Devkota’s literary voices are expression of man’s psychology shaped by social factors such as alienation, quest for individual freedom, will to power and irony governing life. For example, speaker of “*The Lunatic*” is not single integrated individual but assembles of many contradictory things such as desire to accumulate wealth, struggle for new democratic human relation and sense of hollowness. As a freeman , speaker rejects convention in which he feels alienated and is aware of political myth that offers society new way of relation in the turbulent time. Irony is at the heart of “*The Lunatic*” in which the poet condemns the people who feel they are realistic, practical and normal, are, in fact, abnormal and unable to use reason to see their ironical situation brought by societal changes and development of Sigmund Freud’s psychology and social Darwinism that the poet read. Freud’s definition of personality derived by three levels of mind; conscious, unconscious and subconscious, and Carl Gustap’s concept of archetypal memory frequently appears as theme of Devkota literature. Personality expressed in “*To a Beautiful Prostitute*” is an example of fragmented perception, refuting existed notion of woman’s sexual condition and adopting new social code and biological feeling. Besides, speaker is driven by unconscious part of mind supporting sexual action as way for survival.

literary elements employed in *The Lunatic* have affinity with English romantic and modern, and postmodern literary traits such as theme of fragmentation, stream of conciseness, stark imagery, experimentation, and expression of societal changes and individualism. This linguistic experimentation makes “*The Lunatic*” a master work of modern literature.

Conclusion

Yet re-examining *The Lunatic* from discourse analysis leads to the conclusion that *The Lunatic* is a master piece of modern literature. Set of literary characteristics such as stream of consciousness, stark imagery, experimental, individualism, and societal changes has close affinity with western romantic, modern and postmodern literature. These features exemplify that *The Lunatic* is modern literary work of art. “*The Lunatic*” is mirror to modern literary characteristics filled with idea and practices of cross cultural worldviews and divergent linguistic and thematic issues of societal changes and individualism. Examining “*The Lunatic*” through the lens of discourse analysis redefines the poem in terms of poetic styles and proves that the poem is the master work of modern literary characteristics.

Recommendations

“*The Lunatic*” requires thematic analysis to examine how Devkota uses a variety of diction to create a picture of the society undergoing changes.

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