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Voice from the Margin in Khagendra Sangraula's *Junkiriko Sangeet* [*The Music of the Firefly*]*

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Abstract

The women particularly from Dalit community are doubly under-shadowed in Khagendra Sangraula's novel Junkiriko Sangeet [The Music of the Firefly]. The novel shows how women from Dalit community are tortured by their male partners and people from the so-called high caste people. The objective of this article is to study discrimination of Dalit women based on their caste, economic status and gender as women. The novel deals with the issue of Dalit, particularly Dalit women who have been physically and mentally exploited by upper caste people. This study shows how high caste people give stereotype identity to low caste people in order to impose their power over them. Sangraula depicts the harsh reality of Simring village where Dalit woman is fed stool and drunken men's urine accusing her doing black magic. The Dalit women have no unity and some level of conscious to raise voice against such inhuman act. Therefore, their voice remains unheard. To analyze the issue explored above, this article takes theoretical ideas from Subaltern Studies, particularly from Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, Gramsci and Foucault. The scholars of Subaltern Studies believe that subaltern group of people lack their own true representor which is the cause of remaining their issue at the bottom of social hierarchy. Some scholars believe that subaltern studies groups are like new historians who have to create discourse in order to re-write history of history less subaltern group. This paper also rewrites the ignored history of history less Dalit and Dalit women in Nepal.

Keywords: Discourse, discrimination, hierarchy, injustice, voiceless.

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Caste Base Nepali Society

Khagendra Sangraula's novel *Junkiriko Sangeet* narrates the painful stories of those groups of people who have been at the bottom of social hierarchy. The people from Dalit community always remain at the bottom of social hierarchy in Nepali society. Durga Sob points out the Hindu religion are the root cause behind this caste-based discrimination because Dalits are put at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy (57). He further claims that the Hindu caste system was legalized in the Kathmandu valley in 15th century and throughout Nepal by the Civil Code (Country Code of the year 1854). Dalit were legally suppressed by this code because as per this code, they occupied the lowest social status (Sob 57). Although the new constitution of 1964 abolished untouchability and other forms of caste-based discrimination, people tend to practice them as a part of their tradition and culture. The condition of Dalit women is worse than the condition of male Dalit. According to the report of International Dalit Solidarity Network, Dalit women endure extreme forms of poverty, humiliation, denial of social, economic rights and recognition as human beings. Moreover, it is reported that Dalit women are doubly marginalized because they face both caste and gender discrimination (3). Dalit women are identified by stereotyped images created by upper caste people in Nepali society.

The women from Dalit community are doubly marginalized by upper caste people as by their own male partner. In the novel, the Dalit women are badly tortured as if they are animals. The novel shows how the voices of Dalit community are not heard; moreover, this novel shows lack of unity among Dalit women as loopholes of Dalit community which makes their voice always unheard. People from Dalit community don't dare to break down narrow cluster created on the basis of caste which is their main weakness because they also don't have easy access to education confirming that "Only education gives respondent confidence to demand equality and freedom within marriage and society" (Guinee 7). In the novel, Gopilal is a character who is from upper caste. He exploits who are from particularly Dalit community. He has sadist nature because he enjoys in other people's sufferings. He always loves to make the Dalit people fool and to control their properties. The female character, Jiri, who has been often beaten for touching drinking water. Like Sangraula, Shrestha and Aryal argue that people are being discriminated in the capital city, Kathmandu even today.

“Ram Bahadur B.K. has been facing this bigotry each time while searching room for rent in Kathmandu” (Shrestha and Aryal para. 6). Even in twenty first century, the society of Nepal is same as it was in past in terms of caste or racial discrimination. There are many Jiris whose voices have been unheard for years and years. Jiri Damini of Simring village represents many Jiris in Nepali society who are being tortured for long time.

Aaite is a brilliant boy in the novel. He is more brilliant than other students who are from upper caste community in the class. However, he is not encouraged by the teachers. He can't hold first position in the exam. He is not allowed to sit with other students even if he is good at study. He has to sit on the floor, whereas other students from upper class can sit on the bench. “He is not allowed to sit on the bench. Therefore, he goes to school carrying a seat from the house” (Sangraula 241). It shows how Dalits are discouraged even by educated people. School should have been caste and race discrimination free place but reality is different from expectation. Shrestha and Aryal bring the inhuman event of Rukum where six Dalit boys were killed because Nawaraj B.K. married a girl who was from upper caste family (para. ix). Another feminist and social activist, Sarita Pariyar points out how women particularly from Dalit community are stereotyped. They are blamed that they have no formal education, they can't think critically or independently. Thus, they can't be eligible for the key post in the administration of the state (para. ii). However, the indignities and humiliations encouraged Dalit women to combat against Nepal's autocratic regimes. She reports how Dalit women took part in People's movement run by the Maoist in order to reform the structure of the society.

Dalit women are unheard in the novel. The voices of such group have been suppressed. The novel shows that caste base Nepali society has been dominating subaltern people like; the central character, Jiri and other characters from Damai community. They have faced several problems i.e. racial discrimination, physical violence and internal conflict as well. They have been raising voice against such discrimination for long time. However, their voices always remain unheard. The subaltern group's history is being ignored by the state and they have no plan to make their voice be heard. The subaltern groups always lack true representor to carry their

real voices. The voice of the Dalit community has been raised by Sangraula, who is from upper caste family.

Subaltern studies group emerged in 1980s in India in order to uplift the status of peasants who were tortured by the British rule government. The term “Subaltern” used to denote low rank of army and warrior. Later on, Gramsci used the same term to indicate that group of people who don’t have access to state power, who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. They are with low ranking in social, political or other hierarchy (Sahoo 81). The term “Subaltern” was derived from Latin Word “sub” and “alternus”. The term “sub” means “below” and “alternus” means “all others” (Sahoo 81). Sahoo argues that the objective of subaltern studies to write history “from below” (81). History from below means rewriting of history that was ignored in the traditional history. The scholar, Gayatri Chakrabarti Spivak brought the issue of women in Subaltern studies (29). She says that women as subaltern cannot be heard. She points out that women have no access to power exercise level so women remain voiceless. She strongly raises the issue of representation in her essay “Can Subaltern Speak?”. Another researcher, Kapoor also examines how women as subaltern are doubly in shadow (627). Particularly women from Asia are doubly marginalized. They are tortured by their male partners and by white women. In case of Dalit women, they are three times under shadow. They are firstly exploited by Dalit male partner and secondly like other Asian women by white women and lastly women from high caste.

The voice of Subaltern group always remains at the bottom of the society. Their voices are unheard because they have their representation crisis, no easy access to political power, lack of sufficient number of people to create pressure and they are not as much conscious as they need to be. The Dalit community, indigenous and women have been remaining at the bottom in the social structure of the Nepali society. Particularly Dalit community is known as untouchable community even today although the constitution of 1989 promised that people would be treated equally. Another more democratic and inclusive constitution came after 10 years’ civil war promising more inclusive representation and equality. However, “still many people are tortured in the name of caste” (Acharya 48). Caste system is still prevailed in Nepali society which is key cause of conflict. The society can’t be prosperous unless people are treated equally.

The silencing of the subaltern doesn't only shape the discourse; it also renders the subaltern without a "subject being" (Maggio 426). The researcher points out how subaltern people have to face identity crisis. Maggio shares how Spivak argues that case of Indian sati is illustrative of how the subaltern can't speak (424). Similarly, the structure of the Nepali society, based on caste system, makes Dalit voiceless. Spivak claims that the local elite officials, educators, religious leaders and Western scholars can never faithfully speak for subaltern group. "The most important is that more powerful people like academicians, religious leaders or people who are otherwise privileged in the society always speak for them (Riach 11). The elite or educated people forward their interest instead of subaltern people's issues. Subaltern studies group is like New historicist who want to re-write history of those group of people who were ignored by the people who were from main stream in the past. Writing history from margin became as new trend of writing history particularly after the Second World War. The ignored group like Dalit, Slaves, Women, working classes came to in seventies as "history from below" (Chakrabarty 15). The subaltern studies groups also want to construct academic discourse to bring voice of subaltern at the center.

Subaltern studies seek to write history from below. Scholars of subaltern studies group try to bring voiceless people at center. "Subaltern studies rupture the hierarchy created in between people on the basis of caste, gender and access to mainstream political power" (Kim and Dutta 143). The project of subaltern studies is to revisit to history by asking how and by whose voices are represented and erased. The objective of subaltern studies is to explore the suffering of minority group. The subaltern groups have been struggling for long time for their identity. Working within this space of displacement, Mahasweta in *Bashai Tudu* tries to write in "the history of the dispossessed, the disinherited, and the displaced that have been almost "written out" of Indian history (Bagchi 42). Narayan Dhakal comments in the cover page of this novel that unlike other majority writers, Khagendra Sangrula has raised the sufferings of Dalit community. He further praises that all the characters have given equal space in the novel.

My study attempts to examine why Dalit particularly women are unheard in Nepali society and how their voice gets strength to rupture the fences created between

so called high caste ruling people and ruled Dalit community. This study tries to make voiceless group's voice heard.

Hegemony of Gopilal

Gopilal rules over the Dalit people in Simring village making them realize their main duty is to serve people from high caste people. He says that the Damai and Kami are the castes who eat meat of dead animals. "He often compares them with pig" (Sangraula 59). The majority Dalit from old generation believe Gopilal is an incarnation of god. He creates hegemony to rule over uneducated poor Dalit people. Gopilal's discourse make them feel that they are inferior to Gopilal, they have no knowledge, skills and they are cursed by the god that they always have to beg in order to run their life (Sangraula 241). Hegemony is such constructed system where people are obliged to follow rules made by rulers even if they disagree with rules (Gramsci 4). Another researcher, Klein says, "hegemony is part force and part consent" (104). Gopilal convinces people from Dalit community that he is a ruler of this village and he sometimes uses physical force to create fear in their mind. He can keep physical relationship with Dalit women if he likes. No single male from Dalit community dares to raise voice against Gopilal's inhuman act. "Foucault has talked about two types of powers: positive and negative. Positive power moves society ahead whereas negative power creates havoc situation in the society" (Wandel 375). Gopilal's desire for negative power creates gap between people from Dalit community and from upper caste. He often touches women to fulfil his sexual desire. Once he attacked Jiri Damini for sexual relationship. Although he misbehaved Jiri, she was unable to file case against Gopilal. Even the police administration does not encourage filing case against him. The state always stands in favor of rich and powerful people. Actually, state seems to be unable to create faith in minority or voiceless people that they also can get justice. Therefore, they don't dare to raise voice and always remain their voice voiceless. No power and justice are possible without struggle. Subaltern group of people don't struggle to get justice because they are not as much conscious as they need to be.

Culture or tradition is one of the best ways of continuing hegemony by the ruling class. Gopilal wants to continue old tradition because the old system has kept him in safe position. Old culture has placed him in high rank, whereas people from Dalit community have low strata. He always remains in top position in hierarchical system of

Nepal. Gopilal assures how people from Dalit community have been serving them from generation to generation. He persuades people from Dalit community that their main job is to worship the people who are from upper caste family. They are considered to remain silent. The discourse made by Gopilal is that the job of people from Dalit community is to just listen and follow being honest. He gets angry when Aaite denies ploughing his field. [Aaruko joteni ma timro joldina] “I don’t plough your field but I may plough others’ field” (Sangraula 28). Aaite has seen exploitation of Gopilal over his father and mother. Therefore, he has sense of revolt. He wants to raise voice against Gopilal’s hegemony. Unlike father and mother, Aaite seems to raise voice against Gopilal’s against his master, Gopilal. “Foucault’s genealogy is an attempt to study historical discontinuities and breaks rather than chronological narrate what happened in the past; its main goal is to establish history of the people who were ignored in the past” (Manokha 433). Sangraula brings story of Aaite who grows having seen exploitation over his father, mother and his community. He raises voice against Gopilal’s inhuman behavior over Dalit community. Dalit males are also equally exploited by the high caste people but Dalit women are doubly tortured by the state and high caste ruling people.

Although Kapil and Sheskant are from upper caste family, they struggle a lot to change society by developing consciousness level of Dalit community. They face different challenges while speaking on behalf of Dalit community. They wanted to break down Gopilal’s hegemony in Simring village in order to uplift status of Jiri and her community. However, they could not bring drastic change as they had expected. [Gopilalharu pahilajastai Gopilal thiyee ra Jiri Damini pani ustai] “There were no change in Gopilal and Jiri Damini” (Sangraula 37). Damai gawn has been portrayed as the bottom of hell. Simring village has become as desert because of Gopilal’s extreme exploitation over Dalit community.

Status of Dalit Women in Simring Village

The Simring village has been facing different difficulties like gender discrimination, caste discrimination, poverty and fresh drinking water crisis as well. They have to depend on the water of well which is only one in the village. The Dalit women have to stand in long queue, whereas women from upper caste do not need to wait for their turn. (Sangraula 41). Jiri Damini is not only suppressed by upper caste

people, she is equally tortured by other women and men from her own community. Budhahir writes: “a Dalit is humiliated and discriminated by another Dalit; how can they fight against discrimination?” (para. 3). Budhahir further says that Dalit caste like Kami, Luhar, Oda and Sunar consider they are superior to Damai, Sarki and Dholi. Sangraula has depicted hierarchy within the same community on the basis of their economic status and caste within Dalit community. Jiri is from under the poverty line. She is a widow. The society puts a label of a witch to her. She is forced to drink urine. She is badly beaten but nobody raises voice in favor of Jiri Damini which shows how subaltern women are at the bottom of social hierarchy and how their voice always remains unheard. Spivak claims no subaltern are heard (28). Like Spivak’s claim, Jiri and her husband’s voices have remained at the bottom of social hierarchy.

The Dalit women are most oppressed group of people in the Nepali society. The so-called patriarchal hegemony gives the Dalit women a tag of inferior ones in mainstream society. “Dalit women are considered as dirt or filth, which can pollute other people” in caste-based society (Unni 43). Jiri is considered as dirt; so, she is not allowed to touch the drinking water in Simring village. Women from upper caste family beat Jiri accusing her of touching the pot of water. Jiri’s pot is thrown and broken into small pieces by the women from upper caste. However, she remains silent. She does not have access to police administration and that level of consciousness as well. The novelist has provoked the much-suppressed voice of the Dalit women in the novel. No single woman from Dalit community dares to help her. They just see Jiri being beaten by the upper caste women. Jiri’s husband dies because of the dead buffalo’s meat given by Gopilal. Her small plot of land also has been confiscated by Gopilal. She does not have any source of income to pay high interest loan. Small boy Aaite also becomes weak having seen continuous exploitation over his mother

The novelist points out some weakness of Dalit community. They only blame to the upper caste people for their exploitation but they are not ready to evaluate their inferior complex as loophole. They create group only on the basis of caste and gender which is key cause of continuation of racial discrimination in the society. They think as if all people from upper caste are exploiters. The columnist, Budhahir brings example of Olani village in the article “how a Dalit is humiliated and discriminated by another Dalit” (para. 4). He claims that Dalit community can’t achieve goal unless they are

united. The so-called lower caste Dalits of Olani village in Godavari Municipality, Kailali cannot use the water tap or well as the upper caste people. Budhaair means to say Dalit don't have unity to raise voice against such inhuman act. Similarly, the Dalit women of Simring village have no unity. They have no belief in each other. [Simringka aaimaiko najarma aaru sabai aaimai bokshi ra randi thahariyeka chhan] "All the women are either witches or prostitute in their perspectives (Sangraula 134). The voice of Dalit women remains at margin because they have no unity and they are unable to remove exploitation in their own community. Different movements are being organized by Dalit community to make their voices strong. They have been creating pressure to make strong law against caste system. However, they seem to be unable to recognize their inherent weakness. It is sure that their voice never be strong until and unless they get united. They need to change their psyche as well. They have to expand their social horizon changing their narrow concept.

Jiri Damini has been beaten by the wives of Kaji in the name of touching drinking water. She has been again tortured by the Dalit women, too. She is blamed that she is witch but no journalists, human rights activists could raise voice against that inhuman act. [Tai Daminilai aafnai jaatki aarki aaimaile bokshiko baat layera naarka khuwaai] "She is forced to eat stool by other women from Dalit community accusing her of involving in making black magic" (Sangraula 71). Sarita Pariyar writes in the Kathmandu Post that Dalit have been stereotyped in the media which discourage them to overcome their oppression. She further claims that the stories of exploitation over Dalit are not covered by the media houses in Nepal. Pain and sufferings of Jiri has remained unheard.

Conclusion

Dalit women in Simring village have to face discrimination based on their caste, economic status as well as their gender. The horrible picture of Simring village represents picture of different caste-based villages of Nepal where Dalit women are physically and mentally exploited. Although they are raped, they can't raise voice against this inhuman act because the majority Dalit doesn't have access to police administration. The voice of Jiri in Simring village is the voice of subaltern women. Her voice remains unheard. She cries for help when people from upper caste ask her to drink urine and eat stool. Upper caste people beat her and call her witch publicly but

nobody comes to help her. She tries to persuade people that she is innocent but her voice remains unheard. The voice of Dalit as subaltern can't be heard easily. Therefore, this paper plays some level of role to bring suffering of Dalit women at the front. Although Sangraula belongs to upper caste community, he has raised voice in order to uplift the status of history less people. The Dalit community lacked representation that could raise the real issues of Dalit community strongly. People from another community could not depict the real pain and suffering of Dalit women as they could explore themselves.

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