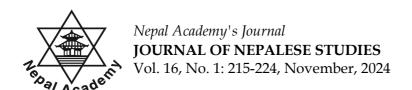# Quest of ancient fire: Mahakavi's *Shakuntala* and the contemporary Nepalese society

Tara Prasad Adhikari[1]

Corresponding author: tarapadhikari@gmail.com
Received date: 26 April. 2024 – Accepted date: 10 July. 2024

ABSTRACT

'*Quest of Ancient Fire: Mahakavi's Shakuntala and the Contemporary Nepalese Society*'*penetrates the question of the relevancy of ancient myths in new contexts. Using Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota's Shakuntala as the primary text, for it is textual criticism, this study looks into Devkota's rewriting of the Shakuntala myth, assessing its implications for contemporary Nepalese society. By scrutinizing Mahakavi Devkota's portrayal of ancient Hindu society, its people, gender dynamics, and the nexus between past and present, this explorationseeks the multifaceted relationship between literature, history, and society. Its major findings emphasize that Devkota could connect the past with the present as his writings are relevant in the modern context as well. Furthermore, this study reads the implications of Devkota's mythical adaptations as a request for cultural consolidation. Employingthe New Historicist perspective, the study investigates how Devkota highlights historical themes and encourages readers to reexamine the deeper nuances of Nepalese culture and history. Eventually, this research illustrates how Devkota's legacy is still indispensable in the Nepalese context.*

Key Words: Historicism, mythical renderings, national consciousness, Mahakavi Devkota

INTRODUCTION

For ancient myths to remain relevant, be represented, and be critically examined in the context of today's culture, they must be rewritten. It makes it

---

1   Adhikari is an Assistant Professor at Public Youth Campus, Tibhuvan University.

possible to bring classic stories up to date so that they appeal to contemporary audiences while promoting a diversity of interpretations and elevating marginalized perspectives. Myths are very adaptable so authors find them important resources for their writings. Regarding myths and their importance, Hardwick(2017) writes, "The malleability of mythological narratives has been a rich source of creativity and also an index of changes in horizons of imagination and understanding. This both permits and nuances the notion of 'Return' in cultural history" (p. 11). Renowned poet Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota also did such mythical renderings by narrating ancient tales in his own unique style, occasionally altering them somewhat. This aids in our comprehension of these tales and opens up new avenues for learning from them. By reviving and reexamining old myths, authors, and artists like Devkota support cultural regeneration while deepening our understanding of human storytelling traditions and fostering creativity and critical engagement.

Mahakavi Devkota's reputation in Nepali literature spansgenerations. His profound writings have been resonating in Nepalese social and cultural spheres long after his passing. The establishment of the Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota Study and Research Centre in 2005 underscores the ongoing interest and reverence for Devkota's life and works, reflecting a collective endeavor to preserve and promote his literary legacy.Born on the auspicious occasion of Laxmi Puja, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, though bestowed with a name symbolizing material wealth, became renowned for his intellectual richness rather than material affluence. His literary corpus, spanning various genres including poetry, novels, essays, and dramas, is imbued with themes of nationalism, romanticism, and profound humanism. Despite facing economic challenges himself, Devkota's generosity and compassion were legendary, epitomizing the altruistic spirit embodied in his writings.

Devkota's literary journey began with his education under the tutelage of his father, setting the stage for his later contributions to Nepali literature. His formal education, marked by his studies in both Sanskrit and English, provided a solid foundation for his literary endeavors. Despite financial constraints, Devkota's passion for literature led him to pursue higher education and engage in various literary circles, including his involvement with the Nepal Bhasaanuwad Parishad and his tenure as a lecturer.

Central to Devkota's literary career is his pioneering role in modernizing Nepali literature and elevating it to new heights. His epic poem *Muna Madan*, inspired by traditional folk tunes and narratives, not only became a bestseller but also garnered acclaim for its poignant portrayal of human experiences. Devkota's departure from traditional Sanskrit conventions and his embrace of colloquial language and themes rooted in Nepali society marked a significant shift in the Nepali literary landscape.The exploration of Devkota's works from a

New Historicist perspective offers a multifaceted understanding of the socio-political context in which his writings emerged. His critique of societal norms and his advocacy for individual worth over hierarchical structures are particularly resonant in the historical backdrop of Nepal. Moreover, Devkota's engagement with political issues, as evidenced by his involvement with the Nepali Congress and his critique of colonial influences, further enriches the discourse surrounding his literary legacy.

METHODOLOGY

The undertaken study titled "Quest of Ancient Fire: Mahakavi's *Shakuntala* and the Contemporary Nepalese Society" examines the relevance of ancient myths, using Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota's epic poem, Shakuntala, as its primary text. As it is a textual criticism, it scrutinizes Devkota's Shakuntala myth, directing its inquiry toward modern Nepalese culture and society. Dealing with issues like societal structure, myths, gender dynamics, and time factors, the study highlights the relationship between literature and society. As a part of the methodology, the New Historicist lens is being applied here to interpret the textual data.

DISCUSSIONS

In examining Mahakavi Devkota's selected writings through a New Historicist lens, this research paper aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between literature, history, and society, thereby enriching our appreciation of Devkota's enduring relevance in the contemporary Nepalese context.The interplay between narrative and historical context has long captivated scholars, with New Historicism emerging approximately three decades ago as a scholarly approach that intricately examines the relationship between history and fiction. Within this analytical framework, the impact of history on literature is acknowledged, while literature itself is recognized as a potent tool for interpreting history. Matos(2014), in "History, Memory and Fiction" underscoresthis link between history and fiction as "Past often allures writers for it contains the seed of our contemporary thoughts and culture. History helps to understand the human problems of the past—and even those of the present" (p. 437). Conscious of this value of the past, Devkota unfolds social realities that have underlying universal patterns and structures.

Critics of New Historicism have emphasized the significance of this approach in shedding light on the multifaceted interactions between literature and historical context. According to Greenblatt (1988), New Historicism "foregrounds the mutual dependence and interrelation of texts and their contexts, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of literary works within the socio-political milieu of their production" (p.27). This emphasis on context situates literary texts within broader historical narratives, revealing how socio-political forces shape literary expression.Moreover, New Historicism recognizes the role of national narratives in

shaping cultural identity and collective memory. As Montrose contends, "National narratives serve as repositories of collective memory, reflecting and shaping a society's understanding of its past and present" (p.49). This acknowledgment highlights the integral role of storytelling in articulating and preserving national heritage, mythologies, and cultural values.

For Devkota, the allure of the past is palpable, as he intricately weaves historical elements into his literary works to illuminate contemporary realities. His engagement with historical themes reflects an acute awareness of the enduring influence of the past on the present. Through his exploration of historical themes, Devkota invites readers to reconsider the complexities of societal dynamics and cultural identity in Nepal.Devkota's engagement with historical themes underscores the enduring significance of the past in shaping cultural consciousness and societal values, inviting readers to delve deeper into the complexities of Nepalese history and identity.

While his legacy in Nepali literature is indisputable, his exploration of English-language poetry adds a new dimension to his literary repertoire.Devkota's proficiency in composing epic poems is evident in his remarkable ability to craft works of philosophical depth within remarkably short periods. His magnum opus, *Shakuntala*, penned in a mere three months, stands as a testament to his literary prowess and creative genius. Published in 1991 AD, *Shakuntala* captivates readers with its evocative portrayal of Eastern heritage, values, and culture, serving as a poignant reflection of Devkota's reverence for his cultural roots.

Central to Devkota's exploration of English-language literature is his reinterpretation of timeless narratives, such as the story of Sakuntala from the epic *Mahabharata*. While the origins of this myth are steeped in ancient Indian literature, Devkota's rendition imbues it with fresh vitality and contemporary relevance. Drawing inspiration from Kalidasa's Sanskrit epic *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, Devkota's *Shakuntala* navigates the complexities of love, destiny, and identity, offering an in-depth interpretation of this enduring tale.However, beyond mere adaptation, Devkota's engagement with the Sakuntala myth transcends literary conventions, inviting readers to contemplate the broader historical and cultural implications embedded within the narrative. As Devkota reimagines the story of *Sakuntala*, he also subtly reshapes the history of the Vedic land, infusing it with his perspectives and insights. In doing so, Devkota blurs the boundaries between past and present, tradition and innovation, offering a multifaceted exploration of Nepali identity and cultural heritage. With regards to the relation between myth and epic, Misra (2019) writes:

> Basically, an epic refers to a long narrative poem derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the great deeds of legendary heroes who embody the values of a particular society. Whereas myth is an ancient story, especially concerning and explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts typically

involving supernatural beings. However, the stories of epic and myth are told again and again serving to explain why something is the way it is. (p. 163)

Misra delineates the nuances between myth and epic succinctly. An epic, rooted in oral tradition, chronicles the heroic exploits of legendary figures, embodying societal values. Conversely, myth delves into ancient narratives elucidating the genesis of societies or natural phenomena, often entwined with supernatural elements. Despite their distinctions, both genres persist through retelling, elucidating the origins and essence of existence.

Through his English-language poetry, Devkota not only expands the literary landscape of Nepal but also fosters a deeper understanding of the interplay between language, culture, and history, through his mythical renderings. His reimagining of the Sakuntala myth serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of storytelling to shape collective memory and cultural identity. In examining Devkota's English-language works, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of Nepali literature and the enduring legacy of one of its most illustrious literary figures.

The portrayal of society in *Shakuntala* offers a window into an agrarian world where reverence for the divine, embodied by Brahmins and Rishis, permeates every aspect of life. In this Vedic Brahmanical society, religious rituals and knowledge are revered as paramount, with Brahmins and Rishis tasked with the sacred duty of warding off malevolent spirits through their spiritual practices. Despite the hierarchical structure of society, wherein kings hold the highest position, tensions often arise between rulers and the priestly class, reflecting the struggle for power and authority between political and religious spheres.

Central to the societal fabric depicted in *Shakuntala* is the pervasive influence of casteism, an entrenched social order that dictates individual conduct based on one's caste, age, and social status. Each caste is bound by its own set of duties and responsibilities, known as dharma, which governs every aspect of life. For instance, while hunting may be a favored pastime for kings, it is viewed with disdain by Brahmins due to its inherent violence against innocent creatures. This dichotomy underscores the ethical and moral complexities inherent in caste-based societies, where individuals must navigate the intricacies of their prescribed roles and obligations.

Furthermore, *Shakuntala* illuminates the intricate interplay between religious beliefs and social norms, as characters grapple with the tension between personal desires and societal expectations. The clash between individual aspirations and collective obligations underscores the perennial struggle for autonomy and self-determination within the constraints of a rigidly stratified society. Through the lens of *Shakuntala*, we are invited to contemplate the enduring relevance of these timeless themes and their resonance in contemporary society.In essence, *Shakuntala* serves as a mirror reflecting the complexities of ancient Hindu society, offering profound insights into the interplay of power, tradition, and morality. By digging into the

intricacies of casteism, religious rituals, and ethical dilemmas, the play encourages readers to interrogate their own beliefs and values, fostering a deeper understanding of the human condition across temporal and cultural boundaries.

The societal treatment of women in the era depicted in *Shakuntala* unveils a stark reality of entrenched patriarchy and the subjugation of female autonomy. Sakuntala, the protagonist, serves as a poignant exemplar of the restrictive gender norms that prevailed in ancient Indian society. From the counsel of her foster father Kanva, urging obedience and deference to male authority, to the explicit portrayal of Sakuntala as little more than a commodity to be passed from one male figure to another, the epic offers a sobering portrayal of the marginalization of women.

Kanva's admonitions to Sakuntala underscore the pervasive expectation for women to adhere to prescribed roles and behaviors, reinforcing the notion of female subservience and dependency on male guardianship. Sakuntala's fate is emblematic of the systemic disenfranchisement of women, as she is relegated to a position of vulnerability and dispossession within the patriarchal framework of her society.Moreover, the transactional nature of Sakuntala's marital union, epitomized by her foster mother Gautami's explicit statement before her departure to her husband's house, further elucidates the commodification of women in ancient Indian society. The portrayal of Sakuntala's plight serves as a poignant critique of the systemic oppression faced by women in antiquity, inviting readers to confront the enduring legacy of gender inequality and the imperative of challenging patriarchal norms.Gautami in *Shakuntala*(1991) states:

> Our daughter is a debt that must be paid
> To him who purchased all her loveliness
> She came to us a nestling, and in warmth
> We brought her up as the parent's living-kind.(Canto Seven, p. 86)

In the poignant dialogue from *Shakuntala*, Gautami, Sakuntala's foster mother, encapsulates the pervasive societal attitude towards women, framing their existence within the confines of patriarchal expectations and reproductive roles. The sentiment expressed, "Our daughter is a debt that must be paid," encapsulates the commodification of women's bodies and their reduction to objects of exchange within the patriarchal framework of ancient Indian society.

Gautami's lament underscores the transactional nature of Sakuntala's marital union, wherein her worth is contingent upon her ability to fulfill her husband's and his family's expectations. Sakuntala's value is perceived solely in terms of her reproductive capacity, with her worth measured by her ability to produce a male heir, thereby perpetuating patriarchal lineage and ensuring the continuation of familial legacy. Furthermore, Gautami's assertion that Sakuntala is indebted to "him who purchased all her loveliness" highlights the inherent imbalance of power and agency in Sakuntala's relationship with Dushyanta. Sakuntala's autonomy and personhood are subordinated to the patriarchal dictates of male authority,

relegating her to a position of dependency and subservience within the marital union.

The pervasive belief that a woman's worth is contingent upon her ability to bear children underscores the devaluation of female agency and autonomy in ancient Hindu society— "a woman is meant to bear children for her husband's family"(Kane et al.(2016), p. 5). Sakuntala's struggle to assert her identity and agency within the confines of patriarchal norms serves as a reminder of the legacy of gender inequality. Through Gautami's lament, the epic offers a searing critique of the societal expectations placed upon women, inviting readers to interrogate the inherent injustices embedded within patriarchal systems of power and privilege.In Dushyanta's court, Sakuntala's worth is measured solely by her ability to bear a son. The prevailing belief in society is that a woman's life lacks meaning unless she gives birth to a child. Kanva emphatically advises Sakuntala that:

> The wife must fill her home with plentitude
> Of light and joy, create an atmosphere
> Of smiling sanctitywhere kith and kin
> In amity embracing keep abode.(Devkota, 1991, Canto Seven, p.90)

In *Shakuntala*, the role of a wife is depicted as creating a home filled with abundance, happiness, and a sense of sacredness where family members live together harmoniously. The play also illustrates two distinct types of human settlements: those in the forest inhabited by Rishis and Brahmins, and those in villages. Brahmins, particularly during their Banaprasta stage, resided in the wilderness, engaging in religious rituals to connect with the divine.

The societal structure of the time prescribed four distinct life stages for men: student life, domestic life, renunciation, and asceticism. Rishis, embodying the ascetic lifestyle, attained profound knowledge and power through penance, earning reverence even from kings due to their ability to bestow blessings or curses.Devkota's rendition of *Sakuntala* transcends a mere reflection of past society, revealing underlying subplots when read 'against the grain'. Within the text, astute readers can discern the author's manipulations and projections, highlighting the subjective nature of historical interpretation. New historicists contend that the past is not received in its unmediated form; writers reinterpret history through the lens of their contemporary context. A. S. Rao (2000) eloquently articulates this perspective, asserting, "Meanings and truths are influenced by their historical position and cannot in principle be set apart from history" (p. 64). As a student of ancient history, Devkota was inevitably subject to this interpretive process, potentially altering historical facts and endowing the epic Sakuntala myth with a distinct identity.

In *Sakuntala*, Devkota skillfully intertwines the mythological realm of the ruler of heaven, Indra, with the political landscape of his contemporary Nepal under Rana rule. Through subtle parallels, Devkota illuminates the oppressive reality of his time. The opulence of Indra's palace serves as a reflection of the

luxurious lifestyle enjoyed by the Rana rulers, evoking comparisons between the divine realm and the earthly power wielded by the ruling elite. Moreover, the nefarious schemes of Indra resonate with the political machinations employed by the Ranas to maintain their grip on power, often at the expense of the common people's welfare. Through these nuanced connections, Devkota offers a poignant commentary on the political repression and corruption prevalent in his era.

Within this epic, Devkota's fervent desire to resurrect the splendor of the past confronts the stark reality of Nepali society under Ranacracy. Devkota's frustration with the contemporary era is palpable, as he paints a somber portrait of his time, referring to it as a "pall of gloom." In his impassioned address to the readers, he articulates:

> This cheap weary life?
> This kitten play?
> This endless nonsense?
> Worthless foolery?
> Dead news in bold black mournings drummed to death?
> Reiterations of the machine life? (Devkota, 1991, To the Reader, p. 1)

Devkota's poignant lamentation in the lines encapsulates his profound disillusionment with the contemporary state of affairs. His portrayal of life as monotonous and devoid of meaning reflects his deep-seated frustrations and yearning for something more profound and meaningful.

In likening himself to Prometheus, Devkota embarks on a metaphorical journey into the past, akin to the mythical figure's quest to steal fire from the gods for the betterment of humanity. This journey represents Devkota's quest to rediscover the ancient wisdom and vitality that he perceives to be lacking in the present age. By venturing into the past, Devkota seeks to unearth the essence of human existence, hoping to ignite a spark of enlightenment that may illuminate the path toward a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

Through this metaphorical journey, Devkota confronts the existential dilemmas and societal malaise of his time, challenging the prevailing notions of progress and modernity. His quest to reclaim the ancient fire symbolizes a profound longing for authenticity and spiritual renewal in a world dominated by superficiality and materialism. Ultimately, Devkota's poetic exploration serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring quest for meaning and transcendence in the face of modernity's relentless march.

Devkota's romantic inclinations, influenced by Western poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, imbue his epic with a profound emphasis on human sensitivity, emotions, and love. Unlike mere reiterations of Byasa's Mahabharata or Kalidasha's Abhijnanasakuntalam, Devkota's rendition of Shakuntala is marked by his unique interpretation, where nature plays a pivotal role. In Devkota's vision, nature is intimately intertwined with human experience. Throughout Shakuntala, nature emerges as a source of solace for the soul and mind.

Shakuntala herself finds solace amidst the embrace of nature, symbolized by her name's association with birds, integral components of the natural world. Devkota portrays nature as both sympathetic in times of adversity and invigorating in moments of joy, as seen in Dushyanta's penchant for the wilderness, where he finds pleasure amidst the untamed beauty of the natural landscape.

Devkota's profound appreciation for nature enriches the fabric of the epic, bridging the gap between past and present. His vivid descriptions of the natural world infuse the text with a sense of timelessness, where the beauty and vitality of nature serve as a backdrop against which the drama of human existence unfolds. This fusion of past and present is further exemplified in Devkota's depiction of Menaka's beauty, which he evocatively compares to the breathtaking landscapes of Nepal, weaving together elements of myth and reality to create a narrative tapestry that transcends temporal boundaries. He writes:

> Her wings were whirring music,
> like the leaves of gardens hanging in Nepal's fair vale
> when rains set in to end the summer heat. (Devkota, 1991, Canto Two, p.16)

Through his writings, Devkota endeavors to uncover and preserve various cultural symbols, a pursuit evident in his work *Shakuntala*. Our nationality and identity often stem from our shared memories and collective history. Myths, legends, and a shared past serve to unite us. Bruynell (2014) in an essay titled "Collective Memory" says "Our nationality or our identity is often a product of our collective memories. Our myths, our legends, our common past unites us" (pp. 589-90).

CONCLUSION

In *Shakuntala*, Devkota seeks to foster unity by invoking our common heritage while also allegorically addressing the fears and aspirations of the Nepali people during the Ranacracy era. In this epic retelling of the Shakuntala myth, Devkota accomplishes dual objectives: he reflects the mythical society of the Mahabharata period while simultaneously allegorizing the repressive socio-political landscape of his own time. By intertwining elements of the past and present, Devkota's work serves as both a homage to ancient traditions and a poignant commentary on contemporary realities.

REFERENCES

Bruyneel, K. (2014). Collective memory. In *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought* (pp. 589– 590).

Devkota, L. P. (1991). *Shakuntala*. Sajha Prakashan.

Matos, S. C. (2014, January 7). History, memory, and fiction: What boundaries? *Historiadahistoriografia*. Retrieved June 15, 2023, from http://www.historiadahistoriografia.com.br/revista/article/viewfile/930/556

Misra, S. (2019). A modern approach to retelling of Indian epics and mythical characters. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR), 6*(3), 162–163. https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.63.162

Hardwick, L. (2017). Myth, creativity, and repressions in modern literature: Refigurations from ancient Greek myth. *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics, 40*(2), 12–31.

Kane, S., et al. (2016). Gender relations and women's reproductive health in South Sudan. *Global Health Action, 9*, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v9.33047

Montrose, L. (1991). The work of gender in the discourse of discovery. *Representations, 33*(1), 1–41.

Rao, A. S. (2000). *Myth and history in contemporary Indian novel in English.* Atlantic Publishers.