

Laxmi Prasad Devkota: A Myth-taker and a Myth-maker

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Laxmi Prasad Devkota was a romantic poet, well acquainted with the Western and Eastern romantic tradition. It is a well-known fact that the western romantic writers brought about a kind of revival of the era of mythology through their writings. Mythical stories and scenes often became the sources for their works. These romantic poets sometimes took the existing myths for their literary creations and sometimes they also created their own myths. Love for mythology is visible not only in these western Romantic poets but also in our own poet, Mahakavi Devkota. Because of his intense knowledge of the classic myths, he often exploits some aspects of mythology in his writings. In his works, Devkota often uses mythological refrains, names, character traits, mythical beings and some related images. He does not just take myths from various sources; at times he also creates them.

It is a well-known fact that the western romantic writers brought about a kind of revival of the era of mythology through their writings. Mythical stories and scenes often were the sources for their works. These romantic poets sometimes borrowed the existing myths for their literary creations, and sometimes they also created their own new myths. As a romantic poet, well acquainted with the Western Romantic tradition, Mahakavi Devkota does not just borrow and rewrite existing myths but also creates them. Love for mythology is clearly visible in Mahakavi Devkota's writings. In his writings, Devkota often uses mythological refrains, names, character traits, mythical beings and some related images. Because of his intense knowledge of the classical myths, he often directly or indirectly exploits some aspects of mythology.

In the words of Thomas Mann, "myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows..." (371). These timeless mythical schemas are the products of our own mind, be it conscious or unconscious. Such mythical stories try to explicate certain realities or truths about a society or the universe in a figurative way. They do have certain universal and transcendental capacity. Myths play a very formative role in the shaping of human psyche. They just don't affect the individual life but also determine the nature of our cultures and our societies. Using a set of symbols or codes, myths unify the people of a community or nation. Francis Ferguson claims that myth represents the "deepest wisdom in man"(161). Warner associates myths with human identity. He writes, "myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context"(19). Warner thus has associated myths with our capacity to understand things.

In an attempt to explore the importance of myths, Sri Aurobindo writes, “they are not the work of rude, barbarous and primitive craftsman, but the living breath of a supreme and conscious art, forming its creations in the puissant but well governed movement of a self-observing inspiration” (178). Aurobindo asserted that the primitive man was not a savage. These noble ancestors recorded encounters with the universe for us in the forms of myths. These myths are realities, but veiled in allegories and illustrated through symbols.

Regarding myth, Cotterell writes, “Myths possess an intensity of meaning that is akin to poetry” (1). Poets are often fascinated to myths because poetry is full of speculations and ripe with meanings. Poets engage themselves with myths primarily in three modes. The first mode is just taking a myth and retelling it in poetic form. Such retellings may be more or less similar to each other. The second mode of using myth in poetry is reliving the myth. Poets enter into the mythical world and explore it or expound it. Wherever they find something important, less explored or enigmatic, they develop that part, using their own scholarly insights and intense imagination. The third possibility is that the poets revise the myth. They may question the validity of the given truth and reimagine the new or an alternative model. In such retellings, poets may give voice to those whom the original text silences. In Mahakavi Devkota’s mythical renderings, all these possibilities are exploited. The first tendency in Devkota is myth-taking tendency.

Devkota as a Myth-taker

Laxmi Prasad Devkota often explored mythical stories and rewrote them in his writings. He didn’t just limit himself to the myths that belonged to our cultural system. He also ventured beyond and brought many foreign myths to our land. Though Nepal remains at the core of his writings, he brings home some prominent myths from Rome, Greece, India, England, Russia, and many other literary and artistic arenas of the globe.

One of the prominent mythical themes rewritten by Devkota is the story of Savitri Satyaban. It is one of the best-known and best-loved tales of Indian subcontinent. It originally comes from *The Mahabharata*, one of the most sacred epics of Hinduism. In this story of love and devotion, Devkota explores the most cherished values and beliefs of Hindu society. Devkota’s short epic *Sitaharan* also deals with a mythical story prevalent in Indian subcontinent. Here, Devkota gives an elaborate description of a scene from Ramayana where Sita accuses Laxman for not searching Rama who had been lost in the search of a golden deer. The *Sakuntala* myth is another myth from Indian subcontinent. It has made a very strong presence in the psyche of the people of the subcontinent. *Shakuntala* is his first epic poem in twenty-four cantos. It is also known as the first epic in Nepali language. Based on Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, it shows Mahakavi’s depth in Sanskrit meter and diction. *Dushyant-Shakuntala Bhet* is another short epic by Devkota. It again deals with the same story somehow but the focus here is more on how they meet and how their relationship proceeds. The context and characters of this story from the Mahabharata and the Padma Purana are given Nepali characteristics and context.

Raavan-Jatayu Youdha is another mythical story used by Devkota where he dramatizes how a Jatayu confronts Ravana and tries to stop him from abducting goddess Sita. Jatayu knew his limit but still he preferred to die rather than to be an idle witness of her abduction. Devkota was not just a poet confined to his own territory. He was man of cosmopolitan mindset. He also explored foreign myths and brought them in own literary arena. Circe myth is one among them. In *Mayabini Circe*, he has rewritten a western myth of a woman who is a centuries-old enchantress and is kept young by an elixir called vitae. Similarly Devkota was fascinated with a Greek mythical character named Prometheus. In his epic called Prometheus, Devkota has introduced Nepali readers with a character called Prometheus who did not hesitate to steal fire from heaven for the sake of humanity. He was a lover of human kind and he was ready to bear any consequences for the betterment of humanity. These are just few celebrated examples of myths from the corpus that Devkota produced. In other texts also, he has drawn ideas from mythology, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly. In some of his writings, he has gone beyond just taking the available myths and has created or recreated new myths in his own way.

Devkota as a Myth-maker

Poets do not just borrow myths. Some of the great world poets are also Myth-makers. They examine their surrounding with their noble perspectives and find out a larger purpose behind what they see. Homer created classical mythology and his interpretations of the universe is still affecting the western worldview. Similarly poets like Shakespeare, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley, Byron, Eliot, and many more have created their own mythologies and archetypes.

Devkota didn't just limit himself to using available myths. He was a creator of high ingenuity. Devkota's ingenuity reminds many readers of Shelley who called poets the unacknowledged legislature of the world. In Shelley's view poets write the universal code. They are the ones who bring to us divine wisdom. With their wisdom and imagination, poets could create a new world and a novel worldview. Their writings attempts to find some greater meanings in seemingly mundane human experiences. Great poets succeed in assigning a higher significance to our everyday occurrences. Devkota too, through his writings, displays the ability to go beyond the mundane and transmute them into the universal.

In his poem "The Song of the Storm," Devkota does not address the storm just as a natural force. He assigns the storm some divine qualities. This addition to the natural force is something that Mahakavi attaches to the existing entity. He sees lord Shiva in the storm. Probably, even Hindu scriptures do not mention storm as a form of lord Shiva. This is the creation of new myth. Devkota writes, "The world's Doom Dancer Shiva"(line 2). In the poem, he also brings the reference of the goddess Kali. He compares the dark and powerful storm with "a lady of terror." Devkota gives the storm a feminine image but this image of

the feminine natural force is an image of utter terror. When there is the flash in the sky at stormy night, Devkota calls it, “I beam up with my smiling flashes” (line 8). Devkota looks at the storm as a living being, so he portraits it with various images that connect to other beings. He creates a new myth here that storm visits the earth with a motive to take revenge. He writes, “how should I vent my soul of throes” (line 16). He assigns the storm a ferocious image as he writes, “I am the purple Kali with the blood-red tongue, I am the ever hungering, the ever thirsting Kali” (lines 54-55). Thus the poet creates a new being in the storm. It is neither a male (not just lord Shiva), nor a female (not just Kali). The storm is the fusion of both. It is the dangerous blending of both masculine and feminine power. In this sense, the poem is full of images that reflect Devkota’s genius as a mythmaker.

In another poem titled “To a Dark Clouded Night,” Devkota again reconfigures new myths about nature. Most of the people neglect or devalue dark night. It is often used as an image of evil forces. However in Devkota’s reading, night is something else. He begins with some negative attributes of the night but towards the close of the poem he writes:

Behold! Unconscious Night,
 Within you find
 The imperishable and the immortal ones,
 The stars, the stars! (Lines 53-56)

Similarly in “To the Rain Storm,” Devkota gives rain some divine attributes. He calls it “the dream of the infuriated creator” (line 27). In Eastern and Western myth, there is the mentioning of the great flood and dooms day. Slightly stepping upon these creation myths, Devkota builds his own unique myth here. What he is trying to convey in this poem is that God will use rain and flood to wipe away the sinners. Rain is a weapon of god that brings justice to the world. This is why the poet invokes the rain, “come, waving the locks of darkness, joining the sky to the sea, you the awe-inspiring face, the keeper of the doom, the years total despair, wipe out the remaining winter, cleanse the earth dwellers, rolling high” (lines 1-6). His new understanding of rain rises above the ordinary meaning and becomes something of greater significance. When the poet pleads to rain as “launch an attack on everything false”(28), it becomes apparent that the poet succeeds in giving humans a new hope, in the form of rain. Such reconfiguration of nature is an act of mythmaking. In the similar line, MacDonald defines mythmaking as:

But is it not rather that art rescues nature from the weary and sated regards of our senses, and the degrading injustice of our anxious every-day life, and, appealing to the imagination, which dwells apart, reveals nature in some degree as she really is, and as she represents herself to the eye of the child, whose every-day life, fearless and unambitious, meets the true import of the wonder-teeming world around him and rejoices therein without questioning?
 (89-90)

When poets provide us with new definitions of the existing natural phenomena, we call it myth making. This sort of addition to existing notion of natural forces is a part of Devkota's mythopoeia.

Creation of Hybrid Myths: Some illustrations from Devkota's *Prometheus*

Devkota chose a Greek hero *Prometheus* as a symbol of human liberation. Sohana Manzoor writes, "Prometheus has been a very attractive figure, and among other things he has been presented as the creator of mankind, a fire-bringer, a trickster and a skilled craftsman, a redeemer, a rebel against the gods, and a great humanitarian"(105).

In the selection of myth itself, he seems to have a greater purpose in mind. He chose *Prometheus* as his mouthpiece because he aspired to attack the Rana regime for their atrocities upon common Nepali folk.

If compared with the original Greek mythology, the story Devkota tells us in this epic is a bit different. His version of this myth neither truly resembles the original Greek myth, nor does it truly resemble our eastern mythology. In this sense, it is a kind of hybrid myth that Devkota has created. For example, in *Prometheus*, Mahakavi writes,

Dhadaraang- dhararaang- gadaraang
Chadarang-
Chachatkindo cutki cutkimaa ranachatak
Ranachandiko. (19)

Why does the poet mention the name of Ranachandi here? He is telling us a story from the Greek mythology! Such names of Hindu goddesses are found rampant in Devkota's epic *Pramithas*. He uses the names such as Kansa, Kurukshetra, Sita, and many more. He even compares Helen with Sita as:

Ti Helen thiin meri ek jhilka khaali,
Jasti Sita, sundarataaki maharani purbaki. (107)

Such comparisons of Eastern mythical characters with western mythical characters may startle any careful reader. While invoking the poetic muse, the poet writes:

Maatar Saraswati! Amar- barnini!
Unaani Shaarade aau! (1)

Who is this Unaani Sharade? This is neither our eastern myth, nor any western myth. This is in fact Devkota's own hybrid creation. These are just few notable examples of how Devkota involves himself into an act of mythmaking. Thus, many of Devkota's works include some mythical features. Some of his poems derive ideas from the classical Eastern and Western myths whereas some of them opt for new myths. In this sense, our Mahakavi is a Myth-taker, and a Myth-maker.

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