

The Superb and the Awesome: Animals in Muna-Madan

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From the earliest cave painting to the most recent human expressions, both real and fantasized animals have continued to haunt our memory and imagination. Such animals have found their metaphoric, symbolic or metonymic equivalents in our ways of thinking about culture and have largely populated all genres of literature including fables and allegories. They are today invariably tied to our thoughts, motivations and feelings in ways that demand our concern. While we have hunted them or captured and domesticated them for our use, we have also distanced them as inferior beings or stopped to question our own moral superiority over them. However, we have not stopped marveling at the variety and beauty of the animal kingdom with an emotional entanglement which transmutes the wild and dangerous into superb and awesome creations that fill us with wonder and respect. I aim to dwell upon this emotional entanglement to study how Laxmi Prasad Devkota populates his long narrative poem, *Muna-Madan*, with animals and, in the process, show how these animals reflect the delightful and the tragic mood of the poem.

The non-human animal world in *Muna-Madan* presents two categories: the mythological and the real. In the first category, there are three examples. First, Madan addresses his wife as *nagakannya* or the daughter of a *naga*, which literally means any snake and, in particular, a cobra. But, these inhabitants of *patal* or the underworld in Hindu mythology were creatures with a human face and the tail of a serpent. Somewhat curiously, Muna is compared to a young female of *patal* and, accordingly, asked not to dare the difficult slopes of the high altitudes. The effect of this metaphor is further heightened by the immediately preceding simile. Muna has “feet like flowers” (39).¹ Elsewhere, her heels are compared to “duck’s eggs” (414)— smooth, round and fragile. So, Madan says, “O nymph, do not dare the hills” (40). Second, in Muna’s complaint there is a reference to the *simalchari* which is a Nepali approximation of the Greek phoenix. Now convinced that her tears are powerless against Madan’s departure for Lhasa, she predicts her existence without him:

Each moment of my life will burn, my dear.
Reviving from the ashes, memory
will sob every now and then. (92-4)

Just as the phoenix resurrects from its own ashes, Muna’s memory of her lover will revive over and again from the residual pain and suffering of separation. And, third, the tiger is also Kali’s mount, of which I will speak later on.

In the second category, there are the reptile, the insectile, the vertebrate, the apian and the avian. These creatures appear in abundance throughout the narration and are either simply described through Madan’s eyes or used as symbols, images or metaphors with or without the cultural burden. Often, they are described as things of beauty. However, both their usefulness and their threat to life are clearly perceived. For example, in *Muna-Madan*, animal products are used as food, as clothes, as beds, as blankets, as curtains and as medicinal musk. Chyangba places Madan on “a bed of lamb’s soft wool” (656) and gives him a woolen blanket to cover himself with. He is fed “fine dried lamb soup and nuggets/ of yak’s milk” (338-9) on top of pure Yak’s milk (645) to give him strength to recover from his illness. On the way to Tibet, Madan imagines the city of Lhasa with its

“Yak-tail curtains,
golden statues of Buddha, images
of lovely damsels carved into colored stones... (170-172)

Once in Lhasa, “he collected/ sacks of musk and sheelajit in abundance” (516-17) and “preserving/ the sacks of musk carefully” (526-27), he departs for home. Thus, animals such as cows, yaks and sheep are both directly and indirectly securities against poverty, hunger and cold. This is why Chyangba raises yaks (688) and grows fruits to raise his family. Animals are domesticated because they provide humans with the essentials for survival.

The above relationship between humans and animals remains somewhat pastoral and idyllic. Nepali Romanticism, unlike its British counterpart, is founded on an understanding of the cyclical nature of life and the world. Here, since the creator is also the maintainer and the destroyer, Nature gives life and takes it away too.

In the shades where beautiful
forms of robust and glossy life
roam with pleasure, there in the deep forest
lives some goddess like Kali
exceedingly lovely, but red in tooth and claw,
a very cyclone, awesome in dark anger. (260-65)

Shiva’s consort is personified eternal Nature who is often depicted as giving life with one hand and taking it with the other. According to this mythology, her mount is the tiger, which “feasts on the body of the deer” (252). This brings out the ferocious aspect of nature and points to the real world where animals are food not only to human beings but also to each other. Thus, the tiger’s aggressive nature is generalized to wild animals (32) that roam “the dusky shadows of the forest” (249) and “feed on holy cows” (32). In this way, the sanctity of the fearful tiger as Kali’s mount is tacitly implied even as the holiness of the gentle cow is explicitly stated because one takes life while the other gives life. Yet, by mythologizing such animals, we also raise them to a higher, supernatural level in an act of appreciation of their superior beauty, strength or skill.

If awesome animals evoke the sublime, the peaceful, relaxed and joyous animal life in the wilderness touches upon the beautiful. When, one day, Madan recalls his “mother’s voice, Muna’s eyes, his sister’s sobs” (900), he turns to survey Chyangba’s front yard and observes, “what lovely children, what lovely lambs/ lost in wanton sport” (904-5). Since lambs are symbols of innocence, they refer to children who are like lambs or to the lambs themselves which are like children. They evoke fresh life, innocence and joyfulness as opposed to the gloom and sorrow in Madan’s home. This simple and beautiful equation of the animal and the human suggests another reality: human beings are animals who share the qualities of other animals and live among them.

Yet, a greater contrast between the tragic and the comic sides of life appears in the description of Buddha’s birth anniversary when nature around Chyangba’s dwelling abounds in birds and animals. The spring mood is easily evoked in the following passage which describes the beautiful side of sentient life.

It was April:
emerald in shoots, a rich burst of colors
in flowers, mellifluous in birds,
a chorus in the evening, a cooing
in the doves, restlessness in the pheasant, sweet speech in the
cuckoo, ripples in the brook, brilliance in Himal, stirrings in

the branches, style in the peacock, scratching in the stag,
frolicking in the deer. (722-730)

April is the sweetest month, also because Buddha was born in this month. The animals, birds, brooks and branches seem to know this and feel it in their being. It is as if all sentient life² shares the joy of Buddha's presence. This reminds us of Madan's upward journey through "[c]lusters of fragrant foliage" (266) that sway from the swing of Radha and Krishna. Here, too, in an amazingly ecstatic moment, Madan observes the "joyful, wanton form" (272) of a glossy, young deer in its "frisking infancy" (271). The young ones of all animals are apparently alike in their joyful innocence.

In the above examples from descriptions of the way to or from Lhasa to Madan's arrival in the city itself, human perception of animals switches from the aesthetic to the economic mode. In the aesthetic mode, humans perceive the silence and the songs of birds and animals; but these creatures disregard the human traveler. During his journey, Madan observes their minor discomfort, their playfulness, their stirrings, and their variety of forms and colors. But, in the economic mode, the animals become commodities valued for their monetary returns. This is an act of debasing the dignity of animals to establish human superiority over them. In Lhasa, the stag and the deer are now replaced by the economically advantageous musk-deer:

It is a colorful land of bright gold,
strange and bright, filled with the fragrance of musk, and heaps
of gold. (481-83)

Madan journeys to this city to earn money, not to satisfy his aesthetic impulses. Unlike Chyangba's abode in the high forests, the city, be it Lhasa or Kathmandu, is a place of lust, greed and toil.

Take lust for instance. In a line highly evocative of "The Sick Rose" by Robert Burns, Devkota writes,

The sweet rose
born of its succulent roots is the worm's food. (381-82)

Seeing lovely Muna at the window, a rogue of the city becomes infatuated with her and begins to loiter around her house like a worm at the roots of the rosebush. The poet affirms that "[t]he flower of the city is the rogue's prey" (383) and laments how "humans scatter thorns where humans tread" (385). A somber mood is thus set as a reminder of what is yet to come. And one might say that the rose bush recognizes the worm. When Naini attempts to seduce Muna, she retorts with the power of a *sati* or a faithful wife: "Plentiful of city vermin are endowed/ with precious youth" (432-33). Once again the rogue is compared to a worm. However, when he writes a letter to Muna lying to her about the death of her husband, she dies of grief. At this point, the narrator exclaims,

What misery! Can He above see such sorrow?
If He does, how can He look at such a spectacle?
The pen cannot record this.
How could a heart be a black serpent?
How could the city wretch fabricate
a letter saying Madan was dead?
In the serpent's teeth is a poison sac;
in man's heart is halahal, a dark poison. (1070-77)

The invisible worm has now turned into a very visible serpent that vomits venom all over the protagonist's life.

Muna's death, rather than being a sudden occurrence, has been suggested twice earlier in the narrative with the help of animals. First, in section VII, she relates her dream to her mother-in-law:

“O, what a bad dream I had!

A buffalo chased me. When I recall
that buffalo, I tremble. It flung me down
in the mud, mother. That buffalo chased me.” (529-32)

This black animal, though a provider of milk, is also a mount of Yamaraj, the god of death. Being chased by a buffalo in a dream augurs ill for the dreamer. On top of this dream, in section XIII, as Madan approaches his house, “A dog cries on the porch” (1049). The prevailing superstition held that a dog cries because it sees death approach the house of its owner. In the story, there are two people besides Madan who are going to die: Muna and her mother-in-law. In this way, Devkota makes use of dreams and superstitions to describe the life of simple folk.

But, several times before this, we find cues to Muna's tragic end. While the apian is used to build the foreboding gloom, the avian is used to signal the darkness of death. Unable to stop her husband from going to Lhasa without her, she compares herself to a bird and then to a lotus flower in this splendid passage:

Now tearless, the bird shall die gulping tears
as the day departs in the west
leaving the golden field behind.
The heart of the lotus shrivels up and dies.
The bumble-bee's desire is here entrapped.
Gaping darkness gathers all around it.
My body shivers in the cold, my love,
suspicion chills my mind. (102-9)

When the sun sets, the golden field, the bird and the lotus in the pond are left behind. The bird shall die of sorrow. The heart of the lotus shall shrivel up and die. Should the bumble-bee, a symbol of lustful male desire which roams from flower to flower, long for this lotus which is Muna, a “[g]aping darkness” (107) of death will surround her in her lover's absence.

Men are like bumble-bees. This is a widely used image in Sanskrit literature. When Naini tries to seduce Muna saying, “A husband like a bumble-bee is not your worth” (425), she is quickly angered. However, when she begins to suspect the motive behind his long absence, she, too, reasons that “[t]he mind is/ like a bumble-bee” (853-54) and even questions the possibility of having faith in it (854). Of course, she is quick to repent such suspicion.

Unlike the bumble-bee which stands for infidelity and deceit, the bees are sweet, little insects that swarm around flowers. Their presence is only suggested in *Muna-Madan* by the sound they make: “Light vines swung and bloomed and there was humming/ around the nectar” (731-2). They, too, represent the joys of spring. But birds cannot be left out of this festive season. Just as a cock crows “inviting daylight” (878), the cuckoo calls out, “Spring is here! 'Tis spring!” (916) and flies excitedly among the flowers. As I have pointed out earlier, in April, there is not only “sweet speech in the cuckoo” (727), but generally “melliflence in birds” (724). They are like good omen. When Madan sees a pigeon fly across the town (491) “[t]aking wings, his heart flew home” (492). It is about time it did! Having assured Muna that “[t]his love-bird will fly back to you” (20), he had told her,

The bird that flies
beyond the hills will not forget its nest.
Does not the soaring kite return when drawn
by the thread of love, my dear? (140-143)

The pun on the word “kite” is important also because Madan’s heart—the kite—is now drawn by the thread of love. So, he now recalls his home from Chyangba’s abode and his “heart followed the flight/ of a bird over earth’s horizon” (719-20) in a straight and direct path to his house in Kathmandu where he imagines

A small house beside this tree, at the window
a songbird, his aged mother, his dear Muna— (897-98)

This is the “bird of imagination” (126) which, Madan tells Muna, “will not brush/ your heart of immortal love with its wings” (127-8). Thus, the songbird sweetens his memory while the pigeon takes him home in his imagination.

That night nostalgia for home robs him of his sleep. In his trance, “a cold blast grew intense” (499). Once out from his trance, he sees “the moon covered with lamb’s wool” (500). Then he realizes in the morning

A hundred and twenty bright winged days having awakened in
the Himal had now flown like birds across the western sea of
gold. (506-8)
He has dallied long in Lhasa and his days have been bright.

Muna’s longing for him, however, is of a distinctly different tone. In his absence, she knows she will feel like a “bird in the cage” (89) that pecks at the bars to fly away; but, unable to do so, she prophesizes that “this bird shall die gulping tears” (102). Such incapacity to fly away troubles Muna constantly because, “[w]ith no wings to fly away (835), she can only weep. And, in her deep sorrow, she comes close to bearing a death-wish, too. Her soul is “a bird in a cage” (840), which deplores its plight.

Perhaps at the root of Muna’s incapacity to fly away lies a woman’s need for male support, which she confesses to her mother-in-law in section VII.

Our weak frame, when its support is far away,
trembles like a dry winter leaf
in the cold breath of Himal and wilts away.
The bird of the heart, afraid of shadows,
flutters with fear in the boughs of life
wondering whether to stay or to fly away. (566-71)

Her own hesitation leads to her continued imprisonment. Separated from her husband since many months ago, having heard nothing from him since his departure, she is worried for his well-being. And, she is also not free of suspicion that he might have been seduced by the “bulbul-throated” (79) girls of Lhasa.

In section II, after we are told that “Dreams are sweeter/ than the waking state, feelings sweeter/ than reality” (189-91), Madan imagines the Queen of Lhasa bathing in milk and living a luxurious life. A description of a civilized Sherpa village follows. The journey is, nevertheless, very difficult because “the stones bite sharp/ upon the road” (246-47). Despite such hardship,

The birds, wonderful voices of the wild,

are more colorful than imagination;
forest songs are sweeter than the city's. (253-55)

Suddenly, the real world which is God's creation becomes "more colorful than [Madan's] imagination." And "these dappled birds are superb creation/ in lovely forms" (259-60). This delightful aspect of nature suffuses the text of *Muna-Madan*. Even young children such as Fucha happily learn to imitate the "sounds/ of male and female birds and animals" (703-4).

If the songs of birds delight us, their silence can appear sympathetic to our fate as when Madan falls sick on his return journey and is deserted by his friends in the middle of nowhere,

Faint twilight

suffused the forest, the winds slept and birds stopped twittering. The
nasty cold increased. (606-8)

Birds stop twittering in the growing darkness because they now retire for the night; but their songs would have sounded callous at this time. Madan had requested his friends not to leave him in the forest "a prey/ to cruel crows and vultures" (581-82), but human cruelty has now painted the whole world cruel.

Everything was cruel:

the forest, the mountain, cruel the star,
the whole world was barren and cruel. (609-11)

Although it may sound far-fetched, in another instance, too, a bird apparently disapproves of destruction. When the whole city appears to be mourning, a tree is snapped by a storm and an owl "fixes its round eyes on the young tree" (1057). The round, large eyes of the owl appear to show surprise at such destruction.

And, although crows and vultures are shown to be ugly in their acts of feeding on dead bodies, the crows also have a brighter side to them. In Section XII, Madan sees a crow alight on a branch and caw. It then descends to the ground, comes nearer to him and caws again. He address it as a "sweet messenger, traveler in the sky" (1030) and requests it to carry a message to his mother and his wife. As a reward for this favor, he gives it permission to taste a persimmon from his orchard before returning to its nest. The crow flies away as if it understood what Madan said, but he knows that the two beloved women back at home "do not understand/ the language of birds" (1042-43). This is somewhat of a contrast to the Lama who is a "friend to birds and animals" (681) and lives in "joyful communion with the mysterious/ unseen" (681), "making all creatures happy/ with his generous heart" (692-93).

The concluding lines of *Muna-Madan* ask readers to face the tribulations of the world bravely and to "flap our wings from earth/ towards the sky" (1293-94). This is a request to rise from our merely animal nature of "eating and drinking" (1294) and to discover the boundary between animals and human beings by finding meaning in life and "hopes for the future" (1297). To flap the wings is to exert the body so that "the flame of the mind/ burns to create a serene heaven" (1300-1). In much of Devkota's literary works, poets are compared to birds that fly on the wings of imagination. In *Muna-Madan*, too, the suggestion is that we use the human imagination to soar such heights as will lift us out of the bog of worldly tribulations. Worms that crawl or creep into holes are harmful like the city vermin and the snake in man's heart. Animals that sport on the ground can delight us or be of use to us. Bees that fly not too high hum sweetly, but bumble-bees are still too close to the earthly lust and greed. Birds that fly in the sky sing like poets and delight the listener. The poet does not forget the duality of pleasure and pain, of life and death, of earthly and spiritual existence as he narrates a tragic love story which underscores the heart-ache of the Nepalese society of his time. In doing so, he finds in birds and animals a companionship which alleviates the pains

of existence. They capture our minds with their beauty and we read our hopes and fears in them: hopes of surpassing them through imaginative flights, fears of losing our human potentials in the common herd.