

Critique of Capitalist Ideology in Bhattarai's *Muglan*

--Hari Krishna Lamichhane
PhD Scholar in English at the
Office of the Dean, Humanities and Social Sciences,
Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Email: hklamichhane@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.3126/litstud.v34i01.39521>

Abstract

This article explores Govinda Raj Bhattarai's worries about the innocent youths to be the *Muglanis* forced by the dominant capitalist ideology of the society in his novel *Muglan*. In the novel, he presents the critical situation of the youths who are compelled to leave their motherland just for survival but they get sold like cattle and are enslaved and forced to do hard physical labour in the cruel foreign land. The article applies neo-Marxist insights to study devastating results of elitist bourgeois ideology of the society over the life of poor innocent people in the novel. It mainly borrows ideas from Luis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" along with the ideas by Terry Eagleton and Antonio Gramsci. The article shows Bhattarai's critique of elitist bourgeois ideology of the society that he does through his choice of the protagonist, Sutar, who along with other youths leaves his home and goes to *muglan* but gets robbed, sold and forced to work as road builder in the foreign land of Bhutan. By showing the hopelessness of better life for the youths in their native land, Nepal and their pathetic condition in the foreign land, Bhattarai critiques the elitist ideology of Nepalese society.

Keywords: Exploitation, Ideology, Capitalism, Elitism, Bourgeois, Proletariat

This article explores how Govinda Raj Bhattarai critiques the dominant capitalist ideology which forces the innocent youths to be the *muglanis* in his novel *Muglan*. In *Muglan*, the protagonist, Sutar, a young and energetic boy of his early twenties, longs to go to *muglan* along with the youths of his time as he sees no means of supporting his and the life of his family in his homeland. But the dreams of those helpless youths shatter in no time when they fall upon the prey of the cruel robbers and human traffickers and are looted mercilessly and sold like cattle before their own eyes as bondage laborers in the dark, dense forests and desolate mountains

of Bhutan where they are forced to work as the road builders. However, he is able to escape from that trap of the mongers and takes the shelter in Pakhe Kailo. There he is again cheated by the bourgeois like Salbote. Not only this, he is again looted and deceived by his own friend, Moktan (Chyangba) in the tea estate. So, the poor and proletariat youths are always deceived by the cruel, brutal and inhuman elitist bourgeoisie people who promise them to give them something which they never give. Because of the everlasting defeat in his life, Sutar gets mad and runs away from his family, at the end of the novel. Thus, by depicting the struggle and resistance of the common people against the elitism which however fails to bring the desired goals in common people's lives, Bhattarai in *Muglan* offers a bitter critique of elitist ideology that both creates the condition for the common people to go to *muglan*, and pacifies them.

Muglan has received a number of interpretations from multiple perspectives. Although *Muglan* is Bhattarai's first novel written in his young age of 20, it is compared with the Nepali texts like *Ramayana*, *Muna Madan* and *Tarun Tapasi* of Bhanubhakta, Lekhnath Poudyal and Laxmi Prasad Devkota respectively. Prof. Chandrashekhar Dubey in his essay, "Courtesy: Nepali Sahitya: Ek Sarvekshyan", highlights this aspect stating that, "just one single substantial creation is enough to secure fame to a writer" (184). By the creation of *Muglan*, Bhattarai has secured his position as a canonical writer in Nepali literature. Like Prof. Dubey, Parijat, one of the canonical Nepali writers, has also commented the novel as the second novel that she had been "able to read in a single breath, within a decade" (172). It is because the novel is written with the pen of bone, paper of skin and ink of blood.

Yugbhasha, a quarterly literary anthology takes *Muglan* as a perfect work of art in the sense that it has depicted life in relation to its way of living. *Yugbhasha* states: "mere exploitation is not the target theme of the novel; its rather strong aspect is the description of life and its relationship with how it is lived" (182). It not only focuses on exploitation, but also highlights on the artistry of living.

According to *Samiksha(Weekly)*, *Muglan* has depicted the life of the unhappy people experienced in the then society. Nepali youths are forced to die a premature death in the foreign- land, Bhutan. *Samiksha(Weekly)* has commented on the novel stating:

It has life in it. It is actually the moving story of those Nepali youths who are bought off, sucked up, those who weep, wail and die a premature death or some who disappear. This is the heart-rendering story of Nepali youths in search of some means of livelihood who are

forced to die gradually inside a gas chamber (the forest of Bhutan). (179)

In a sense, Bhutan becomes the Nazi's Concentration Camp for those Nepali youths who cannot raise even a single voice against the domination upon themselves.

In this way, the critics have interpreted *Muglan* from various perspectives but there lacks the sufficient study of the text from neo-Marxist point of view which the present article aims to carry out and reads the drawbacks of the then Elitist ideology of the society. Neo-Marxists seek to develop theories which look at the individual as well as structural factors. Its root theory, Marxism refers to the economic theory as brought to the people by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It views the society as the endless history of class struggle. In this regard, Karl Marx, in his *The Communist Manifesto*, states: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (1). He means to say that the history of humanity is always evolving along with its social groupings, of its thinking and its institution as moulded by the changing mode of economic foundation. The socio-economic condition of the people along with their thinking capacity is determined by the ideology of the society as Marx, in his *German Ideology*, mentions, "life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (625). The way we live our life, think and experience the world around us is directly or indirectly affected and determined by the socio-economic structure of the society. Marxist thinkers believe that the history of a society proceeds along with the class struggle because of the unequal distribution of economic foundation. Eradication of the feudal social structure of the society has indicated the present capitalist mode of production and the capitalist ideology.

Louis Althusser in his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", argues, "it is not enough to ensure for labour power the material conditions of its reproduction if it is to be reproduced as labour power. I have said that the available labour power must be 'competent', i.e. suitable to be set to work in the complex system of the process of production" (1485). In the capitalist society, the labourers have to do very complex work, who do not have any option to reject the order of the authority. The repressive state apparatuses, such as the police, the military, the prison system, and government, in several key ways: they are not unified, they operate primarily in the private sphere, and they attain their power not by means of explicit coercion or force but through implicit consent realized in accepted "practices". In the context of the novel, the Jimdar threatens the

youths to work whatever they are assigned without raising a voice against the command and without running away from there. Here, Bhattarai writes:

The Jimdar kept telling Kanchho and Sutar- ‘Now you have to work. The work is digging the road. [...] You have to work from six o’clock in the morning to five in the evening. You will have to do whatever you are assigned’. [...] With his red bloodshot eyes, the Jimdar raised his finger at them and added- ‘but if you think of going into hiding or running away from here... your life...beware...’ (48)

These poor youths have to do only what is given for them who cannot have any option to choose. The task is beyond their expectations. They are kept under such authority and power, whose command and order they cannot reject and deny. Capitalism provides no freedom to the labourers and compels them to do the most difficult, hard and complex task to fulfil its own selfish motif. The labourers, who are from working class, though the task is difficult and unbearable which can even take their life, cannot reject to do it in front of the order and command of the authority. They are tongueless in front of the authority.

The poor people enjoy in their imagination rather than in their real life situation. The ideology of the state makes their mind imaginative which makes a beautiful dream of their happy existence. Althusser says:

There is therefore a cause for the imaginary transposition of the real conditions of existence: that cause is the small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the ‘people’ on a falsified representation of the world which they have imagined in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imaginations. (1499)

There is always domination and exploitation wherever we go. Even though the poor people cannot dominate other people in their real life situation, they create an imaginary world to dominate others. In the context of the novel, the novelist presents a situation in which the youths are ensured to be recruited in the army are kept in a hotel of Raini *Didi* [sister]. They start enjoying in the world of their imagination that their life in the army would really be pleasant. In the very context, Bhattarai writes, “Looking at his mates and smiling, Karki said ‘This is the rice of *bageda* and this, the lentil soup of *musur*. Now the government will provide us ration like this daily. Nothing to worry about. Now the diet of *dhindo* is over, right?’” (32) Reaching far away from their real life situation, the youths float in the sky of their imaginative world of *Muglan* being recruited, getting good payment and facilities which would enrich their life making it more standard. But in reality, they are living the sorrowful and poor helpless life. Here, whatever Karki does seems as if he is the leader and commander of the group and he

knows everything, but in reality, he is also like the remaining youths, all innocent.

Capitalist bourgeois society is successful in its politics of sustaining and imposing its own ideology in the mind of the proletariat people in some cases through its subtle and powerful mechanism. People, in some cases, are giving their consent to rule over them and most of the cases, they are concisely supporting the system. This is a critical and currently existing bone of contention in the field of Marxism. Some classical Marxists – Marx himself and his blind supporters – are preoccupied with the view that capitalism and its powerful ideological imposition are successful just because people are blindfolded with the structure of capitalism and its devastating consequences. However, he envisions that people will one day bring in happiness through revolution thereby changing the existing system. On the other hand, the similar powerful and convincing argument supplied by Slavoj Zizek is in practice in the field of ideology. Zizek opines that people have been under the huge encompassing capitalist ideological umbrella not because they are ignorant of the fact but because they are consciously supporting the system. Zizek gives light to the debate with the remark, “The most elementary definition of ideology is probably the well-known phrase from Marx’s *Capital*: ‘*sie wissen das nicht, aber sie tun es*’ – ‘they do not know it, but they are doing it’” (312). The above remark of Zizek clearly demarcates two explicit propositions: one leads the view of classical Marxism claiming that the false consciousness moulds the general people to remain under capitalistic ideological shadow and another more stranger view led by recent and alternative thought of Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Zizek is of the opinion that people of the system are consciously remaining under the ideological umbrella. However, there are numerous instances in which both the propositions show their effects: in a particular zone depending upon the particular context while one is on the side of Marx’s claim thereby false consciousness leads their lives; in some other cases, people are following the system having well knowledge of the structure and its future consequences.

In this line of argument, *Muglan* dramatizes the characters consciously and unconsciously supporting the ideological mechanism depending upon the context; even a single character cannot remain stable. With the massive reading of the novel, the researcher comes to the conclusion that most of the central characters are practicing the then Nepalese bourgeoisie ideological system that limits its own obligation in the fact that economic prosperity brings in happiness. The Nepalese youths long to go to *Muglan* in the hope of better job opportunities and better economic status. They see no trace of happiness in the land of Nepal without ‘job’ and

‘income’. They are even ready to be recruited in foreign army only to have better economic status. In this context, Bhattarai writes:

Sitting in the truck loaded with goods, they experienced adventurous moments. They fancied descending down towards *Muglan* and were swept away by the imagination of being recruited in the army. They felt their every pore filling up with eternal joy. ‘Wow! How wonderful it is, Kanchha, to be in the lorry! This reminds me of being in a cradle.’ Said Thule, smiling and twisting with joy in the lorry. ‘It’s rather like being on a gaint-wheel.’ Sutar was getting even more imaginative. (2)

The innocent youths are in the happiest situation of their life here. Their minds are floating into the clouds of their imagination for their bright future. When their own motherland does not provide them good opportunity of income, they long to go to the foreign country for job and income. This is because of the unconscious support to the ideology of the system. They don’t go against the existing system of the country that people are unemployed in the country, but they go somewhere else to find out better job opportunity. Because of the imagination of their happy future, the youths are ready to tolerate any difficulty today. Bhattarai further writes:

Their minds were possessed by the unprecedented imagination of reaching *Muglan*, recruiting themselves and becoming *lahures* [foreign army]. They followed that man with trembling legs, supporting themselves solely on the sweet fantasy of trotting in their boots once they became *lahures* [foreign army]. (22-23)

They forget the pain they have today thinking about their future tomorrow. They forget their hunger. They forget their exhaustion. They forget their each and every misery only because they will have better future tomorrow.

The bourgeois capitalists rule over the proletariat as the later are hegemonized to be ruled. In this light, a notable neo-Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci opines that the ideology is a means or tool to hegemonize people. He has made a distinction between two kinds of society: civil society and political society, and tries to see how they function in order to maintain their hegemony. He writes:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural ‘level’: the one that can be called ‘civil society’, that is, ensemble of organisms commonly called ‘private’, and that of ‘political society’ or ‘the state’. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of ‘hegemony’ which the dominant group exercises through the state and ‘juridical government’. (12)

What is clear out here is that ideology of capitalism and more clearly to the elite group in the society can be maintained in two ways: firstly through direct force and secondly through consensus. The coercive control is practiced through political society which is the sum total of government organizations that use direct force like army, police, bureaucracy, and so on. On the other hand what is hidden and more critical is that people voluntarily accept to be under their hegemony. Ideology creates such an environment in which elite group wins the consent of subordinate group and hegemonize them. This type of ideology functions through subtle government organizations that mould people in the shape of capitalist culture so that they would rule over them.

Ideology, then, has a material existence in the sense that it is embodied in all sorts of material practices. What is clear is that ideology is waiting for us wherever we go and that everything we do; everything we engage in is pervaded by ideology. This leads Althusser to the conclusion that “it therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the ... system” (67). While we believe that we are acted out of free will, we are in reality acted by the system. What happens in the context of the novel is that the people, without knowing that they are victimized by the system, are following and supporting them. Why the youths tend to go to *muglan* for recruitment seems as if because of their freewill but in reality, the social system is the main cause to send them there. Bhattarai presents the appearance clearly with the following lines though the reality is kept secret. He writes:

The boys who had spent their lives quite pleasantly working at home and amidst the cattle and who were drunk with their youth and vigour, might have been carried away by wild dreams, occasionally. They could not control themselves from the temptation of getting lost in this colourful world of *Muglan*, away from home. Neglecting to carry the salt back home after selling ghee in ‘Dorling’, they got into a truck heading for Siliguri. (2)

What is there in their mind is that they will certainly have better life standard by going to *Muglan* leaving their motherland. The ghost of going to the foreign land forgetting their dear ones and near ones is all the time haunting them, and they are driven away with their ‘hope’ of being recruited there. The ‘dreams’ they have are actually not of theirs but installed into their mind by the elitist society they are living in. They are unconscious about their condition and unknown about the force by which they are driven away from their dear native land.

With his concept of eternity and pervasiveness of ideology, Althusser claims that “ideology has no history” (240) as it is a structure in which we individuals are played. Althusser’s proposition that ideology has no history is directly related to the Freudian proposition that the unconscious is eternal, that it has no history. Along this line, Althusser argues, “in its Freudian conception this time, our proposition: ideology has no history, can and must ... be related directly to Freudian proposition that the unconscious is eternal, i. e. that it has no history” (240). This concept of trans-historicity of ideology can be compared to the condition of the Nepalese youths from the very past to the present who try to go to *Muglan* to make their life happy and lucky. No matter where their *muglan* be, they leave their family, village and native land to be employed. As Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s *Muna Madan* presents the destination of the unemployed Nepalese youths as the Bhot, Today’s Nepalese youths go to their *Muglan* of Arab, Quatar and even to the ‘First World countries’ and suffer a lot as Devkota’s Madan suffered in Bhot and the youths in *Muglan* suffered in Bhutan. This process of suffering is an ongoing process and eternal. While paying the fare of the truck to the driver’s helper who demands twenty rupees per head, Thule consoles himself and Sutar saying ‘It might be right, yes, our father used to say it took him five *koris* while going to Assam’. (3) In this way the process of going to somewhere to support their life was practiced since long before till today.

The wide and inhuman discrimination is not only the culture practiced by the bourgeoisie from one part of the country but everywhere in the world. It has been imposed and practiced by the state authority and judiciary. When the Nepalese youths become able to run away from the trap of the Bhutanese, they are the fugitives in the eye of the law there. They are tagged as ‘tipaite’ and searched everywhere by the police. If found, they are punished badly. Even the law becomes so cruel, brutal and inhuman for the poor and helpless youths in the foreign land of mercilessness.

In the capitalist culture, capitalists always create hierarchy between bourgeois and proletariats. Capitalist ideology creates the discourse that human progress becomes possible only through capitalism. Hence, capitalism is world’s dominant social, political and economic system based on hierarchy, production for profit, private ownership and low wage payment for labor. The main motive of capitalism is to generate more capital. In capitalism, a capitalist uses money in a special way as a medium to create hierarchy. The more we buy, we become the owner of more commodities that turns us richer but it also generates the more chance of common people to become poor. In capitalism, capitalists control everything and they create the desire to sell the commodities. The more desire they create upon people the

more chance is there to collect surplus value or capital. In this context Adorno and Horkheimer say:

Capitalist production so confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them. As naturally as the ruled always took the morality imposed upon them more seriously than did the rulers themselves, the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success even more than the successful are. Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them. (238)

In culture industry, bourgeois aims to sell as much commodities as possible. For this they need labor but they pay low wages to them. In pre-capitalist time, there was the practice of slavery. They used to buy the slaves or the laborers and force them to work as much as they like. The feelings and aspirations slaves were trampled and their freedom was robbed. In the same manner, the proletariat's feelings, sentiment, choices and ability are overlooked in materialistic society. This hierarchical situation creates proletariat feel alienated, isolated, an outsider and eager to earn capital, reputation and power at any cost.

In *Muglan*, all the characters are more or less affected by the frenzy of capitalist ideology. There are many hierarchal situations, exploitations, dominations, instances of slavery and sufferings. The protagonist, Sutar along with other youths blindly follows the capitalist ideology and becomes the victim of it in the novel. Their poor economic background compels them to work till the day of their mother's pregnancy. They all are kept under the domination of the cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of the capitalist ideology. Capitalists do not bother on what is right and what is wrong but their only aim is to collect money. If anyone tries to escape from the dungeon of the system, it is impossible for him, capitalism does not allow it. After the youths are recaptured by the human traffickers while trying to run away from there, they are behaved more inhumanly. Bhattarai, in this context writes:

After the sound of every whipping, another one would twirl his moustache and ask -'Will you run away like this?' '... ..' The man would merely whisper something in indistinguishable manner. He ordered-'Go to work from tomorrow. As a penalty, your two months' salary will be deducted. And you will receive only half of your ration. Understood?'. . .] The four labourers stood sobbing there with scars of canning all over their bodies. These were the people who had absconded during *Dashain*. (74-75)

Capitalists are so merciless that they never think about the condition of the poor people but of themselves only. The cruelty, brutality and

inhumanity of capitalism are so intolerable for the working class poor people. Once entrapped in their mousetrap, no one can escape from that dungeon.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Bhattarai's *Muglan*, the article concludes that the novelist has observed the socio-economic system of the 1960s in his novel. The then Nepalese youths of the late 1960s were compelled to go to *Muglan* by the elitist ideology of the society. This article has pointed to the capitalistic modes of production of the contemporary society and exhibits its harsh impacts on the lives of working class people, and they are forced to work for their survival. Bhattarai presents the sorrowful condition of people under capitalism in which the proletariats are always dominated, exploited, tormented, and neglected by the bourgeois. In the novel, Bhattarai develops the themes and ideas as the strong critique of capitalism. In capitalist society, the characters like *Sutar* have no human value. The tendency of othering in capitalism makes *Sutar* alienated, frustrated and isolated in the society. He commits suicide because of his frustration that he sees no means of escaping from the mousetrap of the capitalism. By showing the hierarchal social condition, slavery, class-hierarchy, domination and exploitation, the text critiques the capitalist ideology.

Works Cited

- Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." *Mapping Ideology*. Ed. Slavoj. Zizek. Verso, 1999.
- Bhattarai, Govinda Raj. *Muglan*. Trans. Lekhnath Sharma Pathak. Oriental Publication, 2012.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology*. Verso, 1999.
- -. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. Routledge, 2002. Eagleton, Terry, and Drew Milne, eds. *Marxist Literary Theory*. Blackwell, 1996.
- Engels, Fredrich and Karl Marx. *The Communist Manifesto*. International Publishers, 1994.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebook*. Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Intellectual History Reader*. Ed. Beerendra Pandey. M.K. Publishers, 2005.
- Leitch, Vincent B. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. W.W. Norton & Company. 2001.
- Marx, Karl. "The German Ideology". *Critical Theory since Plato*. Ed. Hazard Adams. Harcourt Brace, 1992. 624-25
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Mapping Ideology*. Verso, 1999.