

Dalit Literature and Political Consciousness in Sharad Poudel's *Likhe*

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Abstract

*The article attempts to explore the class and caste consciousness in Nepali Dalit literature; and, to identify contemporary Dalit literature and its presentation of subject matters, social messages and themes. The article sketches how Dalit literature reflects the contemporary socio-political and economic issues where Dalit community is routinely discriminated, exploited, boycotted, and excluded in various social spheres. Basically, every social structure has binary oppositions such as masters-slave, landlord-worker, bourgeois-proletariat and 'haves' and 'haves not'. Dalit literature is a medium to fight against the system for rights, equality and social dignity. The article employs the concept of Marxist concept of class consciousness and aesthetic on Poudel's novel *Likhe*. The paper adopts the analytical and exploratory method and qualitative approach as a research tool.*

Key Words: *Exploitation, Class consciousness, Dalit literature, Aesthetics, Conflict and Aesthetics*

Introduction and Rationale:

Dalits is considered as the most vulnerable and marginalized group of Nepal. The community has been socio-politically discriminated and economically exploited in various facets of social spheres for centuries. As a result, they have been deprived of proper education, livelihood and health facilities, political representation, employment opportunities and most importantly social dignity. Recently, Dalit community has started to raise the voice for their right, equality and social dignity from different corners of society. And, among them, Dalit literature is one of the powerful weapons of their movements. The literature has its own literary aesthetic features. It is a medium to release the pain, sufferings, anger and traumatic experiences of the socio-political suppression, oppression and discrimination. In this context, Chamanlal defines, "Dalit literature is that which expresses the lives

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of Dalits, their socio-political status, their culture, their beliefs, the suppression and oppression faced by them and the status of the protest against suppression and oppression clearly, deeply and artistically” (qtd. in Maharjan 23). The literature expresses the Dalits' life style, feelings, sufferings and their bitter experiences of discriminations of what they go through in everyday life. Similarly, Soumya Nair Anoop Kumar states, “Dalit literature being a new dimension is the primary concept the literature of marginality...that remained speechless for centuries opened their hearts in the form of Poems, Ballads, Dramas, Short Narratives, Novels, Critical Essays, Biographies and Historical writings...” (209). The literature is realistic writings but it is not the fictitious or imaginary like mainstreaming literature.

Dalit literature narrates the socio-political lives of Dalits. It is regarded as realistic literature where fictionalization is rarely embedded in it. In this connection popular Indian Dalit aesthetic writer and critic, Sharankumar Limbale remarks, “Dalit literature narrates experiences that have been heard or seen until now, the reader is shaken while reading them. To the middle-class critics, these experiences appear unprecedented...” (55). Dalit literature and its themes are focused on the experiences of Dalits. Moreover, Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay argues, “Dalit literature is not a literary movement in ordinary sense of the term. It is, like Black literature, a product of an identity as well as constitutive of that identity” (qtd. in Savyasaachi 1658). The literature is for identity formation for Dalits. It is a part of Dalit movements that the readers may find protest and resistance against discrimination, oppression, suppression and injustice in it. It is the voice from margin to seek the space and new identity in the mainstream of social life.

Dalit literature adopts the contemporary lives of Dalits. However, there is a lack of a comprehensive research conducted in this area regarding how it delivers messages and themes to readers. This research article is outlined with the framework of the messages of the Dalit literature and writings- How does the Dalit literature impact on the socio-political arena of society? Hence, the article aims to explore the political consciousness; and, to identify the social messages, themes and impact of Dalit literature in society in reference to Sharad Poudel's novel *Likhe*. For this purpose, the researcher has employed the Marxist concept of class consciousness referring to Marx, Georg Lukacs, Terry Eagleton; and, the concept of Dalit aesthetics of Sharankumar Limbale as well.

Briefly mapping the Nepali Dalit Literature

Nepali writers started to pen in fictions and poetry on Dalits in large number from 1950s. However, most Dalit fictions have been published in 1990s onwards. Notably, Khagendra Sangroula's *Joonkiriko Sangeet (2056 BS)*, K. P. Dhakal's *Jutheko Naya Ghar (2058 BS)*, Sharad Poudel's *Likhe (2059 BS)*, *Simana Waripari*

(2061 BS) and *Tapan* (2070 BS) are the novels written by *non-Dalit* writers that portray problems and politics of Dalits. The plots, themes and story lines of these novels seem strong and realistic that protagonists of the novels represent the Dalits of our society.

The contemporary Nepali Dalit fictions show that the protagonists get victory over the social evils. In this context, K. P. Dhakal's *Jutheko Naya Ghar*, a novella, brings the Dalit and untouchable protagonist in forefront of Nepali literature. Regarding it, Ramesh Prasad Bhattarai critiques that "by bringing the *Sarki* family, who was suppressed and oppressed by feudal, the writer portrays the pain and problems of all Dalit community...it presents the socio-political background before 1990. It shows the conflict between *Dalits* and *Brahmans* and victory of *Dalits* at the end!" (207). The novel flows upon a Utopian world which is different from a realistic Dalit hero of our society.

Mostly, leftist and progressive writers depict the Dalit issues and present strong characters to defeat the evil social practices. Notably, Khagendra Sangroula's *Joonkiriko Sangeet* is another progressive masterpiece of this kind. The novel presents the Dalits' problem as the class problem; however, he focuses it as a political problem. Again, Bhattarai commented that "the novel reflects the economic, social, cultural and caste discrimination faced by *Dalits*; and, moreover, he portrays the suppression, exploitation, torture, domination, malpractices and injustice upon them" (211). It also shows the political awareness of Dalit youths. One of the characters in the novel speaks "...I strongly attend here to affiliate, work and fight for rights being a member of this organization" (Sangroula 430). The novel presents the idea that the alternative force of political parties can be Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The writer has strongly advocated and glorified the activities of NGOs for social change in Nepal.

Dalits are not only being oppressed and discriminated socio-politically but they are also fighting against extreme poverty. Poverty is one of the determining factors of Dalits' backwardness. Sharad Poudel's novels, *Likhe* and *Tapan* depict the tangible problems of Dalits and show how Dalits are being suppressed in socio-political and economic spheres of the society. The protagonist Likhe stands as a Dalit youth who is oppressed and exploited in feudal society; and, compelled to leave the birthplace in his early age. "Both of Poudel's novels present the Nepali lower-income family and society; the pain, torture, hurdles and problems faced by Nepali women; and their life process and life-style" (Bhattarai 215). Likhe has both hope and expectation from life. He struggles from his early age to get rid of the miserable socio-economic condition. His transformation from poor Dalit boy to politically oriented conscious youth leader of a political party seems dramatic in the novel.

Dalits and poverty seem synonymous in the socio-economic context of Nepal. They are physically exploited due to poverty and their miserable economic condition. The poverty of Dalits is reflected in most of Dalit literature. They have to work to their landlord or feudal lords for their everyday bread and butter but they are exploited physically and mentally. Specially, Dalit girls and women are in much vulnerable situation. They are sexually harassed, exploited or tortured which are presented in the Dalit literature as well. Dhruva Satya Pariyar's story *Naandi* presents a Dalit girl named Naandi who works in a restaurant for her survival. She narrates about the exploitation how she is exploited in her workplace that "the restaurant owner always misbehaved while providing the salary. He tried to harass me most of the time. He used to see me as his wife when he knew that I was an orphan and a poor girl. At last, I quitted the job of singing in the restaurant..." (104). This is a representative incident of how much Dalit girls are harassed sexually in their jobs and professions.

Similarly, the *Badi* community is living in a pathetic condition. The *Badi* girls and women in past had to sell their bodies to the so-called upper castes' clients for their daily survival but those clients would not accept water, food and things touched by them publicly. It was considered that *Badi* women's bodies were like the public land (*Ailani*) that anyone can use it. Writer Bibek Ojha's novel *Ailani (A Public Land)* is a story of *Badi* women of western Nepal. In the novel, a *Badi* woman's body is used by the people but her husband is severely bitten and killed accusing that he had touched the water source. The plot of the novel depicts that "it was brutal and painful for all. I could not see the face of Kamman. His head was broken due to severe attack with the stones. His broken head was hanging. It was bleeding. His clothes were full of blood due to over bleeding. His legs were sunk in the pond of blood" (Ojha 122). What miserable lives they have been surviving! They were untouchables in open society but their bodies were used in private.

The present literary writings on Dalits and their issues give a hope for social transformation. Some writers seem progressive in reference to the message they deliver to the readers. However, there is not comprehensive research conducted in Dalit literature with specific objectives and Marxist concept of class consciousness and Dalit aesthetic. In this very context, the research paper expects somehow to contribute to Dalit research and academia.

Methodology

Marxist concept believes on the real contradiction between two factors that of human nature and the way of working in a capitalist society. There is dialectical approach to life which has two opposite or contradictory sides or factors. There is always dialectical conflict between binary opposite forces such as 'haves' and 'haves

not', 'master' and 'slave', 'bourgeoisie' and 'proletariat', 'capitalism' and 'socialism' and so on. The bourgeoisie exploits the proletariats and the conflicts arises from there which aim to establish the classless equality-based socialism. For Marx, class antagonisms under the capitalism, owing in part to its instability and crisis prone nature, develops the concept of class consciousness in working class people.

Marxism thinks that the common literature is nothing in true sense but ideology in artistic form can work as literature and expresses the consciousness in the society all the time. These types of literature generate the 'false consciousness' in Engels' term. Terry Eagleton argues, "it is a position characteristic of much 'vulgar Marxist' criticism, which tends to see literary works merely as reflection of dominant ideologies" (16). However, literature changes the ideological assumptions and makes its own literary art with artistic meaning. No one can separate the ideology and literature but they both have interlinked to reach to the real meaning of the text.

The dialectical determination of false consciousness constitutes a true analysis to remove from the naïve description of fact, thought and feelings of men. "By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interest arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society" (Lukacs 51). The fact, thought and feelings of men may be appropriate to the objective situation of the society. Lukacs further claims that "class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions imputed to a particular typical position in the process of production" (51). The consciousness is thought and felt of every individual.

Marxist concept of base and superstructure believes that the economic condition and production are simply reflected in culture and literature. As a part of studying cultural phenomena, literature reflects the culture, religion, language and daily lives of the society. Regarding this nature of literature and ideology, Ronald Strickland contends:

Literature... was inevitably an expression of ideological 'false consciousness' supporting oppressive political and economic relation... Althusser makes two significant advances over the traditional understanding of ideology. First, he rejects as an oversimplification the concept of ideology as merely false consciousness... Second, for Althusser, there is no clear dividing line between base and structure. Ideology effectively 'produces' social subjectivities and mediates the subject's experience of reality. (47- 48)

It is true that superstructure cannot reflect the base perfectly. However, language and consciousness are material products of ideology. Such ideologies are reflected in product, language, culture, and even in literature.

The researcher applies the Marxist concept of class consciousness and Dalit aesthetic on Poudel's novel, *Likhe*. The paper basically adopts the exploratory and analytical methods and qualitative approach as a research tool. It implies various components and paradigms to interpret the primary text.

Discussion: Dalit Literature and Political Consciousness

Dalit literature is a metaphoric writing of Dalit consciousness against inequality and injustice. One of the Dalit critics on Aesthetics, Limbale argues about Dalit literature, "the form of Dalit literature is inherent in its 'Dalitness', and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus" (19). Dalit literature recalls the pain and the sufferings given by the Hindu *varna* system. The common readers never expect the traditional aesthetics or beauty and pleasure in Dalit literature; rather better search the true representation of Dalits problems and 'Dalitness' on it. It rejects the traditional concepts and values of aesthetics. Moreover, Limbale argues, "rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature- an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic" (19). The message of awakening and consciousness are truly existed in the Dalit literature. It is a part of Dalit movements for rights, equality, justice and social liberation.

The emergence of Dalit literature was seen for last several years. Both new creation and translation from other languages were published. As Laura R. Brueck states: "...scholarly attention to the subject of Dalit literature in India has increased almost as dramatically as the recent surge in the publication and translation of Dalit literature across India" (05). The literature spreads the message to the readers and the leaders to work for Dalit liberation. The process is still increasing day by day. Specially, the *Dalit* narratives are most important and popular writings in Indian Dalit literature.

Similarly, Dalit literature develops as resistance literature in context of Nepal. It is against inequality, injustice and sociocultural discrimination. Even the Dalit writers cannot believe that the traditional theories do justice to Dalit literature. Consequently, Indian writers and researchers have developed their own Dalit theory for Dalit studies. In Brueck's words "...Dalit literary theory itself is too often dismissive, perhaps willfully so, of the diversity and complexity of the literary strategies employed by Dalit authors across a range of regional, linguistic, class and gender identity positions" (07). The literature and theory work as protector of the community.

Sharad Poudel's *Likhe* is a masterpiece to understand the Dalit problems, exploitation and caste and class consciousness as well. The protagonist of the novel, Likhe, a young Dalit boy, is discriminated and exploited due to his social and economic status. He struggles for survival from his early age and later works for rights, equality and social dignity. Likhe, as a Dalit of Nepali Hindu society, has many social barriers and hurdles associated with his caste and class. In the beginning, he works as a laborer in local landlord's house from his early age. He knows that his family is fighting with poverty and caste system. The problem is not only the problems of his family but of his entire community. He feels he is discriminated and exploited in his landlord's house but he cannot go against them. He knows it is the problem of his entire Dalit community. He feels but he cannot speak against it. Regarding the context, Japanese scholar, Otsuki Shoten argues:

Class consciousness is neither the sum total of what individual members constituting the class think and feel, nor its average...the individual has no knowledge of what is the objective state of society, although society is made by himself, Engels called this individual consciousness 'False Consciousness' (qtd. in Toshihiko HIRAI 12).

Every individual may not be conscious about their socio-economic and political position. The society itself is made of the innocent people who cannot speak against social injustice and discrimination. In the novel, Likhe is a nine-year-old innocent boy. He works day and night for the landlord but he hardly gets sweet words and appreciation of his works rather he gets misbehave and torture from them. Though, he takes care of the grains but landlord's son scatters it. The landlady scolds Likhe instead of her son. "Oh, stupid boy! Why are you catching my son? She scolded him. Likhe freed the hands of youngest landlord and began to collect the scattered rice slowly" (Poudel 36). The same aged boy plays and scatters the grains but Likhe has to collect it. It shows how the caste and the class matters in the social position. It is the misery of every Dalit. In Slovak's word, subaltern like Likhe cannot speak against landlord because he is at the bottom of social hierarchy.

Dalit literature develops as a part of Dalit movements which aims to liberate the Dalits from socio-economic and political barriers. Brueck argues that "Dalit literature...is the creative expression of a social liberation movement, a struggle not for independence from physical occupation but rather a struggle for freedom from the tyranny of caste-based discrimination" (62). Dalits desire for social liberation, equality and discrimination. The protagonist of the novel, Likhe works for landlord and his family; however, he gets abuses and torture from landlord's family. He knows that he is suppressed and oppressed but he cannot protest against them because he belongs to the working class. Georg Lukacs believes that "...a class consciousness is prevented from emerging by their position within the process of

production and the interests this generates” (61). Likhe tolerates the discrimination or controls the anger. “Oh boy, you are dropping the tears throughout the day, aren’t you? The landlady spoke loudly looking at Likhe who was weeping nearby cowshed. The word does not touch him; so Likhe did not move from there...” (Poudel 25). Likhe knows that he is exploited by the landlord and his family but he cannot take action or move against them because of his social position.

Struggle for survival and social dignity is a key issue for Dalits. Likhe, from the very early age, does struggle for bread and butter in his village and foreign land as well. His parents are unable to provide him good education and basic needs. There is none to support him. He feels the feudalistic suppression wherever he goes. The narrator reveals that “Likhe worked throughout the day. He washed the dishes-tea cups, plates, pots etc. He continuously washed throughout the day. He swept the house twice; cleaned the floor. But he did not get any leisure time” (Poudel 158). The landlord exploits Likhe and promotes the child labor by depriving him of his basic rights of childhood dignity and development. He does not love and care the child labor. Marxism believes that there is only master-slave relation so as between these characters- landlord and Likhe do have. There is value of capital, profit and production in the capitalist society. Marx argues, “relation of production of every society from a whole is the methodological point of departure and the key to the historical understanding of social relations” (qtd. in Lukacs 09). The workers should also understand the social relation with their masters. The isolated things are always in isolation in Marxism. The dialectical relation is seen in opposite parties. Likhe feels the same situation in Delhi, too.

Marxism believes that class groups separate themselves. The working class and masters divide their societies on their own. On the basis of it, they can have the struggles as per their strategies. Lukacs claims “classes that successfully carried out revolutions in earlier societies had their task made easier subjectively by this very fact of the discrepancy between their own class consciousness...” (71). The class consciousness is the primary need to be united for revolution. In the novel, Likhe and Parashuram share a small room, though, they work in different places. Sunam frequently visits them and orients them with social, political and ideological concepts. As a cadre of communist league, Sunam also orients them with the Marxist philosophy and importance of laborers’ organization; and he forms laborers’ organizations for the rights and dignity of laborers in many cities of India where Nepali laborers work for bread and butter. He talks about various issues from egalitarian to agrarian society, classes, birth, development, and evolution of human beings and the present society. Sunam speaks to Likhe and Parashuram in their room as:

[...] the class division is seen slowly in society from there between ‘haves’ and ‘haves not’. People learned about agriculture thereafter and they started farming; and later class conflict is seen rapidly. The leaders, pundits, shamans and state system began from there to manage the agriculture, animal farming, and other cooperative works. And, prostitution, robbery, poverty and malpractices also began with this system of society. (Poudel 234)

The character, Sunam is an ideologically well-oriented communist cadre who teaches the characters like Likhe and Parashuram. They both (Likhe and Parashuram) work in a factory as laborers. Making the laborers aware about their rights and condition and raising their consciousness is a process of class struggle in Marxism. The protagonist, Likhe is a very innocent and socially oppressed person who cannot speak against the discrimination, injustice and social malpractices.

Raising the voices for rights and equality is next step of developing consciousness to working class people. The socially lower caste people who frequently become victims of caste-based discrimination and oppression; and they can raise the voice against such discrimination and oppression only if they unite. Hence, Lukacs argues: “...for the class consciousness of the proletariat, the dialectical relationship between immediate interests and the objective impact on the whole of society is located in the consciousness of the proletariat itself” (71). One does not work for your consciousness or does not make you conscious since you are not aware of your own rights and dignity. Thinking about your rights and the importance of organized or unified voice is a process of consciousness. And, unified voice has power to change the system what Marxist ideology believes in. In the novel, the protagonist Likhe is conscious about his rights and social dignity. In a conference of “Workers’ United Organization, Delhi”, Likhe delivers a powerful speech which shows his level of consciousness in fact. He speaks in front of a huge mass:

If a person understands the value of rights, how can he/she get victory over the social practices alone? It is a conflict between bourgeoisie and proletariat. The bourgeoisie would exploit the poor people and their sweat...Neither one could collapse feudal nor uplift the workers in the capitalist society... Realizing the need, people should fight against the system. Since we do not understand the need of class conflict, we cannot get anything instead. (Poudel 275)

Likhe stands completely aware or conscious about his rights and dignity after a long orientation from Sunam. He is sure that nothing is possible until and unless the victim communities or the oppressed ones are ready to fight against the system. Dalits should fight for their rights and dignity in a systematic and unified approach.

Class consciousness is the initial stage of class struggle. In this regards, Marx and Engels argue, “the production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life.... Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness” (qtd. in Eagleton 04). The consciousness gives the clues of freedom and happiness in life if one uses conscience properly. The protagonist, Likhe is politically conscious about his status in the society. He is more aware about political rights and importance of organization and unified voice. And, he is associated with the workers union in Delhi. His speech indicates his level of consciousness about the rights, equality, the need of class struggle and the unity of the people. With the hope and mission of establishing an equality-based classless society, Likhe returns to his motherland, Nepal. He has a plan to unite the backward and Dalits and to mobilize them to fight against the socio-political inequalities and discrimination.

Conclusion

Class consciousness in the working-class people or the proletariat is the primary requisition for class liberation. It determines the liberation and freedom of the people. The novel *Likhe* is a masterpiece of caste-based and materialistic exploitation, class conflict, class consciousness and liberation. As a part of Dalit literature, it is a comprehensive text to make the people aware of their rights, equality, dignity, justice and social liberation. The writer is able to make the people conscious about their rights and equality. Likhe, as a Dalit youth and protagonist of the novel, encounters with numerous discrimination and exploitation throughout his life. Later, he is associated with laborer unions and political parties after the rigorous orientation, empowerment and motivation of Sunam. Likhe is a representative character of our society who has hope, positivism and activeness for social liberation. He has a dream to be liberated from all types of social and political barriers and hurdles. The novel is a comprehensive package to make the Dalits and marginalized people aware of their rights and dignity.

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