

Reflection of Dalit Aesthetics and Consciousness in Prakash Nepali's *Andho Samāj*

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Abstract

This article explores the aesthetic features and values and consciousness in Prakash Nepali's Andho Samāj. The concept of Dalit aesthetics developed in literature includes the various characteristics and issues of Dalits. It embeds many facets of Dalits and their problems connected to caste, culture, economy and society. Nepali's Andho Samāj elevates diverse problems and complications of Dalits including inter-caste relation, caste system, poverty and cultural practices in the society. In the novel, major Dalit characters try to revolt against the socio-cultural and economic difficulties and barriers through social intermingling and assimilation. They seek the freedom from all forms of restriction, prohibition and difficulties of caste and culture; and, plead for equality, justice and dignity of Dalits. However, the characters such as Hari and Sandhya encounter with suppression, insult and discrimination from the parents, family members and society themselves; and, they are compelled to commit suicide together. Hence, the novel portrays the pain, anger, sufferings and other numerous problems and also resistance, protest and revolt linked to caste, culture, gender and varna system which are considered as aesthetic features and norms of Dalit literature. For that, the researcher applies the concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness as theoretical tool and also employs the qualitative approach with explorative methods.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Dalit literature, resistance, caste system, social complication and discrimination

Introduction

The research article investigates the aesthetic features and norms and consciousness of Dalit literature based on Prakash Nepali's social novel, *Andho Samāj*. Aesthetics and consciousness in Dalit literature are the revolutionary mentality connected with struggles and movements. Indian writer Sharankumar Lambale defines, "it is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers" (33). Dalit consciousness stands for the socio-cultural rights, equality, justice and caste liberation. The literature has prominently been raising issues and problems of Dalits for long. Basically, it upholds rights, equality, justice and liberation of concerned people through its characters in literary texts. Moreover, the literature written

on Dalits has become a resistant literature to establish pertinent agendas including space, representation and inclusion of Dalits in the state mechanism.

Prakash Nepali's *Andho Samāj* illustrates the socio-cultural and economic status of Nepali society in general and Dalits' various aspects, issues and problems in particular. Majority people of society have been practicing Varna system which has four-fold-varnas: Brahman, Kshetri, Baishya and Shudra. Regarding the Varna system, Yam Bahadur Kisan argues, “*Brahman* comes from the head, *Kshetriya* from the arms, *Vaishya* from the thigh, and *Shudra* from the feet of Bishwarup Birat Purush” (07). Shudra lies at the bottom of Varna system. Later, they are converted into Dalits in Indian sub-continent as the political discourse. Dalits have also been raising the voice for their equality, rights and social justice from the centuries; and, the movements have been still taking places in different forms.

The voices for rights, equality and liberation have been rising from different corners of society; and, literary voice is one of them. The literature and writings of both Dalits and non-Dalit writers have been developing as movements with clear agenda and mission of social transformation. In his context, the research seeks the answers of these questions that what are the Dalit aesthetic features and values in Dalit literature? How the Dalit aesthetics and consciousness are reflected in the text? And why does the writer use aesthetic values and norms in Dalit literary texts? Hence, the paper explores Dalit aesthetics and consciousness, its uses and importance based on the text *Andho Samāj*. The researcher applies concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness as theoretical tool to the primary text.

Methods and Methodology

The paper employs a qualitative approach to explore Dalit aesthetics and consciousness by analyzing prominent literary work. The researcher has also adopted exploratory methods to examine and interpret the primary text. The novel *Andho Samāj* prominently underscores Dalit aesthetics and consciousness through various literature features, elements and themes. For this purpose, the theoretical framework is developed based on Dalit aesthetics. The concept of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness is connected to protest, socio-cultural, economic activities and literary writings seeking to liberate the people from all types of social barriers, inequality and injustice. Regarding Dalit aesthetics, Limbale defines, “...pain of suffering is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature” (114). The literature minutely reflects and pain, sufferings and problems of Dalits. In broad spectrum “the literature that promotes equality, freedom and justice is revolutionary, and it emphasizes the centrality of the human being and society...” (Limbale 119). Dalit aesthetics is associated with the social issues, complications, sufferings and revolts of Dalits.

Review of Literature

The issues of caste and culture are the pertinent in Nepali literary writings. Nepali writers have been contributing in developing the Dalit literature, aesthetics and consciousness

over the years. Their literature and writings have established Dalit literature both in form and content. Scholar Ishwor Chandra Gyawali in “Sāhityamā Dalit Soundarya ra Soundarya-Bodh [Dalit Aesthetics and Perception of Aesthetics in Literature]” presents cultural aspects of oppression and aesthetics of Dalit literature. Regarding the context, Gyawali asserts that “[...] the discrimination and oppression imposed to Dalit community is not only the problem of casteism but also the problems of social, political, economic and cultural issues; and it is a question connected to class liberation” (trans. 175). The article discusses that aesthetics as expressed in literature on Dalit issues is distinct from mainstream literature. The literature with certain characteristics is Dalit aesthetics.

Tarakanta Pandey’s “Samasāmayik Pragatishil Kabitāmā Dalit-Chetana [Dalit Consciousness in Contemporary Progressive Poetry]” also discusses Dalit consciousness based on selected poems some prominent poets. Pandey highlights issues such as class and caste-based discrimination imposed to Dalits. He elucidates, “having focused on the sense of Dalit oppression and discrimination; the contemporary progressive poems have been presented in melodic expression by connecting the various facets of Dalits” (trans. 160). The contemporary writings portray various aspects of Dalits, and their protests. In his observation, literature is the reflection of Dalit oppression, caste discrimination and protest against it.

Ninu Chapagain’s “Dalit Soundaryashāshtra ra Sāhitya [Dalit Aesthetics and Literature]” underscores caste system and discrimination as depicted in selected Nepali literature. He opines that Dalit literature is to be studied from Dalit perspective so as he studies Dalit literature in relations to Marxism and aesthetics. For him, literature is a tool to look at the social movements in Nepal. Besides, “writers are the conscious people who raise the voices against social evils. They have been continuously speaking against caste division and Dalit problems that has fragmented to humans and the social prosperity and movements artificially; and, they are supporting for human liberation and equality movements” (trans. Chapagain 82). Chapagain observes the potentiality of Dalit literature which sketches the ground of Nepali Dalit writings. However, he has not discussed potential features, norms, values and elements of Dalit aesthetics and Dalit studies.

The existing review of literature highlights the poverty, caste system and socio-cultural status of Dalits. Most of the research based on Nepali literary works has failed to cover Dalit issues ranging from Dalit aesthetics and consciousness to Dalit liberation. Hence, to fulfill the gap, the paper attempts to study the text from the perspectives of Dalit aesthetics and consciousness.

Analysis: Dalit Aesthetics and Consciousness in *Andho Samāj*

Prakash Nepali’s *Andho Samāj*, published as a social novel, opens the avenues of multiple aspects of society. The novel, primarily, portrays the socio-cultural and economic status and roles of Dalits in Nepali society. Dalits and radical non-Dalits protest for socio-cultural and economic transformation for rights and equality of Dalits in the society. The novel, *Andho Samāj* as a masterpiece Dalit literature embeds the features of Dalit

aesthetics; and, it also covers the issues from caste, culture, gender, and different forms of discrimination.

Literature, as a form of art, has power to blur the conventional practices. It transforms the imaginative world into real one. Marcuse asserts, "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real. In this rupture which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality..." (9). Aesthetics is the literary features and values of literature connected to the truth of socio-historical reality. The literature associated to society and social issues has different aesthetic values and norms. The *Andho Samāj* begins with the long description of social reality and situation of Dalits in Nepali society. Dalit characters- Santaman, Bikram, Ravi, and Ramakanta and other Dalit characters are obliged to live an inhumane life. The narrator of the novel presents an incident of *Saraswati puja*:

It was the day of *Saraswati Pujā*. Surya, son of Santaman Sarki, took bath and went to the temple with worshipping materials. Unfortunately, there was none at the moment in the periphery of temple...he waited there for hours patiently but pandit did not appear in the periphery of temple until 11:00 AM...Surya entered the temple and performed *pujā*. Suddenly, pandit appeared there and asked from outside "Who is inside the temple". (trans. Nepali 08)

Temples and ritual places are prohibited to Dalits in varna-based society. Surya, as a young Dalit boy, is barred to enter the temple. However, he enters the temple and worships in the absence of pandit and people. Thereafter, the society nags, misbehaves and severely punishes him. Then, he is thrown into the nearby river.

Dalits raise voices for the rights, equality, liberation, justice and social dignity. However, society still murders the people based on their caste, culture and social differences. Bianca Chereches states in, "An Exploration of the Aesthetics of Dalit Trauma in Mulk Raj Ananda's *Untouchable*":

The Dalit community has been suffered generational, multi-faceted and institutionalized discrimination as a result of the implementation of the Hindu caste system in the Indian society for religious and political reasons. This casteist practice has left a clear mark of social division and inequality and has severely damaged this community's identity. (29)

The varna-based society suppresses, exploits and discriminates Dalits through ritual practices as depicted in Mulk Raj Ananda's novel *Untouchable*. The trauma of Bakha in *Untouchable* and Surya in *Andho Samāj* seem similar in terms of discrimination in cultural spaces. Both represent Dalits who cannot resist against the society instantly, though, they are discriminated and punished in temples. The caste discrimination in temples reflects the cultural brutality to Dalits. "Dalit trauma is thus the main issue in the novel's agenda, since the multi-layered inter/intra-caste inequalities are extensively portrayed to highlight how Dalits were constantly reminded of their inferior and powerless

position" (Chereshes 36). In both novels, the protagonists cannot protest against the suppressors and society.

Caste system does not perceive inter-caste relation between Dalits and non-Dalits positively. Ghanshyam Shah, "...the world-view of Dalit is based on materialist philosophy which is essentially different from the world-view of Brahmanism" (23). The society views differences between Dalits and non-Dalits on the basis of caste and economy. Therefore, inter-caste relations and marriage between the characters are not accepted by the society. The characters such as Ashok and Namrata are in inter-caste love affairs. The novel reveals:

"Why? Do you think I will betray you? Do you think so to me?" Namrata spoke surprisingly.

"No, I am not telling so but you are *Brahmin* and we are *Sudras*. Neither we have same castes nor same customs; you are the daughter of feudal; and I am a son of Darji (*Dalit*), who would survive by sewing the clothes of villagers. Is it possible for our marriage? (trans. Nepali 30)

The inter-caste relation and marriage creates tension to the Dalit characters in the society. Ashok knows the reality very well; though, he is still in love with Namrata. Their love and relations develop as the protest against the varna-based society.

Dalit writers mostly include the setting of the subjects and issues on pertinent social subjects. Social issue and condition of Dalits seem heart-touching whatever they write. In this context, Indian scholar, Milind Eknath Awad states, "Dalit writings are not only restricted to the lives of Dalit writers. It is delineation of social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation, and of people who had been subjected to these evils. The core of Dalit writing is the rebellious reaction against exploitation and the call to free man" (148). Subject matters of Dalit writings mostly emphasize on problems of Dalits. The text, *Andho Samāj* written by a Dalit writer, includes Dalit issues and numerous social malpractices related to Dalits. The character- Hari as the son of local pandit; and, Sandhya, the daughter of local Dalit, Man Bahadur Nepali, are in inter-caste love affairs. Hari, a well-educated boy, goes to Malaysia for employment but Sandhya studies in Pokhara. They have caste barriers for formal marriage and relation. In the text, Hari speaks against the discrimination as the statement reads:

Sandhya! There would not have similar thought like ours. In fact, there is need of eliminating all forms of exploitation, oppression and discrimination against women and Dalits from the society; but it is not easy to eliminate the deeply rooted discrimination. It will be eliminated slowly and the exploited communities should be aware for it. (trans. Nepali 48)

Hari imagines a society free from caste system and other socio-cultural malpractices. The victims of the society need to be conscious about their rights and duties. Without their efforts, the community cannot make any significant change. However, solidarity and

cooperation from non-Dalits is imperative for the socio-cultural change. They have to work with certain theoretical frameworks of actions as Michael Moffatt comments:

Untouchables do not necessarily possess distinctively different social and cultural forms as a result of their position in the system.... Replication is a strong indicator of cultural consensus than complementarily, since it operates within the untouchable subset of caste, where the power of the higher castes does not directly operate. (3-5)

Moffatt provides a theoretical framework for the socio-cultural liberation of Dalits. The framework develops the strategy to resist for Dalit cause. Especially, the leaders, scholars and researchers need to make strategies for equality and liberation of Dalits.

Caste and gender discrimination encumbers the prosperity of society. The female character- Sandhya has a step-mother, Ramita. Her father gets married to her step-mother but she does not behave well to Sandhya. She is grown up at maternal uncle's home with care, love and education in Pokhara; but her step-mother does not like her and ways of life-style. When her step-mother scolds badly, Sandhya feels extreme sad, and, remembers her dead mother. Sandhya murmurs in her sadness "Why did you go far-away leaving me alone, mom? I was a single daughter; father brought step-mother with her son to make me happy; but why did not you take me with you? Perhaps, you are looking at my fate from your happy place! Are you happy seeing my tears?" (trans. Nepali 58- 59). Sandhya's step-mother shows her cruelty against her. The discrimination by the step-daughter really makes her disappointed.

Dalit female characters do not make meaningful efforts against the discriminatory and vehement social practices. Being an educated and qualified girl, Sandhya cannot speak against her step-mother and society. Sandhya never thinks her step-mother as step-mother. She always loves and supports her. In return, she gets boycott, torture, abuse, hatred and ignorance from her step-mother. Sandhya represents a subaltern female character in the text. In this regard, Devadas and Nicholas argue:

[...] the "cannot speak" in "the subaltern cannot speak" is gesturing to the impossibility of speech to an audience that refuses to hear and respond to the crying out. It is the incomplete transaction that suppresses the subaltern... [S]peaking, as a complete transaction, is only possible on the contingency of the reception of the sent message (qtd. in Maggio 430)

Sandhya represents a subaltern character in terms of gender, caste and relation with her step-mother. She cannot make any objection against the so-called established discriminatory rules and values of the society. The novel, as Dalit literature portrays pain, sufferings, tension, exploitation, discrimination and boycott faced Dalits in Nepal.

Human trafficking and girls trafficking are increasing as serious problems in Nepal. Criminals sell innumerable of girls as animals within homeland and abroad. The present text also raises the issue of girls trafficking through some short plots. The character, Dinesh Sharma involves in girls trafficking profession but he pretends to be a good job-

holder in India who searches a beautiful girl for marriage. After getting married, he supplies the innocent girls to brothels in different cities of India. In this context, he traffics Amrita to Mumbai who returns pregnant with HIV/AIDS and dies in her delivery. The novel reveals that "Amrita's heartbeat was moving slowly. She remembered God to leave the materialistic and selfish world as soon as possible. In this way, a pregnant woman is compelled to leave the world without having to feel the motherhood; she died" (trans. Nepali 95- 96). Amrita dies early as a victim of girls trafficking of Dinesh Sharma. Caste system, trafficking and inter-caste love and marriage collapse the society. So, people are compelled to commit suicide. Amrita's sister, Ashika and Bir Majhi's love relation ends with Ashika's suicide due to caste system. Regarding varna system and Hinduism, Jalote remarks:

Since Dalit literature opposes exploitation and discrimination in the name of the ideal of *varnashram dharma*, Dalit writers discard myths accepted by Hindu religion. Dalit writers cannot accept Rama as their ideal God, because Rama killed *Shambhuka*, a *Shudra* who was practicing penance and also because Rama deserted Sita. (5)

Caste system has been murdering numerous youths in inter-caste relations for centuries. It is believed that the caste system has been made rigid and rude by misinterpreting the holy books, Hindu legal code, and practicing the evil culture in the name of social system. The lovers from Dalits and non-Dalits cannot freely demonstrate their love and relation in the society. The society has restricted them to do so. In the text, though, Hari and Sandhya are lovers. Informally, they have already been married-couple; however, they cannot introduce themselves as husband and wife with their parents and society open. The narrator demonstrates that "By cutting the finger, Hari puts his blood on Sandhya's forehead; and, speaks- "you are always with me today onward...never think that I will be away from you even a single moment"" (trans. Nepali 132). Though, they have already been married, Hari introduces her as friend. He cannot introduce her as a beloved or wife because her caste becomes a hindrance in their relationship. The novel further reads "Wife, to whom Hari could not introduce due to castes- upper and lower caste relation; and, if everybody would know her; he could leave his mother with Sandhya and he would fly foreign land but it was not possible. They were compelled to talk symbolically" (trans. Nepali 155). Hari is sure that their relation is not accepted by his parents. Therefore, he does not announce her wife at home for long time because of caste hierarchy. Concerning caste problem, Tapan Basu remarks, "[...] caste segregation is that it prevents inter mingling of castes that must be kept apart from each other to avoid adulteration. While segregation has been rigorously imposed between the upper caste and the lower castes, it has also worked ...hierarchal formation" ('Introduction' xxii). The relation between Sandhya and Hari is the same as Basu has mentioned so far.

Dalits' problems are connected to socio-cultural and economic issues of the society. Surya cannot return to his hometown when he is brutally punished by the society. Rather he moves to city with hope and expectation to earn money to make his father happy. Dalit

literature depicts that Dalit characters appears as change makers of the society. In the text, Surya stands as a hero with hard-work, self-confidence and caste consciousness. The novel reflects the reality of Dalits because "Dalit literature is the representation of Dalit reality" (Bala 38). Surya struggles to achieve his destination of life.

Unequal love and marriage between higher and lower castes is not accepted in varna-based social system. Hari and Sandhya get married in presence of Sandhya's maternal uncles and they go to meet Hari's parents for blessings. As they reach the hometown—for blessings, Hari kindly notifies his parents about his marriage and tries to convince them to accept their marriage. But his parents are not ready to accept it; rather, his father straightly rejects him. The conversation between Hari and his father reveals:

"You should not teach me. Do you have remained any prestige of life by getting married with Sarki's daughter; and asking permission to get entry in my home? Never think, do not dream about it. You are going to be untouchable due to her. And, the Dalits' daughter cannot be my daughter-in-law. These Dalits are lower caste"....

"Father, do not say so. She is my wife. She is daughter-in-law of this house. It's her right to live in this house. What do you find the differences between us?"... (trans. Nepali 225)

The son, Hari humbly requests and tries to convince him but he fails. Sandhya, as an educated and beautiful girl, presents herself as strong, bold and energetic girl with competency; but Pandit and his family do not accept as daughter-in-law. In this context, Basu enunciates that the coercive aspect of caste power is an evident in the denial of knowledge to those considered outside the domain of caste power in Hindu society. The monopoly overlays as much as theological knowledge enjoyed by male Brahmins has been matched by the marginalization of lower caste people of education and learning which is hindrance for the development ('Introduction' xxii). Basu portrays that how Dalits and their knowledge are directly denied in social system. Caste system discards the knowledge of Dalits as Pandit does to Sandhya. In caste system, the education, knowledge, qualification and competency do not matter and make any sense. Pandit denies accepting Sandhya as his family member.

Most of the couples of inter-caste marriage get boycott, rejection, exclusion and displacement from their society. They try to break the rigid social barriers consciously and tactfully. It must be a revolt against the caste system. Youths make effort to transform social practice with social *mélange* and assimilation. Limbale believes that "Dalit consciousness is a revolutionary consciousness motivated by the desire for freedom from slavery" (76- 77). The couples of inter-caste marriage wish to be free from all forms of barriers for their equality, justice and dignity as illustrated in the case of Hari and Sandhya. However, they are insulted and discriminated mentally, physically and psychologically. They are rejected from home, boycotted from society and compelled to commit suicide together. The narrator reads:

People started crying early in the morning; they were asking for help. All the people started running here and there; but Pandit was still angry so that he did not care about it. He remained silent. The villagers were tearing in the tragic death of Hari and Sandhya. Hari, a single son of Pandit, who recently returned from Malaysia; and, came there to get blessings from parents but he passed away by making the world dark...His wife was rejected by his father accusing as a daughter of Dalits; so, Hari was depressed; who left the world with wife; finally committed suicide. (trans. Nepali 249)

The tragic death of Hari and Sandhya reveals the destiny of Dalits-non-Dalits inter-caste marriage and relation. The parents never accept them, their love and marriage. Consequently, they are forced to leave the world tragically for their eternal happiness. Pandit, Hari's father, gets shocked at hearing about the death of son, Hari. He regrets a lot thereafter. It is an irreparable loss of two lovers.

The novel portrays the socio-cultural aspects of society. As Bala remarks about Dalit literature that "...literature which artistically delineates the trials and tribulations humiliation, exploitation, sorrows and sufferings, degradation, ridicule, and poverty experienced by Dalits for an age-old time" (Bala 40). The literature aims to develop the Dalit social movements for the equality and rights of Dalits. In the text, Pandit's mentality changes with the loss of his son, Hari; so, Pandit permits his daughter to get married with a Dalit, Surya. Thus, the text as Dalit literature enables to cover the issues of rights, equality, justice, liberation and dignity. The paper has examined that *Andho Samaj*, as Dalit literature raises Dalits' socio-cultural and economic issues in contemporary context. Moreover, it has explored the various aesthetic features, norms, values and consciousness of Dalit literature.

Conclusion

Andho Samāj as Dalit literature highlights the socio-cultural, political and economic problems of Dalits and their caste consciousness. The literature has prominently illustrated the issues of social hierarchy, cultural discrimination and economic disparity. The paper has, mainly, explored that Dalit liberation is possible through Dalit consciousness and it upholds the rights, equality, and liberation of Dalits. It has implanted the issues of Dalits-social justice, representation, inclusion and right-based-approaches in state mechanism. The literature comprises of issues of Dalits has advocated for addressing the agendas and problems of Dalits timely. Hence, Dalit literature has developed as the protest literature to liberate Dalits from all forms of socio-cultural, political and economic complications.

The novel has also illustrated the picture of Dalits and their various dimensions connected to their lives, society and economy. Moreover, the sacrifice of the Dalit characters has hindered the radical movements for the rights, equality, justice, liberation and social dignity of millions of Dalits. Fundamentally, the literature has embedded aesthetic features and values such as agony, pain, sufferings, discrimination, oppression, suppression, exploitation, boycott, exclusion, marginality, anger, revolt, protest, advocacy and mission for establishing a discrimination-free society. It has fueled the Dalit

movement for establishing the society full of equality and social justice. The literature has also developed the power to change the concept, perception and conventional practices in the society. Most importantly, it has supported to awaken the oppressed people against injustice, discrimination and exploitations. The novel, *Andho Samāj* as Dalit literature has been a voice of voiceless people.

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