

Civic Education through Literature: A Case of Devkota's "The Lunatic"

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Abstract

This research paper examines the role of literary texts in implanting and enhancing civic sense with reference to Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem "The Lunatic." It primarily aims at excavating the aspects of civic education regurgitated in the poem through close textual analysis. As the process of affecting people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members of communities, civic education occurs involuntarily from social institutions and communities. literary texts are important resource for civic education as the ideas and experiences depicted in the texts sensitize readers to enhance civic knowledge, civic skills and civic dispositions on the students and to understand their role as active citizens. not only for developing communicative competence, but also for imparting civic education. To meet the complexity of tough academic challenges and expectations, educational institutions including schools and universities aspire to excel in a particular field and fail to cover civic education in their curricula as a separate course material. By teaching literary texts they can fill this gap. While preparation for examinations is afforded priority, value formation, character building, and focusing on building ethical standards in learners are not given adequate emphasis in our university curricula. The poem "The Lunatic" demonstrates that the readers can understand what they should do and how they should behave as a human being. Ultimately this helps in the formation of their personality as a good citizen. Thus, teaching literary texts as a course content is an important ingredient in the overall personality development of learners.

Key Words: Civic Education, literary texts, civic knowledge, civic skills, civic disposition, lunatic

Introduction

The research paper aims at examining how literary texts as a course content function in inculcating civic sense in learners with special reference to Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem "The Lunatic." Civics refers to the rights and responsibilities of citizen as a social being. Civic education aims at preparing enlightened, critical and democratic citizen in the country. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines civic education as "all the processes that affect people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities" (Civic Education). The League of

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Women Voters, a nonpartisan political organization to encourage the informed and active participation of citizens views civic education as “the study of the theoretical, political and practical aspects of citizenship, as well as its rights and duties. It includes the study of civil law and civil code, and the study of government with attention to the role of citizens—as opposed to external factors—in the operation and oversight of government” (What is Civics?). Hence, civic education is the process that plays an important role in the overall development of the society because productive and critical educational system would help to prepare effective human resources for the attainment of socioeconomic and political objectives of the society. Therefore. Civic education leads to exercise of constitutional rights, motivates citizens to respect other’s rights, builds up faith in citizenship, generates social awareness, promotes equal opportunities, and strengthens democratic process. It also orients citizens of performing responsible behavior with politeness, truthfulness, and social needs. It emphasizes on character building, human relationship and positive contribution to the society. In short, it aims at inculcating the sense of duties and responsibilities by maintaining ethics, self-reliance, discipline, respect to elders and love to juniors. Civic sense is nothing but social ethics or the unspoken norms of society. it “consists of abiding by laws, showing respect to and consideration for fellow countrymen and maintaining decorum in public places” (Balakrishnan). Individualism, vandalism, intolerance, racism, road rage are all examples of lack of civic sense because they make people gradually become less and less tolerant toward each other and of other's cultures, backgrounds, and beliefs and behavior.

As knowledge is getting more and more complex and the competitions are becoming tougher and tougher, the faculties, subject committees and institutions have been offering more and more specialized courses in university curricula. In this context, it is getting more and more difficult for teachers and parents to devote much time and energy to educate the learners about the importance of civic sense and how it could make a difference to the country as well as contribute to the betterment of their own lives. While preparation for examinations is afforded priority, value formation, character building, and focusing on building ethical standards in learners regrettably are not given adequate emphasis in our university curricula. After going through good literary texts, the readers come to an understanding that we as human beings share many experiences which are common across the boundaries of time and space. In this context, literary pieces taught as the compulsory English course has had a secondary purpose of sensitizing learners with civic sense with their primary purposes of inculcating communicative competence of English language in learners. There is reciprocal relation between society and literature, society provides raw material for literature because literature imitates life. Literature incorporates the politics of class gender, culture, race, and power found in the society, and also it enriches society by providing what life should be like. It contributes in building the body of knowledge and raising awareness of people. Literature sensitizes people’s thinking and insights, provides models and standards for moral conduct. For example, moral lessons from the *Ramayana*

are adopted by millions as a reference for day-to-day living even today. As a case in point, the research explores how the poem “The Lunatic” by Laxmi Prasad Devkota at Bachelor level courses of different faculties/institutes such as Humanities, Management, or Forestry of Tribhuvan University as a part of compulsory English course content contributes in promoting and inculcating civic sense in the learners. In this context, the research examines such questions through textual analysis as: Do the ideas or experiences expressed in the poem help in sensitizing learners to acquire/learn civic sense? If they learn some, do they apply these manners and morals in their practical life? How does the teaching of literary piece enrich the learners’ civic sense?

Civic Education and Literary Texts

Civic education deals with knowledge, cognitive and participatory skills, attitudes, beliefs and dispositions to democracy and human rights. Civic education empowers people to be well-informed and active citizens and yields them the opportunity to change the world around them. C. N. Quigley and C.F. Bahmueller define it as “a study of the purpose of government, the nature of law, and the way that private behavior affects the public order and the political system and the international context of politics” (3). The Society for the Promotion of Civic Education (SPCE) in its editorial note, emphasizes the role of civic education as:

For a democracy to survive and flourish a critical mass of its citizens must possess the skills that embody the values, and manifest the behaviors that accord with democracy. They must know enough about the basic features of a democratic political system to be able to access it when their interests are at stake, and they must believe in the importance of certain key democratic values, such as tolerance for divergent viewpoints and support for the rule of law, it is essential that people have a basic understanding of the process of democracy by imbuing civic values into their everyday life. (1)

The editorial postulates that civic education not only strengthens democratic culture and human rights and promote rule of law but also emphasizes the importance of good manners and morals that we need as a good human being such as tolerance, compassion, politeness, truthfulness, positive attitude etc. In this context, K. B. Bhattachan and Shiva Raj Dahal identify “civic knowledge, civic skills and civic dispositions” (53) as the three important organs of civic education. Apeles L. Lonto relate these terms in the context of civic education as:

Civic knowledge refers to substantial material which every citizen must know about their rights and obligations. This knowledge provides basic explanation on the political system and structure, and ideal social system and government which should be well-implemented in the life of people. It also contains universal values in democratic society and efforts to achieve mutual development and harmonious relationship with the global society. Civic skill is developed from civic knowledge which primarily aims at attaining useful and meaningful knowledge to solve problems in the life of society and nation. Civil

skills consist of intellectual skills and participation skills. Civic disposition implies that public and private characters are important for maintaining and developing constitutional democracy. (39)

All individuals require these aspects in every walk of their life because these experiences are expected to sharpen the awareness that democracy requires independent government to be responsible for them. In this sense civic education correlates with character building.

Like civic education contributes in the upholding good manners and morals of people, reading literary texts does the same. Literature is highly valued course material in the language classroom as it exposes to the learners to complex themes and fresh, unexpected uses of language to involve learners in their study. It also provides learners with access to the culture of the people. Its indirect link with the real world has been accepted and established. The use of literary texts in moral education is not something new as a concept and a trend. Since seventeenth century thinker John Locke, nineteenth century poet/thinker Mathew Arnold and the twentieth century thinkers John Dewey and T. S. Eliot have highlighted the correlation between moral education, development and literature. There are several advantages of values education: Since literary texts are contextually whole and inherently meaningful, they provide an authentic source of comprehensible English language input and can lower inhibitions or the “affective filter” (Krashen, 345). Feryal Çubukçu highlights the importance of teaching stories in the classroom because “Direct discussion of character perspectives in stories enhance students’ understanding of characters and their consideration of the social context and relationships” (27). In this sense, literary works uphold values, traditions and social practice of a particular group that it deals with. Literary texts also reflect the rich and fascinating diversities of the world. Therefore, literary texts serve as motivating material for encouraging language acquisition and for expanding student’s language awareness. Except linguistic benefits of using literature in the classroom, Gillian Lazar observes the contribution of literary texts in overall development of students as:

Literature may also have a wider educational function in the classroom in that it can help to *stimulate the imagination* of our students, to *develop their critical abilities* and to *increase their emotional awareness*. If we ask students to respond personally to the texts, we give them, they will *become increasingly confident* about expressing their own ideas and emotions in English. They will feel *empowered by their ability to grapple* with the text and its language, and to *relate it to the values and traditions of their own society* [my emphasis]. (19)

The italicized words and expressions show that literary texts can contribute in overall development of learners as human being. It equips them with tools to cope up with the real-life problems in the world outside the text. In spelling out the instructional principles in selecting readings and classroom activities the text book prescribed at Tribhuvan University Bachelor level compulsory English in which the poem “The Lunatic” is itself

collected, Moti Nissani and Shreedhar Lohani opine that learning “is not acquisition of facts, but grasping concepts, seeing connections, and gaining confidence in one’s ability to solve intellectual and real-life problems” (x). Here, Nissani and Lohani’s comply with Lazar’s view as both of them link teaching literary texts is linked to developing learners’ critical and holistic thinking so that they can solve the real-life problems on their own. M.C. Nussbaum expresses similar ideas in *Cultivating Humanity* when she develops in more detail the argument concerning the role of reading and teaching literature in liberal arts education. She proposes that liberal education should aim to cultivate humanities that equip learners with the following capacities: the capacity for critical self-examination and of one’s own tradition; the ability to see oneself not simply as a citizen from some local group but also as a human being bound to others.

Contemporary Society and Civics in “The Lunatic”: Critical Observations

Laxmi Prasad Devkota’s “The Lunatic” depicts prevailing social contradiction of the time. It criticizes the politics, cultural beliefs and practices, behavior of people and many other aspects of contemporary society. He throws bitter satire on the political system which has been manipulated by the then ruler for their own benefit rather than for the betterment of the people. By denouncing Alexander-the-Great, the speaker is trying to indicate the ill governance of the Rana oligarchy, under which many innocent people have been victimized. Devkota also criticizes the widespread discriminatory practices on the basis of caste, creed, culture and gender. He covertly asks the readers to be sympathetic to fellow citizen and help them when they are in need. In short, he criticizes the society which fails to regard human as human.

With the help of masked insanity, Laxmi Prasad Devkota in “The Luntic” makes a groundbreaking and realistic observation of the exploitation gnawing at society. He subjects the time-revered knowledge and value system of society to his severe examination. Commenting on his poems, Ramesh Adhikari in “Devkota’s Voice of Rebellion and the Social Critic in the Lunatic” argues that Devkota has the consciousness of his age, and he tries to inspire all the Nepalese people to change the thinking, morality and behavior according to the age. Adhikari further contends:

He provokes the dissatisfaction to the corrupt and unjust prevalent society in his time. The contemporary society was slowly and gradually changing but tradition and religion were not ready to accept the new change and democracy. Like the watchdog of the society, Devkota was capturing the consciousness and change by revolting against the prevalent traditional rules, norms and values. (103)

This shows his disapproval and dissatisfaction with the contemporary society in rebellious spirit against all kinds of misconduct and injustices prevalent in the contemporary society. In this way, he inspires Nepalese people to declare the storm of revolution against the mistreatment and discrimination in his poems. Bal Krishna Sharma in “Rationality of Devkota’s Lunatic” observes, “the poet puts on the persona of insanity to scrutinize

intellectual emptiness, social corruption, and spiritual decadence. Insanity is the vantage-point from which the poet looks at society pointedly, and makes close, valid and realistic observations” (12). Sushanta Gurung detects the autobiographical element in his masked insanity in the poem. He was once taken to mental asylum in Ranchi, a city in India, because the then society misread his good intentions when he showed incessant love and compassion to beggars and other unprivileged people in the society. Therefore, he utilizes mask of insanity as a poetic device to bitterly attack the contemporary society (76). According to Devi Gautam and Bhagawat Acharya, the central idea of the poem is that Devkota cleverly proves himself of having a sound mind by attacking the contemporary social evils wearing the mask of insanity (145). Sita Panthi makes similar observation of Devkota as a social critic in “Devkotako Pagal Kabitako Vishlesanatmak Adhyayan.” She views that Devkota has endorsed progressive ideology through the poem in his “aggressive attack on social anomalies” [my translation]” (54) prevalent in the contemporary society like exploitation, discrimination etc.

The survey of related literature establishes the fact that both civic education and literary works contribute in upholding and conveying social morals and manners that we need as good citizens. Similarly, Devkota intends the same when he bitterly attacks on social evils under the mask of insanity in the poem. Close textual analysis of the poem shows how the poem upholds and strengthens three basic components of civic education in the learners: civic knowledge, civic skills and civic disposition.

Text in Context: A Close Reading of “The Lunatic”

The poem relates the personal feelings of the poet through the persona with lunatic mask, and it brings out a different aspect of the speaker’s character, confidence, abnormality, imagination, sensitivity, rebellion, aggression, anger and awful majesty. Despite the abnormality, the persona is imaginatively hyper-sensitive, tenderhearted and considerate to the sufferings of fellow citizens:

Back from the burning-ghat
Blank-eyed I sat for seven days,
They cast their eyes on me and called me one possessed
Shocked by the first streak of frost of a fair lady’s tresses,
For a length of three days my sockets filled and rolled.
For the Buddha, the enlightened one, touched me in the depths,
They called me one distraught. (Devkota162)

The speaker is so hyper-sensitive that he cannot sleep for seven days after coming back from the ghat; he weeps for three days after seeing a white strand of hair in a beautiful lady’s head; and he is deeply moved by Buddha’s teaching. Going through these alternative perspectives of the speaker, the learners can identify such social evils as exploitation, discrimination, dominance, lack of humanity, lack of sympathy, indifference to other’s problems, lack of respect, and lack of cooperation. The speaker further foregrounds the

cruelty and intolerant predisposition of the so-called sane world when the speaker feels uneasy being choked by the aforementioned social evils:

One moonless night, all dead and still,
Annihilation choked my soul,
And up I jumped upon my feet.
And the fools of the world put me in the stocks,
I sang with the tempest one day,

And the wise-acres of the world dispatched me down to Ranchi. (Devkota 163)

These lines induce the learners to use proper civic skills to deal with the problems of the people. Examining the poem as an exemplary work in deconstruction, Mabindra Regmi in his blog post of *NELTA ELT Forum* claims that the poem can proliferate in developing constructive approach. Regmi analyses the poem as “a work in disestablishmentarianism where the poet tries to raise voice from the marginal fringes of the society, attacking the social injustice created by the leaders of the society” and creates “an alternate possibility... of changing the nature of the society that we live in through constructive and positive practices” (Regmi). In this sense, Devkota appears as a harbinger of change by painting a dark picture which is more revolutionary than evolutionary.

In the last stanza, the speaker bitterly attacks the socio-political establishment like a rebel. He expresses his anger against the injustice, violation of human rights, and exploitation of poor people by the so-called intellectual aspirants of the day. He views that they have deprived people of their rights. The leaders are shameless they are ready to do anything to make money for themselves and they pay no attention for the welfare of the public. They deprive ordinary people of their rights, but newspapers publicized them in large letter headlines. Whenever the speaker comes across such propaganda, he gets so angry that his every strand of hair rises and his eyes reddened because of anger. He feels that the heroism reason in him has been challenged:

Look at the strumpet-tongued dance of shameless leadership!
At the breaking of the backbones of the people’s rights!
When the sparrow-headed bold prints of black lies on the papers,
Challenge the hero in me called Reason,
With conspiracy false,
Then redden hot my cheeks, my friend (Devkota 164)

When he sees the rich and powerful exploiting the poor and innocent people, even his corroded bones get strength, and he gnashes his teeth, grind his jaws, and reddens eyeballs to fight against the injustice:

When the unsophisticated folk quaff off black poison with their ears
Taking it for ambrosia,
And that before my eyes, my friend,
Then every hair rises on end,
Like irate serpent-tresses of the Gorgons,

When I see the tiger pouncing upon the innocent deer,
Or the big fish chasing the smaller ones
Then even into my corroded bones, my friend,
The terrible strength of the soul of Dadhichi – the sage,
Enters and seeks utterance. (Devkota 164-65)

When a man treats another man inhumanly, his breathe turns into a storm, his brain gets ablaze, and he gets infuriated like a forest fire to swallow anything in front of him:

Like a clouded day crashing down to earth in the thunderbolt,
When man regards a man as no man,
Then gnash my teeth and grind my jaws, set with two and thirty teeth,
Like Bhimsen’s teeth, the terror-striking hero’s,
And then,
Rolling down my fury-reddened eyeballs,
With an inscrutable sweep,
I look at this inhuman human world.
Like a tongue of fire. (Devkota 165)

These lines show the true democratic spirit of the speaker. The speaker, though sounds abnormal, logically reasons to attack injustice, inhuman treatment, and exploitation of the rich and powerful people over the ordinary people. Here the speaker assumes the personal, political, and economic responsibilities of a citizen. He strongly appeals to respect individual worth and human dignity in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner ultimately promoting the healthy functioning of truly democratic system. Analyzing the influence of Civics teaching and pedagogical competence of teachers to the development of learners' civic dispositions, Apeles L. Lonto in “Students' Civic Disposition through Learning Civics and Pedagogical Competences of High School Teachers” argues that Civics Learning has positive influence on Civic disposition of Students. He claims, “A well-designed Civics learning has a competence which improves learners’ Civic dispositions which refer to the refinement of students’ private and public characters” (40). It helps in the formation of an independent citizen who is self-aware, responsible and obedient to rules.

Conclusion

The literary texts could sensitize learners in learning and strengthening the importance of good manners and morals that we need as a good human being such as tolerance, compassion, politeness, truthfulness, positive attitude. These qualities are the important ingredients of civic education. The literary pieces themselves reflected the social reality and therefore, they exposed the prevalent social practices. Literary pieces incorporate the politics of class gender, culture, race, and power found in the society, and also it enriches society by providing what life should be like. It contributes in building the body of knowledge and raising awareness of people. Literature sensitizes people’s thinking and insights, provides models and standards for moral conduct. As regards the

way how teaching literary pieces contribute in the development of civic sense in the learners, the teacher's guidance in clarifying the context, and references and making and finding connections between ideas are important. Literary texts affect their way of thinking and behaving, and reading the poem gives positive impact in their socialization process and brought positive changes in their disposition whenever they behave in their daily life. After being expose to the poem by Devkota, the learners can understand the contemporary society and the prevalent social evils better, and it ultimately encourages them to adopt good manners and morals in their real social performance.

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