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Research Article

Reading Devkota's *Prometheus* as a Transnational Text: Intersecting the East and the West

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Abstract

This paper reads Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Prometheus* in the backdrop of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, considering the allegiance of a Nepali writer to a Western canon. Devkota, who had access to the literary trends in the West, has attempted to appropriate the Western tradition of portraying Prometheus as a mythical hero in literary works like Shelley's and has tried to localize the image of the hero to elevate the marginalized status of the oppressed in Nepali society. Prometheus was unbound like that of Shelley's and thus unlike that of Aeschylus as bound, Devkota projects this mythical hero in the Western mythology as a savior of the voiceless of his society. Drawing on Peter Morgan's idea of transnational literature which "would identify that point at which two or more geo-cultural imaginaries intersect, connect, engage with, disrupt or conflict with each other in literary form," this paper examines Devkota's *Prometheus* how it intersects the East and the West in terms of the popular myths of two different societies.

Keywords: Western mythology, Prometheus, mythical hero, marginalization, transnational literature

Introduction

Laxmi Prasad Devkota, one of the most prolific writers in the history of Nepali literature, is among handful literary figures who had access to literary texts beyond the national border, particularly of the West. Well-versed in English language, Devkota is known for extensively reading texts produced in Britain and beyond and, after being substantially influenced by the Romantics like William Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley, exploiting subjects and forms of literary texts hitherto unfamiliar with most of the Nepalis, writers and readers. Be it his popular romantic essays like "Aashadh ko Pandhra" ("The Fifteenth of Ashadh") and "Dadim ko Rukhnera" ("Near the Pomegranate Plant") or an epic like *Prometheus*, the text discussed here in this paper,

Devkota has derived impetus from various writers and their texts in dealing with subjects and issues beyond the national border. Arguably the pioneer in giving Nepali literature a transnational touch, Devkota in his seminal works like *Prometheus* does not only establish a hero figure in the Western mythology as his protagonist, but also anticipates someone to emerge vehemently as the leader of the marginalized and speak on their behalf just like Prometheus, revolting against Zeus, sided with humans.

This study is based on the qualitative analysis of the epic. In order to assess the transnational context for the analysis of the text, the study derives impetus from Peter Morgan's seminal essay on literary transnationalism titled "Literary Transnationalism: A Europeanist's Perspective." In the meantime, to substantiate the claim, the study draws supports from some other texts on the myth of Prometheus.

This paper has been divided into five parts. The first part introduces the subject matter, and discusses methodology and theoretical framework of the study. The second part discusses the myth of Prometheus and its use by different authors since Aeschylus. The third part analyzes Devkota's *Prometheus* in the backdrop of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Finally, on the basis of the analysis in the preceding chapters, the paper concludes that Devkota's epic is a transnational text and provides the prospective researchers with some recommendations for further research.

The Myth of Prometheus in Literary Texts

Prometheus, the son of the Titans Themis and Iapetus, was one of the two brothers who switched his allegiance and fought against Cronus and the other Titans siding with the Olympians. Prometheus, as his name suggests, often made wise and anticipatory decisions, his support to Olympians being one of them. He was an important figure in the mythical development of the earth and the creation of human beings. The Greeks believed it was he who had taught them how to survive in the newly created world. There are a number of stories behind his creation of humans. One of the most cited ones is that of Michelle M. Houle who narrates:

It was a good time to be created. No monsters roamed the earth, and the world was at peace. Zeus began to make creatures to populate this beautiful world. However, just as he was beginning, he was called away to settle a matter dividing his fellow Olympians. He decided to appoint Prometheus and Epimetheus, sons of Titans who had fought with the Olympians, to continue the project of creating earth's first inhabitants. (41)

Prometheus, however, had immense love for humans and in trying to help the humans, he got into trouble with the gods. Eventually, the gods punished him by tying him to a rock on the top of a mountain with an eagle tearing at his liver. He was to be left there for all eternity or until he agreed to disclose to Zeus which of Zeus' children would try to replace him. However, he was eventually rescued by Hercules without giving in to Zeus. The Caucasus Mountains that are mentioned in the story are real, geographical mountains, located to the East of the Black Sea, far away from the Greek mainland.

Greece, then, was a society that believed in slavery. In Athens alone, there were around 80,000 slaves during the fifth and fourth centuries BC and that too in the form of chattel slavery where each household had three or four slaves. As Sara Forsdyke rightly argues, the ancient Greeks were marked by hypocrisy as those "who championed freedom in their political discourse yet denied it to many members of their own communities" (5). However, with the prominence of the concept of democracy since the sixth century BC, the Greeks began to contemplate the power of freedom of choice. The concept of freedom as such opened up avenues for novel artistic and literary creations. About the ambivalence of Greek society, Houle states: "In 508 B.C., Athens became the

world's first democracy when free adult males were allowed to vote on matters concerning the city" and as the word *democracy* comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, which means "ruled by the *demos*, or the people" (11). In this way, Greeks gradually believed in the power of the people. Yet, Houle narrates: "It is important to note, however, that only citizens could vote in this democracy, and not everyone living in Athens was considered a citizen" for "at that time, many Athenian families owned slaves, who were often captives of war" and importantly "[s]laves were not considered citizens, and, therefore, not allowed to vote, and women held a nonvoting status as citizens" (11). As many historians like Houle and Forsdyke believe, the development of democracy in Athens and the prosperity of literature and the arts went side by side. Theater was one of these arts and Athens' greatest playwrights were Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Many of the myths readers who come across today come from their plays.

As far as the significance of myths on Greeks is concerned, they believed that the gods lived on Mount Olympus, a real mountain in the central part of Greece called Thessaly. However, according to Greek tradition, the gods could leave their mountain and go anywhere. Myths and legends often told of the gods taking on human forms and walking among the people. For example, the episode of the liberation of Prometheus was often depicted on Attic and Etruscan vases as early as the sixth and fifth centuries BC. Usually Prometheus is crouching on the ground, facing the eagle, while Hercules advances from behind him, shooting his arrows at the bird.

Prometheus has been a trope for most of the great literary and artistic minds. He fascinated not only the Greek giants like Aeschylus but a number of modern greats ranging from Goethe to Nietzsche. In this case, Olga Raggio says:

. . . the old Titan has persistently appealed to the imagination of artists and poets, especially since Goethe, and after him the great Romantics, Byron, Shelley, Longfellow, Nietzsche, saw in him the embodiment of their ideals of freedom and rebellion. In the present study we hope to show that before the middle of the eighteenth century the "fire-bringing god" had appeared in quite a different light. (44)

For all these giants, Prometheus embodied freedom and rebellion and thus they found their hero in him as they strived to challenge the adverse situation that encircled them.

Prometheus for these greats, however, did not entirely mean the same. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus is portrayed as the benefactor of mankind who provides human with "not only the physical fire in the fennel stalk, but also the subtler fire of reason and wisdom from which all aspects of human civilization are derived: divination, astrology, medicine, mathematics, the alphabet, agriculture-every science and every art" (45). In Aeschylus, thus, the conflict between Zeus and Prometheus is "a sharp opposition between the order of Zeus and the independent power of the human reason" (45).

A daring and intelligent figure like Prometheus was probably the ideal hero for the romantic dissidents who, detaching themselves from the neo-classical society's overemphasis on reason, dignity and decorum, sought solace in an idyllic beauty of nature. In art and literature, the romantics defied the standard literary practice of the eighteenth century and engaged in creating free and unconditioned works. Like many other movements, the Romantic Movement too incorporates diverse and sometimes opposing views and ideology and like many movements it emerged as a challenge to the existing tradition. As Dougald B. MacEachen believes, "the word passed from England to France and Germany late in the seventeenth century and became a critical term for certain poets who scorned and rejected the models of the past; they prided themselves on

their freedom from eighteenth-century poetic codes" (5). However, the Romantic Movement did not mean the same throughout the continent as "in Germany, especially, the word was used in strong opposition to the term *classical*" (5). Though the term passed from England to other continental Europe, the Romantic Movement is believed to have begun from Germany, particularly deriving impetus from Immanuel Kant. How diverse and conflicting thoughts the romantics may have, they all, indeed in varying degrees, took pride on emancipating themselves from the fetters of the eighteenth century poetic codes.

As many critics and historians believe, the Romantic Movement primarily sought to replace reason with imagination, emotion and individual sensibility. For instance, Dougal B. MacEachen argues: "The eccentric and the singular took the place of the accepted conventions of the age. A concentration on the individual and the minute replaced the eighteenth-century insistence on the universal and the general" (6). It is therefore the Romantic Movement laid its emphasis on individual rather than on universal and general. Most of the romantic writers responded strongly to the impact of new forces, particularly the French Revolution and its promise of liberty, equality and fraternity. Most importantly, the ideal of humanitarianism that had been developing since the renaissance was appropriated enthusiastically by the romantic writers.

Shelley, one of the revolutionary romantics, who, like Wordsworth, hailed the success of the French Revolution as the beginning of substantial change in the society, particularly the lives of the oppressed. He wrote many of his poems giving some revolutionary touch, and his *Prometheus Unbound* is an epitome of that spirit. In this lyrical drama, his "protagonist personifies the creative soul of mankind, the highest potentiality of the human intellect" (Roland A. Duerksen 625). As the title suggests, his mythical hero Prometheus, winning the punishment of getting bound to the rock and witnessing the vulture devouring his liver, by defying Jupiter and loving humans, eventually gets unbound and thus gets justice. Shelley describes Prometheus as saying,

Go, borne over the cities of mankind
On whirlwind-footed coursers; once again
Outspeed the sun around the orb'd world;
And as thy chariot cleaves the kindling air,
Thou breathe into the many-folded shell,
Loosening its mighty music; it shall be
As thunder mingled with clear echoes; then
Return; and thou shalt dwell beside our cave.
And thou, O Mother Earth!— (240)

To Mother Earth, Prometheus displays his excessive love for humans and urges her to go to the human settlements to soothe them in their despair. His play therefore is "man's ability to transform himself and his world in the light of imaginative ideals" (Sperry 242). Shelley's play therefore depicts "both a change in the mind of its hero and a change in the nature of the universe, and it is difficult not to infer some connection between these events" (244).

Devkota's *Prometheus* as a Transnational Text

Many critics and scholars have contemplated the exploitation of the myth of Prometheus in the writers and thinkers right from Hesiod through Goethe to Shelley and even Nietzsche. What remains unnoticed, however, is the appropriation of that myth in Nepali literature and Devkota as the pioneer in doing so. Greatly inspired by the 'revolutionary' Shelley, Devkota attempted to replicate the idea of heroism in Prometheus and in the meantime envisioned Promethean promise as a liberating force for

the Nepalis to emerge out of the fetters of autocracy. As believed by Chudamani Bandu, Devkota wrote *Prometheus* in the backdrop of the revolutionary change of 2007 BS (1950), the year that heralded the beacon of hope of democracy in Nepal. Here, his verse echoes:

. . . commenced the golden age . . .
 Rose the new light in the horizon
 Like that in Nepal now
 In the dawn of democracy . . . (23)

Devkota, in these lines, draws the verisimilitude between the beginning of new era after Promethean rebellion in the West and the early days of democracy after the abolition of the Rana Regime in Nepal. Like Prometheus, some of the daring Nepali heroes had sacrificed their life to end the dark days of autocracy. As Bandu believes, Devkota has presented Prometheus as the martyrs who staged revolution to end the Rana autocracy (391). Echoing Shelley who, in his *Prometheus Unbound*, expresses his passion for freedom, Devkota, through 'Promethean promise' desperately wants the oppressive nature of the then rulers of Nepal to end without delay.

Devkota in *Prometheus* provides his readers with the knowledge of his extensive reading of the Western, particularly Greek, mythology. As Morgan in Literary "Transnationalism: A Europeanist's Perspective" contends, literary transnationalism "would identify that point at which two or more geo-cultural imaginaries intersect, connect, engage with, disrupt or conflict with each other in literary form," Devkota engages with one of the most inspiring stories of the Western myth so as to contextualize the transition in Nepali politics that would decide the fate of the Nepalis (12). Mostly influenced by Shelley, Devkota, identifies Nepali revolutionaries with Prometheus and anticipates a significant development in Nepali politics.

At times, the story in *Prometheus* gives the readers an impression of just being the reiteration of the Greek myth. But Devkota's innovative skills rule out the possibility of making his epic a mere replica of the popular texts like Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. In the process of reading *Prometheus*, a reader smells the influence of these popular works in Devkota, yet one cannot deny the fact that Devkota does transcend these works and thus yields a local flavour in his work. Devkota's *Prometheus* is quite Hesiodian in the beginning and Shelleyan in the middle. However, it ends in his own style, bitterly criticizing the devilish nature of the heaven. His epic begins quite like that of Hesiod, evoking the Greek Muse. Hesiod in *Theogony* evokes:

Begin our singing with the Heliconian Muses,
 Who possess Mount Helicon, high and holy,
 And near its violet-stained spring on petal-soft feet
 Dance circling the altar of almighty Cronion,
 And having bathed their silken skin in Permessos (lines 1-5)

And Devkota, in his first stanza of *Prometheus*, echoes: ". . . come on Greek Muse . . . / Sing us the grand music of the gallant hero . . ." (4, 7). As stated in the lines above, Devkota's *Prometheus*, like Hesiod's *Theogony*, begins with the evocation of the Greek Muse. Devkota, however, in an attempt to localize the Western practice of evocation of the muses, calls on Saraswati and the Greek Muse together, yet he reflects on the heroics of Prometheus as does Hesiod. Here, Morgan believes: "[L]iterary transnationalism identifies that aspect of literature that represents the encounters of geo-cultural identities, registers the effects of globalization on groups and individuals and charts the movement of narratives across cultural and national boundaries" (15). However, in the case of Devkota's *Prometheus*, it not only considers the case of a Nepali author being influenced

by the Western texts, issues and authors, but also it is an example of the effect of political movements on Nepalis, that is, early call for democracy by the Greeks and the warm welcome of the French Revolution by the likes of Shelley (15).

Devkota asks the Muse of knowledge (she is equivalent to goddess Saraswati in the Eastern myth) to tell the story of Prometheus only in the fifteenth stanza. He writes:

Then tell us the Muse! How,
(This was the dream of caterpillar)
The first fire sneak Prometheus
Enraged the tyrant king of heaven,
Zeus . . . (9)

Devkota asks the muse, Saraswati, as in the East it is believed to be the goddess of knowledge, how Prometheus infuriated Zeus, the god of heaven. Interestingly, he alludes to Saraswati to extract knowledge about the fire sneak hero. In the following stanza, answering his own question in the previous stanza, he writes:

The first fire sneak stole into the heaven the first time,
To sneak,
That precious fire which was the gem of gems,
The light of the world . . .
The first light of the pure civilization,
Fire!
That sneak was Prometheus. (9-10)

Devkota in these lines projects Prometheus as a 'thief' who stole fire from the heaven, but his act of stealing fire was for the sake of humankind. He further writes: "Fought against the God for the rights of man/ Against the tyrant heaven . . ." (10). He regards Prometheus as the monument of humanity and the history of humans.

From the second section of the epic on, Devkota narrates the story behind the origin of Titans. He elaborates on the myth of Uranus and Gaia, and then narrates how Gaia gave birth to a third group of children. He further tells the story of Cronus, the youngest of the twelve Titans, who was the most eager to help his mother. Thus, the two set out to trick Uranus and free the Titans and the Hundred-handed Ones from their mother's prison-like womb. He also reflects on Cronus' revolt against his father Uranus, saying how Cronus crept out of Gaia's womb and stabbed his cruel father with a sickle that eventually brought Uranus to an end. Devkota goes on to shed light on Prometheus' support to Zeus, and not to Titans, when the war between the Titans and the Olympians broke.

Devkota's high opinion on the emerging democracy in Nepal is evident in many of his assertions in the epic. He creates a nexus between Prometheus and the political leader, and then reckons them a messiah of humankind as he writes:

Gave Prometheus assurance to mankind,
A novel assurance. Like how a leader
Assures the voiceless and those deprived of change,
Through skeptical, new comer's pioneer philosophy. (31)

In these lines, Devkota has so much of faith on political leaders who are the people's pioneers and like Prometheus they can lead the people along the path of prosperity. Reciting Prometheus' words, Devkota further writes: ". . . man will never perish./ He has a golden future, long lasting. . ." (31). He sincerely believes that humans are above beasts and thus are capable of ruling the universe, defying any tyrannical rule.

Devkota in *Prometheus* not only replicates the Greek myth but also hypothesizes Prometheus' address about his sacrifice for the sake of human beings. He believes that

Prometheus empathizes with human beings and seriously assists them to rescue them from their state of darkness. Echoing Prometheus' words, Devkota writes:

Hey humans, you're still in a state of darkness,
You are still the victim of millions of illusions, dumb,
Crows that have lost their way in the fog, to throw some light
In the sky of your race, to remove the cloud from the sky,
To give new birth to your race,
Have I descended to the earth, me immortal Prometheus,
Prodigious dissident of the heaven. For your sake, . . . (49)

Here, Prometheus reminds the humans of their miserable life and their ignorance about the world around them. He hints at the inability of humans to free themselves from their state of ignorance and this is why he has descended to the earth, challenging the authority in the heaven. Devkota further elaborates on Prometheus' belief in their autonomy:

Human is his own star, in darkness.
Alone but enough in his space.
The creator of his world. The master of his world.
A lone belligerent. Own light, own path. . . (53)

In these lines, Prometheus believes in human potential to find his way on his own, emitting light from within and ultimately creating and then ruling his world. Devkota says that Prometheus believed in humans' indomitable nature, a spirit to deal with any circumstances even in the absence of any support.

Like Shelley, Devkota portrays incredible heroism in Prometheus. After Zeus imprisons him in mount Caucasus, Prometheus says: "I will not bow down to you, Zeus! / I'm always on behalf of justice. / Your head is not becoming to my foot, King of Heaven!" (84). Devkota's lines resemble Shelley's lines "Submission thou dost know I cannot try. / For what submission but that fatal word, . . ." (155-56). Therefore, Shelley's hero Prometheus can be seen in Devkota. Like Shelley, Devkota too does not let his hero succumb to Zeus' authority. In the following lines, Devkota's departure from Aeschylus has been mentioned by Shelley:

The *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus supposed the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim as the price of the disclosure of the danger threatened to his empire by the consummation of his marriage with Thetis. Thetis, according to this view of the subject, was given in marriage to Peleus, and Prometheus, by the permission of Jupiter, delivered from his captivity by Hercules. Had I framed my story on this model, I should have done no more than have attempted to restore the lost drama of Aeschylus . . . (119)

Aeschylus' *Prometheus Unbound* was not ever published (not ever written?) though, it has been hypothesized that he, in that play, was planning to reconcile Prometheus and Jupiter. Thus, Shelley asserts that his play is concerned with Prometheus' emancipation but not surrender to Jupiter. Devkota, following Shelley, glorifies Prometheus' heroism in challenging Zeus and bearing the pain rather than yielding up to his power.

One of the prime concerns in these different versions of Promethean saga is characterization. All of Aeschylus' characters are Greek, whereas many of Shelley's characters are Roman. For instance, Zeus in Aeschylus becomes Jupiter in Shelly. However, in Devkota, there is the mixture of the Greek, the Roman and the Eastern deities. His characters are Swaraswati, Unani Sharade, Zeus Mahadev, Vinabadini, Uranus Mahadev, Hephaestus Agnidev and so on.

Devkota, in his attempt to give local flavour to his characters and situation, compares Kronos with Kansa and assessed fear of their elimination from the throne.

Kronos had devoured his children whereas Kansa had killed all his sister's children. However, both of them could not brush aside their annihilation as Kronos was killed by his son Zeus, and Kansa was killed by his nephew Krishna.

Devkota, in his tenth canto, interestingly and even surprisingly discusses the Trojan War that annihilated Troy. The story of the Trojan War is narrated by Devkota who presents the details of the cause of the war, that is, Helen's abduction by Paris. After disappearance of his wife Menelaus declared war against Troy, the war that lasted for more than a decade, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. Devkota, after narrating the history of the Trojan War, goes on to identify Helen with Sita. He writes:

She was Helen only my ember;
Like Sita, the beauty queen of the East;
Her beauty in plain clothes during exile
At Panchawati is more beautiful than the moon
Even in the Shraavan cloud . . . (107)

Devkota here eulogizes Sita's beauty and treats her as Helen's equal. Like the Trojan War that was fought after Helen's abduction by Paris, the Lanka War was fought after Sita's abduction by Ravana. Devkota, identifying the Trojan War with the Lanka War, writes:

. . . the lustful Dashanana (Ravana)
Arrives in the guise of a monk, steals her
And through the sky takes her
To an unknown place, to the South towards the sea; . . .
. . . golden oval Ravana-Empire Lanka!
Then is fought the Lanka War, heavily, so heavily that
Ten thousand gallant heroes lose their life. Then begins the new age
Ram's reign in the world, with Sita's return . . . (107)

It is indeed fascinating to assess this analogy between the East and the West in Devkota. Though the situations in the aftermath of the Trojan War and the Lanka War are quite different, Devkota cherishes the return of both Helen and Sita. He echoes the excitement yielded by the arrival of the new era as Govinda Bhattarai argues, "*Prometheus* adds local flavour to the Greek myth; there is the glow of the Eastern philosophy. There is a tiny portrayal of Prometheus's story but the imprint of the situation and issues of the nation is profound" (103) and as Laxman Prasad Gautam argues, "the images in *Prometheus* cover a wide range from the Greek mythology to the history of Nepal" and thus beautifully blend the East with the West (381).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Devkota, in his epic *Prometheus*, first by establishing the mythical hero in the Western mythology as the central character of his work and then by attempting to draw a parallel line between Nepali's contemporary political situation with that of Europe in general and England in particular in the aftermath of the French Revolution, improvises one of the most popular Western myths and thus gives his text a transnational touch. Perpetuating the tradition of invoking the muse both in the East and the West, Devkota has made an interesting yet bizarre comparison between Sita and Helen, and the burning Lanka and the razed Troy, defeating the abductors Ravana and Paris respectively. In the Eastern context, the fall of Lanka heralded a new age *Ram-rajya* (Utopia) and through this metaphor Devkota is calling for a political system based on merit and justice as advocated by the practitioners of democracy in the West.

This paper, like most of the researches, is one of many possible ways to analyze a literary text. As the objective of every new research is to explore some novelty, this

paper, by reading Devkota's epic *Prometheus* as a transnational literary work, has entered a relatively new territory and thus has opened up avenues for further research. As this paper has mostly revolved round the author's improvisation of the myth of Prometheus and its significant relevance to politics, other researchers can go beyond and explore other aspects such as social and cultural significance of the myth to the society. More importantly, as stated in the Preface, this text available is not the complete version of the epic as some stanzas are missing, other researchers can put their efforts to search for the lost manuscript and do justice to both the author and readers. Naturally, the additional stanzas provide the researchers with some new ground to analyze the text.

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