

Struggle for Subsistence in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Muna Madan*

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Abstract

This article explores social realism as depicted in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Muna Madan*. It aims to highlight the fundamentals of social reality of the time when Devkota composed this poem as revealed by the text's content. The article addresses the research problems concerning to the historic origin of the poem, social and economic reality of the time as depicted in the poem, the portrayal of the question of materialism and spiritualism, the question of gender role and caste system of Nepali society. *Muna Madan* is Devkota's most popular shorter narrative poem and the article seeks the reason behind its popularity among Nepali readers. The article adopts the theoretical framework of historical materialism. The historical materialistic analysis of the poem mirrors the true social and economic reality of the time when Devkota composed it. The application of this theoretical framework to the poem reveals its historical and social background. The findings of this article shows that Devkota borrows the framework of the poem from the folk tradition of Newari community of Kathmandu valley, the text depicts the true social and economic reality of the time, portrays the conflict between the materialism and spiritualism, emphasizes the traditional gender role and challenges the caste system of Nepali society.

Keywords: folk tradition, material condition, spiritualism, gender role, caste system

Introduction

This article examines the social reality depicted in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *Muna Madan* by applying the methodological tool of historical materialism. Devkota is a great poet and is famously known as Mahakavi Devkota in Nepali literature. Devkota has gained a summit in the genre of Nepali poetry. He has composed shorter poems, the shorter narrative poems and epic poems. He has composed many poems but *Muna Madan*, which falls under the shorter narrative poems, made him famous. *Muna Madan* becomes popular among Nepali people because it tells their own story in simple language, employing the jhyahre meter of the folk song. This article

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excludes the study of Devkota's biography, his contributions on Nepali literature and the musical meter that he used while writing *Muna Madan*. The article probes into the social origin and social output of the poem through its content analysis. The basic principle of historical materialism is elaborated in the article and this principle is applied while doing the content analysis of the poem. The article has used the original Nepali version of the poem and its translation of Michael Hutt for the analysis. In the article, I have quoted from the primary text first in the Roman script of the Nepali equivalent and then included Hutt's translation.

Devkota's *Muna Madan* is one of the few poetic works in Nepali literature that attracts varied criticisms. Dube (1970) interprets theme of the poem as the triumph of the spiritual over the material (P. 150). Pradhan (1988) applies the psychological theory of Sigmund Freud to the poem and interprets the dreams of Madan and Muna in terms of sexual desires (p. 276). Gautam (1999) evaluates the poem as a great poetic creation that highlights impermanence of wealth, naturalness, simplicity, contentment of the heart and higher pleasure (p. 81). Pradhan (1991) examines the poem from aesthetic point of view and asserts that it is greatest tragic lore in Nepali literature (p. 367). Aryal (2007) has analyzed the poem from the point of view of women characterization and found it excellent (p. 270). Bandhu (2010) has evaluated the causes of the poem's popularity and found that its social ideal and its love story of the married couple made it popular among people (p. 40). Gautam (2019) has examined the narratives in *Muna Madan* from mythical perspectives (p. 80). Thapa (2020) has analyzed the textual properties of the poem on the basis of the romantic philosophic parameters (p. 103). The above criticisms of the poem show that no critics have evaluated it through the lens of historical materialism yet. The article applying the principles of historical materialism examines historical background and the social context of the poem, the conflict between materialism and spiritualism and gender role and the caste system of Nepali society.

Methodology

The article employs the Marxist concept of historical materialism to analyze Devkota's *Muna Madan*. Historical materialism analyzes the activities of human society by applying the principles and laws of dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism observes the inner laws of nature while historical materialism studies the inner laws of human society (Khatri, 2023, p.112). In this regard, Syusyukalov et al. (1988) elaborate: "The unity of dialectical and historical materialism is manifest in the fact that historical materialism exemplifies the application of the principles and laws of dialectical materialism to the development of society" (pp. 73-4). Historical materialism deals with the general laws of historical development of human society and while studying the human society, it takes the society as a single organic whole having its different constituent parts interacting to each other. Historical materialism

studies the activities of human beings in relation to their material life to the particular time of human society.

The continuation and extension of the principles of materialism into the domain of social phenomena gives birth to materialist conception of history. The materialist conception of history gives preference to objective laws that produce the ideological motives of human being. Marx and Engels (1983) explain this concept in *The German Ideology*: "The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with material activity and the material intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior" (pp. 24-5). The human ideas, feelings, conceptions and all the mental activities of men are dependent on their material behavior. Historical materialism gives right answer of the fundamental question of philosophy as applied to social life, the question of relationship between social being and social consciousness. Marx (1984) argues: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 137). Social being stands for the material life of society and social consciousness stands for the sum total of ideas, theories, views, feelings, moods, customs and traditions which are the reflections of the nature and material life of society. The material activities of human beings are the basic things that guide their mental activities. The primary concern for human beings is to engage in material production that sustains their life. The struggle for the means of subsistence is the basic struggle men do in every stage of human history. The fulfilment of their basic material necessities precedes the fulfilment of their emotions and feelings. The human beings cannot reverse this principle though they desire to change it. It is beyond the control of human beings. This article analyzes the text applying this principle of historical materialism.

Results and discussions

The Sources of the Poem

The great poet like Devkota could compose a poem on any subject that can tell the most heartbreaking story. The story of *Muna Madan* moves the heart of millions of Nepali reader up to the present time. This is not only the case that the poem carries so tragic story. The truth behind the popularity of the poem lies not in its tragic tale but the tale captures the pain and pathos of Nepali people of the time. Devkota has narrated the story of the chhetri couple in the poem but they may refer to Newari community of Kathmandu valley who used to go to Tibet for trade and receive such family tragedies. Devkota lived in Kathmandu valley among Newari communities, he could speak Newari language and might have heard many such tragic stories that have fallen on the people of those community while doing trade to Tibet.

The story of *Muna Madan* has affinity with the story of Newari community of Kathmandu valley. It is believed that the essential elements of the story of *Muna Madan* were borrowed from a tale or a number of tales popular among Newari community. A Newar friend of Devkota's while he was a student told him the story of Udas, a Newar trader who abandons his new bride and goes to Lhasa at his mother's request (Hutt, p.9). In this Newari folk tale, merchant Udas obeys his mother and prepares to go Lhasa to trade. Despite his wife's plea not to go and leave her behind, he leaves home. When he is away, someone informs his wife that her husband has died. She cannot bear the shock of this news and falls down dead (Thapa, p.108). The story of this Newari ballad almost resembles with the story of *Muna Madan*. However, many elements of the plot of *Muna Madan* differ from those of the Newari 'original'. Devkota's *Muna Madan*, in comparison to the ballad, is longer and it also contains many episodes that are absent from the original. The episode of Bhote who rescues Madan while being ill is a new to *Muna Madan*. In the Newari song, the heroine commits *sati* when she is told that her husband has died whereas in *Muna Madan* Muna simply faints away and dies. In Newari ballad, there is no description of the trader's mother dying. In the ballad, a friend of the trader is the one who lies to the trader's wife about her husband's death while in *Muna Madan*, a passing stranger conveys this false message (Hutt, p.10). Devkota adopts the framework of the plot of this Newari ballad for his *Muna Madan* but he brings changes and employs varieties of technique so as to make it his original creation. Devkota's *Muna Madan* earned popularity far better than this Newari ballad but it is argued that Devkota has chosen the subject matter of his poem from Newari folk tradition of Kathmandu valley which has experienced years of ups and downs of trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet.

Portrayal of Economic and Social Condition of the Time

The reason behind the popularity of *Muna Madan* lies on its true depiction of the social reality of the time. The poem has truly portrayed historical, economic and social condition of Kathmandu valley during 1930s. Devkota has keenly observed historical, economic and social situation around him in his time and it was unconsciously imprinted in his mind. Khatri (2024) argues: "Unintentionally and subconsciously, the material condition of the moment leaves an impression on artists' minds, which is mirrored in literature and art." (p. 158). The society around him has influenced the mind of the great poet Devkota and compelled him to write the great work that revealed the unfathomable pain and sufferings of Nepali people of his time.

The plot of *Muna Madan* begins with the plea of Muna who tries to stop Madan from traveling to Tibet for trade. She has sensed a disaster before his visit as she might have observed many such cases that have spoiled their family life. It was not easy to go to Tibet because of difficult Himalayan terrain and many other hindrances would have fallen to the trans-Himalayan traveler. Muna urges before Madan:

Nachhodi janos he mera prana! Akeli malai

Manako banma nanivne gari biraha jalai, nanivne gari biraha jalai,

Ansuma khascha manako tukra yo ansu boldaina,

Manako kura manamai bascha, chhatile kholdaina, pyra, ansule boldaina! (p.1)

[Do not go, my life, do not leave me alone,

Do not light the fire of longing in the forest of my heart,

The words in my heart stay where they are,

My breast cannot burst, love, my tears cannot speak.] (Hutt's translation, p.23)

The urges Muna made before Madan reveal her intense pain of her heart that cannot be expressed easily. Her words convey her fear that Madan might not return and they could not reunite again. There could be two possibilities of her fear that they could not reunite again. The most obvious fear of Muna engenders from the possibility of Madan's physical disappearance because of unknown hardship's befallen on him that may lead to his death as well. The other fear of Muna comes out from the possibility of Madan's betrayal of her because he might be attracted towards Tibetan maidens. Lewis (1993) argues that Newar merchants used to marry Tibetan wives and kept their dual families separated by the Himalayas. Such a husband's marriage in Tibet was taken as a source of 'heartache, jealousy and competition' for the original Newar wife (cited in Hutt, p.12). This fear of Muna cannot be taken as granted but there are some hints that may support this claim. Muna makes Madan cautious:

Lhasaki thiti, Ankhaki chhiti, sunama kundeki,

Bulbule boli, galako bicha gulab phuleki –

Ti sabai khelun, ti sabai nachun, danda ra chaurama,

Malai birse yo ansu pirla bhhanechhu ma darama, (p.3)

[The maidens of Lhasa,

With their flickering eyes and golden forms,

Their nightingale speech and rosy cheeks,

They may play and dance on the hills and the fields,

If as I fear you forget me

You will be haunted by these tears.] (Hutt's translation, p.26)

The ending of the story does not support this claim as Madan loves Muna more than his life and so, he commits suicide when he was informed by his sister about Muna's death. The unflinching love feelings of Muna and Madan to each other is rare and immortal and such a love story of Muna and Madan makes the poem eternal. But, the above lines of the poem show Muna's suspicion on the Tibetan maidens that they may attract Madan and spoil him. Madan is faithful in his love but the betrayal of Newari Merchant to their wives of her time makes Muna being suspicious on Madan.

The ending of the story shows that Muna and Madan love each other more than their own life. Muna dies when she is given mis-information by a stranger about Madan's death and Madan dies when he is informed about Muna's death. Their love relation tells us that they should not have been separated to each other and Madan should not have left Muna for traveling Tibet. There must have been some villain that entered between them and destroyed their beautiful life. Who was their villain? What compelled Madan to go to Tibet leaving his beloved wife and old aged mother? It was their poor economic condition that worked as their villain and which compelled Madan to go to Tibet. Madan reveals causes of his visit to Tibet to Muna:

He meri pyari! Bachana timro gaddachha manama,

Ke garchheu Muna! Yo sasa adchha tehi papi dhanama,

Ti amalai dudhako ghudkole gala rasaun,

Unako yeuta pati ra dharako ichha puryaun,

Yo hatalai sunako bala khandilo suhaun

Rinale thotro gharako jaga baliyo banaun. (pp. 2-3)

['Darling, your words strike deep in my heart,

But what can you do? For wealth sustains life,

Though verily it is a sin.

Mother's throat I will soothe with sips of milk,

Her wish I shall grant for a resthouse and spout,

I will adorn your arms with solid gold

And shore up this house which now totters in debt.] (Hutt's translation, pp. 25-6)

This is the truth behind Madan's departure to Tibet leaving his loved ones at his home. The clause 'this house which now totters in debt' tells us about Madan's economic condition and this does not give peace to his family if they could not repay their debt. The above lines of the poem convey the difficulty of Nepali people living in Kathmandu

valley at that time. Everybody knows 'wealth sustains life' and for sustaining his life and the life of his family members, Madan was compelled to go to Tibet. His 'weak and fragile' mother and 'the shadow of love' (Hutt's translation, p.25) of his mother and Muna could not stop Madan from visiting Lhasa. The decision of Madan going to Tibet does not bring happiness in his family at the end but he had such a hope at first that he would earn enough money and he would fulfil the material desires of his mother and his wife. This is the true portrayal of the economic and social condition of Nepali people of that time. Some families through foreign employment could fulfil their dream and others could do nothing more than disintegrating and collapsing their families. The story of *Muna Madan* even foreshadows the reality of present Nepal where millions of Nepali people have left their homeland and their families for earning their fortune. Some people have earned wealth from foreign employment and some families have disintegrated and collapsed like the family of Muna and Madan by the foreign employments even at the present time in Nepal.

Portrayal of Conflict between Materialism and Spiritualism

The poem is based on the portrayal of the harsh economic and social reality of the people living in Kathmandu valley at that time. Madan is compelled to go to Tibet for earning money leaving his beloved ones at home. The poem highlights the difficulties of downtrodden people of the material world but the poem also presupposes the spiritual world where the God resides and guides the living creatures of this material world. Madan keeps his ultimate hope to the almighty God if he fails getting success in his life:

Asala garda jhan bidhna pare bataima marunla

Prithibipari sworgama feri he pyari! Bhetaulan! (p. 3)

[If ill should befall me despite good intent,

If all goes wrong and I die,

Beyond this world, my love,

We will meet again in heaven.'](Hutt's translation, p. 26)

Madan has doubt that he may not get success while fighting with economic hardships and if he fails and dies, he ultimately hopes to reunite with Muna in heaven, the spiritual world. People remember the God in the moment of hardships and the concept of God or the religion is human made. In this regard, Marx (2015) argues: "Man makes religion, religion does not make man . . . Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people" (p.7). This explains that man makes God and the God does not make man. Men imagine some supernatural power when they cannot tackle their

difficulties with their human power. They seek assistance from the supernatural power at this moment. Madan blames to the almighty God when his sister informs him about Muna's death:

Iswor! Tainle rachera feri kasari bigaris?

Sristiko phula rachera testo kasari lataris? (p. 38)

[Lord, how could You ruin what You had made?

How could You spurn that flower of creation?] (Hutt's translation, p. 53).

There is no role of the imagined God in the success and failure of human beings but they seek help from the unseen power when they are helpless. The concept of God or religion, as Marx claims, gives an anesthetic effect to the oppressed section of the people as the opium gives so that they can forget their pain and sufferings for a moment. Devkota portrays in *Muna Madan* such a conflict between materialism and spiritualism.

Portrayal of Traditional Gender Role and Challenge to the Traditional Caste System of Nepal

Devkota wrote *Muna Madan* in the 1930s and the poem has portrayed the traditional gender role of the time. Traditionally, Nepali women are confined to household chores and men are engaged to outside jobs for earning their living. The heroine, Muna, Madan's mother and his sister are some female characters of the poem and all of them are given their role of doing household jobs staying at their home in Nepal. The hero, Madan and his friends are the male characters of the poem who go outside of their home for earning their living. Madan takes a risk of his life for earning something for his family going to Tibet. Madan acknowledges his gender role as being male: "*Ki marichhadyo, ki garichhadyo mardako irada*, (p.1) [A man's resolve is firm unto death]" (Hutt's translation, p.24). Muna worries too much for the safety of her husband and tries to stop him and she expresses her desire to accompany him: "*Jane nai bhaye nachhodi janos sathama suhaun!* (p.2) [Go if you must, but do not leave me alone]" (Hutt's translation, p.24). Muna's desire to go with Madan to Tibet is not fulfilled because the Nepali society of the time could not allow a woman working outside of their home. Madan denies to take her with him arguing:

Banaka kanda, ukala thada, kasori lai jaun?

He nagakanya! Pahada naau! (p.2)

[The forests are thorny and steep and sheer,

How can I take you there?

Oh holy nymph, do not come to the mountains!] (Hutt's translation, pp. 24-5).

Madan cannot imagine Muna's departure from their home and he requests her to stay at home caring his old-aged mother. Madan could stay at home caring his own mother and Muna could go to Tibet for earning their living but it is beyond their imagination because the society does not permit for such a gender role. The society was rigid in traditional gender role at the time when Devkota composed this poem and the poem portrays the social reality of the time.

Devkota's *Muna Madan* earns popularity in its rejection of the traditional caste system of Nepal. The caste system of Nepal has its root to Hindu's notion of *Chaturvarnah*. This divides Nepali people into four varnas: Brahmins, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. The Brahmins and Ksatriyas are taken as superior, while the Vaisyas and Sudras are degraded to the inferior status. The *Chaturvarnah* does not comprise all people and the people outside Varna-system are called outcaste. The outcaste occupies the low position below Sudras and they are regarded as equal with dogs (Khatri, 2022, p. 371). In the poem, Madan belongs to Ksatriya family. Madan falls sick in the jungle while returning from Tibet and in his difficult condition, his friends deserted him. He struggles for his life alone in the jungle while a Bhote (Tibetan) approaches him and takes him to his home. In Hindu caste system, Bhote does not belong to Varna-system and therefore, he is an outcaste. Bhote is considered an untouchable caste and a son of Ksatriya could not even touch him at the time when Devkota composed the poem. Devkota wrote the famous verse of *Muna Madan* at this context while Madan bows down to the feet of this Bhote who comes forward to save his life:

Chhetriko chhoro yo pau chhunchha, ghinale chhudaina;

Manisa thulo dilale hunchha jatale hundaina! (p.20)

[This son of a Kshetri touches your feet,

But he touches them not with contempt,

A man must be judged by the size of his heart,

Not from his name or his caste.] (Hutt's translation, p.38)

The above verse of the poem challenges the traditional caste system of Nepal. The friends of his own caste abandons Madan in the dense forest while he is sick. On the other hand, the Bhote, though he is treated as an outcaste, nurtures Madan taking to his home and he even rejects taking anything from Madan for his kindness. This makes Madan realize that a man becomes great not because of his caste but because of his deeds. Such a realization of Madan arouses reverence to Bhote and he bows down to his feet. The deed of Bhote highlights the value of humanity that transcends the notion of Nepali caste system. This episode of *Muna Madan* makes the poem revolutionary and gains the utmost popularity among common Nepali people.

Conclusion

The article has analyzed the source of the poem, its social contents regarding economic hardships, religious concepts, gender roles and caste hierarchy. The historical analysis of the text has revealed that Devkota has borrowed the framework of the poem from the Newari folk tradition of Kathmandu valley. It is found that the poem's utmost popularity comes from its true portrayal of the social and economic reality of the people living in Kathmandu valley at that time. Madan's poor economic condition has compelled him to leave his beloved ones at home for visiting Tibet. The story of *Muna Madan* has mirrored the struggle for subsistence of the people living in Kathmandu valley in 1930s who were compelled to go to Tibet for earning their living. This brought family catastrophe and disintegration to some of the Nepali families at that time. The tragic story of *Muna Madan* also foreshadows the family disaster of some of the modern Nepali families due to the foreign employment. The text has portrayed the conflict between the materialism and spiritualism as Madan has struggled for earning the means for subsistence that is material but kept his ultimate hope to spiritual power, the God, to get success in his life. The text has given approval to the traditional gender role where men go outside for earning money and women stay inside at home for doing household chores. The episode of Bhote in *Muna Madan* has challenged the traditional caste system of Nepal and this episode has made the text revolutionary and popular among Nepali readers.

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