

ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN B.P. KOIRALA'S SUMNIMA

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ABSTRACT

B. P. Koirala's Sumnima is more criticized as a Freudian Nepali fiction but it is more than that. The novel is a very beautiful and important gift of the novelist to the practitioners of cultural theory because the novelist has discussed the issues of minority, plurality of meaning in cultural practices, cultural differences and ethnic consciousness through the innocent characters, among others. It also documents the conflict and problems among the people living in the same area and helps us understand the value of respecting the other. The book has talked in favour of the weaker section of the society and has made the indigenous practices and way of life victorious through the use of environment, vernacular language, characters, life style, beliefs, norms and values, art, myth, etc. over the classic living style guided and prescribed by the shashtras. Sumnima is a great documentation of cultural reconciliation among the people of different ethnic origins following different beliefs, norms, values and cultural practices.

KEYWORDS: Ethnicity, kinship, culture, commensality, religion, language

INTRODUCTION

An ethnic group is the major social group with a common identity based on history, culture, language and sometimes religion. Not equivalent to a race, ethnic groups, for Brubaker (2004), are internally fairly homogenous and distinguished from other groups of the same kind - are not real (p. 7). What is real is a shared sense of 'groupness', of group membership. Ethnicity is cognitive, a point of view of individuals, a way of seeing the world (Brubaker, 2004, p. 64). It is only the sense of 'groupness' that is real. Real, but illusory (Jenkins, 2008, p. 11). They are real because they are observable, very real - even if modest groups whether they are families, peer groups or friendship circles, our own experience tells us that groups are real.

Ethnicity has partly replaced the idea of 'race'. 'Ethnic groups' or 'ethnic' are defined now in exchange of what once was called 'tribes'. There are different bases on which ethnicity is defined. Common descent that is ancestry or kinship is the core idea of ethnicity but the group sentiment is based on things that are different from the tale of blood which it is based on occupations, social institutions and affiliation to them, religion, custom, tradition, culture, language, nationality, caste, class etc. As Morris (1968) defines:

An ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in the larger society whose culture is usually different from its own. The members of such group are, or feel themselves, or are thought to be, bound together by common ties of race or nationality or culture. . . Members usually identify

themselves with the group and give it a name. (p. 168)

Ethnicity, therefore, is the constitution of cultural practices that are different from any other cultural groups and have a name to differ from the others and feel a common bond.

Common descent, belief in common origin is, for Weber, a key element of ethnic identity; the second is that differences both cultural and physical, visible differences like dress, language and other differences of everyday behavior, even feeding habits (as cited in Elliot, 2007, p. 61). They are socially constructed and a product of circumstances. Ethnic attachments and identities are seen as belonging to the realm of sentiment and 'belonging' to the realm of sentiment and belonging as a psychosocial realm. Most of the times it happens that despite the gains to be made by acting in a non-ethnic way, people choose to act ethnically.

In fact, in the context of small groups, quite intense feelings of loyalty and obligation are generated and executed. According to Geertz (1973) people's primary attachment is to others who are seen to be of the same 'race', who are kinsmen and women, who speak the same language, or whose sense of collective past and future is based on shared experience of people of a region, of the same religion or caste, or on a community of culture and custom. These communities of kinship ties, custom, religion and region are the basis of people's sense of self. Therefore, the strongest belongingness between/ among the people develops on the basis of family, custom, place, religion and language (Fenton, 2010, p. 79). The ethnic identity or the sense of inclusion and exclusion has been one of the handiest tools for dominating the others.

An ethnic group derives its identity from its distinctive customs, language, ancestry, place of origin, or style of dress etc. among others. *Encyclopedia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suit 2014* defines ethnicity as the identification of a group of people based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness. Fishman (1980) says that ethnicity is experienced as being 'bone of their bones, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood' that is ethnicity is felt to be in the blood, bones and flesh (p. 63). However, Fredrik Barth (1980) argues that ethnicity represents the social organization of culture difference, that ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of shared culture, but rather the formation of groups on the basis of differences of culture (p. 1). In other words, the cultural differences from other groups make a cultural group an ethnic group and the contrast between "us" and "others" is what is embedded in the organization of ethnicity.

The first primary marker of ethnicity is kinship, i.e. the presumed biological and descent unity of the group. Commensality, the similarity and/or sameness in feeding habit, eating together indicating a kind of equality is the second primary marker of ethnicity. The third primary marker of ethnicity is a common religious cult, implicating a value system, religious beliefs. These are the cultural markers of blood, substance and cult that separate an ethnic group from the others. The secondary ethnicity markers, according to Nash (1989), are dress, language and physical features (p.25); race and nationality also are the ethnicity markers among others. Geertz (1973) says that people's sense of self remains in actualities of blood, race, language, locality, religion or tradition (p. 41). The feeling of being related to others as brothers, sisters, parents, sons and daughters is one of the most powerful motivations of human kind. Moreover, for Fishman (1980)

ethnicity in the modern era is a consciously manipulated, massive and dynamic social factor (p. 64) within the realm of belongingness which has been the major cause of discrimination of one ethnic group by the other.

The readers of the novel can notice almost all the ethnicity markers like common descent or kinship, commensality or difference in eating habits, difference in religious cult, dress, language, physical features, racial differences and feeling of nationality in the novel.

KINSHIP (COMMON DESCENT)

Kinship or the common descent is the tale of common blood, bones and flesh. B.P. Koirala has introduced three different ethnic groups in his novel. There is a Brahmin family Suryadutta an ascetic Brahman who goes to live on the bank of Koshi river at his third or hermit stage (banaprastha ashram) of life according to varna rule, his wife and their only issue a son, the chief character of the novel, Somdutta. There are Kirat people living in the surrounding villages of the hermitage at the sacred place of varaha kshetra and the bhillas who also reside around the settlements around the varaha kshetra. Somadutta was brought there for his better education as that of the sages (p. 3) of the past and he was brought only after "performing the sacred thread ceremony. . . keeping the benefit of Somdatta in mind" (p. 3). At the bank of Koshi river, Koirala makes Somdatta and Sumnima introduce:

The damsel innocently replied, "I am Sumnima, a Kirat daughter. By the way, who are you yourself hey weak-bodied boy"?

Somdatta said, "I am Somdatta, son of Suryadatta, a Brahmin belonging to the Aryan stock". (p. 7)

Even the children are conscious of their ethnic difference that they show at their first meeting. The Kirats are so much of conscious of the descent and their ancestral practices of sacrificing a cow to the deities and the Bhillas are irritated when the prince prohibits slaughtering a piglet to appease their deity around the varahaksheta. The novel clearly shows that bringing a child up in a different cultural environment does not make a difference in its descent. Somdatta's orphan son is brought up by Sumnima among the Kirats in her village but she observes at last "They were a different kind of people and were different. Although Somdatta's son was brought up in the Kirat society, his blood after all belonged to the Aryan Brahmin stock!" (p. 112).

COMMENSALITY (FEEDING HABIT)

This difference is created through the substances a certain ethnic group uses in their day to day life. The Kirats live mostly on the extracts from the nature; they consume roots, fruits and honey etc more than the cultivated food grains. The novel has not mentioned any paddy field or any cultivated land belonging to the Kirats and the Bhillas. The Kirats, however, herd the cattle as it is almost customary with the people of Tibetan origin, migrated from the northern side of the country. The largest portion of their cuisine comprises of flesh and they consume beef among other flesh items. The Bhillas' kitchen is dominated more by pork though they consume other flesh items. Both of these populace are the cattle herders and depend on the food products extracted from the animals. However, the Brahmin diet is heavily dominated by the cultivated cereals like paddy, barley, maize etc and they depend completely

on vegetable items. They don't even touch pigs and they regard cows as the 'mother', no question of consuming the flesh of the animals. Moreover Suryadatta's is an ascetic Brahmin family which has great restriction on feeding habits. Their nutrition depends solely on the milk the cow 'Kapila mother' offers them twice a day.

RELIGIOUS CULT

It is the matter of cult that incorporates religious beliefs, traditions and practices. The novelist Koirala is very mindful of the religious differences and conflict that arises out of the difference, too. Suryadatta, the ascetic hermit tells his son Somdatta that Kirats are non-Aryans and "Non-Aryans follow the religion of beasts, but whereas we believe in the religion produced by gods" (p. 8). Sumnima says that being human beings we should not follow gods' behavior (p. 8). She further adds: "Somdatta, we should practice human customs as we are human beings" (p. 8). Somdatta has the arrogance of being a Brahmin more than a human being and tries to convince Sumnima: "Sumnima, you ignorant girl, we are Brahmins who can achieve divinity by power of penance. All our fire sacrifices, religious activities, rituals and practices are fused together for achieving salvage from human weaknesses; do you understand?" (p. 8). Sumnima does not lose her heart and refutes Somdatta's argument: "If we try to live like gods we don't remain human" (p. 8).

Koirala has brought the Hindu varna system in reference to show the difference among the ethnic groups that the Brahmins are the ascetics, their duty is to go to the jungle in search of greater knowledge and Kshatriyas have kingly duty to protect the Brahmins from all dangers and save their lives and the king has the duty of managing the society. The Kirats and Bhillas have erected the hermitage for the ascetic Brahmin family and they have presented Suryadatta's family with a milking cow. When a prince of the state visits the Brahmin family there in the hermitage, he commands his people that the ascetic family should be protected from hunger and other dangers. In addition, on the complaint of Suryadatta, the prince addresses a royal decree to the Kirats and bhillas that they shall not sacrifice the cows and piglets around the hermitage area and declares that the place will be called Varahakshetra, or the region of the boar-god and it will be a "pilgrimage site symbolizing the incarnation of Vishnu as Varaha as propounded in our religious texts" (p. 13). The Kirats and Bhillas can continue their rituals but they have to shift the altar of sacrifice beyond the ridge. The Bijuwa, Sumnima's father who is the head priest of the kirtats agrees to arrange the altar of slaughtering of cows and piglets at a different place beyond the hermitage area, though there is a conflict among his people.

BELIEFS

People do have different belief systems. Some believe in spirituality, abstract philosophy, some others believe in materiality. Brahmins are more spiritual and Kirats are more materialistic. They have difference on their value systems. It is very crucial the points whom do you revere more: the father or mother? Somdatta says "A son receives his life as a gift from his father and, therefore, we never commit a sin of neglecting this liberal relation of the gift of life. This is the

way we express our gratitude” (p. 7). Sumnima, on the other hand, has different belief system. She says “But even by your own words you are given birth by your mother and, therefore, you had to respect her, isn't it so? It is for this reason that we Kirats first get to know our mother and the man she shows becomes our father” (p. 7). Somdatta, as if he has been the pundit of the Eastern philosophy retorts with childish confident, “. . . our concepts are different from yours. Mother is field, you stupid girl. The master of the field is father. You are ignorant of this truth (p. 7) for which Sumnima replies instantly “Hey, son of Brahmin! It is the mother who first introduces that this is your father. Father is the male shown by mother” (p. 7). The son inquires the father about the issue and Suryadatta ‘enlightens’ his son “The system of introducing oneself from mother is beastly. Due to the absence of the virtues of chastity and fidelity in females of brutes (beasts) their children are introduced through mother” (p. 18).

There is the fundamental difference in belief system between Somdatta and Sumnima. Somdatta believes in universal soul inside the human soul: “One is the soul and other is the universal soul” (p. 8). However, for Sumnima “it is the human who lives within a human being. . . . Deities live in their respective places, some on the tops of mountains, some in the rivers, some in the rocky cliffs, some in the jungles, and others in the agricultural fields” (p. 19). She believes that what lives within us is the human spirit, not anybody else (p. 19). For Somdatta, there is no religion as great as non-violence (p. 8); for Sumnima slaughtering the cows and piglets in the name of deities is common because she thinks that the deities are like humans and they are appeased by offering the animals. For her a pigeon being eaten by a falcon is natural, there is nothing wrong in it because it is on a pigeon that a falcon lives (p. 20). For Sumnima, body is greater than soul, just reverse the idea of Somdatta. He maintains celibacy, undergoes hard discipline in order to get “high emancipation” (p. 23). He says sensual pleasure is a sin “physical pleasure is a poison” (p. 24). He prefers yoga to suppress and control the youthful desires while Sumnima says “This my body is unable to carry the load of pleasure any more, that is the reason my body is feeling a shivering sensation” (p. 27). Somdatta leaves the hermitage and practices so hard a penance in order that to bring the senses under control that his own parents refuse to recognize him when he comes back home. The Brahmins are the people who feel “The air” (p. 111) pleasant; the Kirats, on the other hand, feel the earth that is pleasant, that you can touch, the thing that is tangible.

Sumnima does not understand much of vedic instructions of Somdatta but believes in Shamanism that her father practices. Sumnima stands for body whereas Somdatta stands for spirit. One says one should protect the body; the other is in favour of saving the spirit at the expense of body and undergoes severe control, practices yoga and offers his flesh in the fire. Sumnima takes pride in her body, Somdatta advocates for the freedom from bodily attachments; Sumnima stands for nature and Somdatta stands for nurture as directed in the Hindu scriptures.

Somdatta marries but to pay the debt to the ancestors and parents by giving birth to a son who could continue the lineage. The wife Puloma also is a learned woman and believes in ritual sex just to give birth to son. They carry out so many rituals for

conceiving a baby; they read the Upanishads, offer the fire sacrifice to the gods in order to “have a son of good behavior” (p. 46) in which “the bodily union performed for getting a son doesn’t have the physical element” (p. 47); they have sex for duty but Puloma fails to conceive a baby until they have passionate, sensuous sex in disguise as directed by Sumnima and her father, Bijuwa. Joy inside makes the world agile; to conceive a baby, body should be appeased, not the gods described in the Upanishads.

DRESS

The Kirats and Bhillas of Koirala’s *Sumnima* do not wear clothes, the Brahmins also wear very thin lion clothes around the groin and Brahmin woman, somdattas mother covers her body with a simple cotton sari, though. The Kirats put on but natural flora and fauna around their body to cover their vitals and the Bhillas decorate themselves with the peacock feathers and a garland of shells around their groin but do not wear clothes, the women cover their chest with the hair falling from the head, the vital exposed. Somdatta feels shame to look at Sumnima standing naked in his front but Sumnima has no feeling of it. She does not like to cover the body with any clothes, rather she feels ashamed to have seen the people cover their body with clothes. Sumnima observes:

You people put clothes on anything and cover their real identity. You hang a mask on the face of an undamaged person . . . and cover the body with all kinds of garments and dresses . . . As your mom covers her body day and night with exceedingly long clothes making you easy to turn her into a godly figure from a simple human female, otherwise inside the coverings even your mother has the same things what all women have with them. As we do not cover our bodies with clothes we are unable see our clothless mothers as *mata* or goddess. Who would call the naked mother goddess? (p. 9)

Sumnima thinks that covering one’s body is to cover one’s reality and identity. It is the practice of dehumanizing the person in the name of covering the human body everybody is aware of; it is a practice of damaging an undamaged person, an unnatural practice.

LANGUAGE

Language is one of the most important ethnic marker because the people of different ethnic groups have their own languages or even if they speak the same language for communication, they speak the language in different accent or they have different ways of using the words and expressions. This difference is very well characterized by the novelist in *Sumnima* when Somdatta and Sumnima discuss about why they call a ‘mother’ by different words. Sumnima very curiously asks Somdatta, “Yes Somdatta,, why did you use the word *mata* for your mother yesterday?” (p. 8). Somdatta replies to Sumnima, “This is the language of gods” (p. 8). Sumnima is not satisfied with the answer and she puts her query forth: “Then, why don’t you speak in a human language being a human yourself.. instead of calling a person so dear as mother, mother you call her *mata* and distance her?” (p. 8). Somdatta has his own philosophy of calling a mother a *mata* and says “*Mata* is synonymous to goddess. We place *mata* on a high and

respected position with respect, honour and gratitude... mother is a word to denote only the family relation of daily life" (p. 9).

PHYSICAL FEATURES

Naturally, as Sumnima rightly has observed, the Brahmins have slender body, lean and thin standing tall at their heads. The Kirats do have their body full of tight and strong muscles. They have golden (yellow) complexion as Somdatta observes as soon as he sees Sumnima: "Hey, gold-bodied girl" (p. 9). The Bhillas, however, have as stout body as the Kirats, slightly taller and they have black skin to cover their body. But it is very difficult to understand how the writer happened to introduce the Bhillas in the territory where he has set the novel because the Bhillas are not the native populace of the Himalayan part of the globe. They are reported to reside in the mid-Indian territory. They are told to have been vanquished and in a war and settled there but no detail is available.

RACIAL DIFFERENCE

The character whom we confront in the novel belongs to different racial groups and they are conscious of the fact from the very beginning of the novel. Even the child characters, Sumnima and Somdatta are conscious of their racial origin that Somdatta introduces him as an "Aryan" and Sumnima knows that she is a "Kirat daughter". The novelist has introduced the people of all three different racial stocks available in the Indian sub-continent: the Brahmins and Kshetriyas belong to Aryan stock, the Kirats introduce themselves as of different origin, the Mongols and the Bhillas must be the Dravidians even though it has not been explicitly pointed out in the text.

NATIONALITY

People have an attachment to their native soil, to the traditions of their parents, and to established territorial authorities. Nationality comprises the features as a common language, culture, ethnicity and history. Nationality creates a common identity among the people, wherever they live. Nationality thus denotes the ways in which the collectivities (groups) are distinguished in their relations with other groups (Jenkins, 2008, p. 18). In other words, nationality provides us with an identity that is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others, that includes us.

The novelist is aware of different nationalities residing in his novel. The prince is proud of his royal belonging when he addresses the gathering "Bhillas and Kirats present here, our ancestors have conquered the whole land extending up to the Himalayas and, therefore, it is under our protection. . .The Brahmin family living here establishing its hermitage is highly respected by us" (p. 12). The Kirats do have the feeling of their nationality that they belong to the land and they are the natives of the land whoever rules it. The Bhillas also, even if they were vanquished by some king at a certain place and have been residing around Varahakshetra they have the feeling of their nationality and they want to save their identity by keeping their customs alive in their own ways.

CONCLUSION

Koirala's *Sumnima* is one of the best reservoirs of ethnic consciousness with tolerance among the people living in the same geographical territory. He has implicitly and explicitly discussed the ethnic consciousness of the people through different characters in different circumstances. On the surface, the novel reads like a document that has meant to create ethnic conflict, domination and disharmony among the ethnic nationalities living at Varahakshetra but the main motif of the novel is that 'divided we stand'. Of course, Somdatta and Sumnima discuss fiercely on almost all the issues but ultimately the novelist has made Sumnima to win the debate. Not only Somdatta has to follow Sumnima's ways of life his vedic knowledge has to take refuge under her practical way of 'life lived'. The Kirats, under the leadership of the Bijuwa, not only respect the ascetic Brahmin family but also carry on their ethnic norms, values, ritual practices and customs. Sumnima and her family are very much conscious about the differences between themselves and the Brahmins but she welcomes Somdatta's son to live with them in the family and finally makes her daughter to marry him, which imparts the message of harmony among the ethnic groups who have shared the territory of a land.

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