WRITING OFF: APPROACHING MODERNITY THROUGH SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

As rupture in the prevailing practices, modernity adopts writing off as one of its diverse ways of bringing the ethos of contemporary time to match up with the aspirations of people. The inner core of the society develops erroneous aspects in its structural foundations over a course of time, whereby promoting social inequalities. Often, the proponents of such system fail to see through the possible implications of such fault line during the inceptions. The fissures in system set onto trouble the people, thereby obstructing the smooth functioning of the society. In such context, the society calls for the intervention of the larger agency, capable of enforcing and sustaining change. The present study examines and analyse slavery as the system that has undergone such change in the history of Nepal. I have taken Chandra Shumsher's 1924 speech on abolition of slavery and Madan Mani Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) as the primary source of data to explore examine and analyse slavery from the intersection of history and literature in that both Shumsher and Dixit reflect on the nature and course of slavery as such. Using the critical perspective of new historicism, the study concludes that modernity employs 'writing off' as one of the chief strategies to upgrade the polity with the ethos of contemporaneity.

Keywords: writing off - modernity - social change - slavery - agency

INTRODUCTION

In the process of social change, modernity employs writing off the unjust social institution, promoting inequality from the base of structure. The social actors require an intense understanding of 'seemingly' absolute foundation of practices in order to challenge them, tear them asunder, and then sift through each of their components to see if any of its aspects can still remain in practice to serve the larger, common good. As the precondition of social change, the interventionist agency usually takes a

very hard decision to write off certain institution by eliminating even the last trace of it. In Nepali context, Chandra Shumsher had issued a decree on 28 November 1924, completely banning slavery from the country. Almost after six decades, Madan Mani Dixit published *Madhavi* in 1983 which also intensely goes into the deeper core of slavery that promotes inequalities in the fictional world. For Dixit, comparison of the cruelty of the Panchayat to the slavery of post-Vedic society appears as the primary motif of the text, for *Madhavi* was written to politically critique Mahendra's vision of polity and people. The text exposes the atrocities of the system whereas Chandra Shumsher's decree unfolds the initiatives of the state for the cause of people's liberation from the prevailing traditional institutions like slavery in Nepal.

Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) has been studied from various points of reference to the date. However, Shumsher's speech has not attracted much attention of critical studies. The following section presents telescopic view of some of the major and available studies on Dixit's novel and Shumsher's speech so as to show the point of departure for the analysis.

The structural and linguistic aspects have been swiftly dealt in Bhattarai (2073) who finds out the use of complex language in Dixit's *Madhavi* as one of the key obstacles to reading the text, implying that such experimentation with the language and style has made the message of the text inaccessible for common people. Dixit's language is taken as a complex way of dealing with the contemporary society. Similarly, Lohani's study sheds light on the mythical aspects of the novel. He identifies "the prototype revolt of slaves under the leadership of Spartacus in ancient Rome and in the Indian Subcontinent" (2016, p. vi). Such studies deal much with aesthetics of the texts where the questions of beauty and use of particular style or interpretation of the allusions become primary for such critics.

The sociological understanding of the text has also drawn the attention of serious scholars. Of them, Subedi (2064 B.S.) critically evaluates the Sage Vishwamitra's relationship with his discipline, Galav in order to argue that Vishwamitra just preaches socialism in his teaching while trying to collect all the luxuries for himself (p. 209). He has encountered the problematic exchange in the post-Vedic society as promoted in the text. Similarly, Baral (2064 B.S.) doubts Vishwamitra's project of slavery abolition since the Sage forgets everything "after getting Madhavi as his own" (p. 171). He conceptually derives the Marxist set of frame to interpret

the social reality in which the elite and the proletariat face troubles in their relations in that both the groups place themselves in perpetual tension with the other in quest of power and justice.

Gradual development of the society has also been studied in the text. For example, Koirala (2063 B.S.) explores the basic theme of social evolution in Dixit's novel that has captured the eastern philology in general. Also, Paudel (2065 B.S.) has studied the whole of the childhood memories as the basic stuff guiding all his writings. Like Paudel's auto/ biographical study, Silwal (2064 B.S.) intensely discusses slavery and the social transformation in Dixit's work. He claims that the institution was used as "the most torturous form of class division where some people own the capital while others become proletariat, get tied in slave houses like cattle, and get treated like commodity of exchange in market" (p.77). Though Phuyal's (2022) study has not confirmed Silwal's position, he has approached Dixit from the perspective of resistance to read *Madhavi*. He encounters the problematic relationship between the state and the people in the novel where the agency imposes certain type of threat to the state and forces it to change its ways (p. 43). In all the different renderings, Dixit's text has never hardly been thematically connected with a historical document in order to see the ways both the text begin to question the unjust social institution to raise voice for social change.

Shumsher's 1924 speech has rarely been able to draw the much attention of any critics. Still, two available sources have responded to the speech in short pieces of writing. On the one hand, Tumbahangphey (2006) has brought the reference of Shumsher borrowing fund from the treasury of Pashupatinath to abolish slavery. Highlighting the significance of the temple in the national need, he mentions that the temple can still serve the nation in many of its endeavors. In the same line of argument, Shrestha (2008) has also appreciated Shumsher's move to write off the slavery as the evil order of the society. Shrestha has stated: "In Nepal, slavery was officially outlawed in 1925 during the Rana regime. The long and elaborate speech of Chandra Shumsher, delivered on Nov. 28, 1924, contains genuine desire to abolish this evil" (Para II). Both Tumbahangphey and Shrestha hail Shumsher's abolition of slavery as the positive step towards modernizing the nation.

The present study builds the conceptual frame that modernity realizes itself through social change and one of its many possible strategies

emerges as writing off certain social institutions in the course of obtaining modernity. In Nepal, the interventionist agency eliminated slavery in 1924 in the quest of a just polity. Shumsher's speech reflects the choice of the state to grant liberation to the bonded section of people under slavery. In the similar line of argument, the study analyzes the causes behind such decision of the state. On the other hand, Dixit's *Madhavi* critiques the ways of the political practices of the late 1970s in the Panchayat Regime in the country. To view the contemporary society, he derives the classical narrative from the *Mahabharata* to comment on the political aspirations of the people for public welfare. Since the historical document and the literary work embody the spirit of change in the form of writing off slavery as the powerful institution, the paper moves towards claiming that modernity employs writing off as one of the chief strategies in the process of social change.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study analyzes Shumsher's 1924 speech as the historical document and Dixit's 1983 Nepali novel as the literary work: both illustrate writing off as the one of the fundamental ways of modernity in the process of social change. Modernity dismisses the troubling social institution of the time: Shumsher gathers his people and addresses them at length to convince them against the practice of slavery. Similarly, Dixit shows the quest of two sacrificial heroes, Madhavi and Galav in search for four black eared horses in the Subcontinent for Sage Vishwamitra to organize *ashwamedh jagna* (ritual of horse sacrifice) to abolish slavery and found a new agricultural order. Shumsher and Dixit commonly cherish the agenda of epochal transition through modernity in their texts respectively. Both the texts illustrate the ways of writing off slavery as a powerful social institution during social change.

As a new historicist study of development of certain social institution, the present study applies Michel Foucault's critical concepts of history and modernity. He views that the forces of historical development reside in the local, specific context in which they play the most significant role in shaping the course of action. He argues for integration of the social-historical forces in the analysis and understanding of modernity and social change. As McHugh analyzes Foucault,

According to the ethos of modernity, Foucault's critical analyses do not constitute a transcendental negation but a historical one, which means, according to the terms of Foucault's historical analyses, a specific negation asserted within a specific context of power relations among competing discourses, a negation to have its effect within that context upon those discourses. (p. 106)

The transcendental reasoning as such does not conceptually illustrate the historical reality of a particular society, for such approach misses the fault lines in the structure. Furthermore, Hans Haferkamp and Neil J. Smelser's discussion on the relationship between modernity and social change has been taken as the key conceptual frame for the analysis of the primary data in the study. Modernity asserts itself through social change as the break in the prevailing social practices: such fissures provide the observers with a window to look into the functioning of the society, promoting inequalities from the base of the social structure. Haferkamp and Smelser (1992) present both the theories of evolution as the process of gradual change and break away as the process of complete change. The study focuses on the fundamentals of writing off the ills/misfit of the social structure to address the public aspiration expressed in social change. Also, social actors are born out of the self that emerges larger than the social structure. Impliedly, the interventionist agent who projects oneself larger than the society holds the power to write off the factors promoting inequalities from the structural base.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Social structures remain functional as long as they address the aspirations of the people and serve the cause of public welfare. However, the structural lapses and errors turn into tyrannical forms of social practices in the long run, consequently leading to formation of spirit for change in society. In such process, certain institutions are written off from the core of the society. For instance, social change has done away with slavery as a social institution by erasing it from the social structure. The following section derives data from Chandra Shumsher's speech on slaver abolition (1924) and Madan Mani Dixit's *Madhvi* (1983) in order to examine the purpose and the mode of social change in quest of human dignity.

Slavery in Nepali history and literature

Nepal had officially addressed the challenges of slavery as early as 1924 when the Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher abolished the system on humanitarian, moral, and cultural ground. In literature, Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) deeply percolates the author's critical sensibility into the roots of inequalities that slavery had promoted in the post-Vedic society. Dixit borrows the central myth from the *Mahabharata* to relate the narrative of self-sacrifice in the epochal transition in his own time. By telling the story of slavery, he critically locates the fissures in the Panchayat as a political system that had curtailed the political rights of the people in the 1970s. The following section discusses the observation of slavery and need to dismantle such practice from society in both the historical text and the literary rendering from Nepal.

As an interventionist agency larger than the polity, Shumsher declared abolition of slavery from Nepal on November 28, 1924. The opening section of his speech declares that societies write off certain unjust systems from time to time in order to cope up with emerging challenges in society. On the day, 51519 slaves obtained their freedom from their owners. The perception of the polity changes over the course of time as new interpretations pop up after passage of considerable amount of time. Under the examination of modernity, the conditions for formation of self also appear as significant forces. For instance, Phuyal (2013) has argued for the examination of formation of self under the new condition of modernity (p. 64) since such formation does not conform to the universal pattern in all societies. He further highlights on the differences of the experiences of the actors in bringing about the experience of modernity for their society. For Shumsher, the cultural resource paves him the road for the liberation of the slaves: he uses the fund from the treasury of Pashupatinath to pay off the debt to the owners of the slaves. In other words, the polity pays the overall debt of the slaves to their owners and sets them free forever. Shumsher's understanding of social forces helps establish the necessity of enforcing new regulations to give new perceptions to the people.

Social change and freedom

In an attempt to theoretically conceptualize the nature of change, Shumsher neutralizes it by calling it the principle of nature in which particular types of modifications occur at the base of social structure to bring about change in the overall configuration. In quest of modernity,

societies often employ writing off as one of the major ways of dealing with social change. For instance, Shumsher critically observes:

> Today, this assembly has gathered to discuss an uncomfortable issue. Time and again many types of changes have also taken in the world that is constantly moving towards progress. This applies to customary practices, our behavior to neighbors, structural organization of society and politics and even to household affairs. (p. 102)

In the lines, he sets the rhetoric of convincing the people to accept his decision to end slavery as an ill-practice for the cultured and civilized people. Shumsher does not lament for the past action: he looks forward in an optimistic tone to convince the people about equality. Also, Eyerman (1992) argues modernity as directed towards future. Unlike Kantian modernity that focuses on break from the immature state of the past (1996, p. 58), Eyerman's actors place themselves at the foundation of society as he states, "The modern individual is aware of himself or herself not only as an individual, that is, as a creator of self and society, but also as an individual with a future" (1992, p. 39). He projects them as capable of reworking on and/or writing off the social structures forming fissures. To guarantee safe future for all, Shumsher moves onto explore religious, humanistic, social, economical, and moral ground to justify his decision to abolish slavery. He presents the international experiences as major evidence (p. 102) to argue against such social system. He promotes the cause of public welfare through his speech in order to convince the society towards writing off slavery from its foundation.

Shumsher recognizes two problems under slavery in Nepal's quest for modernity. First of all, the people are fleeing from own country to Indian plains for freedom. He understands that it can result in serious consequences in future if it is not properly addressed on time now. He presents that abolition of slavery is required in order to check the migration from Nepal to the plains in the South (p. 114). Secondly, such practice reveals the inner, barbaric character of the then society. To him, slavery as such implies being under-civilized (p.119), meaning that such antimodern practice cannot last longer in Nepal in his time. As he argues, "The conscious human hearts have realized the practice of slavery rests on the base of injustice and disrespect as it gives the human right to hold other humans the way they have right to their property like house, land, and cattle" (p. 119). Directly focusing on the human dignity and the need of society, Shumsher justifies his position to write off a powerful social practice.

He reflects on the necessity of change to come in terms with the social practices and aspiration of the contemporary society. To him, "Customs are based on the practices of a people. However, they are not always regulated in the same. As there occur changes in time, the prevailing, useful practices make their way by writing off the old, useless social practices" (p. 103). The new challenges the old, for the old has developed multiple chasms and rifts that do not allow the smooth functioning of the society. Haferkamp and Smelser (1992) identify that modernity addresses the structural inequalities of race, gender, class, and the like through social change. As they discuss,

> Inequality plays a large role in shaping modernity because it generates class and group conflicts, which become the basis of the institutional invention and innovation that come to constitute the structures of modernity. The increasing proliferation of roles and institutional structures, however, provides an ever increasing number of structural bases for inequality. (p. 18)

The fault lines observed in the deeper core of society pave road for the novel aspirations of people to demand new types of social set up in the changed context. Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher had all the authority to strike at the heart of the weakening social system, slavery. As the powerful agency, he issues decree to write it off from the social structure, thereby serving the chief agenda of modernity as the ethos of present.

Quest for human dignity

Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) tells the story of Galav and Madhavi in quest of four black eared horses to pay off the debt of Galav's guru, Vishwamitra. In the course of their journey through the Subcontinent, both Galav and Madhavi reflect upon slavery as the harsh political reality of the time. For Foucault, actors of modernity develop a consciousness to break away from the prevalent social practices for which they develop an attitude to view themselves and the world. As he as argued, "For the attitude of modernity, the high value of the present is indissociable from a desperate eagerness to imagine it, to imagine it otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is" (1984, p. 41). Also, Dixit has pictured Vishwamitra in search of novel social order, breaking away from the contemporary way of understanding the reality. In fact, the Sage requires four horses to carry out a *jagna* to abolish slavery since the society was almost ready to shift to agricultural order as new mode of social reconfiguration. Though it appears that Galav sets on the journey to pay of

his debt or *gurudakshnina*, both Galav and Madhavi function as instrument of writing off slavery through Vishwamitra's *ashwamedh jagna* (ritual of horse sacrifice) to establish a new order in society.

As a parallel story of his own life, Dixit relates Galav and Madhavi's struggle as his own attempt to reread the political torture inflicted on his self. The Panchayat had shut down his press in a customary practice of curtailing his political rights: after the intervention of the harsh political system, he was so frustrated that he harbored the thoughts of of self-immolation in front of the Royal Palace. Dixit thus retells his story:

I chose December 15, 1976 to self-immolate by sprinkling petrol on my body at the traffic beat in front of the Southern Gate to the Narayanhiti Royal Palace. At that time many Buddhist monks were self-immolating for the cause of military intervention in Southern Vietnam and democracy in Sri Lanka. Perhaps, those incidents may have inspired me towards this.

That morning on December 15, I had different state of mind. I thought self-immolation was more emotional and less objective. Nagendra Prasad Rijal and Radha Prasad Ghimire had wronged against me. Why should I punish myself? I asked myself and thought it would be injustice upon myself. I had argument within. Finally, I convinced myself, "They have shut down my newspaper. They cannot snatch away my pen and break it." (2073 B.S., Para V & VI)

To illustrate social actors holding larger agency than the state, Dixit had taken up the project of writing the novel: Galav, Madhavi, Vishwamitra or Suparna Nagjeya show that they can enforce change in the entire Subcontinent. The actors must realize the situation under which they aspire to enforce change in the society. As Foucault argues, "But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies" (1984, p. 265). Galav and Madhavi must realize the fault lines in their social organization: the traveling agency encounters a variety of people and their cultural practices in the land, informing them about the rigidity of the society. The slave order that has grounded itself as the basic rule of the society in Ayodhya and Kashi is not practiced in the northern societies of Shivi in the novel. Also, Matriarch Chaula's society does not have such order as the mode of production.

Both Galav and Madhavi understand the relative nature of slavery as a mode of production. Dixit presents alternative perspectives of Madhavi

and Chaula as the matriarch in the historically harsh period of political history in the late 1970s in Nepal. For the author, the narrative of Madhavi's self-sacrifice becomes a personal story in his struggle against the political order of own time; similarly, the narrative helps the novelist rewrite the national history of social change in Nepali society and assert the nature of change as witnessed through Marxist frame of interpretation (*Madhavi,* p. 8). For Galav to stand against the system, Dixit equips him with the knowledge of critical rationality and art of reasoning. Also, Foucault views modernity as the ethos of present as he argued, "Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, of vertigo in the face of the passing moment" (1984, p. 39). It reveals in social change as the form of rupture from the contemporary practice in the formation of new set of values. The novelist places the actors in a position to develop alternative possibilities, for he knows that social change demands multiple perspectives to propose alternative orders in the process of dismissing the old and establishing the new: as a resident scholar in Vishwamitra's school, Galav learns to see the world through a series of shifting positions and reason out the possible implications embedded in each of the positions. The art of doubt allows him to see the world differently and helps him not to take things for granted (*Madhavi,* p. 54). Such type of perception destabilizes the absolute nature of the world, thereby placing the agency in a more powerful position to comment on the nature of existing social order. Galav realizes fissures in seemingly perfect order through his own ability and art of critical reasoning.

As a social institution, slavery shows first cracks while crumbling away in the most powerful states like Ayodhya as well. Galav hears the matra of *"Om amohamasmi"*, meaning "I am the life" (p. 81). The strong walls of the rulers cannot detain the people from realizing the needs of the changing time and their aspiration. Such age refers to the ethos of people who give life to the whole social order. However, a universal path to modernity does not exist as the aspiration of the people forms the ethos of an age. In this regard, Foucault (2001) has pointed out that societies rework on their own ways to reorganize and update themselves with the ethos of the present. He has stated: "Everyone has their own way of changing, or, what amount to the same thing, of perceiving that everything changes" (2001, p. 444). Both Dixit and Foucault argue along the same line of social change. Brooding over the origin of slavery, Dixit also agrees war as the point of turning the defeated into slaves. The captives were denied any

sort of freedom in the beginning and such institution grew as a mode of production in the society when the people were employed in agriculture. Principally, Madhavi accepts the explanation about the origin of slavery. However, the powerful people also started pushing the weaker ones into the pit of slavery through curse and debasement over the course of time. When Madhavi sees such practice, she finds no justifying ground to such practice (p. 177). Still, the practices lead to form huge body of slaves at the bottom, contributing to the national production at the expense of their political and social rights. Madhavi realizes that the owner and the owned feel less human under slavery (p. 179), for the system transforms the owner into immoral beings who fail to reach the emotions of the fellow beings like them. Furthermore, the slaves receive the treatment just like the animals, thereby losing all the attributes that free humans enjoy in a just society.

Subtly, Dixit presents four sons of Madhavi as four attributes required for social change. In Ayodhya, Madhavi gives birth to Vashumana as her first son to King Haryashwa. In Kashi, she has Pratardan as her second son from Dibodash. She gives King Shivi in Bhojnagar her third son, Shivi. Finally, Vishwamitra also gets a son from her in Chapma: Madhavi's fourth son is Astak. The four sons represent four different attributes: courage and bravery in Vashumana, sacrifice in Pratardan, righteousness and social welfare in Shivi, and knowledge and critical rationality in Astak respectively. These features ground change and prepare society in a fluid way to shift from one order to the next in a swift way. Dixit argues for easy process of writing off hurdles in quest of modernity in any society. He has presented the diminishing impact of slavery in the northern states of the Subcontinent: as Galav and Madhavi set on their journey from Ayodhya to Kashi and then to Bhojnagar, the picture changes significantly. Bhojanagar does not practice slavery as their mode of production, preparing both Galav and Madhavi to challenge the harsh political order of the southern plains.

CONCLUSIONS

In the quest of modernity, every society invents their own unique ways of setting down the agenda for change. Modernity adopts writing off certain social institutions as one of the chief strategies to emerge compatible with the ethos of the contemporaneity. The structural base helps establish the spirit of welfare society where everyone equally receives the bliss of living in the collective set up. However, the underlying structure of the society develops certain anti-rational fault lines that work as impetus to

promote the cause of discrimination in society. At times, certain structures hold so many of such fissures that it turns almost impossible to revise or rewrite them to bring the course of the society in the just path as per the expectation of the people. The social actors cannot continue with such practices, for they realize the hindrances imposed on their way to larger common good. In such case, social change that allows modernity to realize itself paves road for writing off the ill-practices of the time. Nepali history presents Chandra Shumsher abolishing slavery in 1924 through his speech. A similar resonance reverberates in Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) that tells the personal narratives of the author and the national history of Nepal under the tyranny of the Panchayat system. Both Shumsher's speech and Dixit's novel equally 4illustrate the ways of modernity in the form of writing off during the process of social change.

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