

EXPLORING THE REPRESENTATIONS OF CASTE AND ETHNIC RELATIONS IN NEPALI SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

Hindu society has different castes although the exact date of the origin of caste system is not known. Literary writers depict characters of different castes representing a Hindu society. This paper explored the representations of castes and ethnic relations in Hindu society presented in Nepali short stories. The writers have not prioritized more on the themes of castes, but depicted the interactions and interdependence of various castes to expose the other themes. To explore the representations of castes in Nepali short stories, a few representative short stories translated into English are randomly selected; the qualitative descriptive method was exploited to discuss the stories. The findings of the study are that the interactions and interdependence of characters from different castes produce the distinctive themes of the stories. The writers gave good names like Deviraman, Sitaram Pandit, Padmanidhi Lamichhane to upper caste characters, but exotic names like Chame, Juthe, Lukhure, etc. to so-called lower. Upper caste the Dware exploits a lower caste person Lukhure. The upper caste characters dominate the lower castes. Thus different castes are portrayed in the stories to squeeze the themes. Understanding the representations of castes in literature aids to analyse the condition of castes in the Hindu society.

Key-words: caste, Hindu society, interaction, interdependence

Introduction

Hindu social structure based on the caste system form various culture, relations, conflicts and human values in the society. Nepali short stories primarily sketch characterizations of different castes in a Hindu society. Although they do not focus on the main themes of caste and ethnic relations, Nepali short story writers depict castes and ethnic relations in a Hindu society, “The relations between castes in a Hindu society are somewhere in the background of the most of the stories, but they form the principal theme of none” (Hutt 185). The Nepali short-story authors have drawn the characters having different castes from a real Hindu society, and represented them in their stories as in the Hindu society. They have presented the castes and ethnic relations to make senses in the stories, “Caste has fascinated observers by its distinctive, not to say peculiar, characteristics, and many have taken the position, implicitly or explicitly, that if there is a single key to the understanding of ... society as a whole, it is to be found in the caste system” (Beteille 13). Understanding castes and ethnic relations in literary works aids to understand the society. The issue of castes and the relations between castes in the Hindu society in Nepali literature is a scholarly conversation in the academic community and civil society; understanding of the relations between castes is essential to minimize the conflicts between castes in the Hindu society.

The Hindu caste system has categorized people into four *varnas*: *Brahman*, *Kshatriya*, *vaisya* and *sudra*. This issue is a significant to re-examine the representation of castes and their relations each

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other to comprehend the society. In this context, it becomes really significant to discuss the portrayal of castes and ethnic relations in Hindu society as depicted in Nepali short stories. Characters in Nepali short stories are usually from different castes and ethnic groups. Nepali short stories translated into English have been selected as the primary sources for this research study; the research paper used qualitative descriptive method to explore the issue. This research paper examines the representations of castes and ethnic relations in Hindu society in the Nepali short stories selected. This research paper discusses how the castes are demonstrated and how the relations between castes expose the Hindu society. This research paper provides a moderate contribution to the understanding and responding to various castes.

Representations of Caste and Ethnic Relations in Nepali Short Stories

Castes and ethnic relations in real societies and imaginary societies of literary works are demonstrated more by interaction, mobility and interdependence than conflicts between castes, "The names of the characters in every Nepali story implicitly reveal the caste or ethnic group to which they belong and thereby indicate status relative to other characters" (Hutt 186). Castes are characterized by showing their interaction and performance with other castes in the Hindu society; the conversations and interactions of the characters of different castes exhibit their social status and class in the society. A Nepali short story writer Ramesh Bikal in "A Splendid Buffalo" (*Lahure Bhainsi*) provides characterizations of different castes and ethnic groups in a village. The characters the *dware* represents high caste and class lord in a feudal system, Rambire Gharti, a serf of the *dware* represents an ethnic caste and poor, and Lukhure a poor serf in the society. The *dware* calls Rambire Gharti 'Rame'; this interaction shows the injustice and discrimination between castes. Rambire has been tied to working on his lord *dware's* estate, and he bows on the feet of the *dware*: "[Rambire] came up the steps to the *dware's* house. He touched his head to the *dware's* feet ...". This performance exhibits the relation of castes and class in the village. The *dware* fussed on Lukhure's progress:

"Lukhure's bought a buffalo?" said the *dware* in amazement. He'd never have believed such a thing, even in a dream. If this were true, it was the most astonishing thing and something of a misdemeanor. He had always intended to get a good buffalo himself, but he'd been putting it off for years. Now that wretch Lukhure had got one! How could this be? It felt like a blow to his status, indeed, and made him feel uneasy. It was as if someone had pricked him with a gramophone needle.

"What kind of buffalo has he got, then, Lukhure the serf?" (245)

This *dware's* view on Lukhure shows the unusual relations among castes. He felt amusement and jealousy at the serf Lukhure's progressive status. The *dware* with his servant Rambire moved to Lukhure's yard to see the buffalo: "The *dware* could not contain his curiosity, and a terrible compulsion led him toward Lukhure's house. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's have a look. Let's see what kind of buffalo that serf has got for himself.'" The *dware* shocked to the serf Lukhure. Lukhure's four-year old son *Pode* and all family were happy: "Lukhure's yard was full of people, and *Pode*, his four-year-old son, ran round and round the buffalo, clapping his hands. [...] Lukhure was not alone in his feelings; Ghainti, his wife, was delighted, too" (245). This happiness of family indicates how poor villagers become happy even in small things.

When the *dware* reached at Lukhure's yard to see the splendid buffalo, he asked Lukhure about the price of the buffalo. Lukhure surprised with the *dware's* sugary tone to him, and ran to the *dware*: "Lukhure rose hurriedly, walked over to the *dware*, and bowed down at his feet." The tradition of bowing the poor and low castes' heads at lords and high castes' feet demonstrates the discriminatory

relations between castes and classes in the society. The high caste and class lords do not tolerate the happiness and progress of the serf:

The *dware* was not overpleased by the unusual tone of satisfaction he detected in Lukhure's voice or by the happy glint in his eye. The *dware* felt a prickling sensation, and his tongue tasted sour. He grimaced in distaste and his eyes flashed angrily, but he managed to conceal these unsuitable reactions with his usual smarmy attitude. (246)

This description about the *dware's* psychological state represents the attitude of the high castes and class to the low caste and poor ones. The splendid buffalo "made him yearn for it. The *dware's* mind darkened, like a cloth that is stained by smoke." It indicates the dark psyche of lords to poor ones in the caste system of a feudal society. Rambire and other serfs Ghamane and Khulal agreed with the *dware's* deceiving claims about the buffalo although they knew that the *dware* was talking wrong about the buffalo. This interaction interdependence and mobility of the low castes and serfs with the high caste and class *dware* exposes the relations of castes and ethnic people in the society. The low caste and poor people blame their fate, but their sufferings are being caused by the so-called high caste and rich people.

The *dware* went home, biting back a cunning grin. Ghamane and Khulal followed behind him. "No point grieving over it," said Rambire, putting his hand on Lukhure's shoulder. "What had to be has happened. You should have asked a few people for some advice." Then he went home, too. The unfortunate house and the little family that lived there were left alone to bewail their fate. (247)

Rambire, Ghamane and Kulal also the serfs of the lord *dware*; although they know the oppressive psyche of the *dware*, they depend on the *dware's* estate. Their interdependence made Lukhure worry and bewail his fate. "Ordinary characters in realistic [story] wish for family happiness but suffer from their sensibilities, everyday circumstances, and social conventions and situations" (Budhathoki 86). Here, Lukhure has done for family happiness, but the *dware* and other people made his life problematic.

Lukhure has borrowed some money from Nepal Bahun to buy the splendid buffalo, and was worried to pay the loan. The characterization of Nepal Bahun as the money lender to the ethnic people represents the relations of castes in the traditional society. Brahman are high castes. Lukhure got angry with Dhakal who sold the buffalo to him. The traditional concept of the relations between brahman and ethnic people flamed the anger of Lukhure at Dhakal. A religious leader Sitaram pandit is also in the side of the *dware*. The so-called brahman and rich people *dware* and Sitaram Pandit psychologically forced Lukhure to sell the splendid buffalo to the *dware* in low price 150 reducing from 250. Thus Lukhure lose 100 ruppies because of brahman castes and lords in the society. The serfs like Rambire, Ghamane, Budhathoki and Kulal are in the side of frauds the *dware* and Sitaram Pandit because they depend on the estates of the *dware* and Pandit. "[The story] by Ramesh Bikal revolve[s] around the differences between their principal characters' status and those of their oppressors" (Hutt 186). Thus the high caste people *dware* and Sitaram ruined the life of low caste poor Lukhure. The fraud interaction of Brahmans and dependence of serf to lords in this story represents the castes and ethnic relations in the Hindu society. Ramesh Bikal truly depicts the relation between castes and their manners to poor and low castes.

Pushkar Shamsher, Nepali short story writer, has portrayed different castes and ethnic relations although the major theme is that a person can be surrounded by circumstances in 'Circumstance Evidence' (*Paribandha*). Shamsher depicts an ethnic person Rane Gurung and his wife as the main characters in the story, and Rane is the central character. *Lahure* is also an ethnic person who was murdered at night by an unknown intruder; Rane attempted to save *lahure* but circumstance evidence accused him as the murderer of *lahure*.

By the dim light of the *tuki* he saw a huge pool of blood near the bed. Lahure, his body hacked up and bleeding, was lying on the floor at the head of the bed. There were *khukuri* wounds on his chin, throat and neck, but his head had not been severed. His eyes stared steadfastly into the void, and his head rolled aimlessly from side to side. Seti remembered now -- she had heard stroke-like noises a couple of times, but at the time it did not occur to her that they might be the blows of a *khukuri*. Rane picked up a pitcher and gave Lahure some water. A minute later Lahure gasped and died. Rane had raised his head so that he could swallow more easily. He did not realize, however, that in doing so some splashes of blood had stained his clothes. (51)

Rane, a simple honest Gurung, did not care about the blood stains that would be a cause to accuse and convict of a murder that he did not commit. Rane Gurung from the ethnic community was constrained by the circumstances; Rane was brought before the court official *bichari*, and the *bichari* who was aware of Rane's innocence convicted him as the murderer based on circumstance evidences.

The arbitrator was Brahman Padmanidhi Lamichhane who spoke politely; this represents the nature of the Brahman caste: "The old state arbitrator of the third district of the Bharadari, Padmanidhi Lamichhane, was a man with a wonderful knack for sifting the details of a case. He always spoke in a friendly and polite tone with litigants." The dominant tone of Brahmans to other castes was shown in the plot, "Hey, Lal Bahadur! Bring in the prisoner. Rane, sit down, Babu. Well you're a real good-looking boy, aren't you?" "*Hajur*, what's the use of being good-looking? It's good karma that one needs" (52).

The interaction and mobility of Padmanidhi Lamichhane and Lal Bahadur as well as Rane represent the discriminatory relations in Hundi society. Rane respond '*hajur*' that indicates the other lower castes bow on the feet of brahmans. Poor and low caste people have no power; they have humanity and religious beliefs to live happily. Hakim Baja, Angreji Baja, and Bhandari, Lamichhane, and other high caste people do not understand Rane's innocence.

"Cholera took everybody," mumbled Rane. Rane stared at the magistrate without reacting: the effect, these words had had upon him was not clear from the expression on his face. His forehead was soaked in sweat. Perhaps it was because he was straining hard to understand, or perhaps it was because each and every syllable had sunk deep into his heart and his tears could not find a way out of his dry eyes. His lips moved once or twice. Perhaps he was mouthing the words "circumstantial evidence."

"We were a big family," he said, "except for me they all died -- why was I alone left untouched? To fall into this unlucky rotten mess -- this karma." (53)

These lines show how low caste and poor people perceive the society and their fate. "The names of characters in every Nepali story implicitly reveal the caste or ethnic group to which they belong and thereby indicate their status relative to other characters" (Hutt 186). The interaction and representation of castes in the story demonstrate the condition and status of castes in the society.

Next story writer Guru Prasad Mainali, a great Nepali story writer, in "A Blaze in the Straw" (*Paralko Ago*) portrays characters from different castes and their relations between them. "A Nepali reader will automatically understand that Mainali's Juthe the tailor leads a happy life despite belonging to a lower caste than the hapless Chame" (Hutt 185). Chame was from upper caste farmer who had his own land to plough, but Juthe was from lower caste *dalit*; Juthe and Chame were interdependence in their life. Chame called Juthe *dai* (elder brother) and Juthe called Chame *babu*. Juthe sew clothes of Chame's family and Chame gave grains to Juthe; this indicates the relations between castes. Chame would not want to be a *Pode* by taking his wife Gauthali from his in-laws' house. Here, *Pode* represents lower caste in the society. Guruprasad Mainali has presented characters from Brahman

family in 'Naso' (The Ward). The characters Deviraman, Subhadra and Cancala Sri are from the high caste Brahman in Hindu society. Mainali realistically depicts the names of characters from the society; the characters from high castes are Deviraman, Subhadra and Cancala Sri, but from lower castes are Nauli (Deviraman's servant girl), Chame, Juthe, Pode. Even the naming processes of the people of different castes expose the status of castes and the ethnic relations in Hindu society. Deviraman is from Brahman caste, so he reads *Purana*, but Chame ploughs the fields, and Juthe sews the other castes' clothes in the villages. "Although Cañcala Sri had visited his house, Deviraman was without children. He did everything. He constructed a gathering place for the villagers; he built a road; he lit votive lamps in Pasupatinath, and the year before he had the *Harivamsa Purana* read. Still, Subhadra could not conceive. In competition with his contemporaries, Deviraman would win on all counts-- wealth, strength, and wisdom." The Brahman character Deviraman is presented as rich, strong and intelligent, but other characters from lower castes are poor, weak and less intelligent in the society. These descriptions show how people are represented from the viewpoints of castes. "The priests were chanting Vedic hymns and pouring offerings into the sacrificial fire." It indicates the social role of priests (Brahmans) in Hindu society.

Mainali has the capacity to capture the real experience of the characters and to the capacity to capture the real experience of the characters and to emit their inner out. This work of art is based on realism; it has no place for sentimentalism. Very clearly, the writer is able to express the pathetic aspect of rural life and expose the problematic social situations implied in them with compact and economy of language in an organized linear pattern. He uses the apt words and telling phrases. Every word contributes to its effect. (Poudel 148)

Mainali presents lively characters representing different castes in a Hindu Nepali society. "People or characters show the socially patterned behaviors and activities within the socially organized institutions, such as families, communities, workplaces" (Budhathoki 38). Nepali writers exploit characters from different castes to transform certain themes although they do not focus more on the themes of castes. "Experiences of caste life become a means to create visual metaphors as potential critiques of the hegemonic and the normative in dominant [Hindu] society" (Alone 140). The representations of castes in literary works expose the conditions of different castes in real Hindu Nepali society.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the representations of castes and the ethnic relations in Hindu society in representative Nepali short stories. Although the themes of caste is not primary in the stories, writers depict the nature of relationships between castes and patterns of power relations between castes. Brahman and Kshetrees have more social power over other caste people in the Hindu society. Castes' mobilization, representation and accommodation reflect their consciousness and attitude to others. Upper caste like Brahman do not cultivate the lands themselves with the family labour; it is shown in Nepali stories. Nepali writers even provide the characters' names accordingly their castes. Lower castes are demonstrated as serfs, farmers, poor, weak, servants of upper castes. Lower castes are represented as more honest and social than other upper castes. Although, writers have not emphasized more on the themes of castes in their short stories, the interaction, interdependence and mobility of castes make meanings and themes of the stories. This research paper gives a modest contribution to analyse academically the literary texts concern with castes and broadly the castes and ethnic relations in Hindu Nepali society.

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