

Depiction of Caste System and Dalit Consciousness in Ratna BK's *Banda Ākāsh Khulepachhi*

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Abstract

The article deals with the caste system and consciousness in relation to class consciousness and Dalit consciousness based on literary text. As Dalit literature portrays the socio-cultural, economic and political issues of Dalits, their unequal relation with the people, caste discrimination, exploitation and suppression and protest and movements; and, it also presents the potential avenues of resolution. The article explores the brutality of caste system and Dalit consciousness for rights, equality, justice, dignity and liberation of Dalits. For this purpose, some short stories from Ratna BK's Banda Ākāsh Khulepachhi have been chosen for the interpretation. The stories reveal the ground reality of multiple layers discrimination and issues of Dalits, their protest and resolution. Furthermore, the research explores the socio-cultural and political awareness and protests of Dalits, and state's pragmatic position to address the issues and agenda. The researcher employs the qualitative approach with exploratory and analytical methods. The Marxist concept of class consciousness connecting to Dalit consciousness is parallel applied as theoretical perspectives in this article.

Key Words: Caste System, Dalit Consciousness, Social transformation, Justice, Liberation and Dignity

Introduction

The article illustrates the issues of caste system and Dalit consciousness against it based on the literary texts. It, mainly, studies the contemporary condition of Dalits, socio-cultural, economic and political problems, class and Dalit consciousness and their protests and movements against caste system and caste-based discrimination. The literature is considered as the reflection of the society which might be both pros and cons simultaneously. Nepali literary writings, fundamentally, focus the issues of socio-cultural and economic status of the society. Moreover, Nepali literature written on Dalits issues and subject—called as Dalit literature gives more priorities to the issues of Dalits and their social position and relation (Baraly and Adhikari 49). Dalit literature, basically, portrays attempts of Dalits for rights, equality and liberation.

Dalit Literature develops as a medium to release pain, trauma, sufferings, and anger, and to express the socio-cultural, economic and political status of Dalits. The literature expresses Dalit-life style, feelings, beliefs, sufferings and their bitter experiences what they go through in their life-time. In this context, Indian writer Soumya Nair Anoop Kumar remarks: “Dalit literature being a new dimension is the primary concept the literature of marginality...that remained speechless for centuries opened their hearts...” (209). So, the literature opposes the caste silence, marginality, and discrimination. To Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay, “Dalit literature is not a literary movement in ordinary sense of the term.

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It is, ... a product of an identity as well as constitutive of that identity” (qtd. in Savyasaachi 1658). Hence, Dalit literature is developed for identity formation of Dalits.

Dalit literature nurtures as a life-narrative of Dalits where imagination and fictionalization are hardly included rather it embeds the live-experiences of the writers, characters and the people. Regarding it, Indian writer Sharankumar Limbale remarks about the literature is “...narrated experiences that have been heard or seen until now, the reader is shaken while reading them” (55). It delivers social messages including the caste and consciousness themes to aware the entire readers and stakeholders because it is a tool to uphold voices of Dalits for equality, dignity, justice and social liberation. The present article is prepared based on some selected short stories from Ratna BK’s *Banda Akāsh Khulepachhi*(2074), an anthology of short stories. The stories depict the socio-cultural, political and economic status of Dalits in Nepalese society. The stories are studied and interpreted from class consciousness and Dalit consciousness perspectives. The concept of “Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle” (Limbale 32). The consciousness makes the Dalits aware on their present status, and inspires to move against it.

Objectives

The objectives of the article are to explore socio-cultural, economic and political status of the Dalits and to examine caste system, class consciousness in relation to Dalit consciousness for the rights, equality, dignity, justice and liberation from all forms of discrimination.

Methodology

The study adopts the qualitative approach with exploratory and analytical methods. For this purpose, Ratna BK’s collection of short stories— *Banda Akāsh Khulepachhi* has been chosen as primary text for discussion. The researcher employs the Marxist concept of class consciousness and Dalit consciousness as theoretical tools. For this purpose, Marxist concept of *Class Consciousness* and Sharankumar Limbale’s concept of *Dalit consciousness* are used to develop the theoretical framework. Similarly, other available criticism, articles and reviews are also used simultaneously while studying the primary texts.

Discussion

The concept of Dalit consciousness is a complex process as it incorporates several complexities including political, social and cultural consciousness. The consciousness includes Dalit politics, process of political socialization and political culture among Dalits; its impact on the construction of the political consciousness and its different ways of expressions (Priscilla 212). Fundamentally, the political consciousness determines the degree of consciousness of society. The literature reveals the effect of political consciousness among Dalits. In this context, Ratna BK’s *Banda Akāsh Khulepachhi* presents diverse facets and issues of Dalits including caste system, exploitation and solutions of it.

BK’s short story “Anu” depicts an inter-caste love story between upper caste girl, Anu Baral and lower caste boy, Aakash Pariyar. They both are educated youths of the society. They live with their families in Kathmandu; and, their love story begins with Anu’s SLC result. Aakash congratulates her and also advises her for higher studies. They both study in the same campus where their love flourishes smoothly. The study shows that inter-caste relation and marriage is hardly acceptable in Nepalese society. Aakash expresses a wish for Anu’s marriage: “Ok! My best friend Anu would find the same caste boy with good qualities for marriage! With Bachelor’s Degree! ... From well-

to-do family! And, that guy would love a lot to his wife!” (trans. BK 3). The Dalit characters of the fiction (story) cannot express their love and propose for marriage directly due to lack of confidence in caste-based society. The character wishes for her betterment in the beginning of their friendship. However, Anu pretends to be angry at Aakash at first; later, they talk about caste system, and express their love for each other. Anu accepts the proposal but both of them are scared of the implication of their relation. They are conscious about caste differences. In this context, Marxist thinker Lanning remarks: “A variety of measure, correlations, and comparisons may follow; but these are measures of socio-economic status, not class as a site of consciousness and struggle” (25). Socio-economic status reflects one facet of society. It matters in the relationship between and among people of different castes.

The inter-caste love between two educated and mature characters illustrates the consciousness in Lukac concept. Hirai Toshihiko also critiques, “... ‘Class consciousness’ interpreted from the aspect of popular Marxism...” (9), and shows consciousness. Class consciousness is the way of liberating people from socio-economic barriers. The characters representing two different castes are in the process of dismantling the social malpractices. The inter-caste relations in most of the incidents start in the same situation. Both Anu and Aakash go to college together and flourish their deep affair. They attempt to break the social malpractices because they have a huge wall of castes in-between them. The extract reveals Anu and Aakash’s love and determination:

“Finally, the caste does not matter. You eloped me!”

“You are also ready to elope, are not you?”

“If you told me not to elope, I would not come!”

“If you rejected, I would not elope you!”...

“If I do not love, I will not elope you!”... (trans. BK 8-9)

Their conversation illustrates the deep affair between two youths of different castes although their expressions are their wishes in dream. They talk frequently about possible hindrances in their love relation. After completing Intermediate of Arts (I.A.), they plan to get married. Accordingly, they get married without parent and guardian’s consent. In the very day of their elopement, they talk:

“Oh! You are a girl of true words; you came here on time” Aakash spoke immediately.

“I am not like you; you never care the time!” Anu replied.

“Ok Aakash... let's move fast, we may encounter with my friends” she told. (trans. BK 14)

Their inter-caste relation concludes in marriage. They board the bus for Chautara, Sindhupalchowk to start their conjugal life, a new journal of life. The story ends with happiness. However, the situation of inter-caste affair and marriage varies as per context and society. This is a representative story of successful inter-caste affair that the writer artistically designs the inter-caste love and marriage. In this context, Brueck opines, “Dalit writers have embraced the call of Ambedkar to not only intimately reveal the ‘pain and sorrow’ of Dalit lives but also more significantly, to ‘bring progress’. This progress is wrought... a transformation of Dalit literary characters from objects of oppression to agents of social change” (83). The youths are the mediums for social transformation. The process of change through literary characters enhances the possibility of change in future although the wish is not as easy as imagined by the writer in their fictional texts.

Dalit literature pictures the status of Dalits and their lives in the society. In Brueck’s term “authentic representation of Dalit experience...following the stories are well-known examples skillfully

interweave narrative convention of both realism and melodrama in the service of constructing Dalit *chetna*" (84). In terms of Dalit consciousness, the writers should not bring the fraudulent and untrue subject matters, issues and themes in Dalit literary writings as Brueck says. Ratna BK's "Uni ra Ma" elucidates the serious social problems of inter-caste affairs and orthodox mindset of youths of upper castes. In the selected story, Rabi, a Dalit youth character, teaches in a community school voluntarily where Parvati Shrestha, an upper caste- girl studies. Parvati is impressed with Rabi's nature and honesty and then expresses her love after the SLC result. They discuss possible hindrances and problems after their marriage.

The immaturity in love relation is presented through the characters in this very story. Parvati, herself, proposes for marriage which is unexpected to Rabi. She says, "...rather, let's get married before your departure to trekking. You know that many Nepalese people get married in Magh and Falgun. Why do not we do then? Ultimately, our love affair is about to turn three years" (trans. BK 25). It seems a hasty decision of Parvati which is misguiding their love affairs in wrong track. Rabi seems aware of it. It is a serious issue that Rabi cannot accept her proposal immediately because neither he has a permanent job nor any academic degree. Immediate, Parvati moves to Kathmandu to pursue computer course without informing to Rabi. There is caste and class difference among these characters. Erik Olin Wright argues:

[...] class is built around a three-fold distinction in clusters of concepts is used in class analysis: class relation, class location, and class structure, class structuration and class formation; and collective class actors. The first of these concerns the structural position filled by individuals; the second concerns the nature of social relations within classes rooted in communities and social networks; and third focuses on the class-based organization engaged in struggle. ("Preface" xi)

The class structure has multiple-elements to balance the relations in the society. The society is the permanent institution and its orientation to social characters cannot balance the relationship properly in most of the situation. If they have unbalanced relations with different class groups, they face obstacles. Consequently, they break the love relation up. In the story, the two characters represent two different caste groups that do not have long-term relations. After three months, Rabi receives a letter that Parvati changes her mentality and expresses her desire to be free from the love relation.

The teen-aged inter-caste affairs lead the youths to nowhere. It does not last longer. As the time flees, the hearts of two loving characters change with time and situation. The inter-caste relation is in danger. Even the lovers are not sure about durability of their relation. When Rabi meets Parvati at Thamel of Kathmandu after few months, Rabi feels an unfavorable situation with her. He reminds her of their love, relation, trust and promise but Parvati ignores all and wants to forget thinking that as bad incident. Rather she expresses her regret on being in relationship with him because of caste innocence. Parvati speaks:

I would like to say that I am not feeling happy with the relation; rather, I am feeling regret...I am telling you the truth. I am extremely sorry! I was not matured at that time. In which family I was grown up, in which society I was raised up, and in which culture I enjoyed with... I totally wanted to forget that time with you. I cannot break the rules of caste system.... You enjoy with your own caste. (trans. BK 34-35)

The excerpt denotes that most of the inter-caste relations end due to caste hierarchy. Youths fall in love because of physical attraction but finally apart from each other due to caste differences. Accordingly, Parvati breaks her relation up with Rabi. Both caste and class become hindrances in their relation. Wright asserts, "...pivotal features of class relations and central determinant of class

conflict” (21) are the problems of class system. In most of the situations, youths start the relations innocently and break up immediately with their caste awareness. The study reveals that in the Indian sub-continent, mostly love relations among people of different castes end tragically.

Mostly, writers fictionalize successful inter-caste relations for implanting the seed of equality and social liberation. However, literature cannot go beyond casteism and social reality. Anju Bala states, “Dalit literature rejects the Hindu’s beliefs in the varna order with its age-old concepts of *Vedas* and *Granthas* out-rightly...denies this Hindu mentality and affirms that man himself is society and society is nothing other than human beings” (39). It is believed that the literature must be for social transformation. Thus, the characters are presented rebellious and revolting in literary texts. She further argues, “Dalit literature is basically that literature which artistically delineates the trials and tribulations humiliation, exploitation, sorrows and sufferings, degradation, ridicules and poverty experienced by Dalits for an age-old time” (Bala 40). Dalit literature carries the themes including pain and grief of Dalits.

Literary writers bring social realities in their writings that the caste and contemporary society are the hallmarks in writings. In this context, Pawde writes, “Although, I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And, then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: what comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying-that is caste” (qtd. in Yesupaku 4). Ratna BK in “Muluki Ain Diwas” satirizes society and state mechanism that authorities are marking ‘National Code Day’ but Dalits are still prohibited from entering temples.

The story depicts how Dalit characters are discriminated and prohibited from cultural places even after the enactment of anti-caste discriminatory legislations. A character Umadevi Sarkini and her grandson Chandre visit the temple to pay homage where hundreds of pilgrims are in the queue. They are near the entry door of temple; they are stopped by Pandit Ranganath who informs them that there are the spouses of state authorities in the queue. Rita, a conscious Dalit woman and the chairperson of Dalit Jāgaran Samuha, is also standing in the queue. She protests against Ranganath and spouse of the DSP. However, other people normalize the situation down for the time being. Meanwhile, the spouse of the DSP scolds, “What type of woman is this? Go away from here. You cannot touch here. Why are you neglecting?” (trans. BK 49). The way she presents there shows the way of upper caste people to react to the Dalits in public places. Rita endeavors to break the superior reality of cultural malpractices. Therefore, she actively defends her position until last hour.

The story reveals the role of state authorities that how they misuse power and exploit to Dalits. The authorities accuse Dalits of violating the rules although Dalits are unknown about it. As the writer has set the plot, Rita returns home without worshipping. In the afternoon, some people and the police personnels visit Rita’s home and order her to attend in the police office quickly. She attends in front of the DSP where his spouse is sitting nearby him. The spouse of the DSP tries to attack at Rita who is accused of supporting Maoists and, as DSP blames her, “We think that being a woman, you are oriented by the Maoist; so that, you can speak like leader against casteism and untouchability. We have received a complaint against you involving in setting a fire on the vehicles as well...” (trans. BK 53). The statement illustrates the conspiracy to punish Rita. The statement of the police officer reveals how the state authorities suppress Dalits by accusing them of supporting Maoists during the Maoist insurgency.

The state authorities repress powerless people like Dalits if they raise voices against inequality, injustice and casteism. As the story further reveals that Rita is sent to police custody for investigation and accused of being involved in Maoist activities, and she has been brutally tortured for two weeks.

In the police custody, the DSP harasses her sexually. This shows the police brutality to civilians during the Maoist insurgency. “Who are you dear? Are you the leader of the Dalits?” (trans. BK 46). The DSP harasses Rita sexually and tortures psychologically in police custody. The political parties and local civil society agitate against police brutality in front of the police office. The socio-economic class matters in social action and cultural condition so as Dalit characters are oppressed in public spheres. In this connection, Max Weber argues:

The degree to which ‘social action’ and possibly associations emerge from the mass behavior of members of a class is linked to general cultural conditions, especially to those of an intellectual sort. It is also linked to the extent of the contrasts that have already evolved, and is especially linked to the transparency of the connections between the causes and the consequences of the class situation. (qtd. in Wright 37- 38)

Weber underlines the contrast and its connection with causes and consequences of the class situation. In the story, the state authorities speak for Dalit rights and equality in public programs. In addition, state duty bearers exploit Dalits, charge them with unnecessary blames.

The plot of the story, “Muluki Ain Diwas” explicates the dualistic manner of state authorities. In the story, there is an interaction program on the occasion of “Muluki Ain Diwas”; hundreds of people attend including Judge of district court as chief guest and other government officials. Rita attends the program and puts her opinions about the police brutality and sexual harassment happened in the police custody. Rita speaks:

As you know all, I was discriminated and beaten severely by blaming to touch the temple when I was standing on a queue of pilgrims in the temple.... First question, can we not visit the temple? Second, what is the action against the government authorities who tortured brutally by abusing on the basis of caste and gender? Third, should the Dalits be imprisoned due to the incident of temple? Are not Pundit, government authorities and their wives as culprits? What will be the punishment to the DSP who forcefully raped me in the police custody? (trans. BK 58)

Rita discloses the police brutality, caste discrimination and sexual harassment by state duty bearers. When Rita speaks about torture and rape case occurred in police custody; the DSP Rudramani Thapa becomes angry, and perhaps he wants to arrest her by accusing her of being Maoists or violating the rules of the state but Rita quickly disappears from the program and shortly informs the journalists regarding the case and further action. She becomes underground with Maoists. “Next day, a newspaper publishes on the front-page heading with “Rita Sarkini who did not get justice, flees since ‘Muluki Ain Day’” (trans. BK 59). The revolt is reflected as a cause of discrimination. Marx shows that the class struggle and class consciousness are the historical necessities in the feudalistic society.

Marxism believes in class struggle for socio-economic equality and historical transformation. The clash between two different classes is the need for change. To Wright, “Class struggle and compromise do not occur an amorphous ‘society’ but within specific institutional contexts- firms, markets, states. The real mechanisms that generate the reverse curve in are embedded in such institutional context” (192). State mechanism appears as an institution. The story also shows the situation that people do not have access to state mechanism and cannot get justice from the state. Rather Dalits are blamed for violating rules and regulations of the state. Besides, Dalits are obliged to leave the birth-land to get shelter and for justice.

Conclusion

The article illustrates the socio-cultural, economic and political problems what Dalits have been facing in every-day-life based on Ratna BK's select short stories. All the stories discuss the issues of caste, culture, social practice and positions of Dalits; their incidents related to caste system, discrimination and exploitation; and their protests, movements and resistance to liberate themselves from the very situation. As it is considered that literature is the medium to reveal the problems and present the resolution as well. It is true that Dalit literature portrays the sufferings, trauma, oppressions and exploitations; and also reflects the Dalit consciousness and their defense against discrimination. Raising the voices against discrimination and injustice is the outcome of immense consciousness in Dalits. The above-studied stories explore that Dalits are still labyrinth of caste system though they have been raising voices in different forms at the same time. Dalit literature as a form of literary protests aware the stakeholder to address the problems of entire Dalits because it is serious issue of millions of people who have been routinely discriminated, suppressed and boycotted for centuries; and, they are acutely waiting for complete liberation from the caste system.

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