

## Exploration of Dalit Trauma in Sarad Paudel's *Likhe*<sup>1</sup>

Shyam Lal Magarati

### Abstract

*Dalit community has been suffered in every aspect due to the institutionalized discrimination of the Hindu caste system in Nepal which is also known as the output of the religious and political reasons. This unfair practice has left a clear mark of social division, exclusion and inequality severely ruining Dalits' life and identity. Sarad Paudel addresses this issue and offers a glimpse of being a Dalit or untouchable in his novel Likhe. He narrates episodes of verbal and physical violence; recurrent inter- and intra-caste discrimination, which depicts the traumatic existence of that oppressed community. Other dominations and discriminations are less traumatic in the comparison of the cultural trauma caused by untouchability, which is like an incurable disease. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the Dalit trauma as represented in this novel. To analyze the representation of traumatic experience in Dalits, the researcher has tried to apply the theoretical insights based on Jeffrey C. Alexander, Stuart Hall, Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth's exploration on trauma. This paper attempts to reveal how Dalit people have been living in the society bearing harsh torture, trauma and inhuman treatment in the context of Hindu Brahmin dominated society. This study adds new avenue for academic discussion in the field of academia so as to address the age-long discriminatory system in order to create a just and healthy society without any forms of discrimination in the name of race, class caste, color and gender. Therefore, this issue needs further exploration in academic discourse.*

**Key Words:** Abusive words, Dalit trauma, Discrimination, PTSD, Untouchability

### Socio-historical Context of Varna System and Traumatic Reflection

Dalit people have been adversely affected by the Varna system of the Hindu religion. There are four Varna, according to ancient Aryan classificatory system. Shudra

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Shyam Lal Magarati, PhD, Lecturer, Surkhet Multiple Campus; Email: [shyاملmagarati@gmail.com](mailto:shyاملmagarati@gmail.com)

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(now Dalits) categories are at the bottom of Hindu social organization and these have been designed as 'untouchable'. In the past, caste discrimination and practice of untouchability was social practice. Junga Bahadur Rana promulgated Muluki Ain (MA) in 1910 B.S. Caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability became officially strong. People from other castes regarded this as a social rule. Considering it as a social crime, Civil Code 2020 B.S. declares that the caste discrimination is a crime in the eyes of law. Leaders, policy makers, administrators and political parties have almost failed to implement rules and regulations. At this point, it is relevant to cite few lines from great poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota from the lyrical text *Muna Madan* (1992 B. S.): "Kshetrikko Choro Yo P u Chuncha Ghinale Chudaina / M nis Thulo Dilale Huncha J tle Hudaina "; [my translation] this son of Chhetri touches your feet with not contempt, man is great by his heart not by his caste (Devkota as cited in Magarati, 2021, p. 40). Despite such a human expression of a great poet, people only read the text without applying it in their practice. In this regard, Magarati quotes from Pandey (1983) who questions about the practice of untouchability as, "Why is there difference between your words and actions or speech and responsibilities (p. 5)?" In this community too, people only talk but do not apply it in action. Therefore, to display the reality of the Nepali society, the researcher carried out a research to explore caste discrimination, untouchability and cultural trauma in Paudel's novel.

Paudel's *Likhe* revolves around the Dalit people as they are located in Parbat and B glung who are very poor and have been living miserable life. This is the diary of innumerable of such *Likhes* who wander in foreign countries for their livelihood. C ure, *Likhe's* father carries heavy loads and his mother performs domestic work. They send *Likhe* as a cowherd in Rij l Bista's house where he looks after the cattle and performs household works. However, he is victim of caste discrimination and practice of untouchability as he is addressed with following derogatory names: Dum, son of Dam i and dirty lad. He spends miserable days bearing physical and mental pain. Bista and his wife accuse him of stealing her gold ornaments so they punish him physically and torture mentally. Then his parents send him to Delhi hoping for future support. The duty in the M rw di's house was more torturous than Rij l's house. He falls sick twice and recovers within two days. But Delhi L hure is indifferent. Unfortunately, *Likhe* falls sick for the third time and suffers badly.

Caruth's (1995) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* refers to the shocking events which compel people to suffer short and long term as well. Dalits in their community

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have been suffering both by words and actions. The Dalit community has therefore endured centuries of hierarchy, marginality and socio-economic inequality, subsequently deprived of any kind of rights or voice, has been pushed to the very bottom of Nepali society. Paudel, by means of writing this intense novel which narrates the array of discrimination and violence suffered by Dalits, has provided this voiceless and downtrodden community with voice and has thus changed the usual high-caste focalization of the Nepali narrative from a high to a low-caste perspective. Nonetheless, this novel and its bestowal of voice to the social outcasts may certainly raise issues of authenticity, entitlement and representation from Paudel's position from Brahmin family. This research is confined to textual analysis. To explore Dalit trauma, the researcher has selected the text purposively and collected the data by record keeping and description. For the analysis of data, the researcher has implemented trauma theories based on the insights of Jeffery C. Alexander and Stuart Hall on culture; Sigmund Freud's insights on psychological aspects, and notions of Chris Barker, Cathy Caruth, Joseph Kabat-Zinn, Anna E. Kaplan, Joseph LeDoux, Kedarnath Pandey, David Rowe and Simon Readhead's ideas have been used as supporting tool.

### **Review of Literature**

Some important and critical viewpoints of Nepali writers are reviewed in this section. However, Paudel's *Likhe* portrays the plight of Dalit community through the characterization of Likhe and his family. He has presented Dalit characters as weak in economic condition, politics, education, and social status rather dominated and discriminated by the practice of untouchability and victim of intra-caste untouchability. Regarding the plight of the characters, Nepali critic Bhattar i (2070BS) asserts that Paudel's *Likhe* presents the miserable life of Dalits who suffer abroad after they are exiled due to exploitation and discrimination. In this novel, the Dalit character is at the center. This is the struggle between Brahminism and consciousness of Dalits against untouchability. The struggle centers between the upper caste and the lower caste people or the dominant and the dominated. Moreover, it presents the picture of patriarchal domination. In *Likhe*, there is the presentation of reality of Nepali society. The representatives of exploiters are Brahman, Bista, B je and B huni Bajai; whereas C ure, C uri, Likhe and whole Dam i family represent exploited. Dalits, non-Dalits, different parties and its leaders represent the contemporary society. Nepali Dalits both in Nepal and India are suppressed, oppressed and dominated. In this sense, the novel is successful

in raising the voice of Dalit and their rebel for emancipation (Bhattarai, p. 215). Bhattarai talks generally about Dalit issues but does not focus on the crucial issues of trauma.

Similarly, Bhattarai emphasizes that Paudel has captured the main point of Dalit problems. Paudel suggests solutions for the problems. For him, only speech and reformation are not enough. What is needed is radical change. This is the important aspect of *Likhe*. Paudel has appealed that, communist leaders have to make special policies to address Dalits and their issues. Dalit issues are not only Dalits' rather they are equally related to the nation in general. So to overcome these issues, the nation and Dalits themselves should be aware about class and class consciousness (pp. 215-216). Bhattarai, further, mentions the weaknesses of the novel. Curi is raped but no one raises the voice against Bista's sexual abuse and exploitation. Curi even could not report to her husband. Cure could not raise his voice against exploitation on his son by Bista and Bistini. Snni could not go against her father's cruelty either. So the novelist has failed to capture the subject of caste and class struggle. To develop consciousness against exploitation, domination and segregation, Dalits should prepare themselves. For this the novelist has taken Likhe in the contact of Sonm, Prashuram and laborer's united organization and he was conscious of class (Bhattarai, p.217).

Furthermore, Cpgin (2070 BS) shades light on Likhe. Dalits were very poor and facing economic, social and cultural domination of the upper castes. It mainly focuses on miserable life, every day problem and need of the emancipation from domination and torture. It is not only highlighting the torture, scarcity, poverty and humiliation of Dalits in Nepal but also in India. Likhe is relevant in its message in the context of Nepal. In this sense Cpgin (2070 BS) quotes:

[My translation] It is worthless to think that the practice of untouchability will end after the emancipation of Dalits by class struggle. There may be end of class but it may not end the caste discrimination. It does not mean that the struggle of caste discrimination is separated with class struggle. In the same class struggle, we should assimilate the struggle of the Varna, the caste and the practice of untouchability. (Pp. 71-72)

Likhe, Paudel's mouthpiece emphasizes that there is no certainty that the caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability will come to an end after the success of class struggle. His main concern is that the caste struggle should be assimilated with class struggle and Dalits should be aware in time. Likhe is in confusion that there may be end of class but it may not end the caste discrimination.

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Aforementioned reviews of literature mainly focus on intra-caste, inter-caste untouchability, caste discrimination, poverty, lack of political access, and cultural domination in general. However, Dalit community in Nepal has been tortured and traumatized more by cultural domination caused by caste discrimination and practice of untouchability than other aspects. Therefore, trauma in Dalits caused by caste discrimination and practice of untouchability is main problem.

"Trauma theory" emerged in the 1990s when a group of critics began to study the cultural effects of trauma. Caruth's (1995) *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* combines ideas from several disciplines, such as psychiatry, literature, film, and sociology. Cultural trauma, as Alexander (2004) states "occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (p. 1). Similarly, Alexander claims "trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (p. 2). Thus, trauma is not natural rather created by the societal forces.

Dalits have been under the evil cultural practice of caste discrimination and untouchability. In this regard they have been in everlasting effects in every sphere of their life. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, in its ninth edition defines the word 'trauma' as a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time. It also refers to an unpleasant experience that makes one feel upset and/or anxious (p. 1668).

Similarly, Luhrman points out, "'trauma'... refers to singular or repeated events which injure. Some injuring events are dramatic and soul destroying. Some events are quiet and humiliating" (as cited in Kaplan, 2005, p. 149). Deidre Barrett argues that the similar experiences of shock, grief, destruction of security, and the induction disturbing dreams is the reason the term 'trauma' can be applied to such common or quiet events (as cited in Kaplan, 2005, p. 149). In the same way, Sigmund Freud parallels the unconscious and the primitive mind. Freud (1977) explicates that "unconscious drives, similar to libido and aggression, have now been located in the most primitive parts of the brain" (p. 50). Freud's insights on the nature of consciousness are constant with the most advanced contemporary neuroscience views. Freud developed his theories of trauma from studying female hysteria and then the impact of train accidents and wars. Late in life, he also hypothesized that "a violent historical act can remain in cultural consciousness and continue to have a traumatic impact", as he goes on to show in some

detail (p. 150). He emphasizes that violent actions have everlasting effects on the consciousness of the victims.

In the same vein, Rowe (1996) argues that to become depressed one has to have acquired over the years a set of interlinked constructs that relate to the particular circumstance of one's life. These include a self-constituting description of the self as bad, evil, and valueless while other people are to be feared, hated and envied. For such a person, life is terrible to the point where things happened to me in the past and only bad things will happen in the future. Above all such a person feels unable to forgive anyone, least of all oneself. Similarly, contemporary psychotherapeutic literature exposes a low self-esteem and prediction for being emotionally wounded that lies at the base of depression is rooted in family life. While the literature of psychotherapy often concentrates on trauma, it is frequently the less dramatic childhood injuries of meanness and neglect that take up residence in the mind. As much as physical violence, it is the lack of nurturing and guidance that leaves its mark (p. 104). So childhood injuries and pain are not less traumatic than physical violence.

The roots of depression are planted in genetic and biochemical dispositions intertwined with family trauma. Thus, childhood trauma, can have lifelong psychological consequences (Redhead, 1990, p. 103); with post-traumatic stress syndrome marking the extreme bio-psychological outcomes of dramatic events. Dalit children have been victim of the cultural domination; pessimism depletes the immune system while optimistic thinking boosts. This suggests the ability of thought to amend the body with the mounting evidence that cognitive and emotional states influence our probability of becoming ill and our capacities to heal (Kabat- Zinnqtd as cited in Barker, 2002, p. 105).

The aforementioned theoretical opinions are relevant to apply because Dalits have been tortured and oppressed in the name of caste discrimination and practice of untouchability for hundreds of year. Due to this reason they face incurable psychological problem and cultural trauma in their life and in the life of future generation. So this socio-cultural practice interferes the present as well as future generation of Dalit.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Dalit Characters and Trauma**

The novelist has tried to portray the multiple socio-cultural problems in the existence of Dalits in the context of Brahmin-dominated Nepali villages. In the novel, *Likhe*, Paudel has exposed the problems in the life of Dalits in different aspects of the society. They are victim in education, economics, religion, politics and culture in general.

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C ure decides to send his son Likhe in Bista's house as cowherd due to their poverty. When Likhe and his father reached at Bista's house, S nn ni and S nb bu (Rijal's children) at the same age of Likhe approached nearby and started staring at him. Bista shouted at them! Why are you gathering there? You will touch to Dam i, you rowdy children (Paudel, p. 8). This is the example of practice of untouchability that how the upper caste people teach untouchability to their children. Laughing, they started asking Likhe but he was distressed. Joining his two hands, Likhe's father requested them to go away; you will touch him if you approach nearby (Paudel, p. 9). This is the culture that lower caste mature people need to salute to the upper caste children. The lower caste people are not allowed to sit even in the midst part of the courtyard which we can see in this example. Paudel further posits, Bistini orders C ure and Likhe, to sit on the corner of the courtyard. How do you sit at midst part (p. 9)? Bistini questions Likhe and his father for sitting on the mid part of courtyard. Dalits are not supposed to sit in this way in Brahmin-dominated society. Similarly, Paudel quotes, do not go nearby Likhe because he is the son of untouchable/ Dam i, he is a cowherd and a servant, Brahmin woman said to her children (as cited in Magarati, 2022, p. 32). This shows that the upper caste people do not touch Dalits. From the aforementioned examples, it is crystal clear that non-Dalit people dominate Dalits both by action and words. Likhe and his father are forced to sit aside and addressed by derogatory words; dum, servant, Damai and cowherd. At this juncture, Freud asserts that "a violent historical act can remain in cultural consciousness and continue to have a traumatic impact" (p. 150). Thus, Dalits are regarded as if they are culprits so this has great impact in the life of Dalit community.

Another bad cultural practice is prevalent in the society which can be illustrated in this example; while going to the tap, Likhe got down several times before reaching there. The reason was Brahmin women were returning home fetching water. So Likhe should leave the way. Paudel asserts, that a Brahmin woman asked, hey, what is your caste? Likhe answered, he is the son of Dam i (untouchable). If so this pond/ well is not for you people so go downside (Paudel, p.11 as cited in Magarati, p. 22). It is said in "Right to Equality", "all citizens shall be equal before law. No person shall be denied the equal protection of law" (Constitution of Nepal, p. 6). But policy remained in papers. Above examples justifies that how upper caste people dominate, discriminate and humiliate Dalits, even innocent children. This direct and indirect caste discrimination and practice of untouchability remains permanently in the mind of Dalits. The question is

raised that what happens to the tender and innocent Dalit children due to these inhuman behavior and unjust treatment.

Consequently, Paudel clarifies, that in the jungle, S nb bu approached nearby Likhe so he stood then he asked where you are going. If you touch me, so I am going away, Likhe replied normally and S nb bu did not reply (p. 15). Even children consciously practice caste discrimination and untouchability. Similarly, Paudel justifies intra-caste discrimination in this example that S nb bu asked Likhe to play with him but Likhe rejected. Then Range Kami convinced S nb bu to play with him and let not play with Likhe because he is the son of Dam i. We as Bishwokarma did not touch him and you are the son of Brahmin how could you do this. Do not you know Mukhiy ? K mi/ Bishowkarm are considered the upper caste than Dam i/ tailors. His was trying to prove him upper caste (p. 15). This is the example of intra-caste untouchability constructed by the society. Dalits are not only the victim of inter-caste untouchability rather intra-caste discrimination and practice of untouchability.

Dalits are not victims only by the action of upper caste people but also by their abusive words which can be clarified in this example. As Paudel posits, Likhe was collecting unhusked rice which was thrown by S nb bu. Likhe caught his hand when he was about to throw unhusked rice again so that Bista shouted at Likhe, "You as a son of Dum/ untouchable, how dare you to touch and bit to Brahmin's children? Do I break your hands (p. 40)?"It shows that the upper caste people do not hesitate to torture even the lower caste children by action and abusive words. Further, Dalit people in general pay money for food, breakfast, snack and tea however; they are forced to clean the pots. It is crystal clear in the discussion of Delhi and BambayL hure as "Yes, there we find tea shop in the next village where people call it Brahmin village (B hun b d ) but it is inhuman that they ask to clean tea cups, exclaimed BambayL hure before Delhi L hure completed his story" (Paudel, p. 108). According to Caruth (1995), who based her theories on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919) and the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) given in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM III-R) of the American Psychiatric Association (pp. 467-8), an event is traumatic when it is outside the range of usual human experience and its overwhelming nature, can lead to numbness or a period of latency or belatedness after which the victim is haunted by the traumatic event in the forms of intrusive thoughts, nightmares, hallucinations, or can even develop an increased arousal to stimuli recalling the event (pp. 3-4). Such inhuman activities of the upper castes on Dalits really affect Dalits forever.

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Likhe in Bista's house needs to clean the cowshed, fetch water and cut grass, look after the cows, buffaloes and wash dishes. They beat with piece of wood and beat nettle, abuse using derogatory words and accuse him of stealing the necklace. So he lives in constant fear because of physical punishment, mental torture and abusive words. The narrator reveals Likhe's fear thus: Likhe has been alive hiding a bundle of sufferings in his heart. He gets afraid even when the leaves from the tree fall, mistaking the sound for the movement of as there is B je or Bajai and waits for their order to act (Paudel, p. 13). Likhe thinks that there is order for him from the wife or husband of Bista even when the leaf drops from the tree. This is a psychological trauma created by socio-cultural and traditional practice. He cannot cry loudly and comment them. When people are in fear, they cannot do anything. Likhe's family is under domination of Bista's family. Such cultural domination has created the trauma in them. When Likhe was in India, he was not free from that trauma as he was in the village. Once Sann ni (Bist's daughter) was begging help from him, he was indifferent due to his caste. When Prashur m and Son m asked about his feeling on Sann ni, he replied as Paudel reveals: "Who cares brother? She is the daughter of the upper caste whereas me from the lower caste. I am the cowherd of her house, a worthless creature, Likhe expressed his inferiority" (my translation, p. 261). After some years in India, Likhe grows more experienced, independent and assertive, still he is not free from the inferiority complex that he is from the lower caste and was a cowherd in Bista's house. It was impossible for him to think and feel about the upper caste girl like S nn ni. It shows that when a child from a Dalit family comes to the earth, he/she needs to face such everlasting cultural trauma.

Dalits have been suffering from the economic problem, caste discrimination and practice of untouchability which leads them in several traumatic experiences. However, Luhrman asserts that 'trauma' refers to singular or repeated events which injure some injuring events are dramatic and soul destroying, some are quiet and humiliating (Kaplan, 2005, p. 149). Some injuring events are under the trauma. Emphasizing the traumatic events of oppressed life of the individual, Deidre Barrett highlights that, such experience of shock, grief, destruction of security and the induction disturbing dreams is the reason the term, "trauma can be applied to such common or quiet events" (Kaplan, 2005, p. 149). Some experiences of shock, grief and destruction cause the trauma. Dalit children are tortured since their birth which remains throughout their lives as Sigmund Freud opines "a violent historical act can remain in cultural consciousness and continue to have a traumatic impact" (p. 150). They are separated in the classroom, humiliated inside and

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outside school, abused and addressed in a humiliating way. As a result they are compelled to think themselves as inferior throughout the life. So, for Hall and Butler (1997) 'identity is best understood as the structure of the 'inside' with the 'outside' that is the processes by which a psychic identifications on emotion investments are attached to disciplinary discourse. The childhood suffering, torture and humiliation remain as incurable disease in mind. Thus, "childhood trauma can have lifelong psychological consequences" (Redhead, 1990, p. 103) as Likhe suffers even in India. He fears to cooperate with S m n i because he realizes that he is from the lower caste and low economic background.

The cultural practice of caste discrimination and untouchability also affects the learning environment. The dominated children suffer both in past and present as Rowe contends that "to become depressed one has to have acquired over the years a set of interlinked constructs that relate to the particular circumstance of one's life (cited in Barker, 2002, p.104)". These include a self-constituting description of the self as bad, evil and valueless while other people are to be feared, hated and envied. For such a person, life is terrible to the point where they had fear in the past and it will remain in the future. Above all such a person feels unable to forgive anyone, least of all oneself. Not only this separation from the family members also depresses a person as separation from mother promotes changes in serotonin and adrenal enzyme levels suggesting that social and cultural events can have biochemical consequence (Le Doux as cited in Barker, 2002, p. 105). Lifelong socio-cultural, economic, religious and educational domination and suppression has taught them how to overcome such types of aspects in their lives. Unless there is a special provision to eliminate evil cultural practices from the state, Dalits will be victims forever because of unbearable everlasting trauma.

### **Conclusion**

Trauma is, without doubt, an all-pervading characteristic in Paudel's novel *Likhe* as it deals with the Dalit people and their traumatic experiences which are created by the socio-cultural discrimination of the Hindu caste system of Nepali society. This institutionalized discrimination was partly due to their poor or, rather, non-existent representation in most fields of Nepali society and culture which is reflected in different forms of literature. At this juncture, displays an individual trauma; revolving around a day full of abuses as reflective of the Dalit collective trauma. *Likhe*, the protagonist, acts as a representative of the Dalit community and the also he faces atrocities and injustices. Moreover, his parents and Dalit people have had to endure such discrimination in the

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daily works in their locality. Therefore, in the case of Dalits, it cannot be single shattering and historically identifiable event, but rather a continuous traumatic existence in which unexpectedness is almost irrelevant. There is hardly any latency or numbness in their case since, violent events undoubtedly left their marks on their psyche and body, they were forced to internalize their subhuman nature so as to be able to go on with their lives. This constant abuse and discrimination inevitably led to their perpetual state of anxiety and alertness. In this sense, the Dalit community has been living excluded, humiliated and inhuman life in Nepali society. Definitely, Paudel attempts to portray that collective trauma of oppressed people that has left several consequences, at both a personal and a communal level in the Dalit community, which has thus borne the brunt of severe prejudice and institutionalized discrimination for centuries. Their upsetting have not been caused by environmental factors, nor have they been inflicted by a specific person rather, they have their roots in the institutionalization of the caste system of the Hinduism. Although untouchability was legally abolished with the 2047 B.S. and 2072 B.S. Constitution of Nepal but it is prevalent. Consequently, untouchability is still a fact and Dalits continue to face mistreatment and violence because of their status. This research paper is not final due to the broad area of Dalit issues. For the further researchers, it paves the way still people carry out researches imbedding textual evidences as well as in-depth interview regarding trauma faced by Dalit people.

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