

Decoding Deconstruction: Unveiling the Layers in Mahakavi Devkota's Poetic Works

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Abstract

“Decoding Deconstruction: Unveiling the Layers in Mahakavi Devkota's Poetic Works” explores the intricate tapestry of Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poetry, using a deconstructionist point of view. The paper reveals unimagined Deconstructionist features within Devkota's works, akin to the ideas developed by Jacques Derrida during the 1960s. Devkota has questioned all the so-called hierarchies that were prevalent in Nepali society then. He has questioned human-centric discourses. Thus, his poems exemplify a deconstructive mindset. They invite readers to embrace ambiguity, explore new perspectives and transcend traditional modes of interpretation. This study illuminates how some of the poems by Mahakavi Devkota are so very close to the deconstructionist view developed by Derrida and so e other theorists in the 1970s.

Keywords: deconstruction, Mahakavi Devkota, visionary, iconoclastic

Mahakavi Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959), a seminal figure in Nepali literature, has etched his name indelibly in the collective consciousness of Nepali households. Widely regarded as the paramount poet of Nepal, his verse not only captivates the hearts of his compatriots but also serves as a powerful expression of their lived experiences and profound emotions. Devkota's literary prowess extends far beyond his popularity, as his poetic oeuvre embodies a timelessness that transcends temporal boundaries. Notably, amidst his body of work dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, a remarkable discovery emerges—the unexpected emergence of Deconstructionist features, akin to the ideas postulated by Jacques Derrida during the 1960s.

It is within this captivating juncture of temporal synchrony and conceptual congruence that this paper embarks on a scholarly journey, delving into the profound and intricate tapestry of Devkota's poetic universe. By undertaking a meticulous exploration, this study illuminates the enigmatic depths of Devkota's verse, exposing the nuanced interplay between established literary traditions and avant-garde intellectual currents. Thus, this study endeavors to unravel the sublime fusion of Devkota's poetic genius and the emergent contours of Deconstructionist thought, shedding light on the intricate interweaving of tradition and innovation within his poetic discourse.

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Deconstruction makes use of formal stylistic markers in discovering the inherent tensions, un-decidability, and open-mindedness in a text. It is an approach to reading a text in order to examine indeterminacy, instability, tentativeness, and suspended oppositions (Barai 3). Being aware of the potential of heterogeneity, a deconstructionist always tries to find out the various conflicting elements that a text contains. A Deconstructionist does not take such contradictions as weaknesses of the text rather s/he celebrates them with equal admiration.

Spivak describes Deconstruction in her “Translator’s Preface to *Of Grammatology*” as “To locate the promising marginal text, to disclose the undecidable moment, to pry it loose with the positive lever of the signifier; to reverse the resident hierarchy, only to displace it; to dismantle it in order to reconstitute what is always already inscribed. Deconstruction in a nutshell” (Spivak, 1976, p. lxxvii). In Spivak’s understanding deconstruction attempts to dismantle hierarchies or displace them. A deconstructionist believes that a writer is never able to express what s/he intends to do through his/her writings and therefore, s/he always leaves a trace to be filled in by an interpreter or a critic.

Within the context of deconstruction, the relationship between the critic and the writer takes on a distinctive dimension. The critic approaches the words of the writer not merely as fixed signifiers but as traces that lead to a multitude of potential meanings. This approach initiates an endless pursuit of uncovering and exploring the intended meanings concealed within the text. Deconstruction challenges the notion of fixed and stable meanings by subjecting ideas such as ‘center’ and ‘truth’ to a process of deliberate erasure. Instead of accepting these concepts as given and unquestionable, deconstruction unveils their inherent instabilities and exposes the intricate web of language that constructs them.

In this light, it becomes possible to argue that deconstruction involves a deliberate dislodging of authority. By interrogating and subverting the assumed authority of concepts like ‘center’ and ‘truth,’ deconstruction upsets the established hierarchies of meaning and disrupts the conventional understanding of power structures within language. Jacques Derrida, a key proponent of deconstruction, asserts this notion by stating that deconstruction consists in putting authority ‘out of joint’ (Derrida 25). The act of putting authority out of joint implies a conscious destabilization and questioning of fixed positions and hierarchical frameworks, opening up space for alternative interpretations and a multiplicity of perspectives.

Within the realm of deconstruction, the role of the critic transcends the traditional notion of interpreting and analyzing a text; instead, it becomes an active engagement with the complex interplay of language, meaning, and power. By embracing the inherent instability and indeterminacy of language, the critic becomes a participant in a perpetual process of unraveling and reconstructing meaning, constantly challenging and reconfiguring the boundaries of understanding. In this way, deconstruction serves as a powerful tool for questioning and deconstructing the assumptions, certainties, and authority that underpin traditional modes of interpretation and discourse.

Reading Devkota's poems from this frame of mind reveals that he also possessed a deconstructive mindset. In some of his poems, to be specific, "Lunatic", & "The Donkey Speaks", Mahakavi reminds us of the necessity of such a flexible mindset, free from the limits of fixed philosophy, dogmas, and doctrines. He also attempts to put authority out of joints.

Devkota's poetic character and temperament, as evident from his poems like Pagal and others is characterized by an idea that man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any solid referents. And by pointing towards this possibility, Devkota puts a big erasure under our so-called sane world and its fundamental assumptions. His preference for paradoxes and self-contradiction hints at the philosophy that in the intensity of paradox life could best be realized. The speaker in "Lunatic" says, "I see sounds/ I hear sights/I taste smells". What a contradiction! Who can taste smell and hear sights? It is someone who deeply believes in the paradoxical nature of human existence and knowledge. Only a true Deconstructionist can do such things! Reading Mahakavi's poems, we can somehow sense that Mahakavi Devkota could do such things!

Seeing the sound and hearing the sights were not just what the speaker of the poem "Lunatic" could do, he could also go against the general trend of our society i.e. seeking any final solutions through rational explanations. Discarding the so-called rational outlook, the speaker wanted to explore them through intuition or imagination. He preferred a wavering temperament than a resolute one. He says:

Your formulas are ever running correct,
 But in my calculations, one minus one is always one.
 You work with your senses five. (47)

In this poetic expression, the speaker challenges the notion that exact equations and linear mathematics can fully capture the complexities and nuances of life. By stating—

Your exact equations are right forever and ever— the speaker acknowledges the validity and stability of established mathematical principles.

However, the speaker then introduces a contrasting perspective, emphasizing their own arithmetic where “one from one” is taken, yet “there’s still one left.” This suggests a departure from conventional mathematical operations and implies that life cannot be neatly quantified or explained solely through traditional linear thinking.

By attributing this imaginative arithmetic to the Mahakavi, the speaker implies a visionary or poetic quality to this alternative perspective. The Mahakavi, or great poet, is often associated with deep insights, creativity, and the ability to perceive truths beyond what is immediately apparent.

The speaker’s reflection on new mathematics and the limitations of linear thinking suggests that life is far more intricate and unpredictable than what can be encompassed by rigid formulas. It hints at the need for embracing ambiguity, embracing the unexpected, and acknowledging the inherent complexity of existence.

In essence, the speaker encourages a broader mindset that incorporates intuition, creativity, and an acceptance of the uncertainties and paradoxes that life presents. By doing so, they imply that true understanding and wisdom come from transcending the confines of strict rationality and embracing a more holistic perspective.

In the spirit of a Deconstructionist, Mahakavi unhesitatingly questions the prevalent binaries of our society. Binary thinking such as –God versus Satan, good versus evil, speech versus writing, conscious versus unconscious, and many more prioritize one over another category and attempt to establish one category over others. Mahakavi seems strongly against such binary thinking. The speaker pronounces:

I have denounced Alexander the Great,
and I have depreciated the so-called high souled ones,
and the insignificant individual I have raised,
Up an ascending arch of praises. (51)

The speaker is not ready to follow our society’s definition of high and low. Despite being a Brahmin, he detested the hierarchies that the caste system created and the injustices that are allowed in our system. He wrote many poems against the caste system. In Muna Madan, first published in 1936 he made a famous proclamation that a man’s greatness comes not from his caste but from his from his heart. Similarly in

“Ek Sundari Chyamini”, his protagonist, for the first time, is a Dalit woman. Hardly any writers before that time, being a member of the Brahmin or Chhetriya caste, wrote so profoundly in appreciation of the people belonging to the caste like Vaisya, and Sudhra. He dares to go against the cultural norms of that time. In a book titled “Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida” Derrida rightly proclaims, “Deconstruction is a passion for justice, for the impossible. (173) Devkota’s passion for justice is certainly commendable!

Mahakavi could do such things because he embraced a different philosophy, a philosophy that helps people imagine new things and new orders. Mahakavi had understood things from a different angle and this angle is the Deconstructionist one. It is such a vantage point from where one can see things from novel perspectives. The speaker says, “A rose is just a rose to you/to me it’s Helen and Padmini” (49). He further adds, “I try to catch a dream, the way you grasp the rounded truth of cold, sweet coin” (49).

Very much like Jacques Derrida who questioned the validity of the entire knowledge tradition, Mahakavi, using the persona of a lunatic, declares that he is not ready to follow the so-called intellectuals of our society, and neither does he agree with what most of them say. The persona asserts, “Your learned pandit is my great fool/ your heaven my hell/ your gold my iron/ friend! Your piety my sin” (51).

In the poem when the poet says that he was basking in astral light, touching objects the world denies, he means to say that he is totally against the general value system of our society. He is questioning our established thoughts and norms. He is the one who speaks in a language of contradiction and plurality that becomes evident when he says, “I am the moon bird of the beautiful/ the iconoclast of the ugliness/ the tenderly cruel/ the bird that steals the celestial fire”(55).

Adam John Cruise in “Delinearizing the Insuperable Line: Deconstruction as an Animal Ethic” writes, “Derrida was personally very much concerned about the poor representation of non-human animals in philosophy and mentioned on numerous occasions throughout his illustrious philosophical métier, an intention to put together a work directly dealing with this persistent snubbing by philosophers against other animals”(69). Mahakavi Devkota, also does not like the poor representation of non-human animals in human discourses. He raises this issue very loudly in the poem titled “The Donkey Speaks” where he questions such ethnocentric doctrines that human beings have constituted.

Human relationships have, throughout the centuries, been characterized principally by the domination of one group by another based on aspects such as race, ethnicity,

culture, religion, and gender. This has often resulted in dichotomous and tense relationships that sometimes lead to violence over others. This domination of one group by another has extended to other species whereby humankind has completely subjugated animals to a most sorry situation. Thus animals now constitute the “new” colonies of humans. Mahakavi’s poem “The Donkey Speaks” questions these long-cherished beliefs of the humanists who pretend to be the master of all other species on this planet. Protagoras, a noted humanist, pronounces, “Man is the measure of all things” (Protagoras 48). But Devkota, assuming the persona of a donkey questions such anthropocentric discourses that place human beings at the center of everything.

Devkota’s persona of “The Donkey Speaks” is not ready to accept that human beings are rational. He calls our rationality “cruel and dry” for it manipulates facts and even creates truths. The truths that we have made are self-constituted. In this regard, these truths are just human-centric perspectives, nothing more. Bertrand Russell wrote, “It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this “(Cochrane 1).

The speaker in ‘The Donkey Speaks’ questions our anthropocentric discourses as:

The brute world knows that wisdom is self-constituted satire, O God!

Which is the most heart-touching poem?

Is it the wave of joy upon the asses’ limbs, their rhythmic undulations?

When the meadow is green with grass in the warm and sunny time?

Or is it your inky lines? (11)

Thus, the speaker in “The Donkey Speaks” challenges the anthropocentric perspective, suggesting that wisdom and emotional impact can be found outside of human discourse. By highlighting the beauty and rhythm of the natural world, the speaker encourages a shift in perception and invites the reader to explore alternative sources of meaning and connection beyond human-centered constructs. Devkota also sounds very much like Foucault here. Foucault says:

Knowledge is ... the product of a certain discourse, which has enabled it to be formulated, and has no validity outside it. The “truths” of the human sciences are the effect of discourses, of language. The knowledge of human beings “does not derive from access to the real world to authentic reality but from the rules of their discourses. (Bertens, 155)

Thus the speaker in ‘The Donkey Speaks’, questions our so-called rational outlook. This kind of distrust towards human discourses is a very typical characteristic of Deconstruction.

Derrida, in his intellectual pursuits, relentlessly scrutinized the validity of presumed centers, unearthing the inherent flaws in human centrism. He eloquently articulated that logocentrism, as he aptly described, engenders a contentious hierarchy rather than a harmonious coexistence of opposing concepts. As Derrida expounded, the act of deconstruction fundamentally involves, at a crucial juncture, the inversion of this hierarchical structure. In doing so, it dismantles the very foundations upon which it rests, exposing the power dynamics and biases embedded within, ultimately paving the way for a profound reevaluation of our epistemological landscape (Derrida, 1981: 56-57).

Here in Mahakavi’s poem, the speaker questions human intelligence by asking: “Do you know who plays behind the screen, what he does, and how and why? /in this respect, O my master, how like me you are”(11)! Though the speaker calls human beings masters, he is not ready to accept human superiority. The donkey’s understanding is that humans don’t have the capacity to understand even the simplest truths like these. It is evident that the donkey is not happy with the hierarchy that human beings have made between themselves and the rest of the creatures. And it goes with saying that Mahakavi also is not ready to endorse such false hierarchies.

Nietzsche’s famous proclamation “God is Dead” is considered by many as the beginning of Deconstructionist thought. Once we question god’s authority and his existence, we somehow liberate ourselves from many dogmas. The persona in ‘The Donkey Speaks’ questions our understanding of god by saying:

What is the meaning of the Vedas four before the principles twain—
appetite and lust?

The spark at the glow-worm’s tail, and the nut of the squirrel.

These are all that ye know on earth.

My god is like a blade of grass-- succulent, tender, sweet, all-pervasive, never
dying, self-regenerating, and ever strong! (13)

Thus, the speaker in this poem has juxtaposed an anthropocentric god with simple objects like grass in nature. He believes that his god is just like grass- succulent, regenerating, and nourishing. For the donkey, the green grass itself is god. The grass itself is divine. What god is to human beings is not god to animals.

To conclude, it can be safely asserted that Mahakavi challenges the hierarchical nature of human discourses, unveiling the potential for a transformative shift in our understanding. By daring to question the established centers of knowledge, cherished for generations, a profound unraveling occurs. The foundations upon which we have built our understanding begin to crumble, paving the way for fresh perspectives and newfound insights into the world that surrounds us. Through this process, Mahakavi encourages us to embrace the opportunity for growth and the emergence of novel understandings, transcending the limitations of traditional hierarchies and opening doors to expanded realms of knowledge and wisdom.

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