

## Counter-Hegemonic Consciousness in Melawa Devi's Selected Songs

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores counter-hegemonic consciousness in Melawa Devi's selected songs. Firstly, it talks about Melawa Devi as a singer exhibiting how her four phases of life transform her from a hegemonic character to a counter-hegemonic actor. Then it explores how she negotiating with power bloc plays counter-hegemonic actions as 'organic intellectual' in Antonio Gramscian term, and encourages the subalterns to subtly share views against hegemonic power structure. Finally, this paper critically presents Melawa Devi's selected songs that carry counter-hegemonic consciousness.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Hegemony and counter-hegemony refer to the intersections of power, and control. Gramsci's concepts of counter-hegemony, the subaltern, and the organic intellectual are concerned with resistance of the subaltern passions as political resources that challenge hegemonic conditions and formulate strategic counter-hegemonic response to subaltern consciousness (Zembylas, 2013: 1). The struggle against injustice and oppression has taken different forms in global relations of power and struggles in the post-1989 and 9/11 era demand renewed ways of theorizing global relations of power and social injustices (Allman, 2010). Gramsci's idea of hegemony and counter-hegemony has played influential role in advancing insights to develop a critical relationship between praxis and popular beliefs. Gramsci argues that counter-hegemonic resistance involves struggling over the hearts and minds of people, their attitudes, beliefs, and

emotions about the world (Reed, 2012). In the words of Gramsci, 'revolution presupposes the formation of a new set of standards, a new psychology, new ways of feeling, thinking, and living (1991: 41). Art, even music, is one of the most persuasive means of touching the heart and psychology of people.

Female singers' existence to the modern Nepali mainstream music appears not in mean order. Women singers, however, have contributed significantly to establish modern Nepali mainstream music history (Sthapit 2006; Acharya, 2001; Duchon, 2005; Acharya, 2019; Basnet & Paudyal 2044 BS; Phuyal, 2073 BS) and among them Melawa Devi appears as one of the most versatile music mentors (Gurung, 1993; Gurwacharya, 2077 BS). Her actions and songs, amidst rigid Rana regime in Nepal, carry a counter-hegemonic subaltern consciousness.

The bildungsroman, psychological and moral growth from childhood to

adulthood of Melawa Devi traces a noteworthy landmark in the modern Nepali mainstream music. She appears as a myth-like character moving up and down within the labyrinth of hegemonic socio-political order. Her bildungsroman presents subtle negotiation and contestation within hegemonic socio-political order and shows significant growth of herself. The rulers often keep vat singers and performers in the palace to eulogize their deeds (Regmi, 2023). The bildungsroman of Melawa Devi appears as if she is a fictional character but her true stories of struggle from vat singer of the Rana palace to a matured music mentor helps to make view to counter the hegemonic socio-political power relation that persist to date. In this regard, this paper explores how her selected songs carry subaltern consciousness through the Gramscian approach, 'hegemony' and 'counter-hegemony'.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study explores counter-hegemonic consciousness in Melawa Devi's selected songs from the concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony that Antonio Gramsci puts forwards in his masterpiece *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci believes hegemony as an intellectual and moral leadership by one class over another normally exercised through civil society's institutions which differs from the state's direct dominance imposed through coercion rather than consent and negotiation. The notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony propounded by Gramsci helps to explore the dynamics of dissent actions of Melawa Devi from within and outside the hegemonic socio-political world order that still persist in multitude of coercion and consent power relation. The coercive state exercised its power through a balance of coercion and consent (Cere, 2020: 1; Foucault, 2000). From contradictions of an unequal society center-hegemonic resistance may occur disrupting the dominant hegemonic project and rise organic intellectual opposing traditional intellectual, who serves the interests of the status quo. From this view,

how Melawa Devi's stages of life serve or counter the status quo can present historical insights to understand hegemony and counter-hegemony in Nepalese and South Asian contexts. To fill the gaps, along with desk review, 10 key informant interviews and 3 focused group discussions were carried out in 2024 and applied wherever applicable.

The stages of life struggle of Melawa Devi and her selected songs intersect concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and negotiations. The concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony and organic/traditional intellectual cannot be seen in isolation. Melawa Devi's four stages of life justify this argument. She was hegemonic up to the second stages of her life struggle. From the end of the second stage, her docile hegemonic state of life transforms into counter-hegemonic consciousness. Her stages of life struggle justify shifting subaltern position and consciousness from hegemonic to counter-hegemonic power relation that proves one's life story should be segregated into stages and assessed from multiple angles. Gramsci's theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony helps in the analysis of power relations associated to Melawa Devi's (four) stages of life struggle. Hegemony and conversely counter-hegemony possess of negotiation, consent and resistance (ibid: 2) as seen in Melawa Devi's four stages of life. She faces series of turbulences, transitions and transformations in her life. She fights to overcome her subaltern positions and dies with significant achievement that motivates the masses of subaltern groups. Gramsci defines 'subaltern' as subordinate classes and those groups are important to make transformation possible. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "silent subaltern, silenced center" (1988: 283) helps to expand Gramscian reading of hegemony, counter-hegemony and the subaltern. However, unless and until there is a viable counter-hegemonic system, there is little value in going it alone (Drezner, 2019:517) and hegemonic order may persist. Melawa Devi faced these stages and kept on her resistance, which obstructs in

the middle of the struggle. She has paved a way from where center-hegemonic movement looks possible to move on.

Counter-hegemony is an attempt or action to critique or dismantle power (Drezer, 2019), actions that confront or oppose to existing status quo and its legitimacy. It can be observed in various genres and texts and actions in activism and one of them is music. In each critical phase, Melawa Devi was eloquent. Neo-Gramscian critics describe the notion of counter-hegemony as a form or creation of an alternative of hegemony, which can be practiced on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political change (Patt, 2004). It is an alternative ethical view of the civil society that challenges the dominant bourgeois-led view (Cohn, 2005: 131) as the freedom fighter Sukraraj Shastri found associated with Melawa Devi, who recorded his song “Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho.”

## **2.1 MELAWA DEVI FROM HEGEMONY TO COUNTER-HEGEMONY**

The biography of Melawa Devi, based on the available evidences in fragments, can be divided into four phases. In the first phase, we see her in a village in Rumjatar Okhaldhunga Nepal, where she was born in late 1950s BS (Dikchhit, 2028 BS; Darnal 2038 BS; Prakash, 2039 BS; Mukarung, 2071 BS; Prapannacharya, 1995; Regmi, 2023). She was known as Sunmaya-Sulabha in her birthplace - a naïve village girl in the first stage in her life. Her father Gyan Bahadur and mother Sapta Devi Gurung decided to keep her in the palace of the Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher Rana (Swami Prapannacharya and Bulu Mukarung). She would sing sweet songs and dance in the village in her childhood. Her relatives found unique quality in her vocal and performance and decided to keep her in the palace of Chandra Shamsher as a nani (helper). There is no clear evidence when was she sent to the Rana palace. Some write she was of 7 years when she entered the palace as nani, others say she was of 14 then.

In the second phase, we see Melawa Devi as a most popular vat singer confined within the Rana palace. She was “physically attractive as well as a good singer and performer” (Pradhan, 2062 BS: 56). She devoted her time to refine her skill in the palace by performing and practicing music for ten year and acquired fame with her new name ‘Melawa Devi’. She became popular among the ustajs, courtiers and delegates. She was highly honored in the palace. Whenever and wherever she had to perform, she was carried on the palki (chariot) and placed in the decorated stage. Chandra Shamsher and his brothers were crazy about her vocal, performance and physical beauty. No need to say, so were others. There might be many other singers and women artists then like Melawa Devi but they remained invisible; Melawa Devi luckily appeared visible. She would be carried out in golden and silvery decorated palki for the performance in each gathering and public event by doles (chariot transporter).

Chandra Shamsher was crazy about her and her vocal; others were jealous (Pradhan 2062). She would influence renowned ustajs as well (Rawal, 2079 BS). The son of Chandra Shamsher named Keshar Shamsher liked Melawa Devi and her vocal in such a way that once he gave her NRs. 5000 after she sang one and half hour and make it rain (Dikshit, 2028 BS). She would sing classical folk music. Chandra Shamsher would appreciate her in each performance and give boxis (rewards). Influencing listeners and audiences through her songs and performance and getting valuable gifts was common thing for Melawa Devi then (Rawal, 2079 BS: 203). Chandra Shamsher would take Melawa Devi with him during hunting as well. Her beauty, musical skills and popularity generated her enemies. She was served a poisonous pan that destroyed her vocal card (Sayami, 2023).

Chandra Shamsher called doctors from abroad to bring Melawa Devi’s voice back as before but all efforts turned in vain. Her voice deteriorated after she was served poisonous pan, however, Chandra

Shamsher liked her vocal. She was so powerful influencer that Bal Kumari Devi, the wife of Chandra Shamsher, was fearful with the popularity of Melawa Devi. She had to live an unsecured life due to her power of voice and beauty. Chandra Shamsher would invite Melawa Devi everywhere wherever he would go - even in hunting camp (Prasai, 2059 BS: 39). Babar Shamsher was more aggressive toward her beauty. All the courtiers and singers liked her. One of them was Bhakta Krishna Manandhar, one of the Tabala players of the palace. Chandra Shamsher had gifted her a house in Bijeshori. She finally decided to leave the palace taking permission from Chandra Shamsher (Prasai, 2059: 42).

In the third stage, we see Melawa Devi living outside the palace. She decided to leave the palace carrying bitter history in her music career but she did not stop her devotion to Nepali modern music. She began singer and performing in public outside the palace. She used to sing in Newari as well. She had got a house in baxis (as a gift) from Chandra Shamsher in where she lived alone. Bhakta Krishna was closed to her. They fell in love and got married in Dakschinkali temple. He lost his job after they were married because the palace was not happy with this couple. Melawa Devi as a second or third wife of Bhakta Krishna gave birth four children (two daughter and two sons). Her both sons died early. Tramatised and stigmatized Melawa Devi left her husband's house and began to live in Bejeshori with her two daughters. It was not easy to live as a single woman then. There was no alternative way for livelihood. She tried to earn livelihood through music instructor in Kathmandu but failed.

The last stage of her life moves around her struggle in India rearing her two daughters and seeking livelihood as a music instructor. Melawa Devi had sold her the house of Kathmandu that she got as a gift from Chandra Shamsher and went Culcutta with her two daughters seeking safety and better music career (Regmi, 2023: 187) from where she began to record her songs in her own music composition that established her as a pioneer singer in

modern Nepali mainstream music. The last stage of her life is most significant one. She was free from the censorship of the palace. She was far from her husband and relative. She could exercise her freedom as she wished. She recorded her masterpiece songs in India playing a role of organic intellectual.

## **2.2 COUNTER-HEGEMONIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN MELAWA DEVI'S SELECTED SONGS**

Melawa Devi's actions and songs, knowing or unknowingly, carry counter-hegemonic consciousness in micro-political level. Counter-hegemony is essentially a process that challenges normative views about social and political reality. Melawa Devi's actions and songs counter normative views created by the bourgeois socio-political order.

Melawa Devi dared to disagree and stood against the status quo. She was not comfortable and chose option to live outside the palace. She again chose her own house instead of husband to live with her two daughters when she did not feel easy to live with Bhakta Krishna. Again, she chose to live abroad when she did not like to stay in Kathmandu. For Gramsci, resistance is a sign of subaltern discontent and discomfort; however, he recognizes that this discomfort is already always co-opted unless the 'organic intellectual' turns resistance to agency (Fischman and McLaren, 2005). Melawa Devi dared to play the role of organic intellectual even living in abroad and served to the subaltern communities by recording the songs of socio-political transformation.

In the words of Gramsci, organic intellectuals are those leaders who help subaltern groups become critically reflexive of existing cultural and political activities. Gramsci writes, "The organic intellectual helps 'make intuition more penetrating and informs deliberate reflection'" (Gramsci, 1971). The role of organic intellectuals, then, is to make sure that passion for change is 'disseminated' (ibid. 113) and without disseminated passion, critical reflection is not possible to lead to productive counter-hegemonic practices.

Melawa Devi's actions, which have been documented in fragments, stand her as an organic intellectual. Music can play role among and across divides and link with intimate politics (Stirr, 2017).

A tiny book titled Swodeshi Megaphone ke Naye Recordoki Talika (List of New National Megaphone Recorded Songs) was published in June, 1935 from Culcutta. In this book Ustaj Ulauddin Khan Saheb has published two songs of Melawa Devi. The book appeals music lovers to buy the records. The manager eulogizes the songs recorded including two songs by Melawa Devi and requests to buy. At the end, on the cover page, the manager writes,

आप जितने बार इस रेकार्डको बजायेंगे

The more you play this record,  
उतनी ही बार यह रेकार्ड बजानेकी दिल चाहता है...

The more you wish to listen...

यदि आपने य रेकार्ड नहीं खरिदो तो पछुताइयेगा,

If you don't buy it, you'll regret,  
आप यह रेकार्ड अरु जरु खरीदिये ।

You must buy and listen sweet songs. (p.10)

One of the songs recorded and documented in the tiny handbook was written by the freedom fighter of Nepali democratic movement Sukraraj Shastri. The song by Sastri was incorporated at the last page in his masterpiece Sworgako Darbar (The Palace of Heaven) published in 1886 BS from Culcutta in author's own cost and the song was recorded by Melawa Devi with her vocal and music composition. The song "Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho" was published in the promotional book as well, Swodeshi Megaphone ke Naye Recordoki Talika along with Melawa Devi's next song "Sawari Mero Relaima" with title "Pahala Rukh" and "Dusara Rukh":

### पहला रुख (The First Song)

न घरलाई घर कहिन्छ, नारी नै दरबार हो ।

Home cannot be a home female is the palace  
एक मात्रै धर्मसाधन, नारी घरको द्वार हो ।

Only pious home's entrance is the female  
घरको देवी नारी नै हो, नारी घरको ज्योति हो

The goddesses of light of the home is female  
राज्यलक्ष्मी नारी नै हो, नारी मणिक मोती हो ।

The ruling goddess shining dimond is the female  
राजलक्ष्मि तुल्य भै, राजमन्त्री तुल्य भै ।

Figure alike a worshiping minister goddess  
स्वर्ग राज्य भोगको, प्राप्त हुनु सुयोगको ।

Female makes possible to attain heavily state (p. 19)

### दूसरा रुख (The Second Song)

सवारी मेरो रेलैमा

My travel on the train

झन् पर जान्छु लैलै झन् माया लाग्छ बरिलै

The more I move the more I love  
सानुमा सानु लैलै कुसुमे रुमाल बरी लै,

Small & small kusume handkerchief  
धोइदिने कोही छैन, बिरानु देशमा लैलै

Nobody is there to clean  
मै मरी जाउला बरी लै,

I may die in the alien place  
रोइ दिने कोहि छैन...

Nobody is there to cry for me  
सवारी मेरो रेलैमा ।

My travel on the train. (Our trans. p. 20)

The song "Sawari Mero Relaima" (My Travel on the Train) is obviously composed by Melawa Devi and recorded with her own music composition and vocal (Prakash, 91). How did she record the song "Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha" (Home Cannot Be a Home), the song published by Shastri in his book Sworgako Darbar is a question of mystery? Whether she took the song from his book and sang with her music composition or Shastri met her in Culcutta and gave her the song with the book and requested her to record it remained an unanswered question, which most probably never could answer. Nevertheless, after Melawa Devi recorded songs like these two and some others, i.e. "Chhani Chhani Rasa Line, Papi Bhawara" that carry counter-hegemonic consciousness,

छानी छानी रस लिने

Bumblebee sucks juice  
पेट कालो मुख कालो

Black in heart and face

पापी भमरा डुलुवा भमरा

Wandering deceptive bumble bee

कहिले यसमा कहिले उसमा

Sometimes here then there

जहाँ छ कोपिला त्यहाँ छ भमरा

Wherever buds Bumblebee is there. (Our trans.)

Ratna Das Prakash was one of the contemporary singers to meet Melawa Devi in Culcutta. But he was not sure about the connection between Melawa Devi and Sukraraj Shastri. But they were contemporary and active as freedom fighters at the verge of Rana regime. Prakash narrates the pathetic ending of Melawa Devi in India. It was not possible to earn by singing in India but Melawa Devi had skill of teaching music. Earning livelihood through music class, she began to record songs in her own music composition. Prakash writes,

Radio Nepal classical music program announced Melawa Devi as a singer who recorded Nepali song after Mitra Sen but it was not true. Mitra Sen recorded his first song in 1994 BS whereas Melawa Devi recorded her first song in 1991 BS. In Nepal women singers would be treated low and people like Bhakta Krishna could accept women singers. So, Melawa Devi had to struggle in abroad for livelihood..Nobody from her relatives were present to take her deadbody. Her adopted son Ramchandra Gupta had to take her dead body from the hospital and her awards, musical instruments all were burnt with her in burning ghat. We can hear her vocal from her records, which is the only evidence of her existence left to us. Nobody appears to sing such pathetic stories of the women singers, why? (Prakash, 2039 BS: 26, 27).

Her records, that carried counter-hegemonic consciousness, were sold 5000 copies then (Diksshit). She had got award in Ilahabad music festival and honored with gold medal and 'Thumariki Rani' title (Shrestha, 2078 BS). When Melawa Devi left

the Rana palace, Shastri had published his book Sworgako Darbar in the same year from Culcutta. Shastri was born in 1950 BS and contemporary of Melawa Devi. He gave speech in 1995 in Indrachok and was imprisoned. After two years in 1997 he was hanged as capital punishment.

Melawa Devi had recorded Shastri's song "Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho" four years before he was hanged. Shukraraj Shastri's book Sworgako Darbar speaks for the rights of women. It even advocates the widow marriage, which was a bold affirmation a century ago in the Rana era. Shastri's book further carries the voices against child marriage, stigmatization towards widows, and domestic violence. Women of all classes, including single mother, for him were like goddess Laxmi. He writes, "Women and goddess Laxmi are same; women are bright Laxmi of the house" (p. 44). He further writes, "Let the path open to the widows who wish to marry" (p. 47). He claims, "Unless women's condition is not improved, the country can never celebrate its wellbeing" (p. 46). He cites many examples where women rulers performed far better than male rulers (p. 64). Shastri's book ends with the song, "Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho" (p. 109). Melawa Devi recorded such a bold feminist song then.

Most of the songs Melawa Devi recorded from India carry women's voice – the subaltern consciousness. "Hay Mero Pardeshi Pritam Chhadera Janu Bho" (My Aline Lover You Left Me Alone and Got Lost) is another example:

हाई मेरो परदेशी प्रीतम छाडेर जानुभो

Hey my alien lover you left me alone

हरियो भन्नु तुलसी पत्र पहेलो सुरती

The green is Tulashi leaves yellow tobacco

परन्तुसम्म नहुने भए के गर्नु पिरती

If does not last long what use of this love  
(My trans.)

Melawa Devi was one of the most versatile and liberated artists in Nepali music history. She would compose lyric, give vocal to her songs with her own music



composition and record in her own cost. She was a renowned music instructor as well. So, she was more liberated than other female singers. She could express her inner autonomy and freedom in her own words, music and vocal. However, she lived a turbulent life with transition of hegemony and counter-hegemony.

After Chandra Shamsher lost his power, Melawa Devi faced further critical time. She neither could remain at the palace nor got comfortable environment at her husband house. Her two sons died in their early childhood. She sold her house she got as gift from Chandra Shamsher and shifted to Calcutta, India. She was already popular in Nepal, even among Newar community. She had given performances singing a song “Bhoka Jaya Manu Jaki Sita” (People Dying in Hunger) in Nepal Bhasa. The song represents predicament of 1990 BS earthquake dedicating to the dead and wounded, and homeless in the music composition of her husband Bhakta Krishna.

Melawa Devi began to participate various musical functions in India by changing her name as Sumalanda Devi. In Islamabad, she participated Thumari Music Festival and got a title of Thumariki Rani (Darnal, 2038: 60). She recorded 5 modern songs, 2 hymns and few Newari songs marking as the first Nepali singer to record Nepali songs. She kept on visiting Kanpur, Islamabad, Calcutta and Delhi for musical performances and gatherings.

The song “Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho” in Sukraraj Sastri’s word and her music composition was taken as a pioneer one including her recorded other songs in her own words and music compositions “Thapana Thali”, “Kaiyau Phoolbari”, “Yo Jindagiko Ke Bharosa”, “Maya Mari Nisthurile”, “Auna Basam Piyari Mirmire Jhyalaima”, “Hay Mero Pardesi pritam”, “Bhukampa Tras.” According to Bulu Mukarung, Melawa Devi had also eulogized of Judda Shamsher, which could be available in the Nepali music archive (Nepali Sangeet ko Abhilekh 115).

Melawa Devi recorded songs from Calcutta India in late 1930s and early 40s (in around 1985 BS) from His Master Voice.

She drew attention of writers including Swami Prapannacharya, Ramsaran Darnal, Hiranya Bhojpure, Kamal Mani Dikchhit, etc. How many awards and honors she got during her life is still a mystery. But, living in India, Melawa Devi served to Nepali music. Whoever visited India then, they would visit her in Calcutta. Master Ratna Das Prakash and Pravin Dhakal would meet her as a mentor. Melawa Devi might have given voice to many other songs. As we hear, she had given her vocal to Newari popular song “Rajamati Kumati” too. In 2077/78 BS, her statue in Rumjatar has been established, though it looks late. The subaltern communities celebrate her deeds and songs as their voice from within (Shrestha & Shrestha, 2024).

### 3. CONCLUSION

A century ago, speaking for the subaltern communities, with counter-hegemonic consciousness was a high risk. The hegemonic power bloc would exercise rigid forms of censorship. The contemporary of Melawa Devi, freedom fighter Sukraraj Shastri was hanged after he published a book *Sworgako Darbar* in 1986 BS and gave a public speech in Kathmandu. He was imprisoned and hanged in 1997 BS. Before he was hanged, Melawa Devi dared to record his song “Na Gharlai Ghar Kahinchha, Nari Nai Darbar Ho” and some other songs that carry counter-hegemonic consciousness. A hegemonic singer of the Rana palace appeared as a singer of the subaltern communities at the end of her life. The four stages of life struggle of Melawa Devi show that a status quo maintainer, the vat singer of the palace, can be transformed into organic intellectuals and counter traditional intellectuals. It means, it is clear that, one should be be stigmatized by looking one stage of someone’s life. Anyone can be a true intellectual in terms of their role in crucial time as Melawa Devi proved at the last stage in her life. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasizes the issues of representation and self-representation with reference to the women, tribal, and working class and agrees the failure of democratic

countries like India to recognize the histories and struggles of woman, tribal, and working class in South Asian society (Young 351), Nepali intellectuals and historians have failed to document the contribution of women and other oppressed communities. One of the examples is Melawa Devi, whose historic contribution has been left outside the mainstream history. According to Antonio Gramsci 'the intellectuals' as a distinct social category independent of class is a myth. Philosophically, they connect with the proposition that "all men are philosophers" because "all men are potentially intellectuals in the sense of having an intellect and using it, but not all are intellectuals by social function" (p. 3) because to be an intellectual in true sense, one should play role of a permanent persuader. For him, "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals" (p. 8, 9). Melawa Devi performed a role of organic intellectual by recording songs that carry counter-hegemonic consciousness in the era of despotic Rana regime. The socio-political power relation was rigid towards the subaltern communities then. Melawa Devi's four stages of life and her selected songs, however, carry her autobiographical intersectional concepts of hegemony, counter-hegemony, and subaltern consciousness. Her image as eulogizer at the second stage of her life when she was a singer of the palace faded away after she recorded series of songs that carry counter-hegemonic consciousness fulfilling the historical gap a century ago.

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