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Portrayal of Socio-Political Consciousness in Dalits in Reference to Sharad Poudel's *Tapan*

Dr. Rudra Bahadur Charmakar*

Abstract

The article attempts to explore the socio-political consciousness in Dalits for their rights, equality and liberation. Fundamentally, the article studies Sharad Poudel's social novel "Tapan" (2073 BS) from the Marxist concept of class consciousness connecting with Dalit consciousness. For this purpose, the researcher collects and uses the various criticism and literature to explore how the Dalit literary texts portray the Dalit issues, problems, political and economic disparity, their protest and resolutions based on theoretical and critical analysis. The select novel's plots, characters and the major themes also reflect the socio-political consciousness in Dalits. Moreover, the article explores that class consciousness develops within the characters and they stand together in the same mission and set goal for their liberation. And, the ideologies and political consciousness make them more responsible for their people and society. The novel as Dalit literature depicts multiple-layers of socio-economic, cultural and political problems of Dalits and their protests against it. The researcher employs the qualitative methods with descriptive and analytical approach.

Keywords: Class consciousness, dalit consciousness, dalit literature, discrimination, oppression, and liberation.

Introduction

The present article illustrates socio-political consciousness of Dalits and their protest against feudal society based on the literary text written on Dalit issues and subjects. The literature written on Dalits primarily focuses on the Dalits' socio-political condition, poverty, their sufferings and efforts to rid out from the condition. The literature through its characters and plots attempts to portray the ground reality of Dalits and their given roles in the society. Mostly, Dalit characters encounter with layers of discrimination and oppression in different spheres of daily lives. They are mostly excluded in socio-political and economic activities. Similarly, caste-based discrimination and untouchability they face in their daily lives illustrates the social brutality and inhumane praxis committed against them.

The literary texts written on Dalit subjects and issues put the Dalit problems at the center and portray their pain, sufferings and protest for rights, equality, justice and liberation. In this context, Sharad Poudel's social novel *Tapan* (2073 BS) pictures the numerous problems of Dalits and their struggles to overcome them. Mainly, the novel

*Dr. Charmakar is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, Patan Multiple Campus, T.U., Lalitpur, Nepal. Email: rudranepali@gmail.com

presents the protagonist Likhe's numerous social problems, poverty, landlessness, unemployment, foreign laborer, sufferings and political awareness portrayed through many plots and narratives. However, the article seeks the answers of some pertinent questions such as what are the major problems and issues of Dalits? Why do the literary characters struggle against the socio-political system? And, how the socio-political and economic liberation are possible? Thus, the article attempts to explore the major problems of Dalits raised through literary texts; to examine the protest of Dalit characters for the socio-political liberation; and to explore the potential approaches for the liberation of Dalits through literary text.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The article employs the qualitative methods with descriptive and analytical approach. The researcher has chosen Sharad Poudel's *Tapan* as primary text whereas numbers of literary criticism, articles, reviews and theoretical texts are used as reference materials. Furthermore, the researcher has applied Marxist concept of class consciousness connecting to Dalit consciousness as theoretical perspective to study and analyze the primary text.

The Marxist concept of class consciousness primarily discusses on the awareness by a social class of its own position and interests within the economic and social structure. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Manifesto of Communist Party* believe that class consciousness is crucial for the working class (the proletariat/laborers) to recognize their exploitation by the ruling class (the bourgeoisie/Masters) and to develop a unity and collective effort and solidarity (09). This awareness, the working class would understand the capitalist system's inherent inequalities and injustices. This consciousness would lead to a united struggles against rulers' oppression, ultimately aiming to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a classless and communist society. It involves not only an understanding of one's class position but also the mobilization and organization for political action to change the socio-economic system.

Similarly, the concept of Dalit consciousness denotes the awareness expressed through different medium for the rights, equality and liberation of Dalits. To Sharankumar Limbale, Dalit consciousness is "[...] the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus... Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery" (32). It is a pertinent issue of Dalit literature which is different from mainstream literature. The literature delineates it from other literature. Hence, the article applies these above-mentioned theoretical concepts as tools to study and analyze the primary text and information critically.

Discussion and Interpretation

The researcher selects Sharad Poudel's *Tapan* as primary text. It is introduced as social novel which depicts the contemporary Nepali society, status of Dalits, socio-political context and the socio-political movements of Nepal. The novel commences with the protagonist Likhe's travel back to Nepal from Delhi. He has an enthusiasm, zeal, passion and energy to

work for the community, society and nation. His patriotism is expressed through his love and responsibility for the nation. He expresses his wish to dropping his sweat and blood for the betterment and development of the nation. The political context and atmosphere of the contemporary Nepal creates the hindrances to work for the nation. It is also believed that the ruling class hardly makes the good political environment for the working-class people. But the rulers (ruling class) believes that the socio-political setting favors and works for them. The consciousness is an inner realization to take the action. In this context, Ritzer articulates:

Talking about the class (and false) consciousness, Marx was talking not about the individual consciousness but about the consciousness of the class as a whole. Furthermore, the concepts of class consciousness and false consciousness are not, in Marx's hands, static but are rather dynamic ideas systems that make sense only in terms of social change and development. (67)

Mostly, the rulers have false consciousness that their workers and societies favor them in any cost. Nevertheless, workers do not stand by masters because of their class differences. The political environment as portrayed in the novel *Tapan* is not favorable for youths. During Maoist insurgency in Nepal, people are insecure by both rebellions and the state forces. Both sides undertake that the situation is in their favor. The state force arrests common civilians and imprisons them accusing as Maoist cadres. In the novel, a youth is brutally tortured in the police custody. The narrator states:

“Oh Bullshit! Why are not you speaking? Do you want to die in this custody?” Inside the police custody, police personnel, masking the face, spoke looking at Likhe who was tied with old wooden chair.

“I have already told you, I do not know much about it”.

“Bullshit, are you still lying? I know how to get the information from you.... You will tell the truth when you get torture”, the police personnel attacked to Likhe. (trans. Poudel 07)

Before reaching the village, the protagonist of the novel, Likhe is arrested under an accusation of being a Maoist cadre. Police authority seems reluctant to listen his clarification. None is informed about Likhe's arrival to Nepal. “You know brother; I knew that you are communist by the books of your bag. Nobody will believe you as you are not affiliated to revolutionary communist” (trans. Poudel 11). Likhe has some books related to communism and communist ideologies. Therefore, he is arrested and brutally tortured in the police custody. He tells the truth but the police do not believe him.

Books on communist ideologies make the readers more revolutionary and conscious about the rights, duty, position, politics and contemporary needs of the society. Likhe is arrested due to the books carried in his baggage. In bourgeoisie society, proletariats and communists are sidelined by the state. “The hegemony of the bourgeoisie really does embrace the whole society; it really does attempt to organize the whole of society in its own

interests” (Lukacs 65). The bourgeoisie controls the economy, politics, and society and controls over the system as well. They use the system as per their interest. Thus, Likhe becomes a victim by state ideological apparatus though he is not a Maoist cadre.

In the novel, Likhe’s parents are uninformed about his arrival and arrest by the police. They do not receive any letters for a long time. They are still suffered with poverty but Likhe also does not send money to his parents. His parents cannot come out of financial crisis. Here, the poverty stands as the most challenging problem of every Dalit family. In this connection, Ritzer quotes about Marx and Engels’ imaginative communist society:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (64)

The communist society is expected to be equitable as Marx and Engels imagine. The imagination and the reality of bourgeoisie society are two different parts. The rich become richer and the poor become poorer. The reality is reflected in *Tapan* how the situation of Likhe’s parents has been. The conversation between Likhe’s parents reveals, “Shit, the cigarette is about to finish, could not survive even a single ship. I wanted to search in your body. You do not have cigarette most of the time...” (trans. Poudel 23). The scarcity of cigarette and food signifies the poverty. They struggle to meet two ends of the day. Moreover, the caste and gender-based discriminations still prevail in socio-cultural practices. There are certain boundaries and limitations of caste and gender issues. The consciousness level increase due to political activities at the community level. As Ritzer states:

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite form of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general processes of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (20-21)

The relations of productions generate an economic foundation that links the political phenomenon and develops the society consciousness. Likhe’s parents do not have good economic foundation; therefore, they have to work for the feudal. The novel raises the issues of caste, culture, gender, political empowerment through consciousness. The consciousness erases all the limitations related to caste, culture and the society. A feudal character, Rijal’s niece is a politically empowered girl assigned to work in the Parbat district. In the novel, she introduces:

“Yes, I am Namrata.”

“Which district are you from?” Comrade Shashi questioned to Namrata.

“I am from Parbat but I have not visited and worked in Parbat, Comrade. The status of our organization is not good there.” Namrata told about the organizational status of Parbat.

“You are right, Namrata Comrade, we are weak in the district from inception. So that, I have deputed you, Namrata,” Shashi smiled. (trans. Poudel 78)

Namrata is transferred to Parbat as an in-charge of the Communist League. It is an important task allotted to a young girl as an in-charge in political turmoil. It illustrates the women's empowerment and competency in the political system. Her first responsibility is to release Likhe from police custody which she accomplishes successfully.

The novel also portrays that Dalit women are abused and sexually exploited by Rijal Bista (non-Dalit) frequently. It shows how the local feudal exploits Dalit women by influencing them with money and materialistic things. The novel reads:

“Would you have time to go to bazār with me, Kānchi?” Rijal looked at the face of Chandre's wife.

“If you take me, I will go. It's my pleasure to walk with you, is not it?” Chandre's wife expresses her excitement.

“If so, let's go early in the morning tomorrow,” Chandre's wife waved her head with acceptance. (trans. Poudel 68)

Rijal Bista exploits Chandre's wife sexually and physically. He offers clothes and other gifts to impress her for illicit relation. Both of them pretend of not being familiar with each other. It denotes how the bourgeoisie exploits the workers. There are crucial differences in understanding these two classes. Here, Ritzer asserts, “The bourgeoisie can never transform its false consciousness into true class consciousness, this is possible only for the proletariat” (66). The form of exploitation changes but not completely eradicates. They have been in illicit relationship for long time and they elope from the village thereafter.

The novel also reveals the layers of problems of the Dalits. It is discovered that Dalit literature has different language and messages compared to that of mainstream literature. In Limbale's words, “The reality of Dalit literature is distinct, and so is the language of this reality. It is the uncouth-impolite language of the Dalits. It is spoken language of Dalit. The language does not recognize cultivated gestures and grammar...” (33). The concept is also reflected in the novel. The narrator expresses:

Oh, Likhe's mother, listen outside “what is *kaṭuwāl* (the messenger of the then time) announcing for”; Chauri, putting the millet pudding into his mouth, sent her outside.

I do not know...do you want little bit pudding? Chauri asked to her husband.

No, it's okay for me. I have not slept well due to cold; I have stomach aching from morning. Chauri belches with bad smell (trans. Poudel 156).

Dalit community does not have their vernacular language and cultural practices. Rather it borrows the same language and culture from society and practices it accordingly. The community generally uses rough and impolite words with harsh tone.

The political revolution aims to bring the changes in different spheres of society. Mostly, they try to clean the evil practices of society. Their efforts are both theoretical and practical to eliminate malpractices such as the practices of the Maoist insurgency. In the novel, Maoist insurgency reaches to the climax and they surf evil-practices. The state's security forces frequently counter them. Regarding the social transformation, Wright argues:

[...] explanatory agenda concerns the potential for progressive social change in the rules of the game and emancipatory transformation of the game itself, it is critical to move beyond a primary concern with only the moves in the game. Individuals live their lives in class structures that shape their interests and subjectivity... (125)

The bottom-line of Marxist philosophy believes to emancipate the class system in socialism where working class people can equally survive. Maoist insurgency as portrayed in the text tries to eliminate caste system and discrimination against Dalits and other marginalized people. Political cadres work for the overall transformation of the society. However, it is difficult to survive as a revolutionary political cadre because politics is a process of being conscious and making conscious to the wider society with the political ideologies, principles, programs and agenda. The cadres should convince the people with their activities and strategies. In this context, Lefebvre articulates, "It is the role of ideologies to secure the assent of the oppressed and exploited. Ideologies represent the latter to themselves in such a way as to wrest from them, in addition to material wealth, their spiritual acceptance of this situation, even their support" (qtd. in Ritzer 67). Although ideologies have independent existence, their effect on the members of oppressed class is the most relevant issue. Likhe, as a communist cadre grows under the orientation of Sunam, and ponders in the police custody. He does not talk to Namrata frankly for long time. As Namrata speaks:

Comrade, I am Namrata. I have already told you that I had met you once before... I have recently come here to work as per Party's decision. Since I came here, it came to know about you... "why are not you speaking to me, comrade?" ...Likhe did not speak rather he dropped the tears from eyes.

"I am listening to you. I am imprisoned here for four-five months. How did you know about me?" (trans. Poudel 175)

The police release Likhe by completing legal procedure. Then, Likhe and Namrata both plan to expand their political activities in the district. As Likhe does not speak openly; Namrata asks him, "Comrade Likhe, why are you silent from long, why are not you speaking... What to speak? I do not have anything to share..." (trans. Poudel 181). Likhe shares everything about the incident. Since, the political agenda and programs stand as the most important elements of political organization. Moreover, ideology works as guiding principle of

political party and it sets the agenda and programs to reach the people. The mass is the foundation of Communist Party. In this connection, Ritzer states:

An ideological system functions to alter the thoughts and actions of members of the oppressed class... ideologies serve to foster the exploitation of the proletariat. Of course, ideologies do not function in a vacuum; they operate through agents who carry out their dictates. Thus, ideologies affect the actions of agents of the ruling class, who, in turn, affect the thoughts and actions of the proletariat. (68- 69)

The ideologies determine the ruling directives and guidelines of political parties. In the very moment, Namrata meets her former party cadre, Abhinav, who has been close to her since the beginning. However, they are in different parties. Namrata affiliates with Communist League whereas Abhinav works in Maoist. They have ideological debates at their meeting. The narrator describes:

“Yes, I am here in this party, comrade. I could not blindly support to your social fascist and armed-based struggle”.

“The large territory of country has been under our capture. The people’s war is defeating the pillars of feudal one after another but you are still enjoying there in the orthodox and hypocrite old agenda, comrade Namrata?”...

“Yes, you are right. Comrade Abhinav! We are here and you are also there. Did you quit using the power on ideological friends and people?” (trans. Poudel 203)

Their ideological debate seems satire but meaningful at the same time. Likhe remarks about Abhinav that the radical cadre harms the political parties and collapses the agenda. These two characters affiliate with different political parties; one is liberal communist; the next is radical one. The ideological beliefs differ them. Their political agenda and programs are different. Both of the parties have differences but those cadres fall in deep love affairs. Nothing can separate them from each other. Class and caste consciousness can be observed in daily activities as well. People’s activeness signifies the consciousness about their practical life. Regarding consciousness, Eagleton remarks:

[...] consciousness is clearly *an activity- a practice* which works on that experience to transform it into truth. What sense this makes of ‘reflection’ is then unclear. Lukacs, indeed, wants finally to preserve the idea that consciousness is an active force: in his late work of Marxist aesthetics, he sees artistic consciousness as a creative intervention into the world rather than as a mere reflection of it. (47)

Consciousness is reflected in practical life of characters as well. The characters reflect the consciousness in their ideological understanding. Both Likhe and Namrata work hard to stand the party strong in Parbat. Namrata extends political networks in many rural areas of the district and connects the local cadres in party system. She visits those areas; though, she encounters with many hindrances and sexual abuses from the party cadres. However, she stands bold with deep political consciousness and passion. Namrata presents herself clear on

the agenda, destination and ideology. Likhe also demonstrates his maturity in political and social issues. Namrata and Likhe share many ideological and political perceptions between each other. Both characters are ideologically conscious. In this regard, Eagleton asserts, "...class consciousness is at once a cognitive and ethical development; it may be influenced by, but is not entirely subject to, what develops out of contingent class consciousness" (38). Ideological clarity and knowledge and ethical development are most important aspects of Communist Party under the effect of consciousness.

The political ideology, its implications in practical life and literature are different things. These things have different purposes but they are interlinked. Ideology is a guiding principle practiced to achieve the goal of political parties but literature has multiple purposes. In this context, Eagleton views, "Literature, then, one might say, does not stand in some reflective, symmetrical, one-to-one relation with its object. The object is deformed, refracted, dissolved- reproduced less in the sense that a mirror reproduces its object..." (48). Sometimes, ideology does not demonstrate the object as original as it is. *Tapan* portrays socio-political consciousness with love relations between two inter-caste characters as Tamang-Laudari and Laudari-Darji (Dalit) as well. Meanwhile, the Maoist insurgency and other political movements are also artistically portrayed on it. Namrata longs for her hero, Abhinav. Nevertheless, she comes to hear about his murder by the state army-force. The novel reads:

Yesterday night, Nepal Army entered into the village and captured the rebellions who had seized *Mukhiyā Bā*'s house. Army completed its action within one hour. The rebellions who were there murdered into a single cremation ground. The entire village was terrified; there was not good environment to stay there. So that, I came here, Binay shared news in a single breath (trans. Poudel, 285).

The devastating murder shudders Namrata because her lover is killed in Maoist insurgency. Namrata is stunned at his death because she has been waiting for him. Abhinav leaves her alone in the abyss of uncertainty. She cannot recover for a long time. In the meantime, Likhe takes care of Namrata and wins her heart. The literature emotionalizes people that fiction makes readers more emotional although it embeds imagination more than fact. Readers can visualize the incidents and get emotional in the novel. Eagleton questions:

[...] the question of how far literature is more than a mere reflection of reality brings back to the issues of partisanship... modern writers should do more than merely reflect the despair and ennui of late bourgeois society; they should try to take up a critical perspective on this futility, revealing positive possibilities beyond it. (48)

Literature cannot portray the society as real as it is. Eagleton critiques, "The reflection of a distortion will become a distorted reflection" (49). He opines that the literature should bring and reflect realistic issues rather than fictional ones. However, the literature should not distort the reality. Narrative writings reflect more realistic than fictional. In the novel, Likhe and Namrata work day and night for the betterment of party-life. They become successful to

organize the district level convention, from where Likhe becomes the secretary of District Committee of Communist League, Parbat.

Communists as proletariats do not believe in caste differences and hierarchies. Rather they believe in class division, class conflict and capital. Their slogan is “workers of the world, Unite! (“Preamble” *Communist Manifesto* 1)”. They wish for real change. “This means that it is able to act in such a way as to change reality; in the class consciousness of the proletariat theory and practice coincide and so it can consciously throw the weight of its actions into the scales of history- and this the deciding factor” (Lukacs 69). The class consciousness is the deciding factor in the view of proletariats. Namrata and Likhe work for political strengths. Later on, they also believe that social intermingling reflects the socio-political transformation in the society; so, they decide to get married with the consent of the Party Headquarter. The leader of Communist League announces:

Our two perfect cadres are getting married today. I think our comrades have been working together for years; surely, they have known about each-others’ interest, habits, behaviors and characters. I think, after knowing these all thing, they have reached to the final decision of getting the marriage. The marriage is not only guided to fulfilling the physical and sexual needs.... The marriage has two-three features. First, it is inter-caste marriage. It has own importance...; Second, differences in qualification...; Third, differences in age... (trans. Poudel 341- 342)

Namrata and Likhe start a happy married life together. They seek to change socio-political and ritual practices after their marriage. It is an exemplifying of inter-caste marriage; the novelist presents many social issues and problems and gives solutions of them as well. Marxism believes, “The idea that individuals are activated and manipulated by historical necessity undermines the notion of an idealistic voluntarism of individual as the great shaper of social transformation” (Lanning 42). The social transformation starts from every individual. In this context, Likhe sings a song:

Blood is accepted, labor is accepted, the skill is accepted
But why is not water accepted?
What a custom, what a traditional is it?
Why is discrimination between people? // (trans. Poudel 369)

The song has underlying meaning why Dalits are discriminated and exploited although almost everything is accepted, touched and produced by them. It is a pertinent question to society and state. Critiques such as Eagleton take literature as bourgeois notion of aesthetics as, “Lukacs, like several Marxist critics, is unconsciously surrendering to one bourgeois notion of the ‘aesthetic’– the aesthetic as a mere secondary matter of style and technique” (53). In Eagleton’s view, aesthetics is just a mere style and technique of writings. Presenting the style and technique in literature makes the literature perfect aesthetically. The present novel also ends that Namrata and Likhe surrender with the political agenda after the unification of Communist League and Nepal Communist Party (Maoist). Communist agenda

for them is proved as 'bourgeois notion of aesthetic' ('Section 1' *The Manifesto of Communist Party*). The novel concludes with the socio-political consciousness of the characters.

Conclusion

The article mainly studied Poudel's novel *Tapan* from Marxist concept of class consciousness; and explored that class consciousness develops within the characters stand in the main mission and goal for socio-political liberation. The characters are ideologically oriented and work for the socio-political awareness and betterment of the party, society and nation as a whole. The ideologies and political consciousness make them more responsible for the community and society. The novel as the masterpieces of Dalit literature depicts the multiple-layers of socio-economic, cultural and political problems of Dalits, political intervention and solutions for rights, equality, justice and dignity of Dalits as well. Hence, Arjun Dangle believes that Dalit literature is not a simply literature but it is associated with a movement to bright about change (vii- viii). Therefore, Dalit literature is not mere a literary writing, but part of movement for liberation of entire Dalits of Nepal.

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