Of Self and Polity: Writing Resistance in Dixit's *Madhavi*

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Abstract

Madan Mani Dixit's novel Madhavi *(1983) subtly argues for change in the existing rigid political order of his time by projecting selflarger than the polity. Borrowing a narrative from the Mahabharata, the novelist develops it into a full length novel to point out the cracks in the political system of his time: as a political order, the Panchayat had lost the sense of justice within the first two decades after its promulgation in 1962. Dixit employs Galav and Madhavi as dissenting voice of the age, upholding the spirit of resistance and seeking for transformation in consciousness. The tale from the post-Vedic society serves as an instance to imply the parallel situation of the country that attempts to transcend beyond the contemporary context. In this study, I have approached the novel from the new historicist vantage point to dissect the text in the changing political context of its writing. The paper claims that as a Nepali novel, Dixit's* Madhavi *rewrites the episode of political struggle between the person and polity in an oppressive political order in the 1970s in Nepal when the political self and polity were in tension as the outcome of their struggle for a new order in society. Moving beyond the existing situation, the maestro novelist picks the narrative of Madhavi and Galav from the Mahabharata and sets them in quest of new order in the form of agrarian society from the crumbling order of slavery. Dixit's work critiques the limitations of both self and polity in leaving the impact of one on the other, thereby exposing the brutal treatment and fall of an oppressive political order. This paper reads historical reality of the 1970s in Dixit's* Madhavi *in which the author writes the political history of Nepal.*

Keywords: Nepali history, Panchayat, self, polity, agency, resistance

Birth of Critical Reasoning

Maestro Nepali novelist, Madan Mani Dixit (1923-2019) frames a political narrative through the renewed treatment of mythical character of Madhavi in his 1983

Madhavi. He writes the tale of post-Vedic society functioning on the foundation of slavery as the basic mode of production. The novel revolves around the journey of Madhavi and Galav, capturing their struggle to obtain four Shyam Karna (black eared) horses to pay off the debt of Sage Vishwamitra. As adamant disciple to his Guru, Galav sets the condition that he agrees to the declaration of completion of his learning in the twelve domains of the time at the *ashram*, provided that the Sage consents to receive the disciple's offering. The doubtful youth grows so critical towards his own teacher that he wants to pay the price for his learning in order to exercise his knowledge in future on his own terms. As per Vishwamitra's demand, he agrees to find four horses required for sacrifice to abolish slavery as an institution and as a mode of production from the society. In quest of the horses, he reaches his childhood friend, Suparna Nagjeya's place and then to the King Yayati of Ahichchhatra. Then, both Galav and Madhavi get tied to each other in quest of the horses.

Vishwamitra develops the sense of critical reasoning in Galav who later exercises the ability to make sense of his own circumstances in life and the world. As the mandatory attribute of modern agent, critical rationalismplaces a thinking subject in a position to examine the relationship between the self and the governing polity. Dixit identifies 'self-sacrifice' as the primary effect of critical reasoning which leads to formation of an intervening agency in any society. The transition from slave-based mode of production to a new era of agriculture affirms similar transition for Nepal in the 1980s. The text genuinely upholds the preparedness on both Madhavi and Galav's part, implying the need of interventionist agents in the repressive order of the Panchayat. As the author deeply associates himself with Galav, the protagonist's quest for new order signifies the latent goal in the text. In addition, Madhavi seeks after her autonomy by assisting Galav in obtaining the four horses: she readies herself for self-sacrifice to break free from the dictations of Halimak. Her quest yields into four valiant sons who later unite the Subcontinent. The novelist seeks for social change by spotlighting the dissenting voices and rewriting a classical narrative of resistance through the contemporary lens of Nepali society.

What is the ulterior motive of knowledge if viewed from the perspective of modernity in general and social change in specific? For Dixit, the answer emerges in the self-actualization of Galav and Madhavi who push the motor of social change through the transformation of their image into a major icon of self-sacrifice. However, the answer to such question varies from person to person. As Michel Foucault writes, "Everyone has their own way of changing, or, what amounts to the same thing, of perceiving that everything changes. In this matter, nothing is more arrogant than to try to dictate to other" (444). As organic structure, each society explores its unique way of raising the voice of dissent. Dixit revolts against the tyrannical Panchayat system of his time by making Galav his mouthpiece in that the critical rationality born in him pushes the whole narrative ahead. Such reading reveals the purpose of creation of such political narrative in the contemporary society. As one of the victims of the repressive political system of his time, Dixit critiques the system in the novel by bringing self and polity in confrontation.

Sanskrit Diction, Sublimation, and Social Evolution

The complexity arises in the reading of *Madhavi* as Dixit's seminal master narrative in Nepali literature. The complex framing of the story puzzles the readers for two simple reasons: firstly, the plot begins to move ahead before the lead characters are fully established in the text; and secondly, Galav's journey requires the intervention of Lord Vishnu himself. The novelist assigns Suparna Nagjeya with the responsibility to render support Galav in the most difficult moment of his life. As a modern novel, the text has attracted the attention of serious scholars who have examined it from various standpoints. The complexity of language of the text has always puzzled the critics. Critics have approached the text from the perspectives of the use of diction to employment of biographical resources for sublimation of the inner complexities. Similarly, the issues of class division and revolt of slaves have paved road to give Marxist reading to the texts. Also, some of the serious studies have focused on the sociological evolution and transition of ages in the text as well.

Often cited as the most complex novel, *Madhavi* makes use of Sanskrit diction. The use of ancient grass like *dukul* gives special impact in the story. Similarly, Dixit passionately employs the geographical description of the Subcontinent from the Mahabharata: the names take the readers to a strange world. Also, he has listed the words in a glossary at the end for the comfort of the readers. Still, the readers do not get the whole picture of the text even after consulting the list. Ram Lohani does not find it adequate in that the list does not cover all the complex vocabularies (vii). The geographical details, the names of the grains, the post-Vedic clothes, and the rivers are written in the words of the time, resulting in complexity in understanding the gist. Furthermore, Devendra Bhattarai points out the linguistic incomprehensibility in the text, arguing for the need to turn the text into the language people can comfortably grasp hold of (n. pag.). Linguistically speaking, the use of vocabulary puts general readers at a loss. So, both Lohani and Bhattarai show their concern towards the use of Sanskrit vocabularies in Nepali novel.

Like language, the biographical resources of the author have been found at the center of the text as well. Such resources help the author make the text the most authentic one while simultaneously purging the overburdening oppression from the polity. Examining the nature of psychological impact in Dixit's writing, Ram Paudel identifies the repressed content being sublimated through the revolt of Madhavi and Galav in Dixit (26). Paudel reads the author's life and times from the perspectives of childhood memories. In the comprehensive survey, he locates Dixit's encounter with the world and the people as they appear in his writings. Even Dixit narrates the scene behind the text as a political shock. He chose writing novel to self-immolation. He recalls:

> I chose December 15, 1976 to self-immolate by sprinkling petrol on my body at the traffic beat in front of the Southern Gate to the Narayanhiti Royal Palace. At that time many Buddhist monks were self-immolating for the cause of military intervention in Southern Vietnam and democracy in Sri Lanka. Perhaps, those incidents may have inspired me towards this.
>
> That morning on December 15, I had different state of mind. I thought self-immolation was more emotional and less objective. Nagendra Prasad Rijal and

> Radha Prasad Ghimire had wronged against me. Why should I punish myself?
> I asked myself and thought it would be injustice upon myself. I had argument
> within. Finally, I convinced myself, "They have shut down my newspaper. They
> cannot snatch away my pen and break it." (n. pag.)

The novelist asserts the suppression of the political system and his psychological
reaction to it. Emotionally carried away, he could have ended his life in vain; however,
he successfully saved himself by sublimating the desire of self-harm into a beautiful tale.
He undeniably grasps the myth to weave a tale of political tension and self-realization of
actors.

Various other readings focus on the formation of class and consequent revolts,
paving road for new orders. Rajendra Subedi critically assesses Vishwamitra's attitude
towards slavery in his Marxist analysis and explores that the Sage enslaves his own
disciple, Galav. As he exposes Vishwamitra's inner motive,

> Vishwamitra who plots to hold a yagna tofree slaves to set the society free from
> the existing circumstances has his reactionary society revealed to the readers in
> the text. Vishwamitra who preaches socialism in words and follows imperialism
> and feudalism in practice has become a victim of intellectual opportunism.
> Confused between deeply seated feudalism and the emergent practices of
> socialism, Vishwamitra utilizes the opportunity to meet his own interest. (209)

Subedi seeks to posit the teacher and his student at two ends of the same spectrum of
power structure where the weaker serves the stronger. Hrishiraj Baralargues Vishwamitra
does not have a genuine intention of social transformation: "In the beginning, it appears
that Vishwamitra is in favor of abolishing slavery. However, Vishwamitra's reality is
revealed in the end of the novel. This is the significant part of the novel. Vishwamitra's
real face appears here. All in grey, Vishwamitra forgets everything seeing Madhavi before
him" (171). The Sage assigns Galav with the herculean task to make his goal of obtaining
Madhavi possible. Additionally, Subedi argues that the post-Vedic society treated women
and cattle as goods. Yayati follows the same norm when he offers Madhavi as a gift
to Galav: "Yayati's rein is in the post-Vedic period. Women and cattle were treated as
commodity of exchange in the time" (Subedi 211). The text upholds the power and its
play as the governing theme.

Organized attempts at social change result in revolution, while as organic whole,
society possesses in itself the inner potential of self-configuration. Kul Prasad Koirala
and Hari Prasad Silwal identify sociological evolution as the primary dynamics of the
society in the text. Koirala writes: "In *Madhavi*, Dixit has based the whole narrative for
formation of his thought on a story told to an arrogant and firm Prince Duryodhan as a
classical example to make him understand the point and presents the post-Vedic contours
of eastern society through modern anthropological and sociological rendering" (111).
Stating the boarder context for the myth, he sees the significance of happenings in one era
for the people in entirely different era. Similarly, dissecting the intense picture of slavery
from the text, Silwal identifies the social depiction of post-Vedic society in the novel. He
evaluates:

> Dixit has very critically depicted the society based on slavery. The novel
> historically mirrors the division of labor in the ancient society, the ownership of

a few upon such system and the formation of the class of slaves. Slavery is the most torturous form of class division where some people own the capital while others become proletariat, get tied in slave houses like cattle, and get treated like commodity of exchange in market. (77)

Silwal's reading reconciles Subedi and Baral on the one hand and Koirala on the other. As the power institution and its brutal exercise of power on individual subjects, slavery paves ground for its own collapse of the system as such in that it crosses the norms of justice and social welfare. The formation of class lays ground for the new age of social system based on agriculture.

Madhavi also signals the historical transition from one age to the other because an age devoid of justice always crumbles into pieces to let a new one to replace the old one. Both revolution and evolution subtly claim about such transition. Ram Lohani critically observes the role of historical transition in the text. As he concludes,

The writer has given a narrative shape to the thirst for freedom in human heart in the Vedic times in the novel. The novelist has attempted to show the prototype of the revolt of slaves under the leadership of Spartacus in ancient Rome in the Indian Subcontinent. In addition, Madhavi documents the transition of society from women at center to men at center and tyrannical monarchy based on agriculture. (vii)

The uprising of slaves helps set a particular direction in the formation of new social order based on agricultural mode of production. To Lohani, this historical shift also marks the fall of matriarchal order in society to make space for the patriarchy to set itself aground.

The existing studies on Dixit's *Madhavi* basically focus on exploring linguistic complexity, biographical resources, tension between the guru and the disciple or men and women, slave uprising, class division, social evolution, and historical transition from one form of social order to invention of entirely a different one. The textual scholarship delves into the realities of post-Vedic societies that aspired to transform either on their own or through the intervention of a powerful agency. At times, Sages like Vishwamitra initiated the process of change as such. Contemporary scholarship on the text particularly is engaged on the social reality of the distant past, ignoring the organized atrocities in the then polity. This paper reads the novel in the backdrop of historical realities of the 1970s in Nepal in order to see the political tension between the personal aspiration for liberty, equality and dignity, and oppression of the state towards the curtailment of personal freedom of expression. Dixit selects a tale of the Mahabharata to weave a parallel story of modern mode of resistance in which the self and polity confront each other.

New Historicist Reading

This study rereads the novel in the context of Nepali politics in the 1970s. The oppressive forces promoted through the partyless Panchayat System that King Mahendra promulgated in 1959 had adverse impact on the self of the people in the time. A new historicist reading assumes that the literary or cultural productions carry the national, political history in the form of creative expression. The study derives the fundamental key concepts like self, agency, and polity from Foucault and Foucauldian critical thinkers like Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallengerto examine the ways Dixit employs

the historical circumstances of his time as resource in *Madhavi*. As Stephen Greenblatt argues,

> …the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creators or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange. (12)

Dixit's own narrative regarding the time has immensely helped the researcher understand the context of writing. Like Foucault, Dixit also takes the materialist standpoint to view the social configuration as the outcome of necessary relations arising from tensions in power network. The self continually attempts to shape the polity, while the polity also coerces on the self. Actually, both of them posit in a state of continual tension, whereby shaping the other and getting shaped by the other.

New historicist reading provides a valid model of reading documents of creative domains like literature to analyze the social relations and the power networks in the society under examination. Such critic goes deep into the core of the society by digging into the literary texts. For instance, Catherine Gallenger views that New Historicist rereads the political and sociological aspects of life in literature to find out the issues revolving around marginality and negativity (43) so as to bring about a large transformation in the life of the people. In this sense too, such reading puts critic in a position to view the issues from the perspective of change and justice. Having Marxist insight in the backdrop of such reading, the makers of change get due position and the dialectic reasoning serves as the key way of viewing the power relations in the age.

Self and Polity: Writing Resistance in Dixit

Dixit's *Madhavi* (1983) presents the tension between the self and the state in which each dictates upon the essence of the other. The state requires updating itself with the changing ethos of the people who form the inner core of any society; however, the stagnant rulers who represent the collective body of the political control of the state do not allow the new spirit of society to enter into their consciousness and the mechanism of the state. Then, the stress begins to collect at the underlying structure until it reaches fissures in the 'so called' perfect social order. The author has brought up a parallel tale in the novel that narrates the quest of Galav and Madhavi for four black eared horses in order to pay Gurudakshina to Sage Vishwamitra because the Sage wants to organize a jnagya to dismantle slavery as a form of production in society. For the jnagya, he requires the four black eared (Shyam Karna) horses for sacrifice. Madhavi and Galav move from state to state in the Subcontinent in their search for the horses and witness the harsh social realities built on slavery. As opposed to Bhojnagar, Ayodhya practices the absolute form of power vested on the slave owners. However, Dixit helps retain the dissenting voices of the slaves, who challenge the order by declaring loudly and clearly, "I am the soul."

As a resident scholar in the *ashram* of Sage Vishwamitra, Galav develops the art of critical reasoning that leads his inner conscience to the formation of doubt on the self and society. As the Sage agrees to declare the completion of Galav's learning, the pupil wanted to pay his teacher for the learning. Vishwamitra does not expect anything

in return from Galav's education: as a quick and smooth learner, Galav has adequately impressed his teacher. However, Galav believes that his true emancipation lies in paying for his education. So too, he insists on paying his *Gurudakshina* off. As an outcome of the art of doubt, a new ethics is born: he cannot accept *samavartan* (declaration of completion of study) without paying his master (guru) for his education (*Madhavi* 33). Actually, Galav deeply believes that without any payment made for the knowledge he has achieved with his guru, he might face some hindrances in its application in his quotidian life. He runs after the autonomous practice of his knowledge in future. The ulterior motive of knowledge as self-actualization and the ultimate freedom that he aspires to attain through the practice needs to be kept intact for him. Hence, Galav insists on paying his teacher Vishwamintra for all the knowledge he has achieved in the *ashram*.

With the help of Nagajaya, Galav finds Madhavi as Yayati's daughter who possesses double boons: perpetual virginity and a destiny to produce four emperor sons. Madhavi trades her son for a horse in Ayodhya, Kashi, and Bhojnagar. In Champa, she produces a son for Sage Vishwamitra, thereby turning herself into a means to win Galav's emancipation from the debt to his guru. He has realized the power of critical reasoning aided with self-sacrifice in the making of change of epoch and transformation of the public consciousness for social welfare. As a necessary attribute for a modern subject, Galav knows both the horizon and limitation of reasoning: he must use it for the greater common good and for the change in the existing situation. In this specific case, 'art of doubt' leading to critical rationalism results in 'self-sacrifice' that in turn produces four key features of the shift in transformation of the age of slavery into the age of agriculture. Madhavi's four sons embody the features: Vashumana, Pratardan, Shivi, and Astak represent bravery, sacrifice, righteousness, and devotion to knowledge respectively. As an avid critique of the contemporary course of action in the repressive political order, Dixit seeks to arouse the four qualities in Nepal to bring about transformation in the existing socio-political consciousness.

Dixit makes use of the episode from the Mahabharat to contemplate on the transition of Nepali society in the 1970s. Madhavi and Galav's struggle collectively reminds himself of the quotidian reality for every Nepali in his time. The novelist coins a term "yugsandhi" (8) to refer to the confluence of two ages and also the transition from one era to the next where the former crumbles away to give way to the coming one that is also heavily backed up by the social imagination produced by its participants. In fact, Vishwamitra also plays a vital role in institutionalizing new ways in the society. He modifies the customary practice of human-sacrifice to conclude the ritual and the incident persist in the collective memory of the people. As Dixit writes, "It had not been forgotten that Vishwamitra had successfully caught the spirit of the age by detaining human-sacrifice to the Varuna in an effort to complete the jnagya" (11). As a creative form of expression, literature blends the historical resources in it by rewriting the contemporary social reality as well. In this connection, Stephen Greenblatt concludes, "Literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers: we speak of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis" (11). The indirect presentation of the shifting spirit of Nepali society in the 1970s becomes the major issue in the text. The author

depicts the social reality in which the self has to come in direct confrontation with the polity for the oppressive nature of the latter.

The historical knowledge in the people lies in reminiscence because they lacked writing in past. Dixit implies the lack of theoretical framework of change in the people because of absence of the preceding age. It shows the parallel situation of Nepal in the time Dixit sets himself to write the novel. He sees Nepali society through the narrative of *Madhavi* and asserts the nature of change as witnessed through Marxist frame of interpretation (8). What is the motive of knowledge if viewed from the perspective of modernity in general and social change in specific? For Dixit, the answer emerges in the self-actualization of Galav and Madhavi who push the motor of social change through the transformation of their image into a major icon of self-sacrifice. The acting self goes deep into the core of the society to identify the incongruent aspects that expect intervention. The birth of critical rationality in Galav through art of doubt also implies Dixit's revolt against the tyrannical Panchayat system of his time. In fact, through the mouthpiece in the text, the author revolts against the then political system.

The political protests are born from such attempt to change the ways of the polity. The ordinary people gather unusual amount of power in them for the transformation of their plight. Dixit shows Galav the pathetic condition of slaves in Ahichchhatra. The slaves in chain resist the external dictation imposed upon them. They recite the mantra, "I am the soul" (80). Dixit thus telescopes the scene of resistance:

> Prabepan said, "There won't be an end to the story if you start asking them the cause of everyday dispute between the slave and the sentry." In the meantime, the slave said, "I'm the soul" and spat on the face of the sentry. The guard got furious and began whipping the slave. Other guards also followed the suit: the chained slaves attempted to break the ties free and shouted aloud, "I'm the soul." They also charged back at the guards with whatever they could lay their hand on. (80)

The suffering and inhuman treatment of slaves in Ahichchhatra makes Galav more determined , for the system is itself demoralizing for both slaves and masters. Furthermore, he gets to realize that Ahichchhatra believes that only punishment safeguards the moral, social obligation of people toward the societal collective. Also, Todd May analyzes Foucauldian position of power that resembles the scene in Ahichchhatra. For him, power functions as a constraint in social structure. As May writes, "Power, in this case, works by what might be called constraint rather than restraint. But, like restraint, constraint works to limit one's options" (77). The vertical structure of the society detains the people's aspiration for freedom which parallels the historical reality of Nepal in Dixit's time. However, agents reject such dictation as they know that the social norms emerge out of human negotiation, meaning new forms can always come into existence. Jan R. Veenstra states: "The human self is a construct, not an essence" (180). Both Madhavi and Galav know the functional nature of life and society: they prepare themselves ready for change in the society. Ahichchhatra has already begun to head towards revolt where the slaves claim human position for themselves through their matra, 'I am the soul. ' Though Galav appears that he could not understand the meaning of mantra of slaves in Ahichchhatra, it implies that the slave-revolt is on the way and thus

slavery as an institution is crumbling away.

Social system like slavery degrade both the owner and the owned: the owner loses the sense of morality and the owned becomes a permanent commodity for the service of the owner. In the court of Ayodhya, Haryashwa undergoes the situation in which he fails to show any sense of morality. Madhavi severely challenges his ways as she resists him in the following words:

> Haryashwa was elated and he turned his head towards Madhavi, excited with passion. Madhavi took Haryashwa's behavior as vulgarity and she thought it was an insult to her. Furious but polite, she said, "Oh King, do not look at me like the passionate priest of Ahichchhatra, Hamilak. You must not forget that the ignorant lot who look at the sun after getting light lose the remaining power of sight. Do you not have slave girls to satiate your sexual passion at your palace? If you do not have any, you find Yashi, Gandavi or Pichashi among the Vaishya of Ayodhya to physically gratify yourself. I have accepted to be your wife to give you a son in order to help complete Sage Vishwamitra's yajna. Believe me, I will accomplish this task and take your leave from here at the earliest…" (151)

As a way of life, slavery had made its impact on the whole social configuration in Ayodhya. Stephen Greenblatt argues, ". . . it is not politics alone but the whole structure of production and consumption . . . that generates the pattern of boundary making and breaking, the oscillation between the demarcated objects and monological totality. . ." (8). The rules of production and consumptions emerge more powerful than the political relations in society, for such politics obeys the logic of production. In other words, the relations of production and consumptions as manifest in Haryashwa's behavior at the court also subtly tell the gender relationships existing in the society. The oppressive order robs away dignity from both the ruler and the rule, preparing ground for resistance on the part of the general people against the unjust polity.

Call for Change

Dixit's *Madhavi* upholds the revolting youths who herald for change in their society. As agents, both Madhavi and Galav develop self larger than their society and their age. They analyze the society from unique standpoint and develop empathy for the slaves under the complete suppression of the social order. As a creative genius, the novelist presents the situation as a parallel case for change in his society. Very subtly, he claims that dissenting voices pave road for change in the 1970s in Nepal by posing direct challenge to the authority that exercises every form of coercion upon its citizens. The author had to face the atrocities of the state when his paper *Sameekshya* was closed in the late 1970s. His fight gains a very intense form when he realizes that Galav and Madhavi were also the dissenting voice of their time. Like the characters, the novelist seeks out the ways to attack at the weak spots in the political system.

The political struggle of the characters implies Dixit's quest for self larger than the polity, for he argues that only such self can bring about complete transformation in the political and social order. The tale from the Mahabharata functions as a means to contemplate on the nature of contemporary society that secretly calls for complete transformation in its ways of thinking, behaving, and acting as such. Galav and Madhavi

prepare themselves ready for self-sacrifice as they realize the necessity of self larger than the polity to enforce change in society. Dixit's Nepal has fallen prey of a repressive order that requires rescue. He captures the dissenting spirit of the society in the late 1970s and tellingly presents it to critique the political system that has gone defunct in terms of recognizing the need of equality and freedom for its citizen.

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