



Folk, Rituals and Political Change: A Contextual Reading of *Bruised Evening*

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Abstract

The paper makes an attempt to examine how political changes and shifts of people's identities inspire creative writers to express their feelings in new establishment. In doing so I have, among others, utilized Raymond Williams' ideas (such as culture, tradition, and structure of feeling). In addition, as the primary text, I have selected Abhi Subedi's *Bruised Evening*. The rituals and festivals of the Kathmandu Valley provide temporal and spatial point for the people and their deities to meet. Such meeting places and points of time get greater significance when the head of the state as a matter of requirement needs to participate be it Indrajatra especially on the day of Kumari pooja or Machchhendranathko Jatra or Bibah Panchami Utsav at Ram Janaki temple of Janakpur among others. Rituals usually give people a sense of order in their lives. The Hindu priests and their sastras in Nepali society strictly separate death rituals from those of the birth and marriage ones. A family that has been going through mourning is not supposed to hold rituals and pujas of an auspicious nature. This separation of one kind of ritual from the others gives us a certain sense of order within the world of rituals. But this is not found to be happening in the play.

Key Words: aesthetics, rituals, performance, jatras, festivals, 'structure of feeling'

Like political leaders and social activities, creative writers and artists too own up the responsibility of talking about the presentism by taking a stand about the methodology of looking at the history of both the nation as well as of the modes of expression. Evoking such shifting nature of aesthetic forms and expressions, the famous twentieth century English theatre and culture critic Raymond Williams writes:

In a society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural

tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors. Particular lines will be drawn, often for as long as a century, and then suddenly with some new stage in growth these will be cancelled or weakened, and new lines drawn. (56)

This observation of Williams about the British social and aesthetic values is helpful to understand the shifts which did take place in Nepali social and aesthetic spheres too not because Nepal and England share similar aesthetic and cultural fabrics but because both the nations share the experience of going through the shifts that occur in the spheres of their arts and politics.

Nepal went through a violent time during the span of a decade from 1996-2006. This was a period when everyone from the King to the commoners in Nepal were divided into two groups: one that wanted to draw 'new lines' and the other that wanted to keep the old lines intact. The then King Gyanendra Shah as the last bastion of the Shah dynasty took the stand that he held the legitimacy to rule as the monarch with the supreme power. He asserted that he should uphold the right to the continuation of the texts of power that had started with the rise of the Shah dynasty, with king Prithvi Narayan Shah (1723-1775). Political leaders belonging to the Seven major political parties and the Nepal Communist Party Maoist hammered out a '12 point deal' in Delhi and signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement on November 21, 2006. The second point of the agreement states, "... an understanding has been made to keep the Maoists armed force and the Royal Army under the United Nations or a reliable international supervision during the process of the election of constituent assembly after the end of the autocratic monarchy, to accomplish the election in a free and fair manner..." (www.nptf.gov.np). And, as part of the '12 point deal', the first meeting of the Constituent Assembly declared Nepal a Republic State on 28 May 2008. The CA endorsed Nepal's Constitution 2015 turning this country into a federal democratic republic.

After this brief introduction to the metamorphosis of Nepali history, I want to focus on the study of a Nepali play, for theatrical experiments have worked in tandem with the great spirit of change that occurred in Nepal. To be particular, it makes a con/textual analysis of *Bruised Evening* written by Abhi Subedi and performed in 2008 and 2009, and intermittently in later times, and looks at the "structure of feeling" (53) in Williams's term as the play creates contexts to project the social and political changes taking place in Nepal. It concludes that such shifts in politics of the nation can best be realized through the protagonists--the Traveler and the Princess, the characters from folk tales but invested with new roles. The play shows the ritual of carrying pacified gods and goddess in the human-made palanquins, and presents the King character whose role gets 'weakened'. Subedi highlights the lines of thought he

wants to support and share with his audiences for whom mainly he wrote the play.

Written immediately after the People's Uprising, this play crystallizes the political and cultural tensions that the Nepalis had to go through during the violent years of the decade (1996-2006) that paved the way for the political transition as mentioned above. But the fact that the rituals and the festivals which would take place with the presence of the king did bring a fresh concern about the future of such cultural performances:

Will these phenomenal tremors in politics and emotions of the Nepali people bring any changes in traditional performance culture? What will happen to the roles performed by the king as head of state on cultural events and performances in Nepal, especially in the Kathmandu Valley since many cultural performances here demand his ceremonial presence? Are the traditional communities and committees formed to look after such cultural events and performances prepared to explore out alternatives? Will the absence of the king-protagonist make any difference for such performances? (Rijal, 2007)

The 2005-2006 people's uprising has paved the way for newer kind of political and cultural order in Nepal. The country could run its political course; people could run their rituals and festivities as usual without any sense of loss. People realized a reality that kings might come and go, but their rituals are here to stay. Evoking this very public concern, Subedi in this play takes a stand in line with a new political world order that had come to dominate both in art as well as political spheres. As a poet and art critic who had extensively written poetry and plays as well as critical essays on performative aspects of the Kathmandu Valley, the playwright through his characters and the 'structure of feeling' seems to be telling that gone may be the monarchy but traditional or *paramparik* performance cultures of the Valley though religious in spirit are here to stay. The rituals and festivals, the old word order and the cultural fabrics of the land flows with renewed energy at the end of the play whereas there is a sense of old political order represented by King becomes stagnant or 'weakened'.

The rituals and festivals of the Kathmandu Valley provide temporal and spatial point for the people and their deities to meet. Such meeting places and points of time get greater significance when the head of the state as a matter of requirement needs to participate be it Indrajatra especially on the day of Kumari pooja or Machchhendranathko Jatra or Bibah Panchami Utsav at Ram Janaki temple of Janakpur among others. Understanding the significance of these culturally and spiritually important occasions, Gyanendra tried his

best to secure a ritualistic role for him. In fact, he evoked the heritage of king's involvement in the making of the performance cultures of the Valley. Malla kings up to the late eighteenth century invested money and power to instill rituals and jatras in the Valley. Though the Mallas were displaced by the Shah dynasty, the king was still taken as the protector of the performance culture of the religious order in the capital Valley. French anthropologist on Nepal, Gerard Toffin states this bond between king and the jatras of the Valley of the past times in the following manner:

It was the duty of the king to promote religion, to build places of worship, and to bestow on them endowments in the form of money, jewels, and lands. The management of the financial affairs of the temple was a normal part of the administration of the state. In many cases, the ruler himself controlled the form of the ceremonies performed in temple worship. (02)

Gyanendra wanted to hold this historically and culturally significant role bestowed on the king. Politically he could have been ousted, but he wanted to be regarded as a culturally significant actor. Republic Nepal's President's new ritual identity during the ritually important jatras provided a sense of institutional continuity in the changed social and political context of Nepal. The royalists naturally favored for minor changes whereas the radical left parties sought for overhauling the changes at all levels of the state machinery (Rijal, 2018). At times when Nepal's political power had come within the influence of Left Alliance under Nepal Communist Party, Maoist, the continuation of rituals and the participation of the state head set out a strong message that gone may be the king, arrived might have the radical left leaders in power but the *jatra* keeps on going.

As a codirector of the 2008 - 2009 performance of the play produced for the 'Culture in Theatre Festival' and someone who had experienced both the violent as well as the peaceful political transitions of Nepal, I now look in retrospect and realize that this folktale-based play is able to define both the forward moving nature of Nepalis as well as the interpretative spirit inherent in rituals and folktales of the land. What strikes me now is the 'lines' Subedi has added and the 'lines' he has deliberately 'weakened' to evoke the new social and political spirit of the period. Interestingly, he has kept certain lines intact to assert the existence of underlying currents of Nepal's rituals and other forms of performance cultures.

The readers / audiences in the world of this play find themselves in Bhaktapur that has been going through an uncanny situation. As the story goes people of this kingdom attend a royal marriage of the Princess in the afternoon and attend her bridegroom's funeral procession next morning. This has been

going on for some time. Led by the character Old Man, members of the community are seen returning home from conducting funeral at Lyasingkhel, a culturally significant place of real Bhaktapur. Why does the marriage ceremony of the Princess that take place in the afternoon turns into a funeral next morning? Why are their familiar gods and goddesses so ruthless to them? What could have been the 'breaches' that brought such 'crises' and what could be the 'redressive mechanism' for 'reintegration' in Turner's terms? And, how could they 'reconcile' with the angry deities (38-42)? People in the play find it hard to interpret this situation in the beginning. The death of youths and the psychological troubles that the Princess goes through do not matter to the King. He shuns away such issues.

Rituals usually give people a sense of order in their lives. The Hindu priests and their sastras in Nepali society strictly separate death rituals from those of the birth and marriage ones. A family that has been going through mourning is not supposed to hold rituals and poojas of an auspicious nature. This separation of one kind of ritual from the others gives us a certain sense of order within the world of rituals. But this is not found to be happening in the play. A marriage ritual immediately turns into the death ritual. This has psychologically as well as culturally terrorized the people. In retrospect, this ritually incongruent situation in the play indirectly evokes the psychological and cultural crisis Nepalis in general had to go through during the 1996-2006 political unrest. This was the period when the armed force under the command of the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) would kill the army personnel of the then Royal Nepal Army and vice versa. Death taking place in one camp was a news and event of celebration for the members of the other force. In such a situation, people would find it very hard to respond to death. State media would define the death from the camp of Maoist guerillas as the demand of the day and government expected people to take similar approach. Similarly, the Maoists and their mechanisms would spread the death of the members of the Nepal police and army force as well as those who supported the Government body as a thing that was most needed. Leaders of the NCP, Maoist were reported to have asserted that Maoist guerillas have their rights to carry out 'safaya' or exterminate their target i.e. 'people's enemies' (Bohara, Nepali Times). Similarly, the then Nepali government led by King Gyanendra put bounty on the heads of top three Maoist leaders: top three leaders \$64,000, politburos \$ 45,000 and \$13,000 reported the BBC, South Asia (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1947014.stm). In this process of claiming their rights and rewards for killing, more than 13000 Nepalis were to have lost their lives and 1700 people are supposed to have gone missing (01), reports the United Nations Office of the High

Commissioner for Human Rights, Geneva. Many believe that the number of dead and missing could rise to 19000.

As the play moves on, the denizens of Bhaktapur led by the Old Man, a character with certain wisdom and sense of imaginative power, who 'trespasses several dramatic territories of gods and human beings to speak' strikes a deal with Bhairav and Bhadrakali, the divine forces who are not happy with the existing violence around. Bhadrakali is not happy that "To ambush, hit and run, kidnap people and torture the innocents and even kill them have become common practices among the human beings these days" (Scene II). This is one of the few lines in play that have direct reference to the political and social reality Nepalis had to go through from one of the most violent periods in the modern history of their nation. Suffering of the commoners going through violence of such a mode, the bad karma the Princess is going through and the indifferent attitude that the King character holds towards the suffering of the common people become inseparable in the play. The ire of gods and goddesses manifests from the game of revenge and carnage going on in the land of the people. One becomes inseparable from the other.

The order created by the furious *Bhairav* and the calmer and more passionate *Bhadrakali* represents the chakra of suffering and joy people find themselves in. The outcome of such scale of suffering is celebration, i.e. *bisket jatra* that includes rituals, dances, chariot pulling, participation of people and so on. As per the agreement, the denizens will be responsible for holding a ritual procession in honor of both deities known as *Bisket jatra* that usually takes place in the New Year according to the Bikram Samvat or Nepali lunar calendar. Note should be taken here that no representative of the King is present in this deal that takes place between the sufferers and the deities. Subedi wrote this play in the context of the '12 Points Deal' that took place between and among 7 major political parties and Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) with the support of the Indian Government on 22 November 2005. No representative of the King led Nepali state was invited to this deal. It was considered not necessary. And, the last King of the Shah dynasty Gyanendra finally had resigned as the King on 28 May 2008; but he later tried desperately to keep his space in rituals and festivals of the land.

A youth protagonist, the Traveler arrives as soon as this deal is made. He is in a mission of starting a business of his own probably by reaching Lhasa, an autonomous region of the People's Republic of China now. On the way, he happens to meet a shopkeeper who sales him a book and a sword. With these newly bought items he arrives in this terror-stricken kingdom. Since he is one of the few available youths, he is taken to the palace to be

married to the Princess. A dream driven boy that he is, he reads the book that tells him that two terrible snakes will slither out from the nostrils of the Princess at night. He waits for the moment. There appear the two snakes in the same manner! The Traveler takes out the sword, strikes and kills them. He casts off an era. Next morning, the Traveler continues his mission. The Royal seat does not charm and halt him from getting his mission fulfilled. Similarly, the Princess protagonist is bent on exploring her life on her own. She is not interested to live a life of a ritually locked Princess. Enough is enough. She is not going to live like a helpless girl, who needs either father or husband for her protection and happiness. The King at the end of the play remains no more than a tyrant. Even as a father, he fails to impress both the Princess as well as the audience. He becomes the recipient of peace or change. Ethically, he ceases to be the source of influence.

Two new 'lines' which Subedi has 'drawn' in this folk story-based play speak a volume about the shift which has taken place during the political and social transition of the nation. Unlike the happy beginning of conjugal life of the Princess and the Youth that the folk tale ends with, the play ends with two individuals who are guided by the vision of necessity of carving their independent selves. One has to explore the entrepreneurship and the other has to carve out a self that is independent. There is no clue if they are going to meet in future. This added new 'lines' evoke a couple of assumptions about the Nepali youths of the changed political order that can be put in this manner--Gone is the world of Prince and Princess, and gone are the romantic and old world orders, and gone is the marriage as the ideal goal in the life of the youths. Even the Princess wants to be recognized by her work, ideas and achievements, and not by her birth as the daughter of a king. Regarding the journey the Traveler has taken so far, he makes the following observation:

Who am I? A myth or a reality? Honestly, I have no idea. Well, who cares who I am ! Now I am on my way. Forgive me for being late. I was caught in a wedding. Most interesting part was that men of my age had lost their lives there. But I saved the lives of the rest. Now off I go! Wow! I will start my business. Such is life... But there is no point in waffling like this. I must go. (Scene VI)

The Traveler looks at the experience he had gone through the previous day and night with a certain sense of detachment. He comes out of the canvas of the folk order and evokes the new socioeconomic context that a man with professional identity as someone who has acted out his own vision asserts that it is definitely better than those of the Prince and other celebrities.

Similarly, the Princess is driven by her dream of achieving a free identity, free from the old world order represented by her father the King as

well as the sociocultural assumptions about a good and obedient girl. She wants to come out of the chakra of suffering the genesis of which is the personal ego of her father the King and the angry deities of the place. Summing up the karma she has to go through, she speaks:

Now I want to live my life in my own way... But I will not act on others' dictates from now on. I will not wait for gods, kings and men with my dreams packed in bamboo shoulder baskets. I know you all waited to see my drama outside the screen. To see a woman's drama on the screen becomes yours indulgence. (Scene VI)

She comes out of the folk order and points out the existing male dominated psychosocial order that the audience of the play belongs to. This means to say she comes out of the canvas and walks into the world of the audience, and shuns them away for the kind of aesthetics and ideologies they have nurtured for ages.

Second 'line' or element that Subedi has added is the expression that Bhadrakali as mentioned above, makes. She says that deities including Bhairav are not happy that the human beings in the land have given continuity to the carnage and kidnapping. From this line of thought, one can make a reading that what people need most is to come together and celebrate the common bond, and help each other to realise that they share the same faith on life and human relationship. Gods and goddesses become angry when people of the land become angry at each other. Celebration of gods and goddesses during the jatra is also the celebration of the covenant that people have developed not only with divinities but also with each other on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

By the end of the play, Bhairab and Kali get pacified, and the King ceases to be a force. The Princess and the Youth take separate roads to their dreams, and the commoners feel their lives secured. Nepali society has always been regarded as an entity composed out of the compound of divinity, monarchy and common people. But the fact that rituals have been going on shows that common people keep on participating with the same enthusiasm, and the heads of the Republic of Nepal have been making their celebratory appearances that excludes the king element from this composition. Nepal's political transition should not only be seen in terms of the shifts but also in terms of the values, which remain in use. David Gellner states that despite all political changes, Nepal as a Hindu society is going to remain intact, "Thus, Nepal, in its religious self-perception, may be a sacred *margin*, a pilgrimage destination in the holy Himalaya (Michaels 2008); simultaneously it continued and continues to constitute itself as a sacred *centre*" (10). Politically, Nepalis may feel liberated and will celebrate the Republican Federalism but culturally speaking,

they give the same degree of reverence to their faiths and rituals. The absence of the king character does not make their rituals and jatras incomplete. In the concluding section of his tome on Bhaktapur's religious and civic culture, Robert I. Levy writes, "While people may temporarily participate in a myth..., this is kind of celebration of a juncture of two orders, civic and cosmic, and that celebration must be cyclically repeated in a continuing renewal" (612). Deep down as indicated by the play suffering given by polity intentionally as well as unintendedly becomes inseparable from the suffering given by deities. Responding to the divine demands from human position of strength is a way to solve social problems. Power to rule people in the land becomes culturally legitimate through renewing the negotiations with the divine forces. Here in the play, people renew their relationship both with the polity as well as the divine force. Like these characters, Nepalis regard cosmic power as much a part of their lives as the polity represented by the King does to itself. The episode in the jatra the people from Bhaktapur do stage in honor of Bhairab and Bhadrakali every year on the auspicious occasion of Bisket jatra is the celebration of their power to endure all kinds of suffering as well as to give continuity to the creative imagination to penetrate into the existential crisis. Indirectly, this is also a political power of choosing the kind of ruler who they want to rule them. More importantly, this is the way they create arts and rituals. Thus, Nepal as a nation drops, adds and keeps some 'lines' intact during the process of a political transformation. And the play *Bruised Evening* captures Nepal's journey through a difficult yet significant period in its history.

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