

Representation of Dalit Characters and Reflection of Their Consciousness in Nepali Short Stories

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Abstract

The paper attempts to explore the position of Dalit characters and their consciousness on the contexts, contents, and issues as portrayed in the select stories from “Nepali Kathama Dalit [Dalits in Nepali Stories]” published by Nepal Academy. The stories written on Dalit subject matters and issues primarily portray the socio-economic and political positions, problems and issues of exclusion of Dalits in different forms. The characters of the stories demonstrate the miserable condition of Dalits; however, they speak up against the oppression and discrimination for their rights, equality, justice and liberation. For the purpose, the researcher has selected the stories of Khagendra Sangroula’s “Sangram Bahadur Sarki”, Narayan Dhakal’s “Sunakhari Tol”, Matrika Pokharel’s “Itihasko Chihanmathi Ubhiyera” and Krishna Bam Malla’s “Pudke Damai”. The stories are plotted on the context, issues, and problems of Dalits and their resistance against the caste system. The study basically explores the representation of the Dalit characters, their socio-economic and political positions, consciousness and protest for the change. Hence, the stories are studied from the perspectives class consciousness connecting with caste consciousness. The researcher has employed the qualitative approach with descriptive and exploratory methods.

Key Words: Dalit aesthetics, Consciousness, Varna system, Discrimination, Resistance and Liberation

Introduction

The research paper investigates on representation of the Dalit characters and their caste consciousness portrayed on Nepali short stories written on Dalit subjects and issues. The stories deliver the class and caste consciousness through the characters as primary themes and social messages. Specifically, Nepali short stories narrate the multiple problems, issues and resistance of Dalits. In the select stories, the characters and the plots are designed and constructed with the real Dalit characters and their day-to-day lives, socio-economic and political exclusion, their revolts and protests against the oppression, discrimination, exclusion and caste system for rights, equality, justice and liberation of entire Dalit community. Thus, the literature works as a medium to express their pain, sufferings, revolts, hope and liberation at the same time.

The literature written on Dalit subject matters and issues develops as Dalit literature which works for recognition and identity formation of Dalits. The short stories related to Dalits appear as a popular form of Dalit writing and literature. To Nagaraju Potula and K. Sumakiran, “Dalit short fiction is a product of new consciousness. Then, Dalit short fiction

transfers the themes of protest, revolt, freedom from all sorts of bandage and exploitation, a search for new identity, and a longing for human dignity” (1). Dalit short stories convey the socio-economic and political messages for developing the new identity and liberation of Dalits.

Dalit literature spreads the wide-ranging messages pertaining to rights and equality of Dalits. In this context, Bama and M. Vijayalakshmi state, “The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general” (97). The literature puts the issues of liberation at the center. Hence, the select short stories such as Khagendra Sangroula’s “Sangram Bahadur Sarki”, Narayan Dhakal’s “Sunakhari Tol”, Matrika Pokharel’s “Itihasko Chihanmathi Ubhiyera”, and Krishna Bam Malla’s “Pudke Damai” put the Dalits’ problems, resistance, revolt and liberation at the center with the desire of pertaining to the rights, liberty and happiness of entire Dalit community. The present article seeks the answers of some questions: why do Nepali short stories reflect the context, content, issues and problems of Dalits? How do Nepali short stories urge to resist against the oppression, discrimination and socio-economic and political exclusion?

Methodology

The article employs the qualitative research approach with descriptive and exploratory methods. Basically, the researcher has applied the perspectives of class and caste consciousness discussed by Dalits and Marxist critics respectively. The concepts of caste and class consciousness discuss the multiple problems, discrimination, resistance, revolt, art and culture in literature related to Dalits. The concept of caste consciousness discusses the consciousness and identification of every individual. With their social caste or caste group within a hierarchical social system. It is basically, an issue of recognizing one’s position in the caste system. Similarly, class consciousness denotes to the consciousness amongst the group of particular social class regarding their shared interest, common oppression, exploitation and their potential action to advance those interests. The working-class people become aware of their exploitation and express their desire to breakdown the existing social order. Thus, the researcher discusses both concepts of class consciousness and caste consciousness while interpreting the select stories in this paper.

Discussion

Nepal Academy’s anthology of short stories *Nepali Kathāmā Dalit* [Dalits in Nepali Stories] published in 2074 BS (2018 AD) comprises of stories on Dalit subject matters and issues. As Dalit literature emerges as a protest against the established system of discrimination and injustice against Dalits. Khagendra Sangroula’s short story “Sangrām Bahadur Sārki” presents a Dalit boy as a main character. The story portrays the socio-economic and psychological impact on a Dalit student in school. Sangrām Bahadur presents a Dalit subaltern character with his socio-economic and political position. In the first-person narrative, the narrator’s classmate is Sangrām Bahadur Sārki whose social status is menial. The narrator reveals:

Sangrām Bahadur Sārki was my classmate when I was child. The study room was same; the lesson was same; the teacher was same; and we would sit on the distance of ten feet. In the distance, there had a huge hill of caste in between us. I was the son of landlord, and he was son of Sarki. I was at the hill but he was away from there. I would sit on the bench hanging the feet but he had to sit on the floor. The earth was same; the sky was same; and the atmosphere was same... (trans. Sangroula 74)

Dalit students face discrimination as they are treated as untouchable, impure and inhumane in schools. In this context, Tapan Basu argues, “[...] the coercive aspect of caste power is apparent also in the denial of knowledge to those considered outside the pale of caste power” (“Introduction” xxii). Dalit students are denied of sitting with other non-Dalit students to attain knowledge.

Rejection of Dalit children in the process of admission in the school shows a serious problem in educational institutions. Few progressive teachers and school administrators allow Dalit children to get admission. Sangrām Bahadur gets admitted in school; it is regarded as a great achievement because there is a progressive *Janajāti* (*Vaishya* as per *varna* system) teacher who suggests his father to admit the son in school. He is admitted in the school; however, Sangrām Bahadur cannot feel well in the class where other upper caste students sit on the bench but he has to sit on the dusty floor. He is continuously oppressed there by the non-Dalit students and teachers. Among the upper caste students, Kamal Krishna is always against the presence of Sangrām Bahadur. He often discriminates and insults him in the class. Kamal Krishna’s father, a local landlord complains to the teacher:

“Master!” The landlord roared with anger and spoke to teacher. “Do you know, what had Sage *Manu* said?”

“I know”.

“And...”

“Māila Bā, *Manu*’s time is already been over”

“Huh! Look at him! Does the God’s time be old?”

“Listen master! Either the dirty boy gets out from the school or my son!”

“Impossible!” The teacher patiently but strongly replied. (trans. Sangroula 81)

Dalit student’s sitting on the dusty floor is questionable. Nevertheless, the teacher defends Sangrām Bahadur. But it seems that the situation gets worse because the landlord of the village wants more confrontation. The Rai teacher promotes Sangrām Bahadur because the teacher himself belongs to a marginalized *Janajāti* community. As a teacher, he is conscious of the unity of workers and backward people including Dalits. In this regard, Lukacs argues, “[...] class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions, ‘imputed’ to a particular typical position in the process of production” (51). Class consciousness is connected to a process of production. Hence, the Rai teacher as a worker seems consciousness with his role and rights.

Dalits experience caste-based discriminations in public places like schools, temples and sacred places. In those places, Dalit children hardly get participation. When the students clean the school premise, Sangrām Bahadur also actively participates. Since, he drinks water

from the public tape after sometimes; a confrontation develops between Sangrām Bahadur and Kamal Krishna. The confrontation reaches to school administration. The first time, Sangrām Bahadur’s father expresses his anger against the discrimination with the support of Rai teacher and thus he speaks:

“Okay...!” He spoke with anger.

“I can also set fire on it. I stood the poll; I set the ceiling and furniture; could not my son sit on the bench?”

“Is my son a puppy?” He replied to landlord with red eyes. (trans. Sangroula 86)

The landlord gets angrier and returns his home. Sangrām Bahadur’s father speaks loudly to protect his son. It is a revolt against feudalism and caste system. It is an example of Dalit consciousness that the community is much aware about equality and dignified life. Writer Istvan argues that class consciousness is a term of the development of consciousness based on the knowledge of scientific contradictions of the socio-economic structure. The level of consciousness is more than an awareness of issues. Required consciousness comes about only upon consciousness of an alternative and deliberate search of that substitute (120). The response of Rai teacher implies the consciousness level of working-class people. The teacher handles the situation but next day, Sangrām Bahadur sits on the bench without any tension. The room is empty as the students from other castes stop attending the class. It is the resistance of Dalit characters against casteism. Sangroula’s short story upholds that every human is equal and no one is upper or lower. All are humans and one should treat all equally. Regarding the story, Ramesh Prasad Bhattarai remarks “the cruel treatment to Dalits and untouchable, unequal and discrimination done upon Dalit students in education system and injustice are strongly reflected in the story” (223). It is one of progressive and radical stories and it is still relevant. When the story was written, Dalit students would be rejected in attaining the formal education by the school administration and the society.

Dalit Movement aims to establish equity based just society. The movement moves for socio-cultural and political transformation. The inter-caste marriage proves as a part of social intermingling and assimilation, a process of socialization and revolt for change. Nevertheless, in Hindu society, the inter-caste marriage is normally not accepted by the people of upper caste. Here, Narayan Dhakal’s short story “Sunākhari Tol” reflects the problems of the inter-caste marriage and destiny of Dalit character. The story reveals how educated people think about inter-caste marriage. The narrator is a social worker and his friend Balram Dhakal is a politically aware person. He works as the GM of Rāstriya Sambād Samiti and his niece elopes with a Dalit boy. Though the GM is supposed to be a progressive one, he accuses the boy with some fake information:

[...] that Damāi boy is supposed to be a criminal that he has already committed many crimes like this. He is from the Durādāndā of Lamjung. He is already married and his first wife is at his home. He has rented a room near Sunākhari Tol. My niece got married to him by taking one lakh money and other jewelries. He may leave her by using for some days. But my niece does not know about his conspiracy. So, we need to separate them in any cost... (trans. Dhakal 115)

The non-Dalit character (Dhakal) accuses the Dalit boy that he is already married and criminal one. Although there is not any evidence, he informs the narrator that the boy stays in the house of a retired British Army in Sunākhari Tol. The narrator investigates into the boy to whom the GM's niece gets married. He meets the home owner and talks about the boy. The narrator seems progressive on the Dalit issues. He is more conscious about social transformation. Lukacs argues, "[...] as in Marx's, what is crucial is not the differences of status or position as much within a class, although these do carry a measure of analytical importance, but the ontological status of those differences "within the totality of the socio-historical process" (324). The social position is important as it makes a difference in the socio-historical process. Dalits get discriminated mostly in the socio-cultural lives. The speaker stands in favor of the Dalit character. He visits the landlord to know about the boy. The landlord details about the boy:

The boy seems very gentle, laborious, and talented. His way of speaking is also very attractive and polite. I have stayed in Hong Kong for thirty years. I know the people quickly because of my British army experiences. So, I can understand him with his gentleness and behavior. Even if I was in the time of untouchability-based society, I would not hesitate to make him as a son-in-law and greet him on his feet. (trans. Dhakal 117)

The statement of landlord about the Dalit boy implies how gentle, honest and laborious the boy is. However, the then society blames him as criminal and fraud one. The GM and the people make conspiracy to separate the girl from the boy. The girl is convinced by her parents because the boy is from Dalit community whose socio-economic status is not compatible to them. Besides, she is ready to leave him. It is a misery of inter-caste relation and marriage. In most of the cases, inter-caste marriages end with separation and displacement. This type of relation hardly gives happiness to Dalit characters. These are primary features of Dalit literature as Potula et al. state, "literature...tries to transcend history, birth, and death wedded to historical epochs...is a mirror that reflects the outer world as well as the inner universe of life" (2). Ending the inter-caste relation and marriage is the fate of Dalit characters. These incidents usually take place in Nepalese society.

The history of Dalits seems very painful because they have been discriminated and exploited for centuries. The state mechanism and caste system have made the lives of Dalits more pathetic, panicked and worthless. Therefore, modern Dalits seek to forget history and endeavor to create a new history and identity with dignified lives. Even in short stories (fiction), Dalits desire to have a respectful and dignified lives. Potula et al. state, "Dalit short fiction gives a glimpse of how Dalits wishing to live honorably and with respect in terms of quality, and reveals the ambivalent crisis of new identity in the Dalit middle class" (2). Dalits wish to have good and respectable lives portrayed in literature. The progressive writer, Matrika Pokhrel's short story "Itihāsko Cihānmāthi Ubhiyera" portrays the destiny of Dalit women in inter-caste relation. The first-person narrator goes to Udaypurgadhi from Gaighat to conduct the SLC exam. There is not any rented room available for Dalits. The narrator belongs to Dalit community and he has to manage the room himself. In this context,

Limbale argues, “Dalits who opted for a different identity as a result of this upheaval” (40). Dalits have different identities that disturb them in the daily lives. The society ignores the Dalit character that Dalit’s education and knowledge is also denied in caste-based society.

The caste discrimination and untouchability spread rampantly everywhere. The narrator is a bit tensed due to his caste. The hotel owner informs the narrator that he has managed a room nearby his hotel. The narrator moves to the room with a man who is extrovert. The room seems good and the man leaves the room by informing about disturbances of ghosts that ghosts take the bed outside from the house in midnight. The narrator asks the reasons so as the frank man named Bhoju Niroula reveals a secret of ghost. The incident takes place in about 2005 BS. Bhoju narrates:

There was a love relation between Bishwakarma girl and Brahmin boy. The caste system and untouchability was rampant at that time. And, it is still in existence. The girl became pregnant...and she was imprisoned and gave birth to a baby boy in jail. After twenty-two days of her delivery, she died in jail. Her body was buried and the baby also buried alive with mother who was crying. Many women fainted by looking at buried baby alive. The place was known as *Nepi Kaminiko Cihān* (Graveyard of Nepi Kamini). After that, people would say that the voice of baby crying heard in midnight. (trans. Pokhrel 157- 158)

The assertion of story denotes that the love relation is considered as a severe crime against humanity. If Dalit loves anyone, it is taken as a crime and the punishment is only given to the Dalit character. The Love affair is considered to be the blunder of Dalits but not of the next partner (non-Dalit partner). The society shows that the bourgeoisie class is associated to power. The upper caste and class people exercise power in the society. Erik Olin Wright remarks about the failure of class struggle as: “class compromises are forged through class struggles rooted in class-based associated power. Analysis of negative class compromise emerging form of class struggle are particularly prominent in Marxist tradition” (197). Nepi Kamini cannot resist (struggle) against the evil practices. Therefore, she is imprisoned at first and died after twenty-two days of her delivery. The most painful and brutal incident happens in the lives of Dalits due to their castes.

The narrator internalizes the incident as his own in the story. Besides, he listens attentively that the saying is the real incident of his own *phupu* (father’s sister) who is imprisoned due to inter-caste love and pregnancy. The narrator gets panicked by hearing about his *phupu*. The narrator does not reveal his relation to Nepi Kamini with the character, Bhoju. He seeks the soil of his *phupu*’s graveyard. The incident makes him more revolutionary due to severe caste crime upon Dalits. The narrator speaks, “I went to the place of graveyard and stood up. A couple of birds flew away. I plucked up the buds of flowers and put on the graveyard of my own history. By picking up the soil of cremation, I put on my forehead. I looked far away on the light of moon” (trans. Pokhrel 159). It is a pathetic story of Dalit woman murdered due to love relation. The death punishment given to Dalit woman is brutal against human rights and humanity. This is a realistic story of Dalits whose forefathers are killed

severely in the history. Matrika Pokhrel's story shows Dalits' pain, grief, sufferings and brutality in forefront.

Similarly, socio-economic status and fortune of Dalits are reflected in the story of Krishna Bam Malla which is based on western region of Nepal. Malla raises voices of oppressed people through his writings. His story "Hali" is a representative story on Dalits and their poverty. The main character, Pudke Damāi works as a *Hali* (Ploughman), in the land of Manidhar Pandit and receives the grains annually. Basu asserts, "[...] caste, then intersects with class, in a liaison which is more obvious in the villages than in the towns...to ensure control over material resources such as land and labor by the dominant interests in society. Class power usually replicates caste power, though it ultimately goes further" ("Introduction" xxiii). The character Pudke Damāi does not have good financial condition. Therefore, he has to take the shelter of Brahmin, Manidhar for his survival.

The story also presents pathetic lives of Dalits. Pudke Damāi remains single after the death of his first wife at the beginning. Thereafter, he loves Ujeli of next village and gets married to her shortly. After marriage, he falls a sick and cannot work in Manidhar's land. That's why Manidhar gets angry and he does not give even extra loan. In Marxism, the relation between master and laborer is only for capital. Marx argues, "The worker produces capital and capital produces him, which means that he produces himself; man as a worker, as a commodity, is the product of the entire cycle..." (qtd. in White 149). It means master-worker relation is product-based commodity. It is a materialistic relation not the emotional one. In the story, Pudke does not get loan from feudal landlord. But Ujeli earns with tailoring throughout day and night and makes living for her husband.

Poverty breeds as a terrible problem with compound interest of loan pressurizes to the Dalit characters. The landlord exploits in his wages and debt. The minority is exploited and deprived of facilities provided by the society. Hence, White argues, "...the great diversity of forms both of landed property and exploitation of the agricultural producers" (282). Pudke receives a message to payback the loan with interest as soon as possible. "Ujeli and Pudke visit to Manidhar, and humbly request to listen their problems. But Manidhar is not ready to listen anything; rather, he orders to trap Pudke and imprisons him until and unless he clears the loan..." (trans. Malla 68). Ujeli cannot tolerate anymore. She protests, "Fill up the grains (wages) of many years' works first; and, we will clear your loan. You had given ninety rupees but you made the debt-paper of hundred twenty and twelve rupees extra; how can you ask this much amount? Are not you feeling disgrace?" (trans. Malla 68- 69). Pudke has worked for many years but the landlord does not pay any wages. Therefore, Ujeli raises the question of his wages. In this context, Lanning states, "...class consciousness develops through the proletariat's self-active reflection on its capacity to explore and know its own potential, the realization of which always requires some form of mediation" (185). The workers should proactively present their mediator to speak about the wages. However, the master does not think about the wages. Manidhar does not respond any request of Ujeli and Pudke. Rather he threatens to seize their land and property. Finally, they hand over their ancestor's land to pay the loan and leave the birth-land for cow farming in Assam, India.

The tragic story of poor Dalits shows that they are forced to leave the birth place due to poverty and extreme exploitation by the feudal. Dalits are cheated while taking the loan because they are illiterate and cannot read the contract paper. Dalits have the socio-economic problems that they cannot overcome until and unless the state takes strong actions against the system. Dalits rigorously combat against poverty, caste system, and casteism.

Conclusion

The short stories reflect the socio-economic and political problems of the Dalits. In crux, Dalit characters are neither recognized as an entity in the past nor are any such endeavor undertaken in the earlier time for uplifting their social status. Economically, they have no resources for production or property on their own. They are terribly exploited that they cannot get out of poverty. The Dalit characters are presented as poor, weak, panicked, powerless and subordinative; however, they resist, protest and revolt against the society, system and discriminatory feudal society. The writers have fictionally developed the characters who can speak up against the inequality and oppression. The characters have developed consciousness for their rights, equality, justice and social liberation. The writers have mainly dreamed of equitable society to impart a social message for a social change. Hence, the article based on the critical analysis of the selected short stories from the perspectives of class and caste consciousness explores the miserable representation of Dalit characters and reflection of *Varna* system, poverty, caste-discrimination and untouchability, inter-caste marriage, and multiple problems. At the same time, the characters resist and revolts against the entire discriminatory system for socio-political transformation. The reflection of consciousness in Dalit characters demonstrates the uncontrolled desires for the rights, equality, justice and liberation of entire Dalits.

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