



Beyond Protest and Poetry: Political Vision in Devkota's Selected Poems

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Abstract

Great Poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959) transcends the quotidian sphere of social life to reach beyond the domain of the protest through his poetry in his perpetual quest for order. The core of social structures comprises of a body of rules derived from human imagination through which the underlying base in human society is regulated in the process of interaction of human agency and social mores. Since rational ways of society lead to justice and social welfare in general, the configuration of social structures depends on rational choices. However, certain lapses emerge as errors in the underlying principles of society, for the rational choices also give way to particular fissures in each age. Consequently, people aspire to obtain novel social structures through the invention and use of such structures in that errors in projection of public welfare result out of inability of the concerned people to project beyond the solid limitations of the time and space. However, after the passage of time, the value systems encounter with various challenges, whereby letting innovative perceptions emerge within the existing order of social imagination. As guides of society, the most sensitive minds including poets, philosophers, and visionaries spot blank spots in form of errors, lapses, and loopholes in unified, coherent vision of inner core of society. This paper argues that Devkota exploits the systemic errors in the underlying core of social system as the creative resource for his poetry. This paper new historically reads Devkota's "The Lunatic" and "The Swallow and Devkota" to explore social and historical forces in the formation of particular mindset. The paper centers on the poet's political vision for a just society.

Keywords: *Protest, agency, social structure, social vision, Nepali poetry*

Introduction

In "The Lunatic" and "The Swallow and Devkota," Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909-1959) transcends the quotidian sphere of social life to reach beyond protest as a form of writing poetry in search of political vision in his poetry. The social structural inadequacies result in dissatisfaction and frustrations in the people. Consequently, the factors become central to protest and birth of powerful agency that navigates the society under question. Both the poems under analysis in the study document the case of social historical development through literary presentation in that "The Lunatic" addresses the

lapses in society by creating a poetic voice that opposes the incongruent social practices. On the one hand, Devkota's poetic persona dismantles the quotidian irrational mores of society in quest for a just society in the poem. On the other hand, "The Swallow and Devkota" presents a harmonious adjustment of human and the bird who maintain perfect equilibrium in their life style. Devkota presents sharp critique and genuine negotiations in each of the poems under discussion in order to formulate his political vision, demanding restoration of justice in changing situations of political and ethical spirit of his age.

As societies emerge into being, there appear two layers in social configuration for smooth adjustment of human activities and regulations of social affairs in general. The outer comprises of the physical domain in which concrete events take place, while the inner core of society functions with particular rules, principles, and values. The primary objective of the inner core rests on the fact that the world reveals to the members as predictable because of its presence. As errors begin to emerge in this domain, society finds itself at a very uncomfortable zone. Put in the other way, reason appears as the prime organizer of the world so as to identify the predictable from the unpredictable, for human mind ever moves towards forming a predictable world.

The predictability helps in maintaining coherence and upholding faith that the world is knowable: the common ground for all human beings is prepared through this insertion of rules that run human society. In this sense, society is perfectly based on the imaginary principles which govern and regulate human behavior by making it possible to sustain social structure in general. The rules cannot remain valid for ever in that there arise multiple problems in the process of social advancement. The aspirations of the people change over a course of time and the way people want to enjoy life also gets transformed accordingly. As a matter of fact, life maintains its dynamism through revision, rewriting, and transformation of the underlying social structure, for the inconvenient domains that surface in the underlying structure in the form of error have to leave the underlying structure for the fulfillment of expectations of the people. Devkota delves into the social structure that holds certain loopholes, locates them, and hits them hard with the purpose of finding new ways to catch up the pace in the contemporary times. The master poet employs such structural failures as the resource of poetic inspiration to create a unique vision and effect in his poetry.

History, Society and Poetry

The forces of history, social development, and breaks in social systems also inspire creative artist in new direction. The human assumptions can fail at times to address the new ambitions that emerge in changing contexts of society. Certain ruptures are witnessed when the expectations of the people grow larger than what the system can supply the society with. In fact, such breaks in the systems have claimed their due place in certain philosophical schools in the twentieth century. The social rules of the underlying structure are forced to encounter a specific social condition in which they turn lifeless, without any dynamism to lead human life. In the passage of time, the errors that are produced in such way begin to block the quest of the society.

A genius or visionary artist is expected to identify the lapses ruling in the social psyche, for such blank spots equip the author with new possibility of finding a novel approach to life and art. Both Michael Foucault and Jean-Francoise Lyotard spotlight on

the creative significance of break in systems of human assumptions. As Foucault argues, "Today, people tend to favor rupture" (444). For him, the rupture appears when the social system encounters with a particular type of error in its principles. In the similar vein, Lyotard critically observes: "They [painters and novelists] must question the rules of art of painting and narrative as they have learned and received from their predecessors" (74). The artistic ability largely relies on exploration of new domain in the existing order of intellectual existence. The ingenuity in people finds creative outlet to attack such blocks to add revive the social life. Both the twentieth century theorists, Lyotard and Foucault seek to identify a poetic subject who stands as agent in identifying the structural errors and the ways to transform them for the benefit of larger public. They celebrate the dissenting voice that challenges the core of social values. The contemporary spirit faces certain types of change in the way the social codes are organized and those changes are posited at the core of such structural errors in society.

The social system assumes that the rules produced at a particular point in historical development will attain the ahistorical status, whereby obtaining the attribute of the universal. In other words, such rules produced to address the challenges for a particular context tend to universalize themselves with the promise of timeless healing to any challenges of human society. Since the forces in the underlying structure of the social order are not static, they always attempt to move forward beyond the set boundary for the course of action as such. The tension between the defined field for the principle and the principle in itself emerges through this sort of dynamic interaction of forces in deeper core of society. Such forces are derived from the desire of the social collective that aims at founding a predictable world for the comfortable understanding of society reality in the complex world. For instance, Edward Cary Hayes analyzes that social forces include time for action, context for action, action, and the consequence of action in the psychological domain (619). The various factors associated with the social functioning play responsible role in promoting the dysfunctioning of social rules, whereby letting the errors come into existence in society. More importantly, such errors remain under the cover of assumed coherence of the society until a creative eye does not notice it.

Devkota's "The Lunatic" and "The Swallow and Devkota" reveal the nature of protest in modern Nepali literature when the play of social values is analyzed from this perspective. This reading searches for the breaks in system, resulting from the errors in human assumptions, inadequacy of the social system to address the expectations of the people, and birth of dissenting voice as consequence of imbalance in power structure of society. Such new historicist interpretation serves two purposes in specific: firstly, Devkota's texts become resource of historical analysis; and secondly, it reveals the nature of interconnectedness between protest and poetry. Such new historicist reading of two poems helps add new of looking into formation of dissenting voice in Nepali poetry. Consequently, such interpretation leads to understanding Devkota's political vision as expressed through his creative works.

Self, Society and Nature in Devkota

Critical scholarship on Devkota emphasizes self, society, and nature as the basic components of his argument in the selected poetry. Critics have attempted to explore the fundamental issues from the poet's life in the poems under discussion. Furthermore, his

poems are read as a response to social and historical issues of the time. Such interpretation promotes the idea that poetry responds to social development of the contemporary time: this line of argument assumes that the incongruent aspects of the society torments the poet and he intervenes into the situation with his idealist vision. Similarly, the third ways of viewing his poems reveals the interconnectedness between human world and nature. As Devkota is taken as a close observer of nature who brings insights from there to examine the human life in general, various critics have presented their critical deliberation on his poetry.

This section briefly goes through various perspectives on Devkota's poems from three groups of critics: Kumar Bahadur Joshi and Dinesh Kafle, Indra Bahadur Thapa, Anita Dhungel and Bal Krishna Sharma, and Mohan Lohani. Joshi and Kafle attempt to explore the poet's personal frustrations and discontent expressed in the poem like "The Lunatic." Moreover, Thapa explores Devkota's quest for balance between self and society. On the other hand, Dhungel and Sharma argue that the society emerges as the first concern in Devkota's "The Lunatic." To both of them, the incongruent aspects of the society disturb the poet in order to seek out the congruent aspects of life. They imply that Devkota projects his idealistic vision thorough his poems so as to bring about a unique balance in society. Finally, Mohan Lohani seeks to read "The Swallow and Devkota" eco-critically and concludes that the society and the natural world are interrelated in Devkota's poems. The bird appears as the metonymic expression of the larger natural reality in which human life and society are located as a subsection.

Allusions to personal history have profusely appeared in Devkota's poems. In other words, critics have approached his poems as expression of the creator's personal self. "The Lunatic" is presented as a classic case of this reality. Sharma's survey explores Joshi as the one who reads Devkota biographically in that Joshi finds such elements of the poet's past life in his poem (Sharma 26). Further continuing the same line of argument, Kafle joins Sharma when Kafle brings in great Indian scholar Rahul Sankrityayan as the reference: he quotes him calling Devkota mad and goes on to argue that Devkota responds to him in the poem (96). Linguistically approaching the poem, Kafle states that "The Lunatic" has lost its original meaning in the subsequent translations (97), meaning that the same intense personal allusions may be unavailable in the translated versions. Nonetheless, he sets the poem in the historical and personal context to read the poet's dissatisfactions and frustrations of daily life as the basic themes. Such interpretation of the poem helps illustrate the historical resources and the poet's appropriation of the contemporary reality in the text.

However, Devkota has also been read as the one who seeks balance between the self and the society. The encroachment of one upon the other obstructs the smooth ways of the world. As an interventionist in society, Devkota's persona goes into the society with his serious observation and attacks its incongruent domains. For instance, Indra Bahadur Thapa argues that Devkota delves into the world of ideal imagination through the contemporary ugliness in search of perfection. He states that the poem is "a dream of the poem interpreted by exposing the corrupt world that has surrounded him. This world is antithetical to the ideal dream of the poet who wears the persona of a lunatic" (19). The world goes insensitive towards its people; people cannot comprehend their contemporary context; they fail to predict the future course of action in their life. In such context, the world turns into a corrupt place, devoid of rational, sensible ways. In this

sense, Thapa's reading of the poem comes between Joshi and Kafle, and Sharma and Dhungel by finding a balance between the rational and non-rational. Both the light and darkness balance each other in Thapa's reading of Devkota's "The Lunatic."

The second type of scholarship centers on the social forces that generate dissatisfaction in Devkota. In this light, "The Lunatic" becomes an attack on the state of social and political reality which attempts to please people through the enhancement of rational state of being for everyone. Sharma surveys the readings of "The Lunatic" and associates himself towards portrayal of society in the way Dhungel analyzes the poem (26). Sharma's alignment with Dhungel surfaces in his reading in that he argues: "After examining the social problems and lack of spiritual uprightness, the persona finally wishes to rescue the people from irrationality and ignorance" (27). The state of society that has completely malfunctioned and has stopped in working of the welfare of the people requires complete reconfiguration. Devkota takes up the challenge to bring about a state of harmony in society. As a poetic genius, he dives deep down the inner space in search of possible solution to the contemporary problems.

Finally, the third mode of interpretation examines the relationship between the society and the nature. Human society cannot run away from nature in that the latter provides the former with all its necessities, including both the physical resources and the spiritual meaning as such. The interconnectedness between these two domains is supposed to guide humanity further towards an ideal space. As a classical issue, eco-critical reading adds to sensibility in people towards the nature and human being. The source of poetic inspiration in "The Swallow and Devkota" is derived from the all encompassing Nature. So too, Mohan Lohani sees the relationship between the bird and the bard as a special bond of nature in the poem "The Swallow and Devkota" as he eco-critically reads the poem. He writes: "The poet's personal is skillfully deployed to underscore the multidimensional relationship between the human world and Nature symbolized by the bird Swallow" (5). Lohani emphasizes on the greater significance of nature in human life in terms of generation of meaning. For him, the harmony between the bird and the bard reflects the equilibrium between the nature and the culture. In such reading of the poem, human culture, assumption, and human agency come in unison as they are all controlled by the forces of the Nature.

This research departs from all three modes of interpretations of the poems in that I attempt to seek the causes of poetic inspiration in human assumptions. Generally, poetic inspiration is understood as a practice that is directly bestowed upon the poetic genius from the Muse. As a project to humanize the sources of poetic inspiration, this paper attempts to humanize the divine by exploring the errors in human assumptions and the attempt of the poet to address these human challenges by locating himself amid his time, geography, and issues. Since Devkota celebrates the human desire, endeavor, and accomplishment, he also upholds his trust on human beings as capable of overcoming the errors that produce as result of certain lapses in their own mindset. This paper attempts to uncover the underlying causes of poetic inspiration in the human domain, not in the heavenly space which remains a distant illusion to the master poet.

Poetry, Protest and Devkota

At the formation of collective voice aspiring for change in society, the existing rules of social organization lose their grip in regulating the social structure. In the flow

of events occurring in the surface of the society, the function of deep seated logic either produces insufficient or undesired effects. As W.H. Sheldon implies, "Remember that objects are but stages in the stream of events; adopt, in short, a dynamic or functional point of view. Error now appears to be, not a static beholding of an unreal thing, but maladjustment" (342). Such errors disturb the balance of the social order, seeking the attention of sensitive artist to identify it and artistically respond to it. This paper argues that creative response to such error is one of the serious forms of poetic inspiration in that such structural errors reside in the heart of poetic contemplation in Laxmi Prasad Devkota's selected poems: "The Lunatic" and "Swallow and Devkota."

First of all, many rules of the contemporary society turn erroneous in Devkota's world in the first half of the twentieth century in Nepal. The massive social and political changes that took place in his time and society influence him to brood over them. He identifies the errors of the social organization before the majority can even guess about such dysfunctional principles in his society. In "The Lunatic," the tension between the world and the poet emerges because the poet spots the lapses at the base of society and urgency to intervene in these blank spots in order to find a new order necessary to update the spirit of the contemporaneity. A society that fails to upgrade itself with the ethos of the contemporaneity gradually loses dynamism and vigor: the poet knows that there is structural chasm between him and the world. He sings: "Those things I touch --/Whose existence the world denies,/Of whose shape the world is unaware" (7-9). The sensitive soul of the poet has identified the error in the structure and realized the need of agency to intervene in the underlying core of the society; yet, the world is unaware of such problems. The artist realizes the loopholes of the society putting obstacles in its smooth flow ahead. Similarly, in "The Swallow and Devkota," he shows same trait in the bird and the bard. The creative pain shared by both the souls is thus illustrated in the poem:

Silently does the tie spiritual
Between the swallow and Devkota weep.
Seeing our creative pain
The starry sky like the eyes of compassion,
Peeping through a crack in the window,
Falls down rolling in a star. (36-41)

Devkota's response to the rules that have gone wrong, turned insufficient, or become dysfunctional is shared by the swallow that shares the nest with the poet. In the bird, the bard takes flight from the mundane social reality to detach him from it and see the possibility of its rational revival. The bird and the poet unify their soul in the poem, for the spiritual tie helps them arrive at the same conclusion as well.

In a purely materialist world full of quotidian calculations of life, Devkota begins to communicate with the nature. He sees the balance of human self at risk: multiple forces attempt to dictate human soul in the world. In search of prosperous self, he invents a new tongue to talk to various beings in nature:

A variety of moonbirds,
I commune with them as they do with me,
In such a language, friend,
As is never written, nor ever printed, nor ever spoken,
Unintelligible, ineffable all. (18-22)

This language is unintelligible to the world because the world is carried away in the

material calculation of profit and loss, leaving the forces of nature to go in deep slumber. Devkota's sensitivity further seeks to oppose the world when he realizes that it is not adequate to understand the world with our regular sense organs only. He vigorously declares: "You work with your senses five, / With the sixth I operate./Brains you have, my friend,/But the heart is mine" (30-33). The poet identifies the structural error rooted in the cognition of the people and proposes them to transcend beyond their regular practice in order to understand the real call of his time. The world fails to understand the poet's voice; thus, the world ends up taking Devkota as an insane being.

The world was massively reconfiguring after the World War I and the World War II from immaturity to maturity. Nepal also observed similar type of phenomena in its socio-political reality: the mass consciousness was heading towards more rational and politically matured state. In the age of ignorance, Devkota stays awake to examine the structural causes of human problems, for he knows that such issues can be critically addressed through a more stable state of reasoning mindset that balances both emotional and rational halves of the same self. He locates the rules that are inadequate to address the emerging needs of the society. Like a dutiful soul of the poet, the swallow gives him company where he finds solace. For instance, he writes, "Both the beings have a false cause to be awake/At midnight in a room" (The Swallow 7-8). The use of the word 'false' has satirical significance in that the poetic soul attempts to portray the perception through this word. In fact, they have a serious business to stay awake in the darkness of the midnight which actually refers to the study of the social errors in the age of public ignorance. So, Devkota writes, "You are strong prose/But I am liquid poetry" (The Lunatic 36-37). The rigidity of the existing social order is hard to penetrate as it carries the dead norms being collectively practiced in daily life. The emotional dimension of human life is completely ignored in such kind of practice. Devkota implies that the problem lies in absence of emotions, feelings that help add dynamism in the process of progress in society.

The curiosity functions as the point of departure of a society from the innocence to the state of experience. Devkota fills his world with child-like curiosity so as to understand the ignored domain of human knowledge. He follows the great sages of the antiquity towards understanding the dynamics of death. The world fails to grasp the real intension and the tension gets born out of it. For instance, the poet states that he wanted to understand the problem of aging and death like the Buddha (The Lunatic 63); however, the society stuck in the old erroneous principles of its own cannot tolerate what the poet does. So, they call him "one gone crazy" (66), "put me in stocks" (70), and finally "dispatched me down to Ranchi" (72). Similarly, the unequal power relation disturbs the poet. The celebration of the powerful again puts the cause of the mass at risk. Devkota see the a great threat in this:

I have called the Nawab's wine all blood.

And the courtesans all corpses.

And the king a pauper.

I have denounced Alexander the Great.

And I have deprecated the so-called high-souled ones. (81-85)

He opposes the forms of exploitation as referred to in the words "blood" and "corpses." The revolutionary soul in Devkota chooses to celebrate the ordinary: "And the insignificant individual I have raised,/ Up an ascending arch of praises,/ Into the seventh

heaven" (86-88). The simplicity turns into a political tool in that it moves beyond the expectation of the society that ever desires to maintain the prevalent hierarchy. The poet foresees the ethos of the succeeding age of equality in which the act of heroism emerges out of personal quest for larger goals of life. Going towards the downtrodden section of the society, Devkota attempts to correct the structural errors that emerge as the outcome of uneven emphasis of power structure in society.

The political structure favors the ones who invent and maintain it for their benefits in society. Devkota sees unequal practices among the people are supposed to enjoy the bliss of organized society in equal terms. He expresses rage at the erroneous social structure when he realizes the inequality has taken the essential form of principle of regulation. His dissatisfaction assumes the form of terror when "Then every hair rises on end./Like the serpent-tresses of the Gorgons./Every one so irritated!" (The Lunatic 121-123) and "The terrible strength of the soul of Dadhichi--the sage./Enters and seeks utterance" (127-128). He does not care for any kind of remarks passed onto him by the society because now he views himself thus:

I am the moonbird of the beautiful,
The iconoclast of ugliness!
The tenderly cruel!
The bird that steals the celestial fire!
The child of the tempest!
I am the wild eruption of a volcano insane!
Terror personified! (148-154)

Implying that such thing has not taken for the first time, the poet transcends beyond the social expectations to damask the unequal institutions; nevertheless, the outside world fails to understand the true intention of the poet. They name him the lunatic as they cannot properly see the reason behind his anger. In fact, projection of such self-perception informs us of the urgency to intervene into the depth of the underlying core of the society where the structural inequalities have gathered to a great extent.

Poetry benefits largely from the loopholes, blank spots, and errors in social structures as they serve as the subject matter for poetry to express their political vision. The projection of the social ills stay in the heart of Devkota's both poems: "The Lunatic" and "The Swallow and Devkota." The former weaves around the harsh reality of the contemporary world, while the latter one briefly touches upon the evils of the time and moves on to mediate upon how the perceptions of structural errors becomes the source for poetic inspiration. Devkota writes:

We the loving couple,
The swallow couple of poetry and poet.
Flapping shall we reach the sea-shore
To turn back once
And to look through tears
At the forest of human beings. ("The Swallow" 68-73)

The poetic soul flaps above the sea-shore and comes home back with the pain in heart to express it in the form of poetry. Implicitly, the poet merges into the swallow to examine the flaws, explore his political vision of righting the wrong in the specific context, and then pouring this vision in poems. The identification of the structural errors helps establish urgency of social agency in order to enforce correction. The guide in the poet

gets poetic motivation to express his perception of life and society through intense understanding of the structural errors.

Conclusion

As social agency, creative artists pierce through the challenges of society in a specific point of time. The inner poetic mindset obtains a particular frame for creativity in identifying the lapses and addressing them in artistic ways the artist finds appropriate. In other words, the visionary creative geniuses implies that the absences of social structures in relation to contemporary ethos of society, the flaws in the base structure, and the dark spots of structure require proper creative response before legal, administrative intervention in the area, for the creative artists hold swift, sweet, and eye-catching ways of presenting their vision. In this process of presenting the structural flaws in their poetry, such poetry serves as the political tool in that it turns into the critique of contemporary society where such lapses are real and poetic persona raises the voice of a rebel, demanding for change.

Devkota poetically intervenes into the social scene to explore the ruptures in human assumptions. He locates the systemic errors and projects a vision of just power distribution in society in order to arrive at a just world. Both "The Lunatic" and "The Swallow and Devkota" reflect on the contemporary society reality in which the errors have emerged so rampantly that they have challenged the harmony as such. Devkota assumes the energy from the bone of Sage Dadhichi and the might of Bhimsen to dismantle the unjust order that does not care for the basic needs of the people. Similarly, the poet appears as meek as the poetic persona of "The Swallow and Devkota" where he enjoys the presence of the bird. The dissenting voice in the former poem and the appropriating tendency in the latter poem mark the fundamental character of Devkota's political vision that finds its unique expression in the selected texts.

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