

Voices of Unheard People in The Good Shopkeeper: A Contrapuntal Reading

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Samrat Upadhyay's short story, "The Good Shopkeeper" as a literary writing of postcolonial era using Edward Said's contrapuntal reading strategy. This study aims to explore and assess the dark spots of the story, give voice to the unheard characters, and uncover new meanings and new aspects of the story. This study also explores how in the voices of the unheard people pertain the power and influence the decision. Moreover, this research paper investigates the inner incidents that took place in the story. It becomes clear that story is a manifestation of realism in the context of Nepal. Simultaneously, the study also reveals that it can be connected to the colonizers and colonized mindset in the post-colonial era and also how colonialism is ongoing process in the contemporary time.

Key Words: post-colonial era, colonizers, colonized, realism, contrapuntal reading

Introduction

Samrat Upadhyay's book, *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, which consists of nine short stories, explores the nature of desire and spirituality in a changing society. "The Good Shopkeeper" is one of the nine stories. This paper explores and analyses the voices of unheard people in Upadhyay's "The Good Shopkeeper" by applying Edward Said's concept of contrapuntal reading. Pramod is the protagonist of the story and his wife is Radhika. Shambhuda is the brother of Radhika or say brother-in-law of Pramod. Ram

Mohan, Kamal Kant and housemaid are other characters in the story. The story depicts the echoes of modernization in the corporate houses, work places, individual identity, family relation and society as a whole. Upadhyaya has depicted the society and the societal people as they are and has penetrated in deeper psychological understanding of the characters of the story. Although Pramod, the protagonist of the story, loses his job as an accountant due to his lack of skill in computer and not in contact with the influential people, later he becomes able to shift his mind to be a good shopkeeper running a grocery shop, and proves himself as a bold and successful character to resist with the unprecedented circumstances. Talking about Upadhyay's short stories, Oh (2013) states, "For example, in *The Good Shopkeeper*, he writes how Pramod, who loses his job and struggles to find another, has to deal with Nepal's nepotistic, feudal and emasculating business world".

Said's book, *Orientalism* (2003) is an example of postcolonial literature. *Orientalism* (2003) offers many modes of reading colonial discourse, and stereotypical assumptions about the orient and oriental. Said's idea of Orientalism is important to understand the operations of colonial discourses across cultures and contexts. Orientalism is the binary division between the Orient and the Occident or the West (McLeod, J., 2020). It is still questionable whether the colonialism has been ended or it is in action in another form. For example, culture, technology, multinational companies seem to have been acting as a colonial force to some extent or to a greater extent even today.

2. Methodology

Said's contrapuntal reading method has been used to analyze Upadhyaya's short story, "The Good Shopkeeper" to infer the insights of the story from different perspectives. Said offers contrapuntal reading as a method to understand the literature and literary criticism in connection to postcolonial era (Bilgin, 2016). Said views reading contrapuntally means reading the text not only from the western perspectives but also reading the text from eastern perspectives. Oan, Rahman, Haque, Arafat and Hossain (2021) state, "To interpret a text contrapuntally is to interpret its different perspectives

simultaneously and to mark how it interacts with itself as well as with biographical or historical contexts” (p. 76). Contrapuntal reading offers the readers to understand the text from multiple perspectives. In the same tone, Bilgin (2016) states, “Said defined contrapuntal awareness as belonging to multiple worlds not only in terms of cultural identity but also academic field ...” (p. 6). It means to say that contrapuntal reading acknowledges multiple ways of understanding and analyzing the literary text.

In an attempt to clarify the contrapuntal reading, Pourgiv (2017) states, “Contrapuntal reading is a reading back from the perspective of the colonized to show how the hidden but crucial presence of the empire rises in canonical texts. ...Contrapuntal reading gives voice to the text’s silences and illuminates its dark spots” (p. 40). In other words, reading a text contrapuntally allows the readers to interpret the themes and meanings of the text without much focus on the intended meaning of the author. This is also called a resistant reading of a text.

Contrapuntal reading of a text allows to discuss various themes simultaneously. Asghar & Butt (2017) view, “Interpreting contrapuntally is interpreting different perspectives simultaneously and seeing how the text interacts with itself as well as with the larger sociocultural framings without privileging any one side” (p.146).

Therefore, in the contrapuntal reading, text is interpreted and analyzed judging from two perspectives i.e. from the perspectives of colonizers and the colonized. In addition, reading the text contrapuntally also facilitates to analyze it from different other perspectives simultaneously.

In this paper, the same tenets have been used to discuss, analyze and to infer the themes of Upadhyay’s short story, “The Good Shopkeeper”.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Colonized Mindset of Radhika

During colonial era, colonized people were deadly dependent on colonizers. Colonizers were able to create the fantasy that colonized people needed them for their survival, development and for civilizing them. Radhika, one of the characters of the story, “The Good Shopkeeper” and wife of Pramod, the protagonist of the story, does not have the enough courage to fight with the problem that she is compelled. She is too dependent on others either on her husband or on her relatives. The wife of Pramod is too dependent

on her husband particularly in the job her husband is involved. When Pramod informs to his wife, Radhika about discontinuing his job as an accountant she says as Upadhyaya writes, "Hare Shiva, she said, "How are we going to pay the next month's rent?" (p.1). Then after, she suggests her husband to go to her a distant cousin, Shambhu-da for help.

During colonial era, colonizers or the supporters of colonial rule were economically sound where as a large number of the colonized people had to struggle for the survival. Shambhu-da can be taken as an individual who was in touch of the colonizers and benefitted from them.

Shambhu-da as a Symbol of Colonial Power

Although colonial rule is supposed to come to an end particularly after the world war second, in reality it still persist in other form as Said observes in his book, *Culture and Imperialism* (Said, 1994). Shambhu-da can be taken as a symbol of colonial rule or he may represents the colonized who supported the colonial rule and benefitted by the colonialism. He has the construction business and he is successful in business as well. He seems to be using the legacy of the colonial rule or he may represent a businessman supporting the rule. About Shambhu-da, Upadhyay writes:

He was friends with a number of bureaucrats and had helped several relatives find jobs. Pramod knew Shambhu-da's business was shady; he was involved in building contracts throughout the city that were the source of numerous under-the-table handouts. But if anyone could help him find a job, it would be Shambhu-da. (p. 2)

When Pramod goes to meet to rest his problem on him and to find the way out for another job, he finds other people waiting for him. Upadhyaya describes the scene when Pramod approaches Shambhu-da's home as:

At Shambhu-da's house, he found two other men waiting in the living room. An old servant told Pramod that Shambhu-da was still doing puja, praying and chanting to the gods, but would join him after half an hour. Pramod sat down on the sofa, and the two men looked at him suspiciously as he gazed at the pictures of religious figures on the wall. ... Now all the three men concentrated on the doorway, where Shambhu-da shortly appeared. ... "What brings you here today, brother-in-law?" Shambhu-da asked Pramod. (4)

Pramod tells everything why he is jobless now and Shambhu-da said, "I'll see what I can do". However, he didn't get any help from him. Pramod only got sympathy from his friends and relatives. Later even he does not like to get sympathy from others. He seems to be changing to live his life in his own way independently. Pramod seems to be a representative of the colonized people and the victim of colonial rule who later prepares himself to be free. The construction business of Shambhuda and the large company where Pramod worked as an accountant can be taken as the business enterprises or ruling agency of the colonizers.

Spatial and Temporal Relationship in Pramod

Like in Said's book, *Culture and Imperialism (1994)*, past and present conflict is obvious in Upadhyaya's story, "A Good Shopkeeper"(Oan, et. al., 2021). Pramod worked as an accountant and he remembers this job when he is in the state of starting grocery business. He was an excellent employee as an accountant in a large company before another employee was appointed in the same position. There is conflict in his mind whether to start shop or not as he has already done a more reputable job. Despite this, the story focuses on the evolution of Pramod in managing his livelihood, the roles of female characters are not elaborately highlighted. But these two female characters one his own wife and another woman called house maid has the profound effect in his life. Female characters have played very important role during his difficulties although their roles are not highlighted significantly. Probably, due to these two female characters, Pramod escaped his unprecedented situation and he dared to shift himself as a shopkeeper. Contrapuntal reading also explores the co-existence of the past and the present and in the story this relationship is obvious in Pramod's life (Oan et. al., 2021). Pramod met these women in different span of time. He also involved in a job as an accountant and decided to start a grocery shop and to be a good shopkeeper in different period of his life. Psychologically, it was not easy for him to undergo such a journey in course of time. Upadhyay writes, "A few night later she (Radhika) brought up the idea of selling their land in the south to finance a shop of their own, perhaps a general store or a stationery outlet "(p. 8). Although, Pramod did not like the idea of his wife in the beginning, eventually, he decided to run the shop planning to be good shopkeeper and said to his

wife, “May be we should start a shop. What do you think?” (p. 19) and Radhika assured him, “I think you would make a very good shopkeeper”. (p. 19)

Pramod has also been influenced by another unheard female character, housemaid. He meets her when he was almost at the time of probably to reach to the state of depression and while he was not seeing any way out for the solution. He found her bold enough to live a simple life despite she was very helpless. Even she suggested Pramod not to be so serious to live the life. Although developing the relation with her was not good, she became a character to not let down his courage to live a life. Pourgiv (2017) states, “A contrapuntal reading of a text gives voice to the marginal unheard other” (p. 40). Thus, although the voices of these two female characters are not elaborately highlighted, their roles proved Pramod’s life forces to shift his mind from being an accountant to a shopkeeper. Upadhyay has portrayed these two female characters as important character to have the profound psychological effect in Pramod’s life to maintain his spatial and temporal relationship in course of his changing situations.

Resistance and Triumphant in Pramod

Pramod seems to becoming a victim of today’s modern world as despite Pramod is a good accountant, he has been replaced by another accountant. Power and technology are the cause for this. At this time, his wife suggest to borrow money from her parents, but, Pramod dislikes the idea. He feels he is humiliated when he goes to Sambhuda’s home for begging the help. Instead, he prefers, although not willingly and directly, but implicitly and unconsciously, comes into the contact of a house maid, a woman who is living very simple life. The housemaid, to whom he meets in the park becomes one of the forces to overcome his unprecedented situation as she makes him conscious not to worry too much and let the life go as it comes (Gale, C. L. (2016). Pramod comes in to the contact of this woman when he sees no way out for his problem and remains in a great dilemma. Pramod’s resistance to accept him as a shopkeeper is changed because of the roles of his own wife and another woman called house maid.

Pramod becomes successful to change his mind set by deciding to run his own groceryshop using the money he obtains by selling the land. He, probably, decides to do so because he is quite conscious for not losing his self-respect, self-confident and self-reliance. The story implies that in postcolonial era, the people of the colonized country

have developed the sense of self-reliant and self-sufficient as in the story, Pramod, the protagonist, eventually becomes successful to be free from the pain of losing job as an accountant of a large company and decides to run a grocery shop being a good shopkeeper rather than bowing head to influential and powerful people particularly who have been benefitted by the colonial rule. Thus, Pramod's mode of life surpasses from resistance to the triumphant and it can be understood as the changing mindset of the colonized people in the postcolonial era taking Pramod as a representative.

4. Conclusion

Said's contrapuntal analysis is used to interpret the text from the point of the colonizers and the colonized. It emphasizes in the idea that the reader needs to read the text understanding the background of the text and interacting with historical contexts. Contrapuntal reading analyzes the text not merely as a text or piece of writing or literature but also as the depiction of the imperialism through that particular text. The contrapuntal reading of Samrat Upadhyay's "The Good Shopkeeper" explores the relationship between the colonizers and colonized people had. It revealed that slowly and gradually colonized people have begun to be self-sufficient. The study has also analyzed that getting job or losing is not only decided by the skills and qualifications rather it is more influenced by when the employees are in connection to powerful people or less powerful. The story advocates how people are struggling for the livelihood and how there is the tendency of the societal people to run after influential and materially rich people, and how the corporate houses have controlled over the people in the postcolonial era.

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