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Deconstruction of Cultural Hegemony in Nepali Society: A Study of *Sumnima*

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Abstract

BP Koirala's novel *Sumnima* has raised an issue that how cultural hegemony has been being practised in Nepali society on the basis of racial, political and cultural superiority of a certain group of people over the others. The main objective of studying the novel in this article is to find how the novelist has deconstructed the cultural superiority of the privileged group and how the family lineage of the dominant race has dissolved into the lineage of the marginalized group. The critical insights by deconstruction and new-historicism have been used to analyze the primary text. The study examines and analyzes how the relations without understanding cannot prosper even within the same ethnic group but love and understanding make the life beautiful no matter which tribe or ethnicity the people belong to. The researcher has found, having studied the text that nature is superior to nurture, a culture does not become superior by having practised by a certain group of people nor being educated adds to the wisdom in the people because wisdom is rather natural an attribute.

Keywords: Culture, deconstruction, domination, hegemony, superiority

Introduction

Culture is the lived experience and way of people live. It is special behaviour peculiar to human kinds, together with material objects used as an integral part of this behavior. Thus, culture includes language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rites, rituals and ceremonies among other elements. The existence and use of culture depends upon an ability possessed by humans alone. People think and behave the different ways not because anything else but because of the ways they are brought up. Culture, as K. Avruch has defined, is the total life way of a people and an individual learns from his group (264). A very good deal of human behavior can be predicted if we know the people's way of living. It is possible to acquire a good amount of knowledge through the study of literary product of a certain group because literature is the true mirror of a society as someone's individual behavior is the mirror of his/her bringing up. At the bottom, all the human beings are alike very much in the

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biological terms but sexual taboos are different according to the culture of the people of different bringing ups. Even “a biological process”, as Avruch has said, “is caught in a cultural web” (266).

Culture, as Edward W. Said has defined in his book *Culture and Imperialism*, “is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought...” (xiii). He further adds “Culture in [this] sense is a source of identity, and rather combative...” (xiii). Cultural identity is a determining factor of worldwide importance. Apart from being accepted, this basic reality has to be fully and immediately accepted in its many forms and in all its complexity.

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Human society consists of single or plural cultural groups. Some of them are homogenous cultural groups and some others are heterogeneous. There is not much problem in homogenous groups because nothing is different among the members whereas heterogeneous societies may have to face problems because nothing is the same. On the other hand homogenous society is rather a monotonous one because of the same rites and rituals repeating all the time and a heterogeneous society is always lively due to its variety in rites, rituals and practices. There is a good opportunity for the people to exchange the ways of living life and learn from each other. In fact, the cultivated cultures of the world are the products of plural societies.

Most of the societies in the world are plural-either this or that way. The societies that appear homogenous are plural in reality because different families do have their individual ways of thinking, practices and lifestyle as well as real differences in norms and values. On the other hand, according to Edward Burnett Tyler, “Civilization taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society” (1). As Lois Tyson states, “Literary texts are cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written” (291). All these human attributes and practices get represented in literature because literature imitates life.

BP Koirala is a writer who is sensitive about the cultural harmony and equality of the cultural groups. He does not regard any special culture and the practices followed by a special culture to be superior to any other cultural groups and their practices. Through his novel *Sumnima*, the novelist has dismantled the thought of cultural supremacy. In this article, it has been discussed how BP Koirala has deconstructed the cultural hegemony in Nepali society and how a so-called inferior cultural practices can help the people who follows so-called superior cultural practices.

Cultural Hegemony and Its Deconstruction

There are some norms, values and practices followed by one group of people in the society that are valued to be higher than those practiced by the others and they are embedded in human consciousness. “Human consciousness,” according to Marxism, “is constructed by an ideology– that is, the beliefs, values and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain what they take to be reality. An ideology is, in complex ways, the product of the position and

interests of a particular class” (Abrams 241). Eastern along with Western philosophy “. . . is logocentric, because it places at the center (centric) of its understanding of the world a concept (logo) that organizes and explains the world for us while remaining outside of the world it organizes and explains” (Tyson 256). It is inculcated into the human mind when one begins to learn language because it is learned from one’s culture and people begin to behave the way they are brought up practicing it.

Writers write out of their experiences and their personal observance of the social activities and practices because writers, “. . . live in a particular time and place, and their views of both current and past events are influenced in innumerable conscious and unconscious ways by their own experience within their own culture” (Tyson 283) it happens as “. . . our subjectivity, or selfhood, is shaped by and shapes the culture into which we were born” (Tyson 284). Culture is a discourse, an ideology, that carries an ideology and according to Tyson,

. . . no discourse (ideology) by itself can adequately explain the complex cultural dynamics of social power. For there is no monolithic (single, unified, universal) spirit of age, and there is no adequate totalizing explanation of history. . . . There is instead, a dynamic unstable interplay among discourses, they are always in a state of flux, overlapping and competing with one another in any number of ways at any given point in time. . . No discourse is permanent. (285)

Culture and its practices cannot be correctly defined and criticized by a single perspective because culture itself is a multiple facets of human behavior and it is very difficult for one to have a complete knowledge about all the cultures and practices that are carried out in all the cultures.

Culture, like language, as Jacques Derrida says, “is a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them” (qtd. in Tyson 249). He further asserts, “Since meaning in language shifts and remains indeterminate . . . all forms of institutional authority shift in like manner. Since there is no possibility of absolute truth . . . all pretensions to authority, or power systems are undermined” (qtd. in Tyson 341). According to Richard Johnson et. al, “In post structuralism, however, cultural forms and conventions remain central: they are sources of meaning, power, and especially, identity and subjectivity” (34). It happens because cultural products exercise power by hiding or misrepresenting reality (139). They further state, “Power relations attend the formation of identities and subjectivities, individual and collective . . . similarly, power works by producing systems of inclusion and exclusion in cultural representations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ . . . some are central and exemplary, others are marginal or can only belong on certain conditions” (142). Power creates hierarchy that divides people in the groups of superior or inferior.

Culture is like a text and it is written in literary texts; according to Terry Eagleton, a literary text “. . . is a special kind of production in which ideological discourse— described as any system of mental representation of lived experience— is reworked into a specifically literary discourse” (qtd. in Abrams 245). For Clifford Geertz, a cultural anthropologist, a culture is constituted by distinctive sets of signifying systems, like a language. According to M.H. Abrams, at text is a chain of signifiers whose seeming determinacy of meaning and seeming reference to an extra-textual world are illusory “effects” produced by the differential play and conflicting internal forces which, which on a closer reading, turn out to deconstruct the text into an undecidable scatter of opposed significations (26). In Michel Foucault’s view, the patterns of power relations at any given era in a society constitute the concepts, oppositions and hierarchies, of its discourse like male/female, day/night, sun/moon, speech/writing, nature/culture, upper class/lower class, high culture/low culture etc. BP Koirala’s novel

Sumnima is the text that presents Somdatta, a Brahmin by, like Prospero, the 'appropriator' and Sumnima, the 'expropriated' like Caliban in the beginning but the novel underplays this binary opposition of cultural domination and subordination and makes Brahmin 'high culture' to submerge into Kirat 'low culture'.

Koirala's Rethinking on Cultural Hegemony

People from different culture have their own way of living and carrying out day-to-day activities that does not determine that one group of people are superior or more civilized than the other group and the dominant group is always right in what it follows. Somdatta, in the beginning, thinks that Kirats are uncivilized people and they have inferior practices to follow, nothing divine but only the beastly ones. However, when he is tired of all sacrificial rituals performed for the sake of giving birth to a baby, preferably a son, by having performed the rituals of sexual intercourse (47) with the civilized Brahmin woman for the salvage of his ancestors, he remembers that naked girl Sumnima who used to be his friend in his childhood. He goes to Sumnima with a hope of getting some help in the process of bearing a baby and explains his failure. After the Bijuwa, Sumnima's father, listens to Somdatta's failure in the purpose, he shares his tribal knowledge:

Our body is not a machine, nor a medium, nor a means. It is itself a goal, an objective. You should not neglect and hate it. When the physical body of a man is devoid of its juice, the desire of pleasure and feeling of enjoyment, it is like lifeless; and it cannot bear children. The body is not a lifeless emotionless tool only. (Koirala 56)

Somdatta in fact fails in giving birth to a baby because he performs the fire sacrifices and follows Vedic prescriptions to fulfill the purpose but forgets that a human body is a physical creation and it has its own way of functionality.

He is forced to follow the advice of those 'naked' people because bearing a child is a natural, physical process and it cannot be attained through Vedic rituals. Sumnima takes the charge of Somdatta as her father instructs her and Somdatta follows her. "He had some years ago decided to wipe out the memory of a girl from his heart and . . . today he was heading towards an unknown place following the same naked Kirat young woman" (Koirala 60) in the course of fulfilling his Vedic duty to his ancestors. He is brought into a grove, in a "human pond" (61) and a "lonely corner like a living cave of womb inside the body of huge motherhood" (62). He is given a bath in the 'human pond' and nourishing food. Sumnima provides him with all these things saying, "By eating and making the body satisfied, and then the body will be pleased and gods will be pleased" (62). Somdatta's virility revives when "The look of Somdatta fell on the clothless body of Sumnima whose yellow complexion looked like that of a golden idol radiant with health, tight and solid" (62-3). His man gets awakened, "His body felt nothing but an indescribable pleasure . . ." (64) and says, "I feel that I should not go anywhere" (64) and he feels, ". . . as if a flow of wonderful agility and spirit without any reason" (65). The great Vedic scholar comes to understand from the naked people that the body is not only a means or tool but it needs to be pampered and made satisfied in order to achieve any spiritual knowledge.

Somdatta finds himself defeated with Sumnima, bends his head and admits, "I am not joking Sumnima! This is quite true that you are quite an expert. Please tell me who taught you such skill" (66)? The learned, a scholar in Vedic knowledge finally learns from Sumnima, "The spirit is like a child. It requires various kinds of praises. And when it is pleased, it can please the spirit of another individual too" (67-8). Sumnima decorates the Brahmin as a Bhilla young man by a naked Kirat young woman, feels

completely pleased and goes to his hermitage in order to have a sexual intercourse with his mental Sumnima. On the other hand, the lady Brahmin scholar Puloma as well undergoes the same mental situation who has failed to bear a child through the sacred Vedic rites and rituals with its prescriptions followed however, her womb becomes ready to conceive a baby only when she imagines a Bhilla young man in Somdatta.

Ethnic Domination

Powerful people always try to dominate relatively powerless people. They want the defeated people follow their orders all the time in order to fulfill their wishes and prove their political superiority but they forget that the defeated people might have cultural importance of their own. Resistance is one of the tools through which the defeated people challenge the power in order to continue their existence and identity.

When the prince orders the Kirats and the Bhillas that the area in which the ascetic Brahmin family have chosen for their penance should be kept pious and preserved as the abode of boar god that would be “a pilgrimage site symbolizing the incarnation of lord Vishnu, as Varaha as propounded in our religious texts” (13) and sacrifice piglets and slaughter of cows be completely banned, there is “. . . a heated discussion ensued” (13) between the Kirats and the Bhillas. Except the Bijuwa (the Kirat priest), all the other people are not ready to follow the royal order and they want to continue butchering cows and piglets at the same place as an offering to their deities as usual in order to keep their customs intact because that is their sacred site. “The Bhilla was of opinion that they should not discard their customs and traditional manners of life they have been following within the jungle. They should rather destroy the hermitage and drive the Brahmin family away” (15). The Bijuwa tries to convince the people they have already lost many of their kinsfolk in the war and they are at the verge of extinction, however, the Bhilla youth insists. “Even if we die, what of that? That will be a pious act” (15). The Bhillas are ready to even die in order to preserve their own tradition because the practice of offering cows and piglets to their deities is sacred for their community if preservation of cows and boar is sacred for the Hindus.

It is sarcastic when the Bijuwa takes a reference of the Aryans who advocate for the superiority of their ideology and wisdom, He reminds,

Bhilla youth! You are rather talking like the Aryans who always boast of getting religious salvation and freedom from sins after death. It may be meaningful if we accepted advice of war for living, but it is never acceptable to wage war for earning piety after sacrificing life. The Aryans fought a great war in the name of religion called the Mahabharat, what did they achieve except mountain of dead bodies? (Koirala 16)

It is very serious that the so-called non-civilized people light at the practices of the so-called civilized people. Wisdom and understanding of the ethnic leader is much higher than that of the civilized ascetics and scholars. Koirala has made Somdatta speak of his arrogance of being an Aryan, “The arms of Kshatriyas have no taken this ascetic land under their protection” (17). An ascetic Brahmin scholar takes reference of arms and feels great of having used them whereas the wild ethnic person pleads for non-violence. In this context, Sumnima, the illiterate and ignorant girl speaks, “The true existence of God is inside our heart. The god within one heart and the one pervading all over the universe is the one and the same. One is the soul and another is the universal one” (18). This is a great challenge to the so-called civilized and learned people about how one can be superior. Is it only due to one’s belonging to some ethnicity or individual level of understanding of human kinds and their space in the universe. Koirala has deconstructed the concept that the educated and learned people who have enough knowledge of great

books and religious scriptures or the ones who belong to so-called higher class or caste are more civilized than the tribal people.

Uselessness of Intellectual Knowledge

Nature is inborn quality of every living being whereas nurture is the product of cultural practices, almost a by-product of the taboos developed by human beings. A person can acquire a mass of intellectual knowledge through education and can have very highly philosophical debates on different issues, however the intellectual people belong to 'air' as Sumnima describes of Somdatta whereas illiterate or less-educated people are very close to nature, the earth, the soil.

In the beginning Somdatta dominates Sumnima by imposing his intellectual knowledge, "But this body dies and remains only for a moment" whereas ". . . the soul never dies, as it goes on for ages without end until the sky exists" (30). When Sumnima admires, "The body is beautiful like a flower, which spreads sweet scent . . . for a moment and drops down" (30), Somdatta retorts, "The pleasure you get out of the body comes to an end. Therefore, the aim of life is the achievement of eternal pleasure" (30) that means spiritual attainment is much higher to physical pleasure and body has almost no role to play in it.

When Somdatta and Puloma come face-to-face they have the same kind of intellectual debate because both of them are highly educated in Vedic literature. Somdatta declares, "The dual concept between living being and the soul vanishes as they merge only into the universal soul" (41), to which Puloma replies, "To differentiate them is ignorance" (42). They continue their intellectual discussion when Somdatta highlights, "The body is a fleeting and inferior lump of flesh" (42) and Puloma adds to it, "It's just a bubble of water blown into shape by breath" (42). Somdatta and Puloma compare them with cosmic elements, Somdatta explains, "I am the vital air, you speech, you speech and I am the vital air. I am the Sama Veda and you the Rik Veda, I am the sky, you are the earth. . . (47). They think that the people with Vedic knowledge are very much different and much higher than any other members of the species.

This power of scholarship dismantles when the couple fails to give birth to a baby despite performing all the Vedic rites, rituals, practices and prescriptions and they happen to blame each other for not being able to bear a baby. Puloma who used to address her husband, "My lord! My dear husband! (84) begins to speak so harshly to her dear lord, ". . . but I am not the Puloma of yesterday" (85) and she begins to think, ". . . although the relation of Somdatta with her outwardly of husband and wife, in the inner heart it was really of enemies" (91) and "She felt her life could have been very happy if Somdatta was not there in her life" (91). She begins to hate her husband, "Somdatta, if you have such an enmity towards me, now listen I too hate you from the core of my heart" (91). She forgets the Vedic philosophy of universal soul and comes to her real human nature. The same are Somdatta's feelings towards Puloma, "In his heart suddenly a flame of jealousy was kindled" (91) and begins to suspect, "Wasn't some Bhilla young man living in her heart before" (91)? Somdatta memorizes Puloma's behavior at the night of their last enjoyable copulation and thinks, "Isn't that behaviour that of adultery" (91)? He accuses his own intellectual sacred Brahmin lady to be an "unfaithful woman" (91). He forgets his Vedic scholarship and all the family etiquettes taught by his high civilization.

The relationship of the Brahmin couple worsens due to their pedantic arrogance and lack of knowledge how nature is primary factor in human life because they have no knowledge that we are all animals by our instincts and the civilization is only the cover we have developed in order to cover our nakedness. Finally, Somdatta begins to

memorize Sumnima with her “naked body radiated” (95) and begins to find Sumnima very “attractive” and Puloma very “repulsive” (95), Puloma, on the other hand, begins to dream of the Bhilla young man, she begins to caress “her thighs, waist, stomach and breasts” (96) and regrets in not having the Bhilla let her caress them. “The mutual moment of love they never found together. After every unsuccessful meeting they were further apart” (99). Thus arrogance of being learned and being cultured finally causes disintegration of the conjugal life between Somdatta and Sumnima and they regret for not having accepted the naked nature of Sumnima and Bhilla young man.

Collapse of Brahmin Lineage

Somdatta and Puloma fail to give birth to a baby even after a long tiring attempt of sacrificial rituals prescribed by the Vedas. However, they ultimately become successful to bear a baby boy only when they copulate in the disguise of a Bhilla young man and Sumnima. When the deception played during that sacred act of copulation discloses, Somdatta and Puloma begin to despise and blame each other. Somdatta even blames Puloma for having committed adultery and Puloma regards the baby boy as the mental product of the Bhilla young man, whereas Somdatta believes the boy to be a mental child of Sumnima, “This my son is sprouted in the mental womb of Sumnima” (103). He further adds, “What even if he were my own semen? For the mother this is the result of the passion out of adultery. Bhilla is his mental father” (103), whereas Puloma thinks of the boy to be, “A fatherless unfortunate boy” (103). Both the parents do not believe to have borne the boy by themselves because they have killed their physical human inside them which is required to bear a baby.

Somdatta loses any desire to live, “He felt that his whole life was a failure, he realized that all his life he ran after an illusion. All the counting of beads with sacred words, recitations, worships, penance and his efforts for salvation went in vain. Even the getting of son was useless” (107). The parents of the boy meet their tragic death at their old age without providing the boy with any proper love and care. The novelist has not given the boy a proper name. Somdatta, or the novelist, does not baptize the boy perhaps because he is not the mental child of the Brahmin couple.

After Somdatta dies, his son is taken care by Sumnima. She asks if the boy wants to have any keepsake of his parents and the hermitage, but, “The son had no any kind of feeling of love towards his father. Therefore, he did not see the need of keeping anything for the memory of his father” (109). He and Sumnima’s daughter, who has also not been given a proper name, make best friend ‘*yawa*’ of each other. Somdatta’s son finally goes to live with his *yawa* in her family, “In the new place Somdatta’s son did not leave the company of Sumnima’s daughter even for a moment and followed her all the more and became all the more intimate” (109). Sumnima’s daughter as well loves Somdatta’s son not less than he loves her. She ensures him, “Here everybody loves you. This house is yours. My mother is your mother too. I too am yours you know” (111). Even though Somdatta’s son belongs to an “Aryan Brahmin stock” (112) by blood and Sumnima’s daughter is thoroughly a Kirat girl, “. . . yet there was deep love between both of them” (112). Finally, they confess their love to each other, “She closed her eyes. Somdatta’s son tied her in his embrace and kissed in her lips” (113) that Somdatta always avoided with Sumnima in his youth despite her desire for it. Both of “. . . their bodies had turned into one round ball due to love and their bodies were covered by the thick shadow of Shami tree” (113). It happens with the son and daughter of Somdatta and Sumnima which should have happened in the time with their parents.

When Somdatta’s son and Sumnima’s daughter show by their behavior that they are deep in love with each other and want to marry each other, Sumnima accepts

Somdatta's son as her daughter's bridegroom. "Sumnima came out from the room and placing her hands on both of their hands she said "May you be happy" (113). Before Sumnima dies, ". . . she could see her grandson . . . Somdatta's son and his wife also matured. They had a lot of children" (114). Since Somdatta's son comes to live with Sumnima's daughter and Sumnima accepts him as her son-in-law, "After the death of Somdatta's son and Sumnima's daughter their descendants slowly forgot the area of the hermitage altogether" (115) and their Brahmin lineage, "Which left a hearsay among the Kirats that one of the branches of their ethnic stock . . . had one ancestor who was a Brahmin living in a hermitage" (115). Thus the lineage of an Aryan Brahmin stock collapses into a Kirat one.

Conclusion

The novel advocates for the equal value of every culture and it demonstrates that there is no high or low culture as such. The so-called high culture, in this case has failed badly and it has taken a support of so-called low-culture just for its survival. The novelist has deconstructed the belief that only educated people are civilized and they understand the world better than the uneducated people. Somdatta certainly has more knowledge of Vedic literature but Sumnima and her father are far wiser than him. Vedic knowledge has been defeated in front of natural call and requirements which prove that nature is superior to nurture and ones who follow nature thrive better. Koirala has very clearly exemplified that socio-political and cultural domination of one group of people over the other ones is meaningless and vain. By making Somdatta's Aryan Brahmin stock dissolve into the Kirat lineage of Sumnima, Koirala has deconstructed the concept of cultural superiority in Nepali society. Thus, Koirala has dismantled the cultural supremacy created by following fire sacrifices, Vedic rituals and reciting the religious scriptures. A Brahmin body and mind transforming into Kirat is the greatest deconstruction of cultural hegemony. Koirala's interest in the novel becomes clear that variety exists in culture and pattern of life. The Brahmin scholar comes to understand that no culture is superior or inferior to any other culture and one should nurture oneself making compatible to nature.

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