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Critiquing Hegemony and Fostering Self-Agency in BP Koirala's *Atmabrittanta*

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Abstract

Atmabrittanta, an autobiography of Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala (popularly known as BP Koirala), was originally narrated onto a microphone in 1981-82. Moreover, it was published in Nepali in 1998 and the further translated English version was printed in 2001. It mainly incorporates the Nepali tales of revolutionary activism for democracy and nationhood. In the international context, it largely deals with colonial and postcolonial India and her political relationship with Nepal. Likewise, the political association with China is also the content of the book. In these backgrounds, the study analyses the autobiography for exploring how resistance blends with agency and how such oppositional activism contends with national and international hegemonic power blocs, especially applying Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner's notion of resistance and Kaspar Maase's idea of agency. Using textual analysis as a research method, this qualitative study uncovers the domination of neighboring countries, the anarchism of Rana dictators, the supremacy of the absolute kings and the regulations of male chauvinism as internal hegemonic tools to organize people's consent. In addition, the analysis finds the autobiography as a manual for resisting such hegemonic forces to empower people and the sovereignty of Nepal primarily in the form of self-agency. The empowerment and development of self-agency in the national and international contexts ultimately contribute to democracy and nationalism.

Keywords: Hegemony, resistance, agency, autobiography

Introduction

BP Koirala's autobiography *Atmabrittanta* was published in Nepali in 1998 and its English translation was issued in 2001. The memoir largely acquaints the tales of social and political struggles for the establishment and re-establishment of democracy in Nepal. The descriptions and discussions of the political movements inside and outside Nepal vibrate the audience with the feeling of rebellion. It also stands as a critical performance appraisal of the different freedom fighters from the settings. He was an

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iconic “fighter to the end” for democracy as mentioned in the obituary written in *The Times of India* on 23 July 1982 (qtd. in Jha 375). As Shree K. Jha said, he fought for democracy and did not take any rest in his journey for independence and democracy.

Many readers consider Koirala's autobiography as recollections of him from the enthusiastic childhood to matured leadership. Ramchandra Guha admits that the autobiography appeals to him as it conveys a corresponding journey of Koirala and Nehru saying, “Both were democratic socialists who learned much from Gandhi and little from Marx” (75). Here, democratic socialism advocated by Koirala is perceived as the fusion of the ideologies of Mahatma Gandhi and Karl Marx. Likewise, Dibya Shree Chhetry in the same line examines the book idealizing Koirala as a “charismatic revolutionary political leader who can be regarded as a parallel figure to the rulers themselves” (37) wherever he stands. Thus, this study has projected him as an enigmatic leader like the previous studies that even by being a marginalized one, he was at the center of politics.

Although it was a difficult journey of democratization in Nepal, Koirala went on struggling and adding enemies and admirers in the field of politics. For instance, Abhi Subedi identifies him as “Sisyphus who had to repeat the same rhythm from square once again, a lonely hero with very few colleagues who would understand him, a politician whose charisma had earned strong enemies both in Nepal and India, as well as friends and admirers” (294-95). Thus, reading Koirala's recollections unites everyone's dedication to his perpetual commitment to democracy; he earns both numerous national and international support and opponents.

Many scholars have also engaged in multiple rewriting and editing, of Koirala's memoir which was extemporaneously recorded on a microphone and later transcribed in the form of a book. Notwithstanding this fact, several studies praise its literariness. In this context, Rhoderick Chalmers regards Koirala's book not only as a memoir of a politician but also as a creative, psychological and political document by a multipronged persona (209). The creativity of the text comes into sight blending the heart of a revolutionary politician with his head who has the mastery to disclose all comprehensively.

Literally, a memoir could be only a personal experience, which can do nothing for the public affair. In the case of the oral archive, readers may object to the process of verification and editing before accepting it as historiography. There could be a debate about official and alternative archives; however, some critics regard Koirala's work as a form of history. John Whelpton believes that Koirala's memoir recalls his early days, his youthful days in India for Indian sovereignty against British colonialism and largely his significant leadership in Nepali politics from 1947 to his life, which truly serves as a strong image of a freedom fighter (14-15). As Koirala gives active leadership for many years in oppositional politics for nationalism, democracy and socialism, he recollects the history of Nepal.

To sum up, the previous studies as discussed above indicate that the memories of Koirala shared in the form of the book have socio-political implications mainly for Nepali politics, even serving an interesting reading material for international readers of the multi-disciplinary areas like literature, political science and sociology. In the reviews, no single reading overlooks his revolutionary side of him; almost all admire his lifelong dedication to democracy. While considering Koirala's writing as a historical document, some critics have also hurled light on the richness of his language, which sufficiently captures the empathy of readers. The earlier observations have examined the work as a collection of political anecdotes, which incorporates different revolutions for democracy

under his leadership who fights to the end. Remarkably, no single scholar has yet studied the relationship between hegemony, resistance and agency regarding the text.

Methodology

Koirala's autobiography *Atmabrittanta* is purposively selected for the study. As a political writing, it shares the "memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history" (Smith and Watson 16). In the process of recollecting the historical and experiential memories, the memoir recounts the politics of the contemporary world, particularly about Nepal, India and China. By nature, political autobiography focuses on and narrates one's participation in political activism (Gray 2) as done in the book. The study adopts a qualitative research design using textual analysis as a research method to investigate the interplay among hegemony, resistance and agency in the text. To interpret the text under study, the concepts regarding hegemony by Gramsci and the notions concerning resistance by Hollander and Einwohner and the idea of agency by Kasper Maase have been adopted to examine the issues raised in this study. The rationale behind choosing these theoretical concepts for textual analysis is to discuss the political autobiographies of revolutionary leaders, which is appropriate in this study.

Here, in this study, hegemony is a form of domination or control of one over another. Peter Ives claims that the word "hegemony" existed before the rise of Gramsci; however, he has theorized it in politics, and now people parallelly identify Gramsci with the word "hegemony" as an "organization of consent" (64). It means that dominant power blocs exercise their strategies to influence and manipulate the consent of others. Usually, they use ideological and cultural means for hegemonizing others. Normally coercive forces are not applied; however, intellectuals are commonly applied to manipulate others' consent. Gramsci identifies different types of intellectuals as a means of social and political hegemony to organize "spontaneous consent" ("The Intellectuals" 54) of the subordinate groups. At one point, the subjugated groups also develop consciousness about their condition and convert that into resistance. The subordinate groups struggle against that ideology of subordination. From this perspective, "Resistance as actions," Weitz argues, "that not only rejects subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination" (670). Resistance, in this sense, targets the basic ideology of subjugation. Its supporters materialize the consciousness in various patterns. To discuss resistance in the light of agency, Maase and Michael Larsen define resistance more inclusively as "oppositional feelings, thoughts, and actions" (46). In this sense, people involve and promote oppositional activities developing agency within themselves for resistance.

Thus, human agency is inevitable for resistance. For instance, discussing the relationship between resistance and agency, Maase and Larson regard resistance as "cultural exercises of power and oppositional practices from the perspective of 'the people' with the intention of facilitating their empowerment" (45). People can fight for their or others' empowerment which is generally perceived as giving agency or self-agency respectively, but both forms are the formation of the self. Similarly, Margaret S. Archer perceived the human subject "as the linchpin of agency" (17). Disregarding the possible blame of being anthropocentric, human agency strengthens the human subjects which are under threat. Additionally, Hollander and Einwohner have conceptualized resistance as oppositional action mainly responding to the question of whether resistance is planned by actors and whether it is known as resistance by targets and/or observers and categorized it into overt, covert, attempted, missed, externally defined, target-

defined, unwitting and non-resistance (544). Such conceptualization and categorization support the examination of any oppositional action to the different levels of resistance.

Results and Discussions

As a critique of hegemony, the autobiography of Koirala resists multiple power blocs like male chauvinism, foreign interference, Rana autocracy, Nepali monarchy and British colonialism together. In this sense, the book seems to advocate the complete political and social reforms in society through resistance and creating agency. In the words of Maase, "No cultural form is resistant or challenges established power structures on its own, independent of any context" (46). Therefore, in this study, contemporary male chauvinism, political interference of neighboring nations and dominance of domestic power blocs have been taken as evidence for textual analysis that creates such contexts for resistance. Each piece of evidence for textual analysis has been discussed in the sub-sections below.

Critiquing Male Chauvinism

Hegemony appears in society in different forms. Among the forms, gender is one of the aspects where the consent of the women seemed to be organized by patriarchy as shown in Koirala's autobiography. In politics, he was popularly perceived as a socialist but he also sounds like a feminist, giving agency and encouraging self-agency to women for resisting male chauvinism.

Koirala discusses the modern outlook of his father regarding the educational opportunities for women as Koirala quotes his father, "Men and women should receive an equal opportunity to study" (57). The patriarchal orientation of the Rana regime had subjugated women's right to education. Not only the women, but Rana had not allowed the education opportunities for the people who were not from their core families. Hence, Koirala's book advocates the voice for gender equality and justice in society at the same time. Similarly, once when there lies a threat to girls for going to school due to a riot in a locality, his father encourages them as he said: "You should now go to school ... you will carry a knife. If any threatens you, use it on him" (55). It imitates how self-protection and education for women even in adverse situations go together for their empowerment that resists both the potential physical and psychological ills. One of the aunts of Koirala, who lives with her sister's husband leaving her husband, proclaims against the system of forced marriage. As she admits, "I consider adultery, *byavichar*, whereas here I have voluntarily accepted my sister's husband as my own. It is much more respectable for a woman than to suffer through a forced marriage" (Koirala 52). The voice of a woman establishes that marriage should be considered a purely private affair. She performs as suggested by Terry Eagleton that to liberate themselves, women have to know the pattern of patriarchy (96). In this respect, she associates the individual liberty of females concerning decision-making for family life and enjoys self-agency rather than obeying patriarchy that undermines her dignity.

Gramsci did not utter about gender issues explicitly. Nevertheless, if it is scrutinized extensively, the hegemonic authority of the ruling class stands in the form of patriarchy. The strategic operation of a patriarchal society looks not different from the cultural and political domination of the power bloc, which influences their consensus. In the feudal system, for instance, "the nobility who economically exploit the peasantry also exercise certain political, cultural and juridical functions in their lives, so that the relationship between economic and political power is here more visible" (Eagleton 113). The visibility mediated by the economic and political power employs exploitation; women befall as highly vulnerable victims with no opportunities. Eagleton further

discusses the political ground of capitalistic culture where “all men and women are abstractly equal as voters and citizens; the theoretical equivalence serves to mask their concrete inequalities within civil society. Landlord and tenant, businessman, and prostitute, may end up in adjacent polling booths” (125). The virtual electoral equality between men and women ends with voting in a polling booth. As a result, the concept of hegemony covers the previously mentioned scenario presenting the subject of visible resistance. Hence, the activism of Koirala's aunt inspires self-agency and the support of the father of Koirala serves as motivation for women's empowerment in the form of giving agency

The discussion above explores the powerful anecdotes related to the physical as well as mental empowerment of women to defuse the conspiracy of patriarchy. While doing so, the issues related to the agency for women's empowerment seem to encourage the self-agency of women rather than just appropriating by the male. Thus, the encouragement for self-agency sounds more sustainable than giving agency to women by males in a 'neo-hegemonic' form. Perpetually giving agency to a particular group or class without motivating them to self-agency develops a neo-hegemonic power bloc rather than resistance.

Resisting Foreign Interferences

In the context of international interference, Koirala shares a meeting with the Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung when he visits China as Prime Minister of Nepal. While negotiating the border issues, Mao suddenly proposes to Koirala to accept Mt. Everest as a common summit calling it a “friendship summit”. Koirala instantly opposes saying, “But this falls within our country. How can we turn it common?” (Koirala 227). It stands as an effective example of offering hospitality and tendering honor in a foreign land to bring another party to spontaneous consent for their benefit. In international politics, hegemony has been an innermost model, which has been “perceived as a condition when one state controls the international system through its influence and superiority” (Worth 20). However, the hegemonic interference of China to control the Nepali geography along with the national identity faces a forceful resistance from the Nepali side that never appears as an agenda for negotiation in other meetings.

Koirala also recalls an event with Russian Prime Minister Khrushchev who shouts at the Nepali envoy Rishikesh Shaha while talking in a sideline meeting of the United Nations, saying, “You speak for the Americans! I know it, you speak for the Americans!” (233). Khrushchev was annoyed because of not supporting his proposal for forming three secretary generals in the UN. Koirala finds Khrushchev's proposal ineffective; he counters it by affirming that Shaha represents the view of the Nepali government as an ambassador. The

In this way, the intervention of the Nepali Prime Minister against external domination even in informal meetings edifies independence, patriotism and sovereignty at the same time. John Schwarzmantel also agrees that financially strong forces try to use the consent of people for their excess production (74). In global politics, relatively developed countries employ their hegemonic power to other developing and underdeveloped countries by influencing their independent decision-making rights.

In another case, Jawaharlal Nehru, the then Indian Prime Minister, comes with a readymade joint communiqué during his visit to Nepal; Koirala participates in the editing of the paper who considered the independence of Nepal at the crux (Koirala 207). Similarly, the Indian ambassador N.B. Menon once insists on Koirala for welcoming Nehru to the American airport suggesting that friendship becomes greater than protocol (Koirala 234). As a Prime Minister of Nepal, Koirala has been there in New York

although he does not go there allowing them to ascribe any meaning. He blames Indian diplomats who do not understand clean diplomacy. These entire stories replicate how the discourses of special relationships and friendship strategically provoke the cultural and political hegemony of one country over another.

To offset the organized campaign against Koirala and the Nationality of Nepal, he responds to Indian Ambassadors C.P.N. Sinha, Govinda Narayan and Bhagwan Sashy to Nepal saying, "Ambassador should remain an ambassador" (148), "Don't talk nonsense" (159), and "why should I tell you what discussions I had with the king" (180) in different contexts. All these take place at the time of organized students' protest against him backed by a palace and propagated by India while he has been discussing with King Mahendra from Sundarijal Jail. The ambassadors perform as the intellectuals, as defined by Gramsci, who serve to be the "dominant group's 'deputies'" ("The Intellectuals" 54). Purely as hegemonic mediators, such intellectuals work for authorities to influence others' consent employing various means; the quick retort of Koirala has diluted their unnecessary interventions.

Koirala recalls his participation in the Quit-India Movement of Gandhi. Once in an Indian jail, the freedom fighters decided to pin the flag on clothing to mark the protest. Only the pins accordingly, the British clerk recognizes him during an inspection. Koirala narrates the discussion with the clerk after he asks a question to the jailer:

"Jailer, can a prisoner display a political insignia?"

The jailer said, "No sir."

He turned to me, "Mr. Koirala, you must remove it."

I replied, "No I will not."

"Then you will be punished"

"I am willing to suffer, but I will not remove this." (28)

In this conversation, he directly involves in resisting the hegemony of the British Raj in India because he considered that the journey to democratic Nepal would be easier after the end of British imperialists from India, as they supported the autocratic Rana regime in Nepal.

For Koirala, resisting the British connotes defending democracy in Nepal. Micha Brumlik does not consider Gandhi's passive resistance as pure as conceptualized by Gramsci, although he admires the anti-colonial resistance of Gandhi, which happens neither in Europe, nor against Europe, yet opposition to European domination (21). The debate on 'pure' or 'impure' resistance mounts, but the model, which was practiced in India actively serves to resist the western hegemony. The passive and diluted resistance for Brumlik and Gramsci becomes radical for Stephen Duncombe who categorizes the rejection of foreign cultures and the enjoying native culture like wearing *Khaddar* [a typical handmade Indian cloth] as "radical resistance" (177). Koirala recalls his college days in India, "English teacher, I was the only one in the school who wore *Khadi*" (14) and his fasting in the detention of the Rana regime in Nepal (88) appears passive along with cogent assistance to denounce authorities. Marcus Bayer et al. have shown that such symbolic non-violent resistance works more successfully than aggressive revolt to dethrone dictators (758). The non-violence resistance of Gandhi efficiently works to liberate India from the colonizers as the month-long fasting of Koirala captures the national and international attention of educating people against the autocratic Rana dynasty. In this regard, the consequence defines the intensity of resistance rather than the means employed there at a particular time.

In this way, the study concentrates on decoding and resisting foreign conspiracy against Nepal, which was performed and intended to perform contrary to the independent decision-making of a sovereign nation.

Refuting Domestic Power Blocs

At the beginning of the narration, Koirala has described the moment when his father sends an old set of clothes of a commoner as a parcel to Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher attaching a note. On this sarcastic note, he writes, "Sarkar, I am sending this parcel so that you can see the difference between your clothes and the public's clothes. The packet might smell when it is opened, so please have it unpacked at a distance" (5). It deliberately aims at the Rana system and later becomes costly for his entire family. However, it works as fuel for the further aggressive movement against the Rana regime. That signifies "missed resistance," which has an impact on the deliberate action noticed by the target but not visible to the third party as a witness (Hollander and Einwohner 546). After that radical offense, feeling unsecured in Nepal, the family of Koirala goes for self-exile in India. According to Hollander and Einwohner, "self-imposed exile" falls under covert resistance where the target may not recognize it as resistance but the resister intentionally engages in the act and the observer truthfully recognizes it as resistance (545). As such, in the case of Koirala, the target does not get a notification about that resistance instantly.

Koirala recounts the collection of weapons in India for the armed revolution in Nepal; nevertheless, he offers these weapons to Bangladeshi freedom fighters; later Bangladesh becomes independent. After that, he faces a monetary crisis as he clarifies, "Now I had no money. Then the idea of hijacking came up" (304). Both the collection of weapons and the planning of hijacking turn into resistance. While conceptualizing resistance, Hollander and Einwohner interpret such events as "attempted resistance" (544). Neither a target nor an observer recognizes the events as resistance. Similarly, in the categorization of resistance wars into a "war of position," a "war of movement," and an "underground war," Gramsci believes that "the clandestine gathering of arms and assault combat groups is underground war" ("Prison Notebooks" 219). It falls under the underground war, which happened on the ground as overt resistance later in the Nepali history in the form of armed revolutions under his leadership with the support of Subarna Shumshere.

Before the first cabinet meeting of the government jointly formed after the understanding flanked by the revolutionary party, the king and Rana in 1951, Prime Minister Mohan Shumshere disgraces Ganesh M. Singh by saying, "You know, I saved your life" (Koirala 132) in the party organized by him. Singh strongly denounces, "Sorry it was not you but our revolution that saved me" (Koirala 132). By nature, different hegemonic power blocs try to win the confidence of others, as Mohan Shumshere presents himself as the savior of Singh's life at the party. Nevertheless, Singh stands as a potent resister there against the authority, granting all credit to the people's revolution for his survival. At this point, Riccardo Ciavolella identifies the Gramscian interest in the "marginal people's rebelliousness against cultural and political hegemony" (52). The political hegemony applies a different means to influence others for their benefit as Mohan Shumshere attempts to manipulate Singh. In this context, the confidence of Singh along with his faith in revolution strengthens him to resist Mohan Shumshere overtly.

Once, after a report of being involved in illegal activities, Koirala ordered as the home minister to arrest Bharat Shumshere, a secretary of *Gorkha Dal* [Gorkha Party]. Mohan Shumshere aggressively demands the reason behind the arrestment and violently declares, "I am the president" (Koirala 139) of the organization where Bharat Shumshere has been serving as secretary. Without any hesitation, Koirala immediately responds, "If you are the president of an illegal organization, the Home Minister can order your arrest" (139). Miguel Tamen acknowledges the expressions of resistance as they are always relative to intention, function and ambition (218). His resistance aims to demoralize the

coercive forces with the hope to establish law and order. All these happened after the violent attack of *Gorkha Dal* in his residence. In this attack, Koirala fires the mob with his pistol and threatens to take a legal action against the Prime Minister in his presence. It signifies a master event of resistance as a conscious and collective act of refuting power structure (Rubin 245). Both strategies to dominate Koirala and the representatives of commoners through consent and coercion fail because of conscious and instant refutation following the ethos of the time.

On one occasion, humiliating Koirala, King Mahendra claims that he has traveled more than him; Koirala immediately responds, "Your Majesty had the resources, whereas I have had to walk" (174). It illustrates how the national resources work for hegemony and how Koirala confronts them by deconstructing the discourse made by the king to show his relationship with the people. In a different context, King Mahendra gossips to the first elected Prime Minister of Nepal, Koirala, referring to the involvement of some cabinet members in corruption as he said, "I am getting too many reports about your ministers" (204). He challenges the king telling him that he can order investigations. When the secret report comes after the private inquiry done by the officer trusted by the king, there appears no corruption; the charge of the king turns false. Offending the strategies of the king to demoralize political leaders, Koirala challenges the authority by defending his sound members of the cabinet like Singh. However, Gramsci has not used the term 'counter-hegemony' explicitly like any "attempts to challenge dominant ideological frameworks and to supplant them with a radical alternative vision" (Downing 15) that could be understood as a critique of hegemony. Here, Koirala plays a role of counter-hegemony in this context.

Once, as an executive head of the state, Koirala decided to establish a diplomatic relationship with Israel, a country that has faced difficulties in establishing contact with the outer world. Koirala reveals, "King Mahendra had sent a couple of telegrams asking me not to make a decision" (222). He defends the rights of an executive head of an independent country opposing the intervention of the king and the unwillingness of international forces to behave Israel as a sovereign nation. Again, Koirala meets King Mahendra regarding the nomination of upper house members as he argues against the king's intention to appoint all members as his prerogative, as he asserts, "Your Majesty, you are not free to make your own decision. In truth, going by the constitution's spirit, your actions must be guided by the prime minister's advice" (193). The king's motive of "organizing the consent" for "exercising hegemony" (Im 128) disposes of the consciousness of Koirala, who has been aware of his rights as Prime Minister.

In that turmoil in national and international political settings, it was a crucial challenge for a statesman to command both domestic and foreign battles. Even in the time when all the domestic political forces were against Koirala, he refutes the adversities strategically with the support of people and party workers. Finally, the above discussion resembles the multiple accounts of combatting internal and external hegemonic power blocs from various battlefields. Predominantly, Koirala's autobiography encourages the subordinated classes to speak for themselves and the nation in general.

Conclusion

Koirala's autobiography *Atmabrittanta* acquaints an extended account of parallel historiography. It serves as a manual for resisting hegemonic power blocs. It focuses on giving, developing and encouraging self-agency. More specifically, the autobiographical memory counters the subordination of women, defuses the foreign attempts of organizing Nepali consent, outbreaks the domination of monarchy and dismantles the

strategies of the Rana oligarchy by empowering people and motivating them to fight for their rights. In the international context, it also uncovers that foreign nations have used the diplomatic discourse like special relationships to impose their cultural and political models. It also reveals the resistance to those foreign attempts of deploying 'intellectuals' to manipulate Nepali social and political engineering.

Finally, the re-reading of autobiographical memories of such freedom fighters like Koirala is learning the strategic acts of resisting hegemony by developing and empowering agency. Particularly, the empowerment and development of self-agency at individual and national levels appear to empower democracy and nationhood.

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