

Colonial Paranoia and Cultural Narcissism as a Writing Trope

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Associated with the issue of ‘identity reconstruction’, ‘going back to root’ is one of the most common themes in postcolonial writings. Many writers from post-British Empire locations have produced works of great fame on the theme. The discourse on ‘identity’ in non-colonized locations like Nepal, however, is either overtly political, or kept aside under the aegis of ‘independent status of the nation’. Even the fiction writers, who are believed to present “three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness” (Bakhtin 842), have pushed the potential of postcolonial experience to insignificance.

In this paper I argue that one of the dominant modes within going back to root – dialectics of colonial paranoia and cultural narcissism – deployed in many novels like R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchables*, among others is an appropriate trope for Nepali writers, both to present social reality and to help marginalized groups reconstruct their identity. To demonstrate the potential, I shall first analyze the trope's employment by R. K. Narayan in *The English Teacher* and then discuss identical utilization by Parashu Pradhan in *The Telegram on the Table*. Lastly, I shall explore some other circumstances that demand the appropriateness of the trope.

The English Teacher presents journey of a character Krishna from agonizing existence because of his alienation from his belief system, “synthesis of pure being and not-being in God” (Radhakrishnan 40). In the beginning of the novel, Krishna is alienated from his root. Working as a lecturer in an English department during British rule in India, he is doubly separated from his culture – one as colonized subject and other as a servant under colonial institution. Hence, unlike other characters like Gajapathy, he is not happy with his working condition. Consequently, he expresses anti-Anglo but pro-Hindu perspective from the very beginning of the novel. When he discusses the concern of Mr. Brown about B. A. Honours student dropping the ‘u’ from honour, he tells Gajapathy, “Ask Mr. Brown if he can say in any of the two hundred Indian languages: The cat chases the rat” (6). Similarly, his remark on the purpose of English department demonstrates his heightened sense of hatred, “the English department existed solely for dotting the i's and cutting the t's” (7). The most revealing passage is the scene where he becomes critical about the pragmatics and ontology of English department, “I will tell them that they are being fed on literary garbage and that we are all the paid servants of the garbage department” (150). Such comments are understandable because Krishna's childhood among Hindu believers and their ideology has created a strong Hindu subjectivity in him.

Krishna's identity, the result of subjectivity constructed during his childhood, however, does not demonstrate clear contour. On the one hand, his realities – Hindu tradition in which he is brought up, the culture he has inherited and the myth he lives in – compose one unity. So, we find him attempting from the very beginning of the novel to enliven his ‘reality’, “‘I must have a house,’ I

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told myself, 'which faces south, for its breeze, keeps out the western sun, gets in the eastern, and admits the due measure of northern light that artists so highly value' ” (23). On the other, his deviation from Hindu tradition – teaching English to the students and fulfilling his family’s materialistic needs – keep him away from his culture. Consequently, he enters into imbrications: he desires to live life as a saint and also accepts his wife’s desire for metropolitan location for his residence. For instance, when Krishna and Susila are in a restaurant in Bombay Ananda Bhawan, Susila expresses her desire for the use of marble in their house: “‘I like these tiles, so fine and smooth! When we have a house of our own, won’t you have some of these fixed like that on our walls?’” (54). In response Krishna says, “With pleasure, but not in the hall, they are usually put up only in the bathrooms” (54). It shows that Krishna, who is unable to choose one – longing for his ‘reality’ and the materialistic desires of his wife Susila – is entangled in two diametrically opposite poles.

The dilemma of Krishna comes almost to an end after a shocking turn in the story. When Susila dies, Krishna resorts to his own resource to pick up the thread that has been repeatedly broken between himself and his desire. He neither needs to compromise with the materialistic need of his wife nor be obliged to the English department. Gradually, Krishna is oriented towards his myth-based original state: “I believe I shall once again be resolved into the five elements of which I’m composed: and my intelligence and memory may not be more than what we see in air and water!” (164). It makes him an insatiable critic of the reality that he was living:

This education has reduced us to a nation of morons. We were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage. ... What about our own roots? ...I am up against the system, the whole method and approach of a system of Education which makes us morons, cultural morons, but efficient clerks for all your business and administration offices. (178-9)

Krishna, continuing the journey further to reach the root, “develop[s] his mind sufficiently to communicate with her [Susila] ..., and bridge the gap between life and life-after-death” (Mackean). At the end of the novel, the relationship, which is established between him and her, is a relationship in which the ‘I merges with the ‘not-I’ which is no longer materialistic subject. Krishna ultimately reaches boundaryless condition. “The boundaries of our personalities,” he says, “suddenly dissolved (184). There is union of souls, as described in Hindu beliefs, “identification of *Atmon* (human soul) with *Brahman* (the impersonal Absolute), the realization of which is the ultimate goal or release from existence or rebirth” (Philips 1). Overcoming his paranoia due to cultural inheritance from the west, Krishna becomes successful to step in his Indian tradition and reach a state of joy.

Krishna's journey in *The English Teacher*, which is essentially a movement from colonial paranoia to cultural narcissism, can also be an appropriate trope for Nepali writers in English. Using the trope, writers can perform two significant functions simultaneously – demonstrate the nature of hybridization and depict the semiotics of identities. One of the best examples of such writings is Parshu Pradhan's story *The Telegram on the Table*. This story presents a good example of how fiction writers explore the dialectics of paranoia and narcissism.

Krishna, the central character in Pradhan's story, is a tourist guide. So, he “explain[s] the culture and customs” (260) to the tourists and his aspirations also get attached with the people whom he guides. But with a spark of dissatisfaction, Krishna's fascination for ‘foreign land and foreigners’ takes reverse route. When he realizes, “the room he rented was bad” and thus cannot invite Miss Pandey to his room, he feels nostalgic about his life in the village. Though the space in which the major character Krishna exists is not politically colonized, the writer has appealingly dramatized the trope.

Initially, Krishna is paranoiac about everything of his past: he neither likes to return to his village nor wants to bring any memory of village life. His wife, who is also a ‘matter’ of his past, is non-entity for him. So, the telegram that reads ‘Your wife died yesterday’ also does not appeal him. On the other hand, everything of his present fascinates him despite the hardship and mechanical existence in Kathmandu. He enjoys life with the optimism that one day he would be able to materialize his dream i.e. to go to America. In this sense, he is no longer interested in his culture. Yet, he dreams of “lying beside the ocean, playing a tape of Nepali Folk songs” (260). This tension between the attraction and repulsion determines the entire plot of the story that begins from longing for “New York skyscrapers”, “the Goddess of Liberty” and “a tourist girl far across the skies” (Pradhan 260) and ends with narcissism for “distant hills of his home” (262).

The trope has enormous prospect for Nepali writers in English for various reasons. An obvious reason for it is many Nepali writers in English prefer to write about the life of real people in fiction. Manjushree Thapa, in an interview has stated, “my best writing has been inspired by my engagements in areas outside Kathmandu” (Acharya). Samrat Upadhaya's remark is also along the same line:

For a writer like me who lives here and writes about there (and I'd argue this applies to all writers, regardless of where they live and what they write about), the form emerges out of an interaction between imagination and reality. Imagination shapes reality, and powerful literature always is about this shaping, and not the world itself. (Rajani)

The ‘reality’ Upadhaya mentions is Nepali life, as we find his characters drawn mostly from Nepali society. Another reason is the issue of internal-colonization and its consequences. After the restoration of Democracy in 1990, and especially after ‘Jana Andolan II’ in 2006, many

people have raised the issue of internal colonization, marginalization and other identity issues. They have argued that Bahuns and Chhetris are the colonizers of the whole country and the rest of the people are the colonized. For instance, Chaudhari and Chaudhari in their study of Tharus in Terai say, “They [Tharus] were the original cultivators, therefore the landowners of Nepal Terai. But the Tharus have been politically, economically, socio-culturally marginalized in their own land compared to the living status of other hill people who migrated to Tarai in recent past” (abstract). Whatever the reason or the consequence is, there is high potential for writers to draw materials.

Since the dialectics of paranoia and narcissism to present characters’ quest for cultural identity is hardly traceable in contemporary English fiction by Nepali writers, its use can represent underlying reality of Nepali society and also do justice to many people’s quest for identity.

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