

CRITIQUE OF SOCIAL CONFORMITY: FALL OF THE FEUDAL ORDER IN B. P. KOIRALA'S SELECT SHORT STORIES

Komal Prasad Phuyal, PhD
Asst. Prof., Tribhuvan University
Email: ephuyal@gmail.com

Received on: January 20, 2025
Revised on: March 6, 2025 & March 23, 2025
Accepted on: April 7, 2025

ABSTRACT

B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) examines the limits of social conformity in Nepal in the long 1930s and projects the fall of the feudal order, devoid of the issues of justice and social welfare. This paper reads “Doshi Chasma” [The Faulty Glasses], “Karnelko Ghoda” [The Colonel’s Horse], and “Madheshtira” [To the Madhesh] from the collection, *Doshi Chasma* [Faulty Glasses] (1949) in the historical context and examines the political purpose and goal for each of the major characters in the short fiction by applying the critical insights from Cultural Studies as furthered by During (2005), Storey (1997), and Hall (1997). Koirala develops tension from the interaction between the conformists and the nonconformists and aligns himself with the people from the bottom to defend them and critique the limits of the feudal order. The author looks into the spiritual emptiness of the Rana order, which torments and insults the people from the bottom to maintain the authority from the top. “Doshi Chasma” depicts an ordinary man, Keshav Raj, psychologically torturing himself after missing to greet the Rana General. Koirala critiques the impacts of the political order through the psychological upheavals in the protagonist. “Karnelko Ghoda” builds tension from the interaction between the conformist Colonel and the nonconformist bride. The author pictures the inner, empty self of the Colonel, who defeats himself by killing the horse. Finally, “Madheshtira” intertwines the conformist and the nonconformist self in the young

widow who wants to live a settled life by finding a husband. She follows the codes of society as she believes in marriage as a way to a settled life. On the other hand, the widow also challenges the mores of society by deciding to marry again. This paper contextually reads Koirala's selected stories to examine the limits of social conformity in the feudal order and explore its impact in shaping the course of each narrative.

Keywords: Agency, Social Conformity, Nonconformity, Rebel, Feudal Order

1. INTRODUCTION

Modern Nepali litterateur B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) depicts both the conformist and the nonconformist persons in Nepali society in the long 1930s to examine the social and historical forces that have blocked progress. His collection of sixteen short stories, *Doshi Chasma* [The Faulty Glasses] (1949), showcases each of such characters in the title story "Doshi Chasma" [The Faulty Glasses], "Karnelko Ghoda" [The Colonel's Horse], and "Madheshtira" [To the Madhesh]. The conformist persona suffers at all rungs of society: Keshav Raj is stationed in the lower middle class in "Doshi Chasma", while the Colonel is a member of the ruling elite in "Karnelko Ghoda." Both characters attempt their best to comply with the prevailing rules; however, they are forced to endure the torture embedded in the feudal order.

The prevailing political order fails to safeguard their interest. "Karnelko Ghoda" and "Madheshtira" depict nonconformist persons like the bride and the young widow, respectively. Though they challenge the social/political order, they fail to enjoy the bliss of life. In the selected short fiction, Koirala weaves a complex narrative about the young widow who serves as both a conformist and a nonconformist self. This paper contextually reads the select fiction to explore the limits of the feudal order and identify the political goal of the author behind writing the texts. Koirala has depicted the tension resulting from the interaction between the conformist persona and the nonconformist actors in Nepal in the 1930s. This paper has analyzed the stories published in 2009 from Sajha. The stories have been read in their source language and the data extracted is the researcher's own translation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Different critics have approached B. P. Koirala's short stories from multiple standpoints to interpret the issues, structures, and mode of narration. For instance,

Khanal's (2014) analysis has compared Anton Chekhov's Russian society of the 1860s and the 1870s to Nepali society from the 1920s onwards. Khanal compares Chekhov's "The Death of a Clerk" (1883) to Koirala's "Doshi Chasma" [The Faulty Glasses] to comment on the ways the function of the feudal system in Russia and Nepal as the system treats the people at the bottom alike (p.101). Similarly, Gyawali (2014) has examined the cultural impact of Koirala's stories in the Nepali context. He has asserted that his craftsmanship in writing fiction has significantly contributed to modern Nepali short fiction by employing the cultural resources in writing about the people and society (p. 124). He has further discussed the psychological reality found in Koirala's collection of *Doshi Chasma* in order to explore the psychological implications in the persona and the text.

In the same line of argument, Bhattarai (2021) has argued that Koirala's stories use critical insights from Freudian psychoanalysis. Interpreting the stories from *Doshi Chasma*, Bhattarai states that the author delves deep into the psyche of the people of his society and examines the inner soul comprising of the primitive drives that regulate human behavior (p.116). The above-mentioned critics have discussed the outer social reality in which Koirala makes a political statement about society while critically engaging himself in the psychological domains of his characters. However, the existing literature does not state anything about Koirala's critique of the limitations of feudal order in Nepali society from the 1920s onwards. This paper contextually reads the stories to explore the role of emerging socio-historical forces in shaping the course of the stories.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study interprets the selected fiction from Koirala's collection of sixteen short fiction works, *Doshi Chasma*, to explore the ways of functioning of power through the analysis of literary writings. I have taken the critical frame of reference from cultural studies, which provides the theoretical lens to examine the power relations in a society's historical development by reading creative and literary texts. Since the texts that I have used for the analysis were originally written in Nepali, I have read the source texts and translated them as/when required to support my claim with a direct quotation. I have attempted my best to remain loyal to the meaning of the source text in English.

In contemporary times, the theoretical design is informed by the power relations in cultural studies. Such readings focus on the relationship between the dominant and the dominated in the historical context. As Storey (1997) has argued, "Cultural studies would also insist that making popular culture ('production in use') can be

empowering to subordinate and resistant to dominant understandings of the world. But this is not to say that popular culture is always empowering and resistant” (p. 9). The dominant groups generally aspire to maintain the prevailing order in that they primarily benefit from it; on the other hand, the dominated groups are denied the possibility of locating themselves in the political order. For instance, During (2005) has stated:

For cultural studies today, cultural objects are simultaneously ‘texts’ (that is, they have meaning) and events and experiences, produced out of, and thrown back into, a social force field constituted unevenly by power flows, status hierarchies and opportunities for many kinds of transportation, identification and pleasure. They are also social institutions, some based in the state, others in the market or in so-called civil society. (pp. 6-7)

The elite potentially threaten the people at the top of power, paving the road for resistance. Since cultural studies attempts to look at the social and political context from the margin, it intellectually aligns itself with the dominated. It sees resistance as challenging the prevailing power structure to establish justice and redesign the social setup.

At present, contextual reading has gained prominence for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, it helps understand a society's historical development by examining the memory through nonlinear sources like creative texts, folklore, music, and the like. As During (2005) has noted,

Every action carries a trace of the past and unconscious memory of it even. A great deal of contemporary theory analyses the way that the past is carried forward unknowingly into the present. With individuals, one word we use to talk about the unreflective determination of the present by the past is ‘habit,’ and there exist embedded social habits as well. (p. 52)

Literary and cultural analysis helps reflect on the past and its social practices. Such analyses explore the possibility of uncovering the damages imposed upon the dominated groups from the dominant ones. As Hall (1997) has argued,

...to think about or to analyse the complexity of the real, the act of the practice of thinking is required; and this necessitates the use of the power of abstraction and analysis, the formation of concepts with which to cut into the complexity of the real, in order precisely to reveal and bring to light relationships and structures which cannot be visible to the naive

naked eye, and which can neither present nor authenticate themselves. (p. 43)

Cultural analyses are founded on the nonlinear, creative data that store the collective memory in which careful readings explore the scars of the past, the weakness of the social institutions, and the narratives of injustices. This paper interprets the selected texts through the critical insights of During (2005), Storey (1997), and Hall (1997) to explore the political goal of Koirala's selected fiction.

Koirala's Critique of Social Conformity

B. P. Koirala (1914-1982) has contemplated on the historical course of Nepali society through his short fiction. His popular collection of sixteen short fiction, *Doshi Chasma* [The Faulty Glasses] (1949), depicts the context of the historical transition of Nepal in the long 1930s. As an interventionist agency, Koirala explores the limits of social structures in the historical context and shows the fall of the people who attempt to conform to the prevailing mores. In other words, the author challenges the feudal order of Nepali society by depicting the inner soul of the people who lose dignity and respect in their best attempts to conform to the norms of the society. In this section, I have analyzed three selected stories from the anthology published from Sajha in 2009 in Nepali: the title story "Doshi Chasma" [The Faulty Glasses], "Karnelko Ghoda" [The Colonel's Horse], and "Madheshtira" [To the Madhesh].

The stories critically view Nepali society in the long 1930s by considering the historical and social forces and examining the quest of the general public. Koirala purposefully designs his characters as a microcosm to explore the limits of the politics of culture in the historical context. For instance, Keshav Raj, the Colonel, and the young widow search for happiness in life by conforming to the social rules in their own ways in "Doshi Chasma," "Karnelko Ghoda," and "Madheshtira," respectively. Since the characters do not see the traps embedded in the structural codes of living in this historical and social context, they are bound to suffer and fail in their quest for a settled state. Koirala critiques the limits of feudal order by depicting the suffering and fall of the people who attempt to conform to their society's codes.

Koirala portrays the spiritually hollowed-out subjects as the key representatives of the Rana Oligarchy by presenting the suffering of the rulers and the ruled alike. "Karnelko Ghoda" builds on the tension between a forty-five-year-old colonel and his nineteen-year-old wife, who fail to satisfy each other's needs. The spiritually

empty Colonel refers to the state of society and the ability of the rulers. The author critically examines the physical and spiritual strength of the ruler by working on the interaction of the newlywed couple. The Colonel says to his bride, "Why are you so worried all the time? It's your time to enjoy. If you have any problem, do tell me" (p. 30). Ironically, the young bride stands so fragile to question his virility. The incompatible couple is further depicted thus in the story:

The Colonel's wife thought it was unnecessary to answer this question. The Colonel would never understand her trouble. A forty-five-year-old bridegroom cannot comprehend the mental state of a nineteen-year-old girl. The Colonel lovingly picked her silent bride: she did not forget her tormenting emotions in her mind just now. Without minding about her bridegroom's age, she let the weight of her body rest on him. The Colonel could not hold her and he fell onto the ground. The string of the bride's dream suddenly broke off. The bride hatefully looked at her groom, who had fallen down. He was sort of breath, panting due to the pressure to help his bride stand up. From the day, the bride had the greatest feeling for disrespect towards her groom in her heart. (Koirala, 2009, p. 30)

Koirala's critique of the aristocracy manifests in the story through the Colonel. The Colonel attempts to conform to the social mores by showing love, acting romantic with her, and proving his masculinity. On the contrary, he ends up convincing the young bride that he possesses none of these qualities.

Koirala shows the decay of the Rana Oligarchy through the eyes of the common people in "Doshi Chasma" by depicting the suffering of a clerk. The protagonist, Keshav Raj, wears a pair of spectacles that blurs his vision, and one day, he fails to greet the Rana General. Koirala describes the scene in the following words:

The evening was approaching soon. Since the hills in the West had blocked the way of the sun, the earth was already getting dark; still, the long beams of the sun were seen extended from the sky. A couple of pieces of cloud, separated from their company and lost on the way, were moving wayward in the sky. Keshav Raj was fascinated by the scene. He thought that the General wouldn't appear today for sure and went out. On other days, he would be very sad at not getting to see the General, but today, he had high vigor. (Koirala, 2009, p. 1)

Social conformity implies that such behavior benefits the person complying with it. People like Keshav Raj believe they greatly benefit by following the prevailing

mores of society. He hopes to get appreciated, implying political and economic gain. As Merton (1959) has argued,

What is more, the latter distinction has the double merit of being a piece with one made by other sociologists and of countering the stereotyped connotation, held by many, of social conformity as necessarily confined to routine, unimaginative, and unthinking assent to institutionalized expectation. (1959, p. 180)

Koirala portrays a fascinating scene in the evening to juxtapose with the shattered mental landscape of Keshav Raj, who fails to comply with the rules.

The oppressive rule tortures the ruler and the ruled alike. Koirala presents the Colonel and the clerk going through a similar mental state. Keshav Raj knows that the Rana General means everything in life: he is well aware of the loss of the General's favor. The clerk would lose all meaning of life by being discarded from the grace of the General. After missing the opportunity to greet his lord, he reaches home and becomes angry with his glasses first. He would not have disregarded his lord only if he had seen him on time. He thinks about the episode when he gets irritated at his tight trousers as well. He bursts in anger when he hears that the evening meal is a little delayed (Koirala, 2009, p. 2). Keshav Raj cannot sleep the whole night. He accepts that he has committed a crime. He says to his wife, "I have committed a crime. It appears as though I didn't take notice of a big person. Now, what can I do? It will cause great harm if he gets angry" (Koirala, 2009, p. 3). The fear of punishment and loss of reward torture him throughout the night. People comply with the rules of society because social conformity implies reward and punishment. In the self-regulatory practice, society inspires people to behave in a specific way because they can benefit from observing the rules and bringing disaster upon themselves by discarding such rules. As Coleman analyzes,

People conform with a social norm because it gains them with an advantage, makes them feel good, helps them achieve a goal, or avoid a punishment; that is, if people do it, it must be because it is something they choose to do with intent and understanding the alternatives. Presumably, people weigh the pluses against the minuses of conforming in a situation, along with other expected costs and benefits, and take the logical path of their best interest. (p. 9)

Keshav Raj knows the possible threats of not complying with the rulers. In other words, he conforms to social norms because he knows the consequences: reward

and punishment. On the other hand, the Colonel wishes to act as if he is living a normal life: he has developed an obsession with living a normal life. The subject and the ruler have been spiritually hollowed out in the Rana Oligarchy.

Like Keshav Raj and the Colonel, Koirala narrates the events surrounding the life of a young widow in "Madheshtira." Setting the location at the confluence of the Sunkoshi and the Tamakoshi at Benighat of Sinduli, the author portrays the interaction of people in a group. They are all heading towards the Terai as they have heard that a good life is comfortably achieved there. The four men respect the widow because she serves them all like a mother in the group. As the story unfolds,

Suddenly, there was light in their eyes, and there was a huge respect for the widow in their heart. Giving some beaten rice from her portion, she said to Gore, "You are young. You may go hungry more quickly than others." She looked at all of them and said, "I am off to the Mahesh. I don't have a husband. My in-laws couldn't bear to see me there. My brother-in-law was rude, but he loved me. As I didn't have a husband, I couldn't stay in the house." (Koirala, 2009, p. 92)

The young widow wants to bring her life to the normal track by finding a second husband she believes will care for her. She sees happiness in family life where husband and wife understand each other. On the other hand, Koirala portrays the tension rising from the unfulfilled desires between husband and wife in "Karnelko Ghoda," where the young bride does not speak out about what she expects from the relationship. The Colonel says:

"What troubles do you have to tell me such things? What troubles your heart that you get peace by serving the horse? You do have a certain duty towards me, too. Have you ever thought of me as much as you have thought of the horse? To tell you the truth, I envy the horse when I see you so intimate with it," the Colonel was almost in tears as he completed it. (Koirala, 2009, p. 32)

As a rebel, the bride silently revolts against social conformity when she chooses to spend a large part of her time in the stable with his horse. As Coleman (1959) has argued,

If someone is prompted about a social norm, not only are they more likely to conform to that one, but also they will be more likely to conform to other norms at the same time. The more similar norms are, the stronger is

the transfer effect or spillover from the first norm to others. (p. 16)

The young widow and the bride experience society from opposite ends, while Keshav Raj understands that this disobedience means a rebellion against the authority of the General. On the contrary, rejecting social conformity implies that the bride has chosen to discard the promise of a happy conjugal life. Koirala examines the limitations of Nepali society in the long 1930s through these people who attempt to conform to the social norms of a happy life.

Koirala narrates the tale of conformist and non-conformist characters in his stories, for he sees the errors rooted in the social structure. The young widow wants to resettle herself in the Terai by finding a suitable husband. Though she appears to be a rebel who thinks of remarriage in Nepal in the 1930s, she still conforms to the norms of happiness by settling into a family. In the group, she sees a potential husband for herself in Bhote. Bhote, Dhane, Gore, and the old man were also going to the lowlands in search of a better future. As the young widow chooses a young man of twenty-five, Bhote, she convinces him to begin a new life together. She reveals that she has some money and jewelry to support them in the Terai. In the evening, they eat the beaten rice the widow had with her. They fall asleep at the roadside. The next morning, Gore disappears with the widow's jewelry (Koirala, 2009, p. 95). The widow's dream of a settled life gets shattered by Bhote's disappearance from the scene. Keshav Raj is yet another conformist who shows how one submits to authority's dictations. The General had not even noticed Keshav Raj. As Koirala has narrated,

“Keshav Raj moves towards the door to beg for pardon. The General enters on the horseback. Keshav Raj was trembling with fear. As he got to talk to the General in private, he stammered, "My lord! That's the fault of spectacles....I beg for pardon.”

The General halted his horse. He couldn't understand it and inquired, “What did you say? Why do you seek pardon?” (Koirala, 2009, p. 5)

Unlike the young widow, Keshav Raj psychologically tortures himself for no reason at all. He imagines the possible outcome of his disobedience and the impending punishment from the authority. The young widow and Keshav Raj conform to the normalcy of social life and fall prey to the embedded traps.

Koirala weaves complex narratives of conformists and nonconformists meeting and challenging each other. The young widow challenges the mores of a society that

does not allow widow remarriage; however, she desires to live like any other settled woman. In "Karnelko Ghoda," the Colonel conforms to the rule of social life that promises bliss from conjugal life. The Colonel marries a young girl of nineteen at the age of forty-five because he has subscribed to the prevailing norm of a settled man in society. On the contrary, the young bride emerges as a rebel in the family, for she prefers a horse to her husband. Koirala says that the sexually recharged hand of the wife of the Colonel would pass its electric energy onto the horse, and the horse would feel it at her touch. As he further states,

The Colonel's wife placed her hand on the horse's body as it was munching grains. The body of the horse would shiver at her touch. The horse would take its muzzle, eat grains out, and neigh for a while. Then, it would keep itself busy at munching the grains again. (Koirala, 2009, pp. 31-32)

To maintain order in the family, the Colonel has to compete with an animal from his stable. He wants the horse to follow his orders. The bride's alter ego, the horse, retaliates as it throws the Colonel off its body (Koirala, 2009, p. 33). The nonconformist horse and the bride meet in common ground when the horse accepts her on its back and allows the groom to experience orgasmic bliss. The spiritually empty representative of the Rana order, the Colonel feels so helpless that he shoots the horse (Koirala, 2009, p. 34). Koirala depicts the fall of the Colonel, for the author has historically analyzed the complexities of the regime that requires an end to the progress of Nepali society. On the contrary, Keshav Raj feels relief after he realizes that the General had not even noticed him. The conformist servant has lost self-respect and honor in his life.

Koirala aligns himself with the people from the bottom. He does not portray the dismal future for them. For instance, the young widow had ambitiously dreamt of having a young husband, Bhote. The following day, he disappears, taking away her money and jewelry. Nonetheless, Koirala does not end the story without any hope for the woman. The old man from the group consoles her and says that she will surely get a husband (Koirala, 2009, p. 96). Her rebellion and conformity are balanced when she hears the old man's words. As During analyzes,

Gramsci argued that the poor partly consented to their oppression because they shared certain cultural dispositions with the rich. Cross-class alliances or 'blocs' could form around interests in particular circumstances or 'conjunctures', the most important such hegemonic 'cultural front' being popular nationalism. (2005, p. 21)

Koirala does not hold Keshav Raj responsible for the disobedience; instead, the glasses are faulty as they blur the vision. By shifting the focus from the person to his spectacles, the author shows the complexities underlying the historical and social system. Keshav Raj does not identify the person he eagerly wishes to serve at every sight. He cannot read the number on the plate of the motor. He fails to promptly greet the Rana General (Koirala, 2009, p. 2) as he does not identify who the person is. He runs from one place to another to explain his act. In "Karnelko Ghoda," the bride was never happy about the Colonel's love or gifts. She stays in her room and sheds tears in silence. She misses the youth from her neighborhood who had proposed to her before her marriage (Koirala, 2009, p. 29). Koirala presents the bride as the prisoner who fights against the forces that enchain her. The author states the fall of the feudal order that cannot help itself and the other. By punishing the nonconformists of the order, it imposes catastrophe upon itself and kills the horse in the end.

4. CONCLUSION

Koirala's fiction gradually builds the tension from the conflict between the conformist and the nonconformist persons and helps the readers identify a window to the crumbling political order. Since the author believes that the Rana regime hindered progress in Nepal as early as the 1930s, he reads the cracks and fissures through the conformist and the nonconformist characters. Keshav Raj from "Doshi Chasma" and the Colonel from "Karnelko Ghoda" conform with the social mores: still, they cannot find any solace. Why do the conformist people undergo the torture? Koirala's answer is as plain as the daylight: he views the historical and social forces as responsible for the plight of the people. The feudal order harbors the errors that blockade social progress. Koirala aligns himself with the people from the bottom: he shifts the people's focus from the person to the object by titling Keshav Raj's story "The Faulty Glasses." Thus, he redeems Keshav Raj from the guilt of committing errors by missing the chance to greet the Rana General. Similarly, Koirala intertwines the conformist and the nonconformist self in the young widow in "Madheshtira," where she accepts the popular mode of life by deciding to go to the Terai and marry a man. Simultaneously, she challenges the popular belief of the people through the widow marriage. Koirala shows the limits of the feudal order by writing the story of the fall of the Colonel and the psychological torment of Keshav Raj because he analyzes that the Rana Oligarchy had hindered progress in Nepal in the long 1930s.

REFERENCES

- Bhattarai, B. (2021). 'Doshi chasma' kathama asamanya manovishleshan [Exploration of Extraordinary Psyche in 'Doshi Chasma. *AMC Journal*, 2(1), 109–120. <https://doi.org/10.3126/amcj.v2i1.35791>
- Coleman, S. (2007). *Popular delusions: How social conformity molds society and politics*. Cambria Press.
- During, S. (2005). *Cultural studies: A critical introduction*. Routledge.
- Gyawali, G. (2014). Bishweshwar Prasad Koiralaka kathako sangkshipta vishleshan [Brief Analysis of Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala's Stories. *Madhuparka*, 47(4), 122–146.
- Hall, S. (1997). Cultural Studies: two paradigms. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is Cultural Studies: A Reader* (pp. 31–48). Arnold.
- Khanal, H. (2014). Chekhovko karindako mritu ra bipiko 'Doshi Chasma'... [Chekhov's "Death of a Clerk" and BP's "Doshi Chasma. *Madhuparka*, 47(4), 100–101.
- Koirala, B. P. (2009-a). Doshi chasma. *Doshi Chasma* (1–7). *Sajha*.
- Koirala, B. P. (2009-b). Karnelko ghoda. *Doshi Chasma* (29–35). *Sajha*.
- Koirala, B. P. (2009-c). Madheshtira. *Doshi Chasma* (92–96). *Sajha*.
- Merton, R. K. (1959). Social conformity, deviation, and opportunity structures: A comment on the contributions of Dubin and Cloward. *American Sociological Review*, 24(2), 177. doi:10.2307/2089428
- Storey, J. (1997). Cultural Studies: An introduction. In J. Storey (Ed.), *What is Cultural Studies: A Reader* (pp. 1–14). Arnold.