

Nepali Mahakavi Devkota's "The Donkey Speaks" as a Critique of Anthropocentric Discourse

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Abstract

This short research paper tries to establish a point that Nepal honors Laxmi Prasad Devkota as Mahakavi, the greatest poet, and writings exhibit the concern of humanities but they are not just always about human beings and they are not always from human-centric perspectives. Devkota was a thinker of such a stature whose writings do not easily allow us an easy categorization. It must be why scholars called Devkota a "Birat Prativa"(limitless talent). His writings, at many times, question the long cherished belief of humanists. They rebelliously question the entire anthropocentric discourses. Devkota, assuming the persona of a donkey, does exactly the same in his succinct yet powerful poem "The Donkey Speaks", where he blatantly questions such anthropocentric discourses.

Key Words: Human centrism, anthropocentrism, discourses

Nepali scholars almost always tag Laxmi Prasad Devkota as a humanist. He was undoubtedly interested in Greek and Latin classics. He was a thinker who had been deeply engaged with the issues of human affairs. His writings often tend to render man more truly human and try to make his greatness manifest. Robert D. Cornelieus defines humanist as "one who is concerned with the nature and life of man, who believes in man's dignity and worth, and who attaches supreme importance to such expression of man's capabilities as will contribute to the lasting enrichment of human life" (1). In this regard Devkota is undoubtedly a humanist. However, this short research paper tries to establish a point that his writings certainly exhibit the concern of humanities but they are not just always about human beings and they are not always from human-centric perspectives. Devkota was a thinker of such a stature whose writings do not easily allow us an easy categorization. It must be why scholars called Devkota a "Birat Prativa"(limitless talent). His writings, at many times, question the long cherished belief of humanists. They rebelliously question the entire anthropocentric discourses. Devkota, assuming the persona of a donkey, does exactly the same in his succinct yet powerful poem "The Donkey Speaks", where he blatantly questions such anthropocentric discourses.

Anthropocentric discourse places human beings at the center and maps the entire fields of knowledge accordingly. In words of John M. Greer, “anthropocentrism defines humanity as central to the universe”(1). It is the position that tries to establish human beings as the most significant species. In this regard, Burrell brings in a quote from Protagoras that humans are the crowns of creation, the measure of all things (181). Devkota, in “The Donkey Speaks”, interrogates such notions of human chauvinism.

In “The Donkey Speaks”, the speaker is a donkey, an animal that human beings have often been denigrating as one of the stupidest creature on earth. To call someone a donkey in many cultures means that the person is an idiot. Donkeys are being equated to stupidity and stubbornness. A Turkish proverb says: “A worthy man is still worthy even penniless; a donkey is a donkey even if he is finely saddled.” Even in Nepalese context, “Gadha” is one of the most common expressions to show dissatisfaction to someone’s foolishness or stupidity. Thus we have created a human-centric discourse to call ourselves superior to not only donkeys, but also to all other creatures on earth.

Human beings are defined as rational animals. Aristotle began this discussion for the first time in the history of western philosophy in a systematic way (Agassi, 256). But there are many thinkers who do not agree with this statement. Linda Cochrane quotes Bertrand Russell, “It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this (1)”. Devkota’s persona also thinks that human beings are not entirely rational. He calls our rationality “cruel and dry”. He believes that reason manipulates facts and even creates truths. The truths that we have made are self-constituted. In this regard, these truths are just human centric perspectives, nothing more. Devkota sounds very much like Foucault here. While developing Foucauldian ideas about knowledge, Hans Bertens writes:

Knowledge is for Foucault the product of a certain discourse, which has enabled it to be formulated, and has no validity outside it. The “truths” of the human sciences are the effect of discourses, of language. The knowledge of human beings “does not derive from access to the real world, to authentic reality, but from the rules of their discourses. (155)

The speaker in ‘The Donkey Speaks’ also thinks similarly. He says:

The brute world knows that wisdom is self-constituted satire, O God!
 Which is the most heart-touching poem?
 Is it the wave of joy upon the asses’ limbs, their rhythmic undulations?
 When the meadow is green with grass in the warm and sunny time?
 Or is it your inky lines? (18-24)

Thus the speaker in “The Donkey Speaks”, questions the stupidity of human beings, masking himself in the persona of a donkey. He does not agree with the idea that human beings are intelligent, neither are they the towering creation, the most valued creation on earth. The poem states that wisdom is self-constituted and the simple truths of nature like the rhythmic undulation of asses’ limbs can be far more poetic than the inky lines scholars produce.

The speaker questions human intelligence by asking: “do you know who plays behind the screen, what he does and how and why? /in this respect, O my master, how like me you are”(15-

16)! Though the speaker calls human beings master, he is not ready to accept human superiority. He attempts to laugh at human follies, questioning their entire beliefs and actions. The speaker tries to equate himself to the human beings by questioning them about the energy that drives or propels the entire universe. His understanding is that humans don't have the capacity to understand even the simplest truths like these. It is evident that the donkey is not happy with the hierarchy that human beings have made between themselves and the rest of the creatures.

A strand of logic human beings often use to prove their superiority over animals is that the former have recognized God and they have scriptures to guide them. This capacity has made them distinct from animals. This is what they believe. According to Scriptures, humans are not only the highest of God's acts of creation; they are created in the "likeness" or "image" of God. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'...So God created man in his own image...male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26, 27). The rest of the Bible gives us many clues as to what this "likeness to God" is meant to imply. Human beings have often been using this logic to justify their injustices upon animals and sometimes this very logic has been used to justify hierarchy between and among human beings themselves. But the persona in 'The Donkey Speaks' laughs at such anthropocentric god and goddesses and at the same time he laughs at our scriptures that directly or indirectly support human being's domination over other animals. The speaker in this regard says:

What is the meaning of the Vedas four before the principles twain-- appetite and lust?

The spark at the glow-worm's tail, and the nut of the squirrel.

These are all that ye know on earth. . .

My god is like a blade of grass-- succulent, tender, sweet, all pervasive, never dying, self-regenerating, ever strong! (28-40)

The speaker in this poem has juxtaposed anthropocentric god with simple objects like grass in nature. He believes that his god is just like grass- succulent, regenerating, and nourishing. He strongly asserts that in front of two simple truths that we call appetite and lust, the knowledge that our four Vedas proclaim is nothing. Devkota's idea about religion can be related to Karl Marx who, in his essay "Contribution to the Critique," says that god and religion are just illusions. He writes, "The criticism of religion disillusion man so that he will think, act and fashion his reality as a man who has lost his illusions and regained his reason." In this regard, Devkota's understanding of God has some resemblances with the idea of Karl Marx too. Devkota has pitted green succulent grass against the human notion of god and goddesses purposefully to bring human beings out of the world of illusion. For the donkey, the green grass itself is god. Grass itself is divine. What god is to human beings is not god to animals. In order to refute the idea of human superiority, the donkey says that god, to human beings, is the master but god, for the donkey, a servant. It is because god produces grass and animals just eat and enjoy!

Not only God but also the entire human discourse is a matter of discourse formation. It is not something that we need to find out or discover. It rather is a thing that we create. We have scaled entire branches of knowledge, keeping human beings at the center. When we dare to question the center, the knowledge that we have been cherishing for so long will automatically crumble. The donkey asks, "Have you the power to create the grass without its seed"? Thus the speaker backs up his claim that knowledge is self-constitutive.

Finally the poem via the speaker asks us not to live in the hell that we ourselves have created. He asks us to be wise and judicious. He calls our self-centric discourse a curse that has added complexities to our life rather than contributing for our betterment. He says:

All your claims are false and rotten, never just.
 You conceived a paradise and you built an inferno
 We the asses are at least in the middle state of earth. (72- 74)

The donkey calls the notion of paradise and inferno a human construct. He also blames us for not learning from history. The speaker asks, “What did 1934 tell you, sir! Did you see your architecture dilapidate to dust”? Generally, we believe that animals do not have a sense of history but here, in the poem; a donkey contends that human beings have not been able to learn from history, not been able to learn from past mistakes! Though the statement appears false at first glance, it certainly has a profound truth. If we had been able to learn from the past, we certainly would not have repeated our mistakes such as war, genocide, and other crimes again and again.

The speaker also throws some light on our myopic vision. The donkey contends that human beings themselves created the weapons of mass destruction such as atom bombs. We are making war rather than peace. We have not only killed animals but also our own fellow beings. This process has not ended yet. It is going on even at a greater speed. This is why the speaker blames us for not learning from history. He even ventures to call human beings “a brute”, the adjective human beings have long been using to define animals, especially donkeys. The speaker says, “Are you bent on still producing atom bombs to kill us asses, wiser brutes” (75-76)?

It seems that the poem is trying to contend that humans need to investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric understanding. If they do it, a most profound change in consciousness will begin. Alienation will subside. The human remains no longer an outsider. When we realize this fact, we stop identifying ourselves as an outsider. We will consider ourselves a part of this larger ecological system. Our relationship with each and every creature will automatically improve. Devkota, in “The Donkey speaks” attempts to give the message of such co-existence, going beyond our anthropocentric discourse.

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