

Laxmi Prasad Devkota's "Muna Madan" – A Traumatic Experience of Nepali Migrant Workers Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Overseas employment has become compulsive to all the households in Nepal. Nepali people, due to poor economic condition, aspire to go abroad since the day they start understanding their household condition, hardly maintained by their parents so that they would get rid of the current transitional turmoil of the country and if possible to settle there. People from middle and low class go abroad, mostly gulf countries to earn money to run their domestic needs in Nepal by sending remittance which has been playing a pivotal role for the growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and strengthening the balance of payment and external debt of the country. But while working in the foreign countries, they become vulnerable to fall victims and their dependency would be doomed to lead a painful life. However, the Nepal government is reluctant to make any plan to stop them from going there and endow them with plenty of opportunities at home so that they would not have to loiter along the hot sand rather they would toil on their own cozy soil. Although the poem was written decades ago in 1950s, Laxmi Prasad Devkota's Muna Madan is still contextual to the current Nepali socio-economic condition as mentioned above. In order to analyze the poem, trauma theory has been applied as a tool for in-depth exploration of Nepali society.

KEYWORDS: Overseas employment, remittance, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), trauma, turmoil

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INTRODUCTION

In the quest for a better life, people have been moving from one place to another in search of better earning opportunities from the beginning of the human civilization. It is an inevitable feature of human beings until today. With this never-ending feature, many poor migrant workers move from underdeveloped and developing countries to developed countries for their socio-economic status improvement and to make their lives better than before. Among many countries in the world, Nepal is also one of the poor countries that has been ranked 144 among Medium Human Develop Countries category. Lacking earning opportunities, a high number of Nepalese are also leaving Nepal for the sake of better employment opportunities abroad as a migrant worker. While observing the trend of employment abroad, many people are forced to move from their home country for various reasons like natural calamities, lack of better opportunities, low income, conflict, civil war and even to escape from discrimination and prejudices. These reasons for migration abroad always play a traumatic role in human lives. Abroad employment migration is not a new term in Nepal. Nepalese children in our villages, while growing up, started making up their mind to go abroad for better working opportunities rather than to focus on their education. And, following the trend of abroad employment migration, Nepalese youth have also been going

abroad to work in the absence of fruitful local employment opportunities in Nepal. Their employment abroad has become one of the main sources of National Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Nepali economy now. According to the Department of Foreign Employment, around 1,200 to 1,500 people at present are seeking permission to go abroad every day. And, from 2000/01 to 2017/18, altogether 4,096,519 Nepali people have been granted labour work permission and gone to out-migration employment already.

Several writings have been shared on the low and middle-class Nepali people who have gone for abroad employment by highlighting not only their ups and downs but also their family's lamentation longing to see them safe and healthy. There are many labour migrant workers aboard are working in a vulnerable situation without any effective legal protection by the Nepalese government even today. Encountering this type of daily situation, those who lose their lives abroad, maybe their lives would be finished and no more trouble of life should be coped with, would be in turmoil but those who are waiting for them in Nepal, would have to live with a never-ending road like life ahead with despair. I am writing this article to present how the people of Nepal as well as people from other developing countries, have deeply been traumatized by leaving their home countries as well as families under poor economic condition in reference with the great poet Laxmi Prasad Devkota's factual short narrative poem Muna Madan. This poem shows how a caring husband has to leave his country for the sake of better employment opportunity and loses his beloved wife due to sudden death while she was waiting for him at the house.

TRAUMA THEORY

Trauma studies, as we know them today, originated in the late nineteenth century. Originally, the term 'trauma' referred to a physical phenomenon, and more specifically to "a violent disruption of the body's integrity" (Hirsch, 2004, p. 8). It is only in the nineteenth century that the concept of 'trauma' was first linked to mental illnesses by the French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (Ringel, 2011, p. 1). More precisely, Charcot investigated the connection between trauma and hysteria, a disorder commonly diagnosed in women. And indeed, he discovered that hysterical symptoms were not physiological in common, but psychological in nature, describing hysterical attacks in terms of dissociative problems. Supporting his views Joshua Hirsch (2004) further claims that it is because of them that trauma is now primarily linked to psychological phenomena. The term can in this case be defined as "an experience that overwhelms [s] a person's normal means of mentally processing stimuli. The unprocessed memory of the experience remain[s] embedded in the mind, resulting in pathologies of memory, emotion, and practical functioning (p. 8). This altered state of consciousness provoked by traumatic memories has been termed dissociation. Different scholars have defined trauma in different ways.

Among them, Cathy Caruth is one of the most important scholars working on the implication on trauma for the study of comparative literature, whose *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History* (1996), has become an important example of one kind of argument about trauma. Caruth is probably the most influential figure in literary trauma theory today, established a psychoanalytic post structural approach which explores trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious mind that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language. Explanation of trauma can be found in Cathy Caruth's another book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. In this book, she (1995) emphasized trauma by saying "Because traumatic events are unbearable in their horror and intensity, they often exist as memories that are not immediately recognizable as truth. Such experiences are best understood not only through the straightforward acquisition of facts but through a process of discovering where and why conscious understanding and memory fail" (p. 37). Similarly, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*, she has given importance for the fields like psychoanalysis, trauma theory or theory of 'post-traumatic

stress disorder' (PSTD). This is a beautiful and expressive work which has been written with an exceptionally commendable clarity and writing power. Through the concept of trauma in human life, she skirmishes with other views by saying: "one can come to a new understanding that permits history to arise where immediate understanding may not". She reconnoiters the ways in which the writings of psychoanalysis, literature, and literary theory both express about the philosophical story of traumatic experience in human life. Caruth, rather than openly unfolding actual case studies of trauma survivors, or endeavoring to clarify trauma, she observes the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are intertwined in the language of trauma and in the stories related with it (p. 41). Whatsoever happens in one'.

Geoffrey H. Hartman, an important literary figure and critic of the 20th century, also penned on varied range of issues, including theories like, trauma, romantic, literary, and holocaust studies. Among other scholars at his time, he is recognized as one of the greatest scholars of his generation. The term trauma is a notion that he explores throughout his work. However, there are few writings dedicated to directly to that concept.

Roger Luckhurst, professor in modern and contemporary literature introduces and explores the fields of cultural memory and traumatic studies, outlining the ways in which concepts of trauma have become a key element in contemporary western outskirts of the self. His well-known book *The Trauma Question* (2008) sketches the origins of the concept of trauma across psychiatric, legal and cultural-political sources from the 1860s to the inventing of post-traumatic stress Disorder (PTSD) in 1980 (p. 23). It further analyzes the nature and amount of trauma culture from 1980 to the present. The *Trauma Question* offers a substantial and captivating step forward for those looking for a bigger understanding of the controversial and ever-expanding field of traumatic study and research.

By analyzing the views of the above scholars, I must say, trauma is a type of harm to the mind that happens and arises as a result of a severely stressful events and experiences. It is often the result of an overwhelming volume of stress that surpasses one's capacity to survive, or integrate the feelings and emotions associated with that experience. Traumatic events involve one's experience, or continuously repeating bitter events in days, weeks, months or even years, ultimately leads the person to a serious, long-term negative consequences. However, the term, trauma varies between persons, according to their personal experiences. Persons will react to similar events differently or the unfavorable environments that have frequently been facing repeatedly. In another way, not all persons who experience a potentially traumatic event will become psychologically traumatized. However, it is likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after being exposed to a potentially traumatic event, which could be after days, weeks, months, years or decades. The above discrepancy in risk rate can be attributed to protective factors some persons may have, which enable them to deal with trauma, related to temperamental and environmental factors the traumatic persons are facing repeatedly. Some examples are mild exposure to stress early in life, resilience characteristics, and active seeking of help.

TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE NEPALESE MIGRANT WORKERS ABROAD AND IT'S IMPACT IN NEPAL

From the several years now, Nepal has bitterly been experiencing a surge in out-migration for abroad employment to various destination countries. As more and more Nepalese want and depart for overseas employment, they are leaving their home countries even without having any job-related skills. Abroad employment is undeniably the most important motivation for international labour employment migration from Nepal in the 21st century. A report from Labour Migration for Employment: A Status Report for Nepal 2013/14 (2014) illustrates that the number of labour migrant workers leaving Nepal for work is increasing every year. The report shows that Malaysia is now, has become the number one destination country for Nepalese labour migrants for employment, followed by Qatar, Saudi

Arabia, UAE and Kuwait (p. 6). Although the country's political leaders have been harping on the idea to increase the number of employment in home, abroad employment has become a feasible living option for millions of Nepalese who are unable to acquire minimum education and to find work within the country. Following this, Labour Migration for Employment: A Status Report for Nepal 2014/15 (2016) has highlighted that there has been huge growth in the inflow of remittances by the Nepalese labour worker from abroad. It is from NPR 58.6 billion rupees in 2003/04 to NPR589.5 billion in 2014/15. The inflow of the remittance by the Nepalese labour from abroad has contributed a 10.9 percentage share of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2003/04, 27.7 percent in 2014/15 and 29.6 percent in fiscal year 2015/16. The remittance inflow from abroad employment, therefore, is one of the major contributing factor and the source to development financing in Nepal. The Labour Migration for Employment: A Status Report for Nepal 2014/15 has further outlined by saying "Malaysia and the gulf cooperation council countries have been the most attractive destinations, receiving 85% percent of all male and female labour migrants in the past seven fiscal years. Total 2,723,587 labour permits issued over that period, 33.3 percent were for employment in Malaysia, followed by Qatar (at 19 per cent), Saudi Arabia (18.9 per cent), United Arab Emirates (9.8 per cent), Kuwait (2.5 per cent), Bahrain (0.9 per cent) and Oman (0.6 per cent)" (p. 9).

This out-migration statistics shows how labour migration for abroad employment has become a major source of income for many Nepalese households now in Nepal. It also shows that how inflow of remittance has become a major and undeniable contributing factor to increase income not only for the Nepalese household but also to the national GDP of the country. The outflow of labour migrants primarily to different Gulf countries in the past has been significant in transforming the country's economic, social and cultural fabric. Now, Nepal has emerged as a remittance economy country, controversially shaped by labour migrants' cash inflows. Due to this, Nepal is among the top remittance recipient country among least developed countries in the world. Abroad labour employment and its inflow of remittance has provided alternative livelihood opportunities which has helped to increase Nepalese household incomes in Nepal. Among the many impacts of labour employment abroad, the social dynamics have changed and cultural norms are being transformed. The capacious nature of abroad labour migration has brought new opportunities as well as challenges for the Nepalese Government and policy-makers. For the government and the policy-makers, the primary concern has been in managing the huge outflow not only in an organized way but also ensuring the safety, rights, dignity and welfare of labour migrant workers which requires strong coordination between political parties and the government, strengthening the governance process, creating cohesive legislation and policies and ensuring their proper implementation without any hurdle (p. 1). Due to lack of the coordination and proper understanding, there are still gaps in the implementation of such legislation and policies that have hampered the rights and safety of labour migrant workers abroad. Receiving news on labour migrants suffering from abuses, exploitation and financial distress in abroad shows how they are facing a terrible life despite sending remittances in their home country. For labour migrants' safety in abroad, safety and better remuneration should be implemented maintaining their basic working as well as human rights in the best possible way in the current context (p. 2). Nepalese labour migrant workers making a huge development contribution not only to their home country but also to the destination countries where they are filling out labour market with their hard work and below wages in comparison with nationals of the destination countries which does not lessen their vulnerability to labour exploitation and abuse.

Mr. Keshab Poudel, in his article "Labour Migration: Emerging Challenge" (2016) states:

About 300,000 Nepali citizens (women and men) migrated abroad for work. As most male Nepali migrant workers are employed in low-skilled sectors, such as construction and manufacturing, whereas the majority of female migrants' work in the informal sector, either as caregivers or housemaids, they are paid low. Had they been given proper training with new skills, Nepal would have benefited much more. It is because of the low skills and knowledge; Nepali women are compelled to work whatever they get in abroad.

To support this idea, Ganesh Gurung (2004), in his book *An Overview Paper on Overseas Employment in Nepal* says:

Women domestic servants overseas are extremely vulnerable to sexual harassment in their workplace, and mental harassment from employers. There are no bilateral agreements between governments to address the vulnerabilities of women labour migrants. Although Nepal has signed nine international conventions so far which are aimed at protecting domestic workers, these conventions are not effectively implemented. As a result most women who migrate for work are not protected by insurance, have limited access to health facilities, have no provident fund and no guarantees of wages or leave. Nepalese women who find employment as domestic helpers overseas may not be familiar with 'modern' kitchen and household appliances, which can present them with problems. Women who are struggling to deal with such 'culture shock' may face verbal abuse from their employers (p. 18).

The Nepalese women working as domestic servants abroad are expected to earn money for their family in Nepal, but always vulnerable to fall into appalling condition as they are facing physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse at the hands of their employers while working abroad. And, most of the time, they are getting salaries far below than what a broker may have promised in Nepal. And, that makes their family to be in even more pathetic condition and economic hardship than before. A recent news article in *Kantipur National Daily*, published on 23 Jan 2018:

"Gulf Country and Nepali Workers in Malaysia" shows that altogether 957 people die each year due to lack of not having enough access to health examination on the one hand, suicide, road accident-not knowing the traffic rules, heart attack on the other hand in the Golf Countries (Self Translation, p. 1).

Despite having the above problems while in abroad labour employment, Nepali workers and their families face notable problems like, internal migration due to having good money and sometimes losing all the money from remittance, increase in drug addiction not having supportive family members, family breakups due to loneliness, and bad orientations of children not being able to provide good guide for the children while parents are in abroad etc. Supporting this view Prabhu Nath Mishra, an economics professor opines: "Growing towns and cities across the country is an indication of money spent in 'better' living. Very little of the remittance has been brought into nation's infrastructure development." (Interview)

One of the Nepali migrant workers, Sagar Sharma of Kanchanpur Saptari says:

I don't know how my health supports while in foreign employment. The most important thing is to earn a lot for my family. I am feeling sad as I will be departing my family and going abroad and will not be able to take care of them directly but my love will always guide them even if I am not with them (Personal interview with a Nepalese migrant worker).

Many workers do not give any importance to their health, rather how much they earn. It was because of this many families have been found having different household problems like low education, drug addiction, separation, family dispute and breakaway as a bad implication of labour migration in the Nepali society.

Once in conversation with me, Hari Bhaai Bhujel of Doti, a migrant worker says:

Everything was good before I went to Golf for employment except a deep desire to earn a lot than my neighbor. I had good family, home, some pieces of land etc. But, during 5 years of my abroad employment my dream would get shattered. My wife started having affair to another man, my son started scoring poor grade and we had only one piece of land as my wife married to another person and started living along with him faraway from my village. I got divorce now (Personal interview with a Nepalese migrant worker).

Many migrant workers abroad are working in helpless situations without any effective legal protection by the Nepalese government on the one hand. And, they are not getting attention by the receiving countries on the other hand. Work as well as other human related exploitations by the abroad employers are reported frequently. However, the Nepalese government has not been able to establish the international labour migrants' rules and regulations in collaboration with the receiving countries for the protection of its citizens. The statement above shows how pathetic the middle class as well as the lower-class Nepali people are in our society. They have no choice except going for the abroad employment as there are several near and medium-term challenges ahead for Nepal. Effective mobilization of post-earthquake reconstruction, full recovery of exports, and the successful establishment of national election are key near-term challenges. Additionally, the trade disruptions have highlighted the urgent need to diversify the Nepali economy, particularly in terms of fuel trade and transport options. According to Asian Economic Integration Report (2016) published by the Asian Development Bank, Nepal faces several simultaneous and daunting challenges in medium terms. These include the challenges of completing the political transition and setting up a new federal structure while attempting to leverage its endowments to attain faster and sustainable growth, reduce poverty, and create better economic opportunities by providing skill base work for its citizens in Nepal (p. 22). These activities despite having many hardships have enhanced economic condition.

To protect rights of the labour migrants, the Nepalese government should formulate even more appropriate policies and programs for the betterment and for the reduction of trauma for not only labour migrants but also for the family members who are eagerly waiting for them in the home country. The government should take responsibility for regulating all formal channels of foreign labour migration. It should strengthen its process and policy frameworks that support safe labour migration and cohesive legislation and policies that advocated labour rights and safety while working abroad. To make abroad employment even better, mutual agreements between Nepal government and the receiving countries should be formed and implemented which protects labour migrant in every way.

TRAUMATIC FACT IN "MUNAMADAN"

Laxmi Prasad Devkota was a Nepali poet, playwright, and novelist who was born on 12 November 1909 and died on 14 September 1959. He was honored with Mahakavi (Great Poet) in Nepali literary works. He is known as the poet with the golden heart. He is regarded as the greatest literary figure in the history Nepali language even today. He introduce dramatic movement and first literary figure, begin writing epic poems in Nepali literature. Especially poems in Nepali literature climbed to new heights with his innovative use of

language. He wrote Muna Madan in 1930 which is best known as narrative poem in widespread folk tune in Nepal. Muna Madan is unquestionably the most loved book in the history of Nepalese literature in Nepal. The narrative poem describes the hardships of the journey: the sorrow of leaving family, longing to see family, and the grief of death of loved one. It describes the life of a economically poor Nepalese society of a rural area in where Muna Madan were living. Madan, the main and the most important character of the narrative poem, represents character from Nepalese poor economic society of Nepal who goes abroad to for the better employment opportunity and to earn money for better living. Madan is such a character who is compelled to go abroad as he is jobless because of the problems of unemployment and poverty prevalent in his country. Muna, another important character, who is shown as a beloved wife of Madan. She loves her husband, Madan a lot so she is upset as she must send him to a place, Lahsa, where there are lots of obstacles and risks. But finally, she accepts this challenge and stays in the country with her mother-in-law who is old and weak. Madan goes to Lahsa but his journey is not easy. He faces a lot of obstacles and difficulties during his journey and this is beautifully described in the book. The book has tried to show the ups and downs of life by illustrating the problems of Madan's life. When Madan returns, he finds his mother and his beloved wife had already died which also shows the life of poor women who suffered much without their son and husband and later dies because of grief. By seeing all these, he becomes grief-stricken and comes to realize that money is of no value at that point and says:

Bags of gold are the dirt of the hands, what do I do with
the wealth?

Better to eat greens and nettle with peace within the
heart. (Self-Translated, 2008, p. 11)

By presenting the live characters, Devkota has written about the biggest problem of the then Nepalese society which is equally important in the present society. Because of poverty, now also numbers of Nepalese are working in foreign lands leaving their family behind at home. They are working thousands of miles away from their home to give their family with good food, shelter and better life ahead. The bitter traumatic fact is that around the boxes with dead bodies are coming to Nepal in each day from golf countries. The report presented by Amnesty International (2016) shows how workers are facing the harsh reality in golf countries:

There are many workers who keep working like
donkeys, without asking a question. They do not understand
what is legally our entitlements, what our rights are. The
company has been causing a lot of trouble. The company does
not give even minimum facilities and treats them as sub-human
beings (p. 31).

Through the story of Muna Madan, the writer wants to picturize the facts of the traditional Nepalese societies, irrational beliefs and the negative impacts of unemployment and poverty in Nepalese society. He has shown the love between a mother and a son. The poet has wonderfully defined love by writing about the relationship of Muna and Madan. Because of the combination of all these categories of human life, this book has earned a great successful journey in the Nepali Literature. Madan, here, elucidating the harsh reality of the Nepali economic part as well as the youth who aspire to become migrant workers right from the time they would be eligible to get Nepali citizenship card as well as their passport and choose their life to spend in a dark reality due to their current economic and social life in the home country. The story of Muna Madan is representing our daily life in a traumatic as well as in a realistic way even after so many decades it was greatly penned by Devkota.

It is an undeniable fact that the out-migrant labors are the backbone of the Nepal's economy. But, what happens when they die while working in the abroad. Every governmental

agency should be accountable whether it is only the loss of their kin and kith or also the loss of the country as well as the national economy. If this is the loss of the country as well the national economy, then the Nepal government should protect every individual from this traumatic realm of daily life not only in out-migration employment but also in Nepali society from the very beginning of Nepalese' lives. Almost every worker ultimately realizes that they should not have left their home before, rather, to work in their own country, by taking care of their family members and exchange love in their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

The history of labour migration started from 1814/16 in Nepal which shows that Nepali labour migrant workers not only working in their home country but also started working in different counters for the betterment of their lives. Following the trained, an international labour migration abroad, mostly to golf countries started with a new phenomenon of migration in the Nepali context with about a 30 years' history. Since then, Nepal has been facing such traumatic facts not only in economic context but also in social and family context. Many articles, reports, news and research have been penned by highlighting this issue with this new genre of social theory. Devkota's poetic drama Muna Madan has exposed the bitter reality of the Nepali socioeconomic life in his time and this bitter fact is equally relevant in the present time of Nepal that every Nepali has been destined to live. Nepali people of different economic status have various dreams. A poor, with almost no skill has dream to go and work in tea states, farming, forest and household work in India. Similarly, a middle class, with some skills or low skills has dream to go and work in the hot climate of Golf countries and finally, educated and rich people have dream to go to the USA, Canada and other developed countries in search of their material dreams. And, while searching their dreams, their life is becoming isolated and alone in despair. Ultimately, they have nothing except to face a traumatic life, living very far away from their family and longing to see them before the inevitable call of death comes. Their family members are facing the same bitter reality back in home with a prayer that they would not have to receive and see their dear one's dead body inside the box in the Tribhuvan International Airport coming from the Golf and other countries. And, the families, who have lost their members, have nothing except to recall their old memories with the deepest pain to face the hardest traumatic reality in their life ahead.

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