

Sanjeev Uprety. 2007. *Ghanacakkar*. Kathmandu: Nepa~laya Publication.

Ghanacakkar is a fusion of multitudes of cakkars [problems]. Life is a labyrinth of a variety of cakkars. So life is a ghanacakkar. The ghanacakkar of life has four dimensions: political, psychological, existential, and material.

(*Ghanacakkar* p. 144, reviewer's translation)

Ghanacakkar, a Nepali novel by Sanjeev Uprety published recently, picks up the theme of an individual madness apparently triggered by a pervasive national madness. While the national madness is related to the decade-old violent conflict with the consequent political instability, and the eroding faith in the society, the individual madness is tied to one's quest for meaning in a society which is itself unstable.

This commentary reads *Ghanacakkar* on two levels: social and individual. At the social level, there is a (political) society stuck in a labyrinth of activities that do not seem to lead to a solid, uniform, meaningful whole. The political activities occurring do not relate to a definable rationale. Against this backdrop, we have an individual who is mixed up between his own incoherence of mind and that of the nation/society. This mix-up forms one of the cores of the novel.

The Individual

The novel is about one individual. In technical terms, there is only one protagonist in the narrative (and the author does not want to introduce him by any proper name). The other characters come and go, contributing one or two things to the development of the story. The protagonist does not have a 'material' problem in an ordinary sense: he is not living in poverty, he does not have a failed relationship, he is not bothered much about his career, and he has no hard work to do for a living, so to say. This unproblematic social situation places the character in an advantaged position to get lost—intellectually (to use a plainer word in place of ('spiritually')).

When the novel begins, the character has an awakening about a potential madness that is growingly captivating him. He knows he has a quest but does not know what this may be or how he may pursue it. The character admits to himself that he has a problem—the typical way in which he is confused between fact and fiction—and is in a frenzied struggle to resolve it. This struggle makes up most of the plot of the novel.

Ghanacakkar is an extraordinary fusion of fact and fiction: readers are constantly challenged to question what they would traditionally take for granted as fact or fiction. The novel's literary argument is that what happens in the theater of the mind is a happening, similar to any other happenings which we call facts. In other words, isn't it a fact that certain imaginings took place in your mind? So isn't that piece of imagination a fact?

Readers familiar with wider literary genres would recall the novelistic technique called 'stream of consciousness' where events in the novel are things that take place in the minds of the characters. For instance, a character is reading a newspaper over a cup of coffee in a confused morning and is thinking about what she would do for the whole of the day. She goes to a number of places, encounters a number of people, does a series of strange things and, when she is back home (in the travels of her mind), she is just about to finish the coffee in her cup. All those events occurred but in her mind. Some Modernist writers in English, like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, called such events a better portrayal of reality than just a description of things that the characters physically did, like in other event-packed novels. *Ghanacakkar* is a saga of the wanderings of a seeking mind which is arguably stuck in a *ghanacakkar*, the master impasse.

Because the protagonist has a lot of similarities with the author himself one could argue that the novel has significant autobiographical elements. Just to note a couple of examples: The protagonist is a university teacher like the author himself, and there is a consistent pattern in which many real life characters working at the university appear in the novel with their real names subtly twisted but sufficiently giving an indication as to who the characters could be in real life. In addition, there are several activities that the protagonist performs in the novel which the author in his real life has done.

In sum, at one level of discussion, the novel is not only inherently preoccupied but completely based on the *ghanacakkar* of an individual character, whose personal (primarily intellectual/spiritual) ramblings make up the novel.

The Social Level

By thus questioning the taken-for-granted boundaries between fact and fiction, *Ghanacakkar* offers a way to look into the 'realities' of the times we now live in. It provides a chance to examine whether it is the country that has gone mad or the individuals who participate in the madness of

time. The novel is a 'spiritual' autobiography of a character that is seemingly losing the balance of his mind. We, the poor readers, are condemned to trust the narrative of this very semi-lunatic. This technique adds to the flavor of the novel. Should we trust a mentally imbalanced narrator for the whole story of the novel?

Though the novel makes no mention of it, one is tempted to think about the notion of madness discussed by French philosopher Michel Foucault.¹ In *Ghanacakkhar* the character, who is an otherwise promising university academic, does not find himself abiding by the "norms" that other people follow. Hence, the difference between people called 'normal' and 'abnormal.' To quote the over-quoted postmodern terminology, Upreti deconstructs this binary opposition between the normal and the abnormal in the novel, much like he deconstructs the binary of fact versus fiction. In one brilliant episode in the novel, a student demands a re-examination of his answer-sheets after he gets poor marks. But the university system allows only for a 're-totaling' or recounting of the numbers awarded to the answers on the answer sheet. This student (Ranganath) is, like the protagonist himself, admitted to the mental ward of a hospital where the two see each other. Ranganath again demands that his answer sheets be re-examined or re-checked and asks if the protagonist (Ranganath's teacher) could help him in this. The protagonist responds, "I am helpless, Ranganath. The doctors here are even refusing to re-examine me. They have already put me on the list of the mad. With the different set of (fixed) questions, they only try to re-total me" (pp. 182-183). This allegorical episode is a powerful satire against a society which is accustomed to interpreting individuals on the basis of a rigid set of rules: those whose characteristics do not fall within a set of predetermined categories are doomed to be labeled 'abnormal'.

Ghanacakkhar is history. Its characters are real, even in the mundane sense of the word 'real.' The canvas (or theater) is the Kathmandu Valley. Its time frame is the past few years. This is a documentation of facts about

1 See Michel Foucault. 1989. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. London: Routledge. In this book, Foucault explores the dynamics of the origin and growth of the idea of insanity in the history of modern human civilization. Foucault argues that the knowledge of madness developed during the modern era as a regime of truth which helped a certain category of human beings to systematically dominate those who behaved rather differently. According to Foucault, the identification of madness as a social and medical problem is a reflection of the "age of reason" (modernity) which thrives on the politics of difference.

the oldest university of this country, the myth and reality about being an academic in our present day context. This is an autobiography of the most tumultuous time in Nepal's history beginning with the royal massacre through subsequent political changes and instability.

I would also like to argue that the novelist tends to intellectualize the notion of madness. There are undertones of a glorification of madness in the text. There is an intellectual defense of madness. The novel's protagonist suggests that it is not only he who has gone mad, but that the times we live in that have gone mad. This intellectual treatment of the theme of madness could be very engaging for some readers while for others it could be the opposite. If the novelist was making an attempt to demystify things about *ghanacakkhar*, the novel does not serve the purpose. The way the *ghanacakkhar* mind of the character is hooked with the invisible (divine?) forces of this valley is simply intriguing. Its only defense could be an intellectual one.

On different occasions in the novel, the academician writer's persona is predominant over the novelist. But his brilliant insights into the mysteries behind things (the mystification of the otherwise commonplace life and its surroundings) make the novel an interesting reading experience.

One could safely claim that this is a very new type of novel in the context of Nepali literature. All of us obviously have our own personal responses to the extraordinary time we have been undergoing in our nation's recent history. *Ghanacakkhar* is one such powerful response that many would love to read and relate to themselves.

The University: An Incomplete Mess

Tribhuvan University, where some of the novel takes place, is a complete mess. Something like a mess could be an incomplete mess rather than a complete one. According to the novel, the primary disillusionment of the protagonist comes from the fact that he has sacks of answer-sheets to examine as part of his responsibility as a teacher at the university. When one has, say, three hundred answer-sheets to examine of a one hundred full marks paper—the duty thrust upon you without any choice—this is simply a *ghanacakkhar*.

The novel is not primarily focused on this exact theme but it suggests in a number of instances the fading glory of academic work associated with the university. There's a senior professor (pp. 8-10) who is not happy with the younger generation which is not doing serious academic work. There are students challenging the professors over the quality of the

examination. In this novel the university is fertile ground for the birth of *ghanacakkar* minds. Even if not every university mind in *ghanacakkar* would come up with a novel like this, the author conveys the declining sense of purpose and meaning behind academic work associated with the university due to failing systems (largely associated with the overarching political instability of the country) that can no longer uphold the dignity and value of academic pursuits.

Even when *Ghanacakkar* is not about the university's mess thematically, it definitely reflects the university situation as a rich predicament for *cakkars* like the ones dealt in the novel. A powerful instance of this is the student-character (Ranganath) who is admitted to a mental ward of the hospital, apparently as a result of his being unable to perform at the university as per his expectation.

In Sum, What is the Novel Like?

This is an intellectual novel. The intellectual element is its strength. But when it comes to reading the political history of the nation, the novel is weak in its political analysis. It attempts to connect political anarchy with the anarchy of the protagonist's mind but this part is relatively weak. The novel's strength is its powerful depiction of the main character's search for the meanings behind different 'forces' that exist in the Kathmandu valley. The most fascinating part for me was how the character believes in the possible 'supernatural' forces as the ropes that anchor his consciousness, his quest, and the connections between trivial activities in his life.

The novel deals with the theme of madness with a high degree of luxury. The main character is into a philosophical adventure. However, the novel concludes without any 'intellectual' solutions to the *cakkars* the character has faced. The novel returns to the normalcy and mundanity of life as a solution and the ordinariness of family love as a last resort. In this sense, the concluding section of the novel is a disappointment to the readers.

The novel is remarkable for the subtlety with which it examines events and people that tend to almost always pass unnoticed in our day to day lives. For instance, isn't it fascinating to ponder how a shopkeeper selling wrist watches makes sense of his own real time? How does one whose duty it is to sell time machines look at time? Uprety demonstrates a wonderful capacity to observe and establish connections between the ordinary work of a watch shopkeeper and the philosophical concepts of time. Dilbarnath *yogī*, who comes to the Taudaha area annually for a Feri,

is another such insightful person. And, most importantly, the beliefs these ordinary people carry are extraordinary.

The novel does not have a narrative flow that tells a nice, linear story. There is a risk that if a reader does not like the character of the protagonist, then s/he will not be impressed with the rest of the novel. But if the reader likes the way the character is stuck in *ghanacakkara*, then the novel begins to attract. This is the limitation of the work as a narrative.

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