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Breaking Hegemony, Producing Counter- Narratives: A Kumaoni Folk Ballad and its Literary Adaptation

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Abstract: Being a rich source of cultural heritage, Uttarakhand has a plethora of folkloric elements rooted in its soil. However, the continuing migration and globalization have weakened folks' bond with their culture. "Rajula-Malushahi", a Kumaoni folk-ballad, is a case in point. Despite its epic form and the rich cultural heritage, the oral performance of this narrative is completely lost. The professional bards have given up their age-old familial profession of performance and have almost disappeared. The apathetic response of the audience has aggravated this process. With the shrinking of the social life of the villages, the enthusiasm of the folks to assemble and listen to this ballad has also collapsed. Nevertheless, the ballad has generated interest in different genres. One finds numerous renderings of the ballad in diverse performance genres such as songs, plays, TV serials (by Doordarshan), radio plays, and literary adaptations like poems, novels, and short stories.

This paper deals with literary adaptation of the ballad in the novel form. Doing so, the paper primarily aims at studying the silenced voices in the oral versions finding their expressions through literary adaptation. This includes not only a human voice, but all those issues as well which are artistically excluded from the surface; thus, presenting only a linear and restricted narrative to the folks. This paper also intends to emphasise the literary potential in articulating an unobserved and muted narrative suppressed till now. The novels create counter-narratives, while maintaining the basic storyline of the ballad intact, making the once prevalent folk-ballad relevant for the present 21st century readers.

The mentioned objectives of the paper will be achieved through a comparative analysis of the oral versions of the ballad with its literary adaptation. Questionnaires obtained from the authors by the researcher will also be referred to understand the process of negotiation and appropriation authors went through while dealing with the oral versions.

Keywords: Counter-narrative, adaptation, hegemony, silenced and marginalised voices.

“Rajula-Malushahi”, a Kumaoni folk-ballad, narrates a love story and the successive struggles of a girl Rajula who belongs to the *shauk* tribe and the Prince of Kumaon, Malushahi. Though ballad’s presence can be traced in Garhwal region as well, it is known among Kumaoni folks primarily. Used to be sung in the wintry nights by the professional bards for hours and days, this ballad can be considered a true masterpiece that reflects folks’ culture including their belief system. However, the continuous migration and globalization have weakened folks’ bond with their culture, and this ballad is a case in point. The bards have given up their age-old familial profession of performance and have almost disappeared. The indifferent audience and their passive response have aggravated this process. The weakening social life in the villages, the fervour of getting together and listening to this ballad has also collapsed. Nevertheless, the ballad has generated interest in different genres. One finds numerous renderings of the ballad in diverse performance genres such as songs, stage drama, TV serials (by Doordarshan), radio plays, and literary adaptations like poems, novels, and short stories.

The novels *Rajula and the Web of Danger* by Deepa Agarwal and *Blood Red Message: Story of Rajula Malshahi* by Girdhar Joshi are the two literary adaptation of the ballad this paper deals with. Where Deepa writes for children, Girdhar Joshi caters to the youth of the 21st century. They have structured and retold the ballad accordingly. Comparing the oral versions (available in Sangeet Natak Akademi) with the literary adaptation, the paper primarily aims at studying the silenced voices of the oral versions finding their expressions through literary adaptation. This silence includes not only a human voice, but those episodes and issues as well which are

artistically excluded from the surface; thus, presenting only a linear and restricted narrative to the folks. This paper also intends to emphasise the literary potential in articulating an unobserved aspect of the narrative suppressed and muted till now. The novels create counter-narratives, while maintaining the basic storyline of ballad intact, making the once prevalent folk-ballad relevant for the present 21st century readers.

The oral versions available in Sangeet Natak Akademi exhibit Malushahi as a figure of status performing an active role in the love story. In fact, many other versions are called *Malushahi* only. Mohan Upreti's analysis of the ballad, who recorded three versions for the Sangeet Natak Akademi, is also called *Malushahi: The ballad of Kumaon*. The female protagonist, Rajula, seems to lose her presence. It should also be remembered that the ballad would be recited by the male bards only; thus, minimising presence of a woman in a male-dominated activity. Being a woman, only her beauty is highlighted that again reflects softness and femininity against the masculinity and valour of Malushahi. Deepa Agarwal's adaptation takes Rajula and Malushahi's characters into account and gives forth a fresh interpretation of the ballad.

Being a children's author, Deepa retold the ballad for young adults significantly. Deepa's use of magical tricks and chanting, human transformation, and fantastical dreams with a prince falling in love with an ordinary girl, certainly reflect the novel following the structure of a fairy-tale. Apparently, the adaptation includes all the elements of a fairy-tale. But what sets Deepa's novel apart from fairy love-stories is the absence of her heroine as a 'damsel in distress'. Unlike the heroines of fairy-tales, Rajula is the one who is not even frightened by inviting the dangers for herself, and in turn by creating challenges for her lover. "For me, it came across as the story of a rebel girl, something rare in folk ballads, which usually celebrate male heroism", says Deepa. Rajula is indeed a 'rebel' who leaves no stone unturned to marry Malushahi

despite being already betrothed by her father, Sunapati to Bikkhipal, a King of *Huniya* tribe who would grant Sunapati concession for trade in his region in Tibet. On the other hand, Malushahi stays passive all this while. He does not visit her home in Jalnar Desh (in the periphery of Kumaon) to talk to her parents only because, according to him, she leaves 'mysteriously'. However, her mysterious departure should have intrigued him to find her when she had clearly informed him about her whereabouts. As a prince, he has enough strength and capacity to reach Rajula's home. Unlike Rajula, he would not have faced any misfortunes. It is only after reading Rajula's letter that she writes inside Malushahi's room when he was in deep slumber that Malushahi seems to take a stand for his love. Rajula, with her blood as ink and nose-pin as a pen, writes a letter challenging him saying, "If you love me sincerely, and are a true son of your mother, you will come to my father's house and carry me back with honour as your bride." (Ch- 12, p. 101). She also does not forget to mention that "I came here to meet you, braving all kinds of perils." When Malushahi reads the letter, he reveals that he has 'spent so many sleepless nights' longing to meet Rajula which is questionable. What holds him back so long from meeting Rajula is incomprehensible. Even after receiving the letter, he waits three days for his mother's permission. It is only after his mother is grieved by his pain that she permits him to depart to meet Rajula. Reaching there, he loses to the tricks of Sunapati. Again, Rajula takes initiative by postponing her marriage for another seven years while staying with her would-be husband Rikhyepal, thus making the path for Malushahi clear. Even when Malushahi reaches Tibet to 'rescue' Rajula, it is done with the help of magical tricks and diviners who transform him into a parrot. Thus, it is not a rescue as such. Malushahi seems to doubt his own potential when he calls himself an 'incompetent fool' and 'silly' who has already been 'outwitted' by Sunapati.

Undoubtedly, the bards who would perform the ballad were all male. Their performances had created a hegemonic and male-oriented narrative underlining the active role of Malushahi only even though Rajula does everything that is there in Deepa's novel in their oral versions as well. But her actions and initiatives are never praised. The first ever analysis of the ballad *Malushahi: The ballad of Kumaon* by Mohan Upreti serves the same purpose. Absence of a female bard, folklorist, and interpreter led this ballad to continue among the folks from one perspective only i.e. male perspective. Deepa's interpretation brings forth a counter-narrative placing the significant but marginalised character the due status.

It would not be erroneous to think of Malushahi as a prince dependent on others for his wishes to be fulfilled. He comes with an army to take Rajula, tricked by Sunapati almost to death, revived by the magical powers, and visits Tibet with an army and magicians. Also, his encounter with Rikhyepal's army cannot be considered a 'war'. Malushahi and his army only defend themselves instead of attacking their enemy. This is also done taking different forms of animals and birds. At the end, it is with the help of magicians Sidua and Bidua Ramol that Rikhyepal's army is dispersed, and Malushahi takes Rajula with him. There is no moment in the novel which can be absolutely devoted to Malushahi's chivalry. In contrast, it is Rajula whose courage has no boundary. From defying her father's will and travelling all alone via forest in the night to meet Malushahi, from using her blood to write a letter and postponing her marriage to wait patiently as a hostage locked behind seven doors, Rajula comes out not as a distressed damsel but a hero herself.

Though written for children, Deepa has appropriated the ballad to represent a new perspective for children who grow up listening to or reading the typical 'damsel in distress' tales. She has given a chance to the lady who is as significant as the

hero is. In this regard, the title of the novel *Rajula and the Web of Danger* is worth noting. This foretells that the risks are primarily faced by Rajula only. The ‘danger’ of the title upholds the fact that it is Rajula only who experiences the ordeals for Malushahi as a common girl without any army or supporters with her. If, like Malushahi, Rajula has also been inert to the given circumstances, they would not have been together. The author has completely obliterated Malushahi’s presence from the title. On being asked about the title, the author states, “The original ballad is always called Malushahi. I felt there was something very patriarchal about it, since it is Rajula who takes the initiative and Malushahi simply responds to her message. For me she’s the real hero of the story. Thus, I felt she should get her due in the title.”

The oral versions would be commemorated and appreciated as a romance with the resulting suffering to attain a union at the end. But who suffers to what extent and whose actions make the union possible would never be talked of despite being easily observable. Instead of acknowledging Rajula’s brave acts, her feminine features are discussed. Deepa takes cognizance of the matter and provides a voice to Rajula’s character making her actions recognised and beauty secondary.

The beauty empathised by bards tempts men towards Rajula putting her in a compromising situation. The affliction Rajula meets from men is lightened in Deepa’s fantastical narrative. If one happens to read the oral versions, the ravishment Rajula goes through at the hands of men is obvious. It is the sexual afflictions she has to face and escape. But because she is retelling the narrative to children, Deepa has curtailed unwanted sexual advances causing misery to Rajula almost invisible. On being asked about the same, Deepa says, “I tried to combine the three versions I found, keeping the taste of the contemporary young adult reader in mind. I must also mention that I have toned down the sexual content, since the

book falls in the realm of children's literature." It would not be wrong to say that the author has done a great job in appropriating the sexual content as required.

What Deepa restricts herself to do due to her readership is expanded by Girdhar Joshi in his novel. Unlike Deepa to utilise magic and dream sequences at length, he limits magic and dream sequences available in the oral versions in abundance. What is important for him to deal with that sets it apart from the folk version is his emphatic episodes on the issues of sex and love. What is covertly dealt with in oral versions, Joshi's novel talks about that overtly. In all the three above-mentioned oral versions (available in Sangeet Natak Akademi), one observes incidents where Rajula is impeded by many men in her journey to meet Malushahi. Be it a young, middle aged or a toothless aged-man, all of them almost ravish and violate Rajula. Their sexual desire for Rajula is, however, covered in the guise of comic occurrences in the oral versions. However, a reader of the current century will actively deal with such a burning issue veiled in the garb of a romantic narrative.

In her journey to meet Malushahi, Rajula first meets the brothers Sidua and Bidua, the rich farmers of Munsiyari. Both being adamant express their wish to marry her despite her revelation that she is betrothed. Bidua says, "We have large lands to cultivate and wealth of cattle. I own twelve cows, one bull, a pair of oxen, sixty-four goats, and eighty-six sheep." (Ch-11, p. 74). And Sidua says, "Not only that, we have amassed tons of gold. We are Exorcists and cure people in this land who have been possessed by evil spirits and demons. People pay voluntarily in gold and silver. The day you are my bride, I will load you with gold ornaments, Rajula." (Ch-11, p. 75). Instead of a proposal, they display their wealth and assets for a successful marriage rather than getting a woman's consent. The author has openly exposed them as a 'lusty duo'

of ‘polygamous brothers’ and ‘beastly men’ with their ‘filthy libidos’.

Next, she meets Fatchua Doryav who follows her whistling again and again. The author calls him a ‘stalker’, ‘leech’, ‘sticky’, and ‘lusty’ who introduces himself as the biggest shepherd of Dwarahat while he ‘licked his lips’. He does not even care about being called ‘uncle’ by Rajula. Again, she is offered a marriage proposal saying, “Listen...baby... I own two dozen buffaloes and lot many more cattle. Marry me and you will live in abundance. Lot of milk, yoghurt, and butter.” (Ch-12, p. 81). At this, Rajula thinks to herself, “Do these people only live to marry women?” (Ch-12, p. 81). This shows her contempt for the men having only one purpose in their lives finding a woman alone. Further, making it clear that she already has a husband, he says, “Hey...doesn’t make any difference. Just desert your husband. Nothing blasphemous and nothing hell of a job if you desert your present husband, if there is any. You can marry me without any stigma.’ Shrewd Fatchua was [sic] even doubted his prey.” (Ch-12, p.82). The word ‘prey’ has been used quite carefully here by the author to hint at the vulnerability of Rajula in the world full of men ready to hunt her the moment it is convenient to them.

Lastly comes into picture the Mahara brothers - Lachhi and Bachhi Mahara. The author calls them ‘goons’, ‘licentious’ and ‘lusty’, and poignantly comments on them, “Just look at the irony of fate and the absurdity of men’s lust since centuries. The two men were not even bothered to know if that woman was ready to marry them or any one of them or was she at least marriageable in the true context of the word...” (Ch-13, p. 86). Joshi has projected the question of a woman’s will as a grave matter. In her last interaction with men to meet her lover, Rajula’s affliction aggravated. Where Rajula manages to escape the hold of other men, she is strangled by Mahara brothers. Realising the seriousness of the situation and what it can lead to, she rejects their proposals sincerely. Lachhi, in

reply says, “Hey, there is no question of your will, lady. I know you are lonely, absconding, and seeking shelter. You took shelter in my watermill. Didn’t you?” (Ch-13, p. 87). Without waiting for her answer, both started pulling her in the opposite directions crying ‘she is mine’. This shows not only their self-assumed right over Rajula, but also a self-asserted statement that she is absconding and needs their help, and their help should be reciprocated through accepting their marriage proposal only. Additionally, it is ironic that they decide on their own that an ‘absconder’ and ‘orphaned’ woman would need a man for help. They are hiding their own personal interests in the guise of helping her.

When the “brave and self-righteous woman who did not submit to their whims”, they dragged her inside the watermill, and kicked and punched. The author gives a descriptive view of her molestation:

Modesty of a woman was infringed. She was bruised, pained. Her soul had more bruises than her body. She cried, shrilled, and sobbed. But the shrieks lost in the grilling volume of the watermill in that secluded bank of the rivulet down the slopes of the barren hills. Unable to bear the pain of bruised body and more tormented soul, she fell unconscious. (Ch-13, p. 91).

Losing of ‘modesty’ and bruises on the ‘soul’ tacitly indicate her ravishment at their hands. It is further supported by the adjectives like ‘tormented’ and ‘violated’. They are not moved or satiated by this also, and assuming that she is dead they lock her up in a wooden box and throw her into the Ramganga river saying, “She invited her own death.” (Ch-13, p. 92). Though all these events are available in the ballad as well, the tricks Rajula plays at men to escape their chase make the events humorous making the sexual inflictions invisible. But Joshi has beautifully and correctly described the actual sexual

aspiration of men Rajula meets. Pointing out the dominance of physical intimacy over emotional intimacy Joshi comments:

May be sexual solicitation was presented in a somewhat civilized way by proposing marriage those days and those places on earth. People always thought of woman as a sex object and bought and sold her for time immemorial. By marrying a woman, without liabilities, they had a permanent yet renewable source of sexual gratification. So the polished way of saying 'I want sex with you' was 'I wish to marry you.'

(Ch- 12, p. 81).

Though Joshi comments with respect to the time ballad is a part of, this above quotation reflects the aspiration of many men of this century as well. This is the perspective of many paralysed-minded men also who commit sexual assaults against women. Likewise, it will not be a difficult task for a reader of the 21st century to compare Rajula's situation with all those defenceless women who are raped and amputated or killed ruthlessly. Thus, Joshi's literary adaptation regulates a dynamic reciprocity of a past with the present.

In contrast to these men, Rajula and Malushahi's relation is examined at another level. Their love for each other has been described painstakingly by the author now and then. This completely contrasts with what Rajula went through at the hands of other men. He describes their first meeting while hinting at the concept of love:

...two pairs of lovely eyes met, one pair clandestinely thanking the other; two hearts skipped a beat, ah, two beats together...Undeciphered and unexplained signals flew. Something inexplicable happened which only lovers of the world, that and this, knew.

Mouths shut, no verbal communication, but eyes spoke and hearts listened. Many emotions, like love and hate, don't need words. Feelings of the heart are translated and transmitted through non-verbal communication. Silence becomes the language of love. In fact, love is better communicated through silence.” (Ch-1, p. 15).

Sexual relations are also highlighted openly. On being married to Bikkhipal (same as Rikhyepal), “Rajula’s mind was in dilemma: whether Malusahi would come, or he wouldn’t...Or, if Malusahi’s family would accept an impure woman as their family bride. Or, if their nation would accept a remarried woman as their queen.” (Ch-23, p. 143). Thus, on Malushahi’s arrival she asks the same question to which he replies,

And, there is no reason why my people should not accept you...For me, love, marriage, and sex are three different things. You have slept with your husband as his socially married wife. You had to. You didn’t have any choice but to obey. But you love me; you love someone else from the core of your heart. Don’t you?” (Ch-26, p. 156).

In fact, Malushahi supports Rajula’s decision of revealing her love for him to Bikkhipal as they will be able to elope now with a ‘clear conscience’. This will make Bikkhipal understand the result of “marrying a woman against her wishes.” This recalls the incidents where no man cares for asking Rajula’s consent to marry them. Further, Joshi makes Malushahi his mouthpiece and conveys ground breaking statements about sexual relations:

And, sex doesn’t and can’t pollute the purity of love, purity of a relationship. Sex is like food. You take it when you need it. This is a biological need. This is something the Almighty has instilled in us,

for his sake, for his selfish motives, so that his creation doesn't vanish off the earth, so that the living universe he created doesn't go for annihilation in want of living creatures. (Ch-26, p. 157).

He further makes it clear that

And, the present day rules such as celibacy before marriage, faithfulness in bed with the husband or wife, or sex only with the chosen partner, were created by the society over a period of time to save it from anarchy. This was done to instill sense of responsibility among towards children and sense of belongingness to the partner in the conjugal relationship in the society...Therefore, sex doesn't make one impure, unworthy of love, like food doesn't pollute you." (Ch- 26, p. 157).

Malushahi's comments on the issue of sexual relations are what one should think of it in present century. With the help of an age-old folklore, the author has given a new idea. His attempt is more or like to give a definition of love, lovers and relationships. Indeed, Joshi has a readership he has retold this ballad for focusing on such a tabooed or not much discussed topic. He does say in his Preface to the novel, "Well, I wanted to present the story in a form, which would be appealing to the new generation, confirming to the new ethos, and believable in the new socio-politico-cultural environment." (p. 10). Thus, when a 'new generation' reader will observe the silent references of a woman's molestation in the oral version, s/he will surely wish this issue to be vocalised. Likewise, the never mentioned word 'sex' in the oral version, though silently present throughout Rajula's molesting episode, needs to be discussed.

The significant purpose such an adaptation serves is to make the urban children mindful of their detached ancestral roots. Deepa states the purpose of her adaptation, “As a children’s writer, I have always been interested in retelling traditional narratives so that children remain connected with the wealth of our heritage. This folk ballad is not too well known outside of Uttarakhand and even there to the best of my knowledge, it is not commonly performed in contemporary times.” Certainly, Deepa’s retelling through English language expand the readership beyond Uttarakhand’s culture. The glossary at the end of the novel for regional words is helpful not only for the children who culturally belong to Uttarakhand having no knowledge of the language but also for children from other cultures.

Joshi is conscious of the rapid changes folks of this century are going through, and his attempt in retelling a folk-ballad in novel form serves the purpose of bringing the folks to have a touch with their roots. On being asked the need of retelling he says,

Folk narratives should live long. As the social milieu and family structure is changing fast, the new generations hardly have grannies to tell them the stories. This job has been taken over by television serials, cartoon serials, and web-series. These mediums are definitely imaginative but strikingly different. They hardly touch folk-stories. The stories should be told to the new generation in the form and shape they are accustomed to...But the new generation of the region has largely migrated to planes. Their primary and higher education being in English or Hindi languages.

Additionally, the ballad is also a historical narrative for the folks, and Rajula and Malushahi are not fictional characters

for them. The Katyuri dynasty Malushahi is the prince of ruled Kumaon for centuries. The *shauka* and *Hun* tribes Rajula and Bikkhipal (or Rikhyepal) belong to are historically recorded and are, currently, striving for their cultural identities. The trade between these two tribes is also a part of history. Significantly, where there are no official records of women's condition of that period, this ballad insinuates their marginalised, secondary, and vulnerable condition despite their worthy contribution. The literary versions of the ballad succeed in recording what orality fails in surfacing. This proves the effective potential literature carries in preserving the missing parts of history amidst the challenges of hegemonic representation. This, in turn, helps in reviving the ballad and cultural heritage for the present generation while consolidating ballad's existence.

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