

## IRONIC SUBVERSION IN L P DEVKOTA'S "THE ILLITERATE"

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to explore how L P Devkota, in his poem "The Illiterate", subverts the conventionally established notion that the literate people are civilized whereas the illiterate are uncivilized. It also shows Devkota's effort to dismantle the hypocrisies, pomposities, arrogance, follies, fopperies, atrocities, discriminatory attitudes and calculating thoughts of the so-called literate people with the motive of establishing a harmonious society through education based on morality, humanity and equality first to the literate. The poet, being a humanist, disrupts all the hierarchical and discriminatory beliefs and practices throwing the center to the margin and bringing the margin to the center for raising the voice of the voiceless. His mission and vision of humanity in the society challenges the discourse of the mainstream that superiorizes the literate and inferiorizes the illiterate. Outwardly, the poet compares the illiterate people with the animals using the animal imageries like acephalous, dog, snake, dodo, mammoth, owl, cat, monkey, etc. but inwardly he criticizes the negative attitude of the literate who dehumanize the illiterate. Through the use of contrast- literate vs. illiterate, man vs. animal, sunshine vs. moonshine, head vs. heart, reason vs. emotion, vision vs. sightlessness, creationism vs. evolutionism, and religion vs. science- Devkotad is mantles the hierarchy centering on the marginalized ones in the society. The article analyzes Devkota's mission of establishing a moral, humane, equal and harmonious society exposing the negative qualities of the literate who make right wrong and wrong right using logic and empathizing the illiterate who are honest and innocent guided by morality, emotion and simplicity. The deconstructive ideas of Nietzsche and theories of irony by Paul Grice and Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber have been used to prove the research argument. The research proves its remarkability through exploration and analysis of how L P Devkota raises the voice of the voiceless to preserve humanity and morality.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Irony, Subversion, Il/Literate, Animal Imageries, Morality, Humanity*

### INTRODUCTION

Irony is the most powerful literary device which shows the gap between said and meant i.e. appearance and reality. There are two meanings in the ironical text- literal and literary. The literal tells one thing but the literary the opposite of it. Irony also excavates the negative aspects and attacks upon them in order to correct them. Irony negates the negative which reflects the positive attitude with the negative attitude towards the negative. Irony not only criticizes but also attempts to subvert the conventionally established notion, culture and philosophy. Through the use of contrastive ideas and philosophies, it challenges the traditional or mainstream and supports the margin bringing the back to the front. Though it assaults the prevalent, the major motive is correction in the human world. Therefore, the tone in the ironic literature is negatively positive.

Irony tells less than what it means. “The term irony entered the English language in the sixteenth century and comes from the French “ironie” and before that, from the Latin “ironia.” All these terms originate from the ancient Greek stereotypical character known as Eiron. An Eiron figure brings down his opponent by understating his abilities, thus engaging in a type of irony by saying less than what he means” (literarydevices.net). Irony is a literary device which presents the disparity between expectation and happening. “The definition of irony as a literary device is a situation in which there is a contrast between expectation and reality” (Master Class). Through contradictory statements or situation, this literary device reveals a reality that is different from what seems to be true. In a literary text, many forms of irony can be presented. The reader’s expectations and understanding of the disparity between what should happen and what actually happens in a literary work determine how effective the irony is. It can be seen in the form of an unanticipated result of an event, a character’s unexpected performance, or incongruous thing said. Verbal irony, one of the types, sets forth a divergence between what is literally said and what is actually meant.

Irony is connected with tragedy, humor, wit and comedy at the same time. It “includes wit, humour, and the comic” (Hutcheon219). As irony is the best tool, it acts to dismantle the conventional structure. “Irony is an act, not simply a significance” (Muecke, *Irony* 100). Being an act, it is greatly significant in a literary piece. It can be mild or just a tickling or devastating according to the nature of the user. The range of irony depends on the ironist’s temperament - from oppositional to conciliatory” (Henri Morier 558 qtd. in Hutcheon 220). If the attitude of the writer towards the subject matter is furious, the tone and intensity of irony is bombarding. “Every way of regarding how irony works, in fact, can be judged in this double way, as a positive or a negative, depending on your taste, habits, training, politics, or whatever”(Hutcheon 221). Irony gains power from the tempering power of the author. Conventionally, irony is considered as the tool to expose negative sides, but actually, it unravels both aspects. Irony “glances at both sides” (Thomas Mann 173 qtd. in Hutcheon222). Therefore, irony is a critical tool to look at both sides of the issue. Jonathan Culler claims that irony issues a “call to interpretation and its delights” (211), as a trope, it is both “affirming and negating” (25). Irony delightfully opens up the interpretation and reinterpretation of the matter. It is “ludic or playful”(Hutcheon222). So, irony is a lively fun with an attack inside.

Aesthetic use of language demands ironic words and expressions. For Roland Barthes, “reservoir of irony” (147) is the basis of “allaesthetic language” (Hutcheon 222). Aestheticity in ironic literature is created through conglomeration of humour, satire, tragedy, wit and comedy at the same time. The beauty of irony lies in the critical faculty of the readers as only such readers can notice the implied meaning in the literary text. Therefore, there always exists a danger of misinterpreting the ironic text. “The knowledge of irony is usually reserved for observers rather than participants” (Niebuhr 153). I A Richards claims that “simple readers (as he called them) often mistake irony for insincerity” (264), but “even very adept and complex readers sometimes see irony as a form of evasion of committed speech” (Smith254). The normal readers can’t see the inner intended meaning of the text in the ironic form. It is said that irony allows “a speaker to address remarks to a recipient which the latter will understand quite well” (Hutcheon 224). Irony, then, can be seen as deliberate evasion of responsibility. Chevalier (12) evaluates that Anatole France’s irony is “the product of certain radical insufficiencies of character and a mode of escape from the fundamental problems and responsibilities of life” (Hutcheon224). Some critics understand irony negatively whereas some others positively. “We are happy to grasp irony in order to preserve our sanity” (Worcester107). Irony protects the sanity of human life through its use of wit and criticality. Irony is negatively coded as “defensive, as a defense”(Knox, “Irony” 634). “Both conformers and rebels use

irony at each other, and both suffer from it" (Wright 524qtd. in Hutcheon 226). Irony is the best weapon for both the conformists and the rebels to fight with each other using their own tactfulness.

Irony is a means of rectifying the corrupt and pervert society, mind and the practices. It holds the corrective purpose. "Arguably all irony has some corrective function" (Muecke, *Irony* 4), and since satire is usually corrective or ameliorative in intent (Highet56) the writers who use irony in literature intend to correct the follies and fopperies existing in human society. Therefore, they need to reflect their aggression and anger upon the targeted. "Irony is still tendentious; it contains a real potential for aggression offensive and defensive" (Freud 97). It shows that irony intends to both offense and defense at the same time. Paul de Man claims that "the superiority/inferiority dualism was implied in any ironic distancing" (195 qtd. in Hutcheon229). The use of binary opposition and contradiction stands at the heart of irony. It is both positive and negative. "Irony has been called an intellectual attitude, an aristocratic, even anti-social one" (Palante 158-59). Others talk of the verticality of its "axis of power and knowledge" (Muecke, "Images" 402) and of the "rhetoric of hierarchy"(Dane 60) associated with it. Irony includes as much as it excludes, that it involves the pleasure of collaboration, even collusion, with the ironist, creating what Wayne Booth calls "amiable communities"(28 qtd. in Hutcheon229). Irony both includes and excludes at the same time. Therefore, it is very difficult to define what irony is. Gibbs and Colston (2007) argue that the definition of irony is still a "problem that surfaces in the irony literature" (584).

L P Devkota(1909-1959), the great poet of Nepal, efforts to dismantle the traditionally hierarchy-creating philosophies, ideas, cultures and practices. Being a humanist, he aims at establishing a just and humanitarian society, correcting the errors of wrong practices and establishments strongly questioning them and highlighting the good ones in his literary contributions including poems.Devkota promotes counter-establishments in his poems like "The Lunatic", "The Illiterate", and "Yatri" and so on using irony as the most powerful tool. In "The Illiterate", he seems to be criticizing the illiterate people comparing them with the animals but actually he is criticizing the so-called literate people who dehumanize and misbehave the illiterate people keeping them in the position of the animals. The so-called literate people are more illiterate and animalistic than the illiterate and the animals. Therefore, it is not the illiterate but the so-called literate who first need education based on humanity, equality and morality. Ironically, the poem subverts the hierarchy superiorizing the literate and inferiorizing the illiterate.

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study aims at finding out how L P Devkota uses irony as the best tool in his poem "The Illiterate" to subvert the conventionally established notion and practice that the literate people are civilized and the illiterate are animalistic. It also attempts to show how the poet efforts to establish a society based on humanity, morality and equality.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a library-based literary research and therefore, textual analysis method has been used here. The great poet of Nepal Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem "The Illiterate" has been taken as the basic text for analysis. Devkota's poem about the significance of real education to the so-called literate has been analyzed from the concept of ironic subversion.

## Theoretical Background

As the motive of the study is to explore Devkota's mission of establishing a moral, equal and humane society through his poem "The Illiterate", the deconstructive ideas of Nietzsche and theories of irony Paul Grice and Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber have been used. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book *On the Genealogy of Morality*(1887), claims:

“All judgments and understandings are destroyed by so-called standard language and morality. ‘All modern Judgments about men and things’ are smeared with an over-moralistic language; the characteristic feature of modern souls and modern books is to be found in the immoralistic mendaciousness”(GM III19).

**The So-Called Morality Destroys All The Possible Judgments. Talking About Irony, Tony Veale In “Strategies And Tactics For Ironic Subversion” Writes:**

Ironic descriptions subvert the norms of descriptive language. Norms have highly salient exemplars – shared stereotypes – on which speakers can draw to create a vivid description, but ironic speakers instead construct their own counter-examples, often identifying exceptional cases where the standard inferences do not hold. (1)

Irony gives counter to the established hierarchies in the society bringing the margin into the center. In their article *On Verbal Irony*, Wilson and Sperber posit the theory of echoic mentions in the creation of verbal irony. They write that “irony... is [an] echoic utterance, used to express the speaker’s attitude to the opinion echoed.” In echoic utterances, one verbally mimics a proposition that has been made previously. Irony entails an infusion of “an attitude of disapproval” while simultaneously echoing a proposition attributable to someone else (Wilson and Sperber 265 qtd. in Tan 4). Traditional theories, according to Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984), assume that “an ironist uses a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance” (112 qtd. in Clark and Gerrig 121). Fowler, in his authoritative *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1965), hinted at an intuitively satisfying answer.

Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders’ incomprehension. (305-306 qtd. in Clark and Gerrig 121-122)

Irony is used to give the unexpected and implied meaning to the audience. Criticism or the implication of contempt is a central feature of irony: “Irony is always critical of somebody or has denigrating effects” (Fludernik 14). Paul Grice in *Studies in the way of words* (1989) asserts: irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude or evaluation. I cannot say something ironically unless what I say is intended to reflect a hostile or derogatory judgment or a feeling such as indignation or contempt” (54).

**Textual Analysis**

Irony in literature is a weapon to challenge the established discourses and to promote the countercultural movements in order to create equality, morality and humanity in the society correcting the errors and demolishing the hierarchies. L P Devkota, the fighter against all the atrocities, follies, hierarchies, discriminations, pomposities, and hypocrisies, subverts the dividing culture of superiority and inferiority in case of illiteracy through his poem “The Illiterate” with the use of irony, animal imageries and juxtapositions. With negatively positive tone, he exposes the hypocrisy, pomposity, atrocity and arrogance of the mainstream which sidelines and otherizes the innocent and the ignorant.

Devkota ironizes the so-called rational literate people outwardly comparing the illiterate with the headless creature acephalous. The illiterate lacks the capacity to exercise reason in mind and use logic to present arguments and counterarguments but they have emotion to irrigate the desertified rational world. Seemingly, the poet compares the illiterate with the animal but actually he criticizes the literate presenting as both headless and heartless for humanitarian society. In the first stanza the poet expresses:

To think he has missed the sunshine of his day

Is vegetable or less,

Has the eye of a daisy, the ear of the barley

Is acephalous, God bless!

(1-4)

The illiterate has missed the reason necessary for the life. He exists in the field having senses only of the grains and the plants. It means he thinks only about the activities and things related to farming. He lacks rational faculty to think, judge, calculate and evaluate. By comparing the illiterate with the headless animal, Devkota attacks upon the sunshine day of the literate and glorifies the humanly emotion of the illiterate. Telling one thing, he means the opposite other. He seems to be criticizing the illiterate but, in reality, he attacks upon the literate who deteriorate the human world with logic, calculation and falsifying the truth with reason. He supports the illiterate as they do not make twists and turns, right and left, and up and down- they are honest and straight forward resulting from the lack of reason. Therefore, the poet indirectly shows his anger and hatred not to the illiterate but to the so-called literate who hierarchize and demolish the world promoting logic and calculations.

Saying one thing and meaning the opposite other thing, Devkota subverts the conventionally established superiority of the literate and inferiority of the illiterate. Tony Veale in "Strategies and Tactics for Ironic Subversion" writes: "Ironic descriptions subvert the norms of descriptive language" (1). In the same light, Devkota reverses the false notion of superiority and inferiority exposing the so-called literate people. The illiterate people can't think, imagine and be ambitious. They populate the world with the people like them with the robust body having no critical faculty. They never look at the things critically but run after the whim without questioning anything. But the so-called literate ones think, rethink and think again forgetting the action. They develop negative attitude upon anything using the critical faculty and destroy harmony in the society. It is the action of the illiterate that saves the lives of the rational literate people. The poet, in the second stanza, exposes:

Must he dodo or mammoth or fossil the world?

Lag behind our dog?

Still slave to the wind? Genuflector to

The snake in the drains in a fog?

(5-8)

The animal imageries with the words "dodo", "mammoth", "dog" and "snake" are dominant in the stanza. Literally, the poet compares the illiterate with such reason-lacking creatures. But, literarily, he claims that the danger from the literate people is more harmful to the human race than from the illiterate as they are faithful like dog, stable like the snake in the drain, uncalculating and lowly ambitious. They do their task honestly without deceiving others. But the so-called literate people over think and imagine without being honest to the duty and responsibility. Moreover, they make right wrong wrong right using their mind which, at least, the illiterate don't. Therefore, the illiterate are better than the so-called literate for the whole human race.

Devkota attacks the so-called literate who dehumanize the illiterate humans. Certainly, the illiterate don't have any vision and mission in their lives except living their simple lives. But those who have vision and mission adopt different

strategies of falsification, treachery and discursivity to achieve their goal. They destroy the real truth and create the false truth using the reason. They are ready to do anything for fulfillment of their self-interests. Therefore, the rational weight of the literate is more dreadful than the weightlessness of the illiterate. Devkota, in the third stanza utters:

How much does he weigh? A straw in the scale?

Three cubits and a half of flesh?

O the torture of seeing such a man today!

The myopia to the race!

(9-12)

For Devkota, it is not torturous to see the weightless illiterate people than to see the weight of the literate people treading the whole human world with their vision of superiority and victory. In the surface level, the poet calls the illiterate as the myopia of the human race but in the deeper level, the so-called literate people are very much dangerous for whole human race and civilization as they make the world full of unhealthy competitions and over ambitions. The short-sightedness of honesty is far better than the far-sightedness of treachery. Therefore, Devkota subverts the far-sighted superiority of the literate people who inferiorize the illiterate calling them short-sighted.

Literally, Devkota says that the illiterate people lack self-defense as they don't have logic but literarily he criticizes the literate as over-defensive as well as offensive. The illiterate hold the agricultural and other tools but lack logical tools. But, the literate defend themselves falsifying the truth using reason or logic. Therefore, it is not the illiterate but the literate who lack moral defense. The poet reveals:

The cob of the maize is a whiskered fellow

Wields a pair of blades

But the man has no sense of self-defense

He is moonshine that fades.

(13-16)

In the fourth stanza, the poet indirectly proves the literate as morally defenseless. The illiterate lack logical defense but the literate lack the moral defense. The illiterate farmers work in the field and they have the farming tools which can't help them defend themselves logically. They are compared with the moonshine that fades when the sun shines. It means they are emotional and get sidelined when reason appears. No doubt, it is true that the illiterate can't argue with the literate but for the poet it is not the logic but the morality that best defends the people. The illiterate are stronger morally than the logic-playing literate people.

Irony subverts the conventional establishment that the illiterate must be manufactured sight as they shrink to the light. "Irony entails an infusion of an attitude of disapproval while simultaneously echoing a proposition attributable to someone else" (Wilson and Sperber 265 qtd. in Tan 4). Using irony as a tool Devkota dismantles the hierarchy of literacy. It seems as if Devkota is comparing the illiterate with the owl lacking vision in the day i.e. educated environment. They are nowhere lacking the concrete ideas, thoughts and arguments. But, for the poet, it is not the illiterate but the so-called literate upon whom the sight and vision of morality, equality and humanity should be manufactured. The first necessity is to inculcate moral sense upon the literate people. The poet conveys:

The owl to the light of day, the cat,

Whose pupil must shrink to light

Me-seems to the land of the Limbo must go

O manufacture their sight!

(17-20)

The arrow of irony, in the fifth stanza, is not directed towards the illiterate rather it is shot against the literate. Jorgensen, Miller, and Sperber (1984), claim "an ironist uses a figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance" (112 qtd. in Clark and Gerrig 121). Devkota says one thing but means another. It is the so-called literate who do not listen to and learn from others being arrogant. When real truth is told to them that the illiterate are moral and honest, they shrink like the pupil of the cat. Moreover, they remain under the darkness trying with prejudice to keep the illiterate under ignorance and darkness. They are ready to degrade themselves in order to exploit, humiliate and otherize the illiterate. They can't tolerate the success of others and pull others back to clear their way forward. Therefore, the poet is exposing not the illiterate but the literate but it is hidden underneath. Reading between the lines is necessary to understand this type of irony used by Devkota.

Devkota questions the hierarchically superior concept of creationism and promotes evolutionism which proves him to be scientific rather than religiously orthodox. He claims that all humans-both literate and illiterate- have the monkey as their predecessors. The boastfulness, arrogance, hypocrisy, pomposity, treachery and discriminatory attitude of the so-called literate people should be blotted out or barbered as such negative qualities paint black to the human race. The poet is not derogatorily criticizing the illiterate as he is a humanist. But, he is blatantly attacking the so-called literate ones who animalize the illiterate people degrading the human civilization. The poet outpours:

Vain throe of the childbirth to the motherland

To paint some black to the race.

God's image all lost! Monkey still green

O blot out or barber his face!

(20-23)

In the last stanza, the poet says that the illiterate are vain load of the mother earth but he means that the arrogant, prejudiced, discriminating literate people are the real vain load of the motherland. Because of over arrogance, the literate have lost divinity and humanity painting the black spot to the whole human civilization. It is the duty of the literate to educate the illiterate, create equality and morality and establish harmony in the society preserving human civilization. But, they themselves are responsible for deteriorating human civilization because of their bias, arrogant and hierarchizing attitudes and behaviours. "All judgments and understandings are destroyed by so-called standard language and morality" (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* 19). The so-called literate destroy the reality of the illiterate and animalize them using their so-called standard language. Actually, they are more illiterate and uncivilized themselves than the illiterate. Therefore, for the poet, it is not the illiterate but the literate who need to be barbered and cleaned from their hypocrisies.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, irony subverts the traditionally established ideas, philosophies, thoughts, beliefs and the practices using the indirect method. The literary texts which use irony say one thing but mean the opposite other in order to attack the negative

and create equality, morality and humanity in the society correcting the false beliefs and the practices. In the same spotlight, L P Devkota's poem "The Illiterate" counters the conventionally established ideology and practice that the literate are superior and civilized whereas the illiterate are uncivilized and more animalistic. The poet seems to be comparing the illiterate with the animals using the animal imageries like acephalous, dog, snake, dodo, mammoth, owl, cat, monkey, etc. He uses the contrastive ideas of literate vs. illiterate, man vs. animal, sunshine vs. moonshine, head vs. heart, reason vs. emotion, vision vs. sightlessness, creationism vs. evolutionism, and religion vs. science dismantling the hierarchy and centering on the marginalized ones. His major motive is to prove that the so-called literate people are more animalistic than the animals as they dehumanize the illiterate people and behave them as animals. Through the poem, the poet attacks upon the follies, fopperies, treacheries, pomposities, hypocrisies, fraudulence, prejudiced thoughts and behaviours, arrogance, superiority complex and discriminatory and calculating attitude full of self-interest.

Therefore, L P Devkota, being a humanist, emphasizes on the education based on morality, humanity and equality first to the so-called literate and then only to the illiterate. Bringing the back to the front, Devkota exposes the nakedness of the literate and empathizes the illiterate in order to create harmony in the society. The research is remarkable for its exploration of how Devkota ironically subverts the hierarchy and raises the voice of the voiceless to preserve humanity and morality in the world human society.

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