

## BODY CONSCIOUSNESS IN DEVKOTA'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore and depict how Devkota highlights body-centric philosophy in order to demonstrate body consciousness and body politics in the present Hierarchical world through his poems *MunaMadan*, "Sleeping Porter", "The Porter Heaved the Burden" and "The Beggar". The study also shows that Devkota subverts the notion of Cartesian dualism deifying the marginalized and abjected body of the porter, beggar and Bhote, and portraying the physique of the Lhasa ladies and Muna as angel-like, moon-like and divine. To prove body-centrism, the ideas of the body critics Lisa Blackman, David Buchbinder and rationalist Philosopher Rene Descartes have been used in this study. The main motive of the research is to present how Devkota appeals all to preserve humanitarian values through love, respect and adoration of objectified body in order to establish harmony in the society raising voice of the voiceless.

**KEYWORDS:** Body-Centric, Abjected, Subvert, Humanitarianism, Body-Politics

### INTRODUCTION

Devkota, being the humanist and social reformist, destabilizes the mind-glorifying and body-inferiorizing notion showing earnest love and respect to the body through his poems *MunaMadan*, "Sleeping Porter", "The Porter Heaved the Burden" and "The Beggar". He intends to present the body as divine, beautiful, conscious, and lively and labourious worshipping it for its work and action. Devkota, in his poems, highlights on body-centric philosophy subverting the concept of mind-body dualism, abjection of body, soul-body hierarchy and grotesque body. The beggars, the porters and the Bhotes are conventionally marginalized and considered to be impure, dirty and grotesque for their filthy bodies which Devkota reverses proving that the ugliest and incongruous body can be the divinely gorgeous if it is conscious with humanity, generosity and work-worshipping philosophy.

The study of body in literature is a recent phenomenon though studied anatomically in science. "Only in the last two centuries the body has been regarded as asemantic field, a space and atopus for the laboration of new theoretical perspectives" (Schmidt and Campello 9). These days, body stands to look at the use of body in literature. Foucault, talking about docile body, claims that the body is a discursive construction. "Body becomes a privileged target of the interrelations between knowledge and power. We are not aratio inserted in a body: we are our own body. It is from and through the body and its intruding affective force on our desires and emotions that we can make some sense of the reality around us" (Schmidt and Campello 9). The body can be understood as the epicenter of view point, vision and agency. Mercola takes "the body as a signifying medium" (10). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz defines the body as "a vehicle of expression, a mode of

rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects)"(9). Body reveals the concealed inside the humans.

According to Daniel Lieberman, "[w]e live in paradoxical times for our bodies"(ix qtd. in (Schmidt and Campello 10). Moreover, "the human body is central to how we understand the constitution of social and cultural identities along gender, sexuality, ethnicity and racial lines" (10). For Schmidt and Campello:

The body is today depicted through a great variety of lenses in multi/inter/disciplinary fields. The body is a sign, a function of discourse and an aesthetic image, a presence that permeates the fields of literature, of art and of the media, all cultural mediated forms subject to description and interpretation. The rich inter play among the texts makes up mosaic of analogies, dialogues, confluences and differences that highlight the centrality of the body as purvey or of social, cultural and political meanings in different geographical and historical contexts. (10)

The body is a conglomeration of all the aspects existing in the world. It is "a distinguishing living presence in the interaction with its surroundings" (11). For Michel Foucault, cultural practices inscribe meanings on the bodies. (12). It is through the body that most of the concepts emerge (12).

Physical body is superior to all the bodies with us. It is greater than the soul for its foundational role in making all lives. "Body is prior to soul. Soul is a higher degree of organization of body... the living body interacting with its biological and social milieu is soul" (44). Soul itself is a living body. "The body in general is an ensemble of paths already traced, of powers already constituted; the body is the acquired dialectical ground upon which a higher formation is accomplished, and the soul is the meaning which is then established" (44). In the same respect, as mentioned in Kenneth Bausch, Merleau-Ponty opines: "the body provides the stuff and the impetus for the soul which, in turn, integrates that stuff and gives it conscious unity" (44). Bausch glorifies the body as all in all. "We are bodies. Our bodies are our souls. Our bodies are our minds. Our bodies make us wise. We are live, magnificent, bodily wholes in a transcendent river of universal life" (45). Magnifying body, he further asserts: "Our bodies are the crux of existence, the locus of our being-in-the-world. As bodies we experience a world that is molded of the same flesh that we are. As bodies we shape that world and bring it to consciousness" (46). Human consciousness, wisdom, understanding and existence as a whole ground on the body itself. The body offers foundation for understanding spatio-temporal reality through the senses. Talking about lived body, Merleau-Ponty, "When I perceive, I belong, through my point of view, to the world as a whole." "The lived body is in the world as the heart is in the organism" (46). When study of the body gets promoted, the hierarchy between soul and body has been dismantled and thereby highlighting on the material body itself. "The body is one with the soul, with the mind, with the world in our experience before we start separating things abstractly. The whole body thinks; the whole body is not two/not one with the universe; it is us; it is our soul" (47).

Everything invented and discovered in the world by science and technology is nothing more than the extension of human body. In the UPN series, *Star Trek Voyager*, Katherine Janeway said, "Someone once said that 'All invention is but the extension of the body of man'." "First meaning, understanding, and reason and then invention – all these proceed from the body of man" (Johnson 2). The major source of rationality and humanity is body itself. Extending a project initiated with George Lakoff in *Metaphors we Live By* (1980), Mark Johnson's book *The Body in the Mind* (1987) offers the claim that "all thinking originates in bodily experience" (Miall 192). When we seek to comprehend this order and to reason about it, such bodily based schemata play a central role. (Johnson xix, qtd. in Miall 192). Johnson defines an image schema as a recurring pattern, but then describes the patterns in spatial terms: they emerge, he says, "chiefly at the level of our bodily movements through space, our

manipulation of objects, and our perceptual interactions” (29 qtd. in Miall 193). Johnson states this as “PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE.” (195). The body is the strongest force among all. Julian Kiverstein, in “The Meaning of Embodiment”, claims: “the body is understood as the source of meaning”; “the body can enact or make a situation meaningful to an agent” (741). The meaning of all things lies in the material body which is the only reality in the world. As “mind is embodied and embedded, the body is one way of implementing an abstractly described computational operation” (744). All the humanly and mechanical operations are made, controlled and directed by the embedded and embodied human mind.

Body-centric philosophy is the decentering of the mainstream practice of superiorizing the mind and soul and centering of the body coming up from the margin. Projecting the objectified and demonized body as divine, embodied and lived body along with the feature of a text, this philosophy brings the body to the front sight. Devkota, standing on the side of the marginalized, acclaims that it is the body with consciousness that makes human being the real being as the mind exists inside the body. For him, it is not the perfumed body but the sweaty body that is the most beautiful healthiest and the worthiest body which produces something new with invaluable labour. Devkota, deifies the body picturing different types of the body like sleeping body, load-carrying body, helping body, singing and dancing body, the poor begging and the naked body in his poems.

### OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This research aims at finding out how Devkota presents his body consciousness and body politics in his poems *Muna Madan*, “Sleeping Porter”, “The Porter Heaved the Burden” and “The Beggar”. It also endeavours to explore how he glorifies body-centric philosophy, appeals people to preserve humanitarian values and to raise voice of the voiceless.

### METHODOLOGY

The researcher has used the concepts of body critics, Lisa Blackman (1965-) *The Body: the key concepts* and David Buchbinder “Male Bodies” and the sixteenth century French rationalist philosopher Rene Descartes’ (1596-1650) idea of *Cogito Ego Sum* in French in part IV of *Discourse de la method (1637)* to prove body consciousness and body politics in Devkota’s poems *Muna Madan*, “Sleeping Porter”, “The Porter Heaved the Burden” and “The Beggar”.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Devkota, born into a Brahmin family in 1909 and on an auspicious day of the goddess of wealth, Laxmi Puja, he was named Laxmi Prasad Devkota. Despite Laxmi Puja’s blessings, he was blessed even more by the goddess Swaraswati (the deity of wisdom) and went on to become the great poet of Nepal. Devkota is respected everywhere as a humanist writer. Devkota has greatly contributed in modernizing Nepali literature and so he should get respect. Valorizing Devkota’s genius, a great Nepali scholar Mohan Prasad Lohani, in the article “Devkota as a Multi-dimensional Genius”, acclaims:

Very few would dispute Padma Devkota’s assertion that irrespective of differences between castes, races, sexes and religions, poet Devkota was able to create a globe of human feelings in a language that is as simple and as complex as the people it talks about. He writes literature with high degree of aesthetic sense and sensibility. (39-40)

For Devkota, there is no hierarchy naturally in the society but it is created by human beings with the sense of superiority and inferiority. Another Nepali scholar Dr. Kumar Bahadur Joshi, in *Analysis and Evaluation of Devkota’s poetry Journey* argues:

Devkota's contribution in Nepalese political history is unforgettable for his sacrifice of his job, family and relatives in democratic struggle with Rana Regime, editing Yugbani and creating revolutionary and democratic writings and delivering awareness speech to the public when he was in Banaras in 2004-2006. (15)

Joshi acclaims that Devkota has sacrificed everything for revolutionizing and democratizing Nepali literature. The jewel of Nepali literature, poet laureate Laxmi Prasad Devkota, who began to show poetic genius from a very tender age, is regarded as the creator of romanticism - a progressive trend in Nepali literature. With his literary radiance, he has elevated the literary stature of Nepal in the eyes of the world and is perhaps the first writer in Nepal who rose to majestic heights, where no others had ever been before.

### Textual Analysis

In Devkota's poetry, the human body is a major theme and much more. It is a prominent conceptual device; Devkota's use of body metaphors recognizes the body as the ground of human understanding to which all concepts ultimately relate. It is also a source of delight, on a footing with poetry itself, the seat of pleasure and the sympathetic emotions which bind person to person. The body is the heart of democratic politics, the common denominator in the experience of all men and women. Devkota elevates the status of physical existence as a theme and inspiration of Nepali poetry, fully exploiting the metaphorical possibilities of material life as well as advocating a complete realization of the body as a source of psychological, social, and political well-being. The body-consciousness seems to propel the poet beyond anything as simple as interest in the physiological processes of the body in health. He has expressed such an interest in his poetry and prose. In most of his poems, bodily health is at once a metaphor for spiritual, social, and political success and a literal topic set on equal footing with the more traditional topics of poetic expression.

The physical body is the real body for Devkota. One who possesses the lived or sentient body is the healthiest being in the world. Generally the porter's body is taken as dirty because of sweat but the poet glorifies his body as a lived body with sweat labour and mobility. Sweat is not the dirt but the invaluable pearl. Talking about lived bodies in *The Body: the key concepts*, Lisa Blackman (1965-) says, 'bodies are always unfinished and in process.' (84) For her, the sense organs are lived bodies which make human body alive. In "Sleeping Porter", he states:

Beneath this great hero's snow peak

The conqueror of Nature is wealthy

With pearls of sweat on his brow.

And in this night he is rich with sleep. (Sleeping Porter)

The richest person is one who has sound sleep. One who has sound sleep has sound body and mind that can conquer the world. The porter possesses the healthiest body and so he is the wealthiest person who can get mastery over even the most powerful nature.

Devkota, through his poems, subverts Cartesian body-mind dualism. The sixteenth century French rationalist philosopher Rene Descartes (1596-1650) claimed that human beings exist only because they have mind to think. He said, 'I think, therefore I am (originally *Cogito Ego Sum* in French) (68) in part IV of *Discourse de la method* (1637). René Descartes is one of the earliest and best known proponents of Rationalism, which is often known as Cartesianism (and

followers of Descartes' formulation of Rationalism as Cartesians). He believed that knowledge of eternal truths like mathematics and the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of the sciences can be attained by reason alone, without the need for any sensory experience. Other knowledge, like the knowledge of physics, requires experience of the world, aided by the scientific method - a moderate rationalist position. Descartes believes that some ideas (innate ideas) come from God; other ideas are derived from sensory experience; and still others are fictitious (or created by the imagination). Of these, the only ideas which are certainly valid, according to Descartes, are those which are innate. He means to say that human existence is based on human rationality belonging to mind. His rationalist philosophy created hierarchy between body and mind superiorizing mind over body. But, here, Devkota challenges such Cartesian notion emphasizing on body talking about the porter's body. For him, human body is perfect and divine. He writes, with pearls of sweat on his brow / and in this night he is rich with sleep (Sleeping Porter). It is nothing more than highlighting the perfection of human body.

Descartes claims that the only source of knowledge is exercise of reason in human mind. In front of mind, body is a non-existent.

I concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing. Thus the "I" (that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am) is wholly distinct from the body. It is even more easily known than the (body), and is such that even if the (body) did not exist, (my mind) would still continue to be all that it is. (20)

His point is that he can conceive of himself existing as a thinking thing, even if he had no body and there was no three-dimensional worldsort of like if he was just a spirit-mind bobbing around in the spirit realm. Thinking, he concludes, is an exclusive attribute of a non-physical spirit entity. Non-three-dimensional spirit things think, and three-dimensional physical things do not think. While we do have physical bodies, our thinking does not occur in our bodies, but only in the spirit part of us. Devkota subverts exactly the same philosophy of Descartes equalizing body, mind and soul.

Devkota subverts the aristocratic concept of smooth and soft body as beautiful body. For him, the dutiful, diligent and productive body is the most beautiful one. The sweetly perfumed body is a waste in front of the sweaty body with creative power. Moreover, Devkota challenges the mind-body hierarchy in which mind is superior and body is inferior. He acclaims:

He wears a cloth cap, black and sweaty,  
A ragged garment;  
Lousy, flea-ridden clothes are on his body,  
His mind is dulled.  
It's like sulphur, but how great this human frame. (Sleeping Porter)

The porter wears the ragged clothes full of louse, flea and worms. His mind is dulled, he can't think more. But, he is stronger than so called civilized rational people. He has the powerful body with good health which helps him live carrying the heavy loads on which others also survive.

Devkota challenges not only the concept of superiormind but also the notion of civilized and beautiful body. To challenge the smooth and soft body, he uses the mountain-challenging body of the porter. He projects:

On his back a fifty pound load,  
 His spine bent double,  
 Six miles sheer in the winter snows;  
 Naked bones;  
 With two rupees of life in his body  
 To challenge the mountain. (Sleeping Porter)

The porter carries the heavy load in the snowy mountain without wearing warm clothes. But his life is warm as he has warm heart not the cold mind which rationalizes and destroys the warmth of the body. It is the challenge by the porter not only to the cold and cruel nature but also to the cold antilife nature of the so called rational and civilized people. It shows how respectful Devkota is to the dirty-tagged body of the porter. It also proves his humanitarianism.

Talking about lived bodies in *The Body: the key concepts*, Lisa Blackman (1965-) says, 'bodies are always unfinished and in process.'(84) For her, the sense organs are lived bodies which make human body alive. Similarly, Devkota glorifies the porter's body in his poem "The Porter Heaved the Burden". The porter's body is always ready to bear the challenges to fulfill the responsibilities. The porter carries not only the particular load but also the loads of sins by others and makes others survive. Though he is naked and his life is troublesome, he always tries to make others happy. It is his sacrificial nature that makes him really great among all human beings.

The burden of others' sins,  
 The heavy load of desires,  
 The path so troublesome,  
 With the strange strap of thought  
 Giving a deep impression on the forehead,  
 Half naked, half starved, always thirsty.  
 With the vow to climb.( The porter heaved the burden)

Though the porter is thirsty and hungry, he is never derailed from his promise, mission and the destination. His body can tolerate thirst, hunger, pain and suffering for the action. The porter's body is the embodied body which means it is the body with common sense- both emotion and reason. Therefore, his body is a real lived body with all kinds of power.

The Porter's body is strong enough to control the space around it. This idea is highlighted by the body critic Buchbinder who talks about three types of bodies- waif body, athletic body and the fat body. The waif body is thin and weak, the athletic is strong and healthy and the fat is heavy and troublesome body. Among the three types, the porter has the muscular body because of his regular work which is exercise for the body. Buchbinder mentions:

Unlike the body of the waif model, the athletic male body appears to dominate and organize the space around it. In this way, representations of the male body not only preserve traditional traits of masculine dominance but may be said to reclaim them in defiance of the historical developments in the culture. (124)

The muscular sporty body can control others and the space around it. This type of body is powerful to win the world around. The porter possesses the same kind of body as he works hard. Hard work hardens his body. His body is strong not only because of its physique but also because of his heart with compassion and empathy which is the lived body.

The poet presents the human world as desert land which is the body without humanity. The people have lost the sense of humanity and their body is feeling less, senseless and meaningless. But, the world is saved by the humanitarian body of the porter. He carries the load of all people and preserves humanness which Devkota reflects through his body. The poet acclaims:

We add our own weight  
 Making others vow to bear the burden,  
 The bag and baggage in this desert land,....  
 The porter heaved the burden! (The porter heaved the burden)

The porter's body is the carrier of the heavy load which saves other people's lives. We feel superior to the porter making him carry the load but forget that he is strong, healthy and independent whereas we are weak, diseased and dependent. We are boastful of being superior and civilized though we have lost the lived body which the porter holds. It is quite ironical.

Likewise, Devkota highlights human body in his epic *MunaMadan*. Madan narrates the troublesome path to Lhasa when Muna requests him to take her with him. "Don't tell so, understand Muna, your feet are soft like flowers/ thorny jungle, stiff way, how can I take?" (12) Muna's body is soft and smooth but not strong enough to face the troubles by thorns, jungle, cliffs and the rough land of the mountain. So, Madan requests her not to come with him. Then, Muna requests him not to forget home seeing the beautiful Lhasa ladies. She mentions that the ladies are young and beautiful having faster eyes, sweet voice, rosy cheeks and attractive carved body. "Young lady of Lhasa, faster in eyes, carved in gold/ nightingale voice, rose blossomed on cheeks/ if you forget home, there will be rain of tears" (13), expresses Muna fearfully in front of Madan. It shows that the Lhasa ladies possess the most attractive and beautiful bodies which may cause Madan forget Muna and his world.

In *MunaMadan*, the poet also projects love and respect to the body in his body-glorifying process. The body (feet) of lower caste Bhote is touched by the upper caste Chhetri Madan in the poem which means Devkota is in favour of the so-called untouchable boy of the lower caste people. In the poem, he argues:

This son of a Chetri touches your feet, but he touches them not with contempt,  
 A man must be judged by the size of his heart, not by his name or his caste. (33)

When Madan is saved by Bhote, he touches the feet of the Bhote. He doesn't touch his head. Touching head is the tradition of the upper caste people to keep them superior to themselves giving blessings to others. But, here, the Chhetri touches the feet of the Bhote as the Bhote has human heart that means he has a body with sense of humanity.

In the body glorifying process, Devkota casts the beauty of Muna's body. Furthermore, he claims that human body if dead can be the food of crow and vulture. Devkota acclaims: "Beautiful Muna sitting on the window / City don noticed her as angel / Moved around the house for her" (24). "Don't leave me in the forest my friend / Making me prey of crow and vulture / My old mother at home will die / Moon like my Muna will be shocked" (31). The poet admires the beautiful physique of Muna. She is like an angel for the don when he notices her sitting on the window. Muna is shining like the Moon. Moreover, Devkota also adores beauty of Bhote's daughter who is like Buddha and forest god. He mentions:

Bhote's daughter was like Buddha and forest god  
 Her name was Lawa who was the soft heart  
 Lama families sang a song in the jungle  
 With Sweet voice, harmonious rhythm and melodious words  
 Madan's soul enjoyed in Buddha Lok  
 Listened to song that melted the heart (34-36)

The lama families' body is a lived body as it is attractive with sweet voice, attractive rhythm and the heaven-like structure. Their body makes the world Buddha Lok where Madan's heart is pleased and melted totally.

In this poem "Bhikhari" ("Beggar"), Devkota describes the beggar going about his ways in dire poverty and desolation deprived of human love and material comforts. On the other hand, the beggar is also seen as the source of compassion placed in the core of suffering and destitution. Devkota connects the beggar with the divine as the ultimate source of kindness and empathy:

Fallen from the black clouds Living in the darkness is he the god or a beggar? He wanders from house to house He speaks in tunes suffused with pain A heart weighed with compassion. (Eighth Stanza)

This type of body deifies him. It means because of the body, the beggar is not the human being but the god with opposite qualities. His body is the embodied body- the body with both reason and compassion. The beggar's body is simple and sympathetic which makes him not only human but also divine. By deifying the beggar's body, Devkota subverts the notion of mind superior zing and beggar dehumanizing attitude of the so-called civilized rational people of the world.

The beggar's body is elevated in the poem. Though the beggar suffers from coldness and darkness, he has a godly body. He carries sack on his back without wearing proper and sufficient clothes which causes shivering and shaking in his body. Yet, he continues carrying it asking for food to eat. He wears rags and carries sacks that make him a sympathetic character.

Look! – look at the shreds and rags. Ah! Time unforsaking, Wretched and broken on life's worn flags Shivering and shaking! He spreads his bag, threadbare, flaking, the fellow, forlorn, sags! (Second Stanza)

By highlighting waif body of the beggar, Devkota urges all to have sense of humanity to preserve the human world and keep humans always humans. He appeals all the people to love and respect the beggar's shivering and shaking body and prove ourselves as human beings saving his life providing foods and clothes to him.

Devkota's idea of the beggar's body is similar to the sentient body of the body critic Lisa Blackman. She calls the body with sense organs a lived body. The five sense organs-eyes, ears, nose, skin and tongue- make the body a sentient body. The beggar feels cold, looks at other rich people, cries for the food to eat, listens to the people and has no tasty food. When he knows these all things, he has a lived body. "Shivering and shaking!" in the Second Stanza, "the heart in a voice soft spoken, / "A handful of rice!" / The one cry of a whole life, / "One handful of rice!" in the fourth Stanza, "This gloomy sight! /the grieving fern doth sigh / Amid the laughter of the roses bright" in the Fifth Stanza, "Now speaking with a voice of pain: / His heart in sorrow cowed" in the Eighth Stanza prove that the beggar has a sentient body not the abjected body.



## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, study of body consciousness in literary texts is a recent phenomenon. While looking from the body perspective, it is found that Devkota subverts the traditional notion of mind- body hierarchy in his poems *MunaMadan*, "Sleeping Porter", "The Porter Heaved the Burden" and "The Beggar". The poet elevates the body of the marginalized and abjected bodies of the porter and the beggar deifying them as their body is embodied body with both reason and compassion. The porter's body is athletic and robust though it is full of rags, sacks and sufferings. His body carries the load of and for others and so it is a humanitarian lively body. Similarly, the beggar's body is a sentient body with conscious sense organs and heart of empathy and compassion. Devkota, projecting such body appeals all to save the body and be human. Likewise, Muna's body and Bhote's Families' body have been glorified in the poem *MunaMadan*. Muna's body is beautiful, attractive and enchanting which makes her angel as well as moon-like. In the poem, the ChhetriMadan touches the abjected feet of the lower caste Bhote as he has saved his life. For him, Bhote is god. The physique of the Lhasa ladies has been adored as shining, white, attractive and fascinating.

Lastly, Devkota proves himself to be humanitarian figure of all eras speaking for the marginalized and abjected in the society and deconstructing and reconstructing the notion of Cartesian dualism in order to establish harmony through equality. For him, marginalized body is the source of reason, compassion and empathy which help us make and remain humans in the inhuman capitalistic world. Devkota's body consciousness and body politics through his poems are quite appreciable in today's world as it encourages raising voice of the voiceless.

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