



Perpetuation of Casteism through Proverbs: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Hem Lal Pandey (PhD Candidate)

hlpandey@miners.utep.edu

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Sanjeev Niraula (PhD Student)¹

sniraula@miners.utep.edu

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.2001>

APA Citation: Pandey, H. L. & Niraula, S. (2024). Perpetuation of Casteism through Proverbs: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 6(4), 611-622. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i4.2001>

Received:

20/10/2024

Accepted:

26/12/2024

Keywords:

Casteism,
Proverbs,
Discourse,
Caste
Discrimination,
Critical Inquiry

Abstract

Despite the legal provision against caste discrimination, casteism remains a pressing social issue in Nepal, affecting various aspects of individuals' lives and perpetuating systemic inequalities. In this context, the role of language and discourse in reinforcing caste hierarchies and legitimizing discriminatory practices is of paramount importance. This paper examines the roles of proverbs in perpetuating caste discrimination and reinforcing caste hierarchies in Nepal. For that purpose, five caste-specific proverbs are strategically selected to highlight the diverse issues related to caste discrimination, such as fixed categorization, heritability, power dynamics, dehumanization, stereotypes, and intersectionality of gender and caste. Drawing upon the insights from the critical caste theory of Isabel Wilkerson (2020) and the Critical Discourse Analysis of Norman Fairclough (1989) as a theoretical framework and building upon the ideas of the hegemony of Gramsci and the discourse of Foucault, this paper examines the selected proverbs to uncover the hidden assumptions, biases, and power dynamics that underpin caste-based discourses and practices. By shedding light on the rhetoric of caste-specific proverbs as the discourse for perpetuating caste discrimination, this study makes double calls: a call for the critical examination of linguistic and discursive practices that sustain caste hierarchies and a call for challenging and dismantling caste-based discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scene 1 (Corresponding author's reflection)

While I was growing up in my hometown in Nepal without knowing the 'outside' reality of the world during the 1990s, I had no idea how people have demarcated a line of division amongst themselves based on caste. While I knew I belonged to the Brahmin caste, I had no idea what set me apart or made me supposedly superior to others. I could see my friends from other castes having the same features as mine, and most importantly, we were all just kids. I vividly recall an incident during my fourth-grade Saraswati (The Goddess of Knowledge) Puja celebration at school. Wearing my finest attire for the religious occasion (school uniform was not mandatory on that day), I asked my friend how I looked. Their response, "kamiko behula jasto" (like the bride of Kami, metalsmith), left me puzzled. Seeking clarity, I later questioned my father about

¹ Corresponding Author

its meaning. He explained that despite the efforts to beautify, Kami's bride never appears appealing. I was taken aback, not because of the notion of a Kami bride's appearance, but because of my friend's implication that I was not attractive despite my new clothes. Upon my further inquiry into whether Kami brides were inherently unattractive, my father simply dismissed it as an age-old proverb, perhaps assuming I was too young to grasp its implications.

Scene 2 (Main author's reflection)

In May 2020, the whole country of Nepal was shocked by the inhumane killing of Nawaraj BK (who belonged to the caste community of 'metalsmith') along with his friends from Western Nepal. Nawaraj's 'crime' was his birth; he belonged to the 'lower caste' and wanted to marry a girl from the 'upper caste'. The family of the girl was not ready to accept Nawaraj. Therefore, when Nawaraj went into the girl's house with his friends, they were attacked "with weapons, stones and chased into the Bheri River. The dead bodies of five men, including Nawaraj, were discovered later" (Karki, 2020). In fact, Nawaraj's murder reflects one of the pillars of casteism, 'Endogamy', the practice of marriage within the same caste, clan, or origin. (Wilkerson, 101). Endogamy enforces caste boundaries by forbidding marriage outside of one's group or even the appearance of romantic interest across caste lines. The parents of the girl, blinded by endogamy, felt no connection, identification or empathy for Nawaraj and his friends. Nawaraj and his friends were killed on 23 May 2020; two days later, George Floyd was killed in cold blood by a police officer in the United States. These two murders demonstrate the "continuing existence and perhaps the thriving of two ancient and deep-seated prejudices in human civilization: caste and race" (Sundas, 2020). These two murders share the ground of similarities as they reflect systematic violence that has been going on against marginalized groups.

Despite the legal provision against caste discrimination, casteism is a pressing social issue in Nepal, affecting various aspects of individuals' lives and perpetuating systemic inequalities. Rooted in centuries-old social hierarchies, the Nepalese caste system stratifies society based on birth, privileging certain groups to higher social status and relegating certain groups to lower social status. For instance, people born into the *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya* are considered superior, and people born into *Sudra* are regarded as inferior and untouchable in society. Even today, we cannot deny the influence of casteism on shaping social relations and perpetuating inequalities among people in Nepali society.

In this context, the role of language and discourse in reinforcing caste hierarchies and legitimizing discriminatory practices is of paramount importance. Proverbs, as linguistic expressions embedded within cultural norms and values, are powerful tools for transmitting and perpetuating social ideologies and power dynamics. Guided by the research question, "In what ways do the proverbs perpetuate casteism in Nepali society?", this study analyzes caste-specific proverbs through the theoretical lens of critical discourse analysis and critical caste theory. The central objective of this study is to critically examine the role of Nepalese proverbs in perpetuating caste discrimination and reinforcing caste hierarchies. Through a discourse analysis of selected proverbs using critical caste theory, this study aims to uncover the ways in which proverbs contribute to the normalization and legitimization of caste-based inequalities, and such a critical inquiry and examination of language and discourse initiates a step in challenging casteism.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing content analysis to analyze and interpret caste-related proverbs. The proverbs used in this study are sourced from two main

collections: *Nepali Ukhaan Tukka* Collection and *Nepali Ukhaan* (<https://www.nepaliukhan.com/>). A total of five proverbs are gathered from these sources, all selected with a central focus on casteism. Only proverbs directly related to caste discrimination are included in the study. Since the proverbs existed originally in the Nepali language, they have been translated into English with the best attempt to preserve their original meaning. These caste-specific proverbs are then analyzed and interpreted to explore how they perpetuate caste-based discrimination in society.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In interpreting and analyzing caste-specific proverbs, this study examines the connection between power, domination, control, and language in social contexts. Therefore, it utilizes different but overlapping theoretical concepts and lenses. This study uses Gramsci's notion of hegemony to examine how the upper castes control the lower castes through proverbs. Likewise, building upon the Foucauldian idea of discourse, this study views proverbs as a discourse, as “a social construct created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication” (Pitsoe and Latseka, 2013, p. 24). Similarly, this study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA), relying on the ideas of Van Dijk (2015), Ruth Wodak (2001), and Norman Fairclough (1989). Van Dijk (2015), for instance, argues that the social issues, problems, and oppressions are reflected through language use for which CDA becomes a powerful tool, “CDA focuses primarily on social problems... More specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society” (p. 467). In tune with Dijk’s idea, this study studies proverbs as the manifestation of dominance, discrimination, power, and control in the caste system. Instead of viewing proverbs just as linguistic expression, this study relies on Fairclough’s (1989) notion of discourse as social practice to view the proverbs in the social context. Finally, working on the caste-related ideas of Isabel Wilkerson (2020), this study studies caste-specific proverbs through the lens of critical caste theory. In its analysis of the proverbs, it views the caste system as an arbitrary construction, as a social construct, “a fixed and embedded ranking of human value that sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 17). Drawing upon critical caste theory, it critiques caste as a social construct rooted in power relations and systemic discrimination. Critical caste theory interrogates the ways in which caste operates as a form of social domination, perpetuating hierarchies of privilege and oppression. By applying critical caste theory to the analysis of proverbs, this study seeks to uncover the hidden assumptions, biases, and power dynamics underpinning caste-based discourses and practices with an assumption that such an exploration attempt would initiate a critical intervention in the caste discourse and caste-based social system.

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Before discussing the issue of casteism through the proverbs in the context of Nepal, it is better to understand how the seed of casteism was sowed in Nepali society. Such a historical view would offer a lens to understanding how casteism has been validated and passed from one generation to another through the times. First, this discussion section surveys casteism with reference to the ancient Hindu religious text *Manusmriti*, examines Nepal’s socio-political and cultural context from 1854 to the present, and finally analyzes and interprets caste-specific proverbs.

4.1. The Seed of Casteism: A Brief Overview

The often-cited text for casteism is *Manusmriti* which is believed to have sowed the seed of casteism. *Manusmriti* is a significant book in Hinduism, often called “Manav Dharma Shastra” or “The Laws of Manu.” It is believed to be written by Manu, the first lawgiver in the Sanskrit language. This book classifies people into four castes or varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras, claiming these groups originated from the different parts of the cosmic being, *Virat Purusha*. Brahmins are said to have come from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the shoulders, Vaishyas from the thighs, and Sudras from the feet. *Manusmriti* also outlines the major duties of each varna or caste: Brahmins to perform religious work, Kshatriya to protect the nation against the forces, Vaishya to be engaged in business and Sudra to do menial works. Within this division of labor, too, *Manusmriti* creates unequal and discriminatory norms against the Sudras, projecting it as the lowest insignificant community. Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya (1896) writes, “Caste had its origin in its Brahminical tradition” (p. 4). *Manusmriti* set the society in a hierarchical caste structure by placing Brahmins at the top and Sudras at the bottom. Such hierarchical positioning has constructed the superior power position to the Brahmins and inferior to the Sudras. So, it is argued that the caste system was introduced and enforced by the Brahminical *Shastras* (religious texts) (Bhattacharya, 1896, p. 7-12). Since the majority of the people living in Nepal are Hindus, the seed of caste inequality projected by *Manusmriti* has been influential in shaping social structure and hierarchy in Nepali society. The influence of *Manusmriti* is evident even today, as most of the people in Nepal are still following the profession of their ancestors as prescribed in *Manusmriti*.

If caste is a chain that has forced each class to the profession of their ancestors, then it is a chain constraining the limits of the profession for the lower castes. For the upper caste people, casteism serves as a structure to assert their superiority and authority. Caste is not a chain to which they are tied by force; rather, it is their willingness to attach themselves to caste for their own benefits. As Bhattacharya (1896) asserts, “With regard to the higher classes, caste is a golden chain which they have willingly placed around their necks, and which has fixed them to only that which is noble and praiseworthy” (p. 8). Bhattacharya highlights that for the upper castes, caste is not an oppressive force but rather something they embrace because it reinforces their privileges. By likening it to a ‘golden chain,’ he suggests that their connection to caste is voluntary, as it secures their status and access to what is seen as ‘noble and praiseworthy.’ This demonstrates how caste functions differently for those at the top of the hierarchy, providing them with social and economic advantages.

4.1.1. Religious Classification Legally Codified

The seed of casteism sowed by *Manusmriti* was legally codified in *Muluki Ain* of 1854, Nepal’s first legal code. *Muluki Ain* codified the Hindu caste system of hierarchy by bringing together all the Hindu caste communities and non-Hindu communities under a single umbrella called the caste system within the frame of the legal code (Uprety and Thapa, 2020, p. 329). *Muluki Ain* referred to the caste system by the phrase ‘*chara varna chattisa jata*’, meaning ‘Four varnas and Thirty-six castes.’ Even though there were many ethnic groups in 19th century Nepal, *Muluki Ain* did not consider those groups. As Hofer (2004) rightly remarks, “(t)he number 36 stands symbolically for the multitude of individual castes and certainly lacks empirical evidence” (p. 88). Hofer’s remark suggests how the phrase “thirty-six castes” mentioned in the *Muluki Ain* served as a simplified categorization, ignoring the complexity of the total population. He also clarifies that the *Muluki Ain* was more focused

on maintaining a hierarchical social structure than accurately representing the real ethnic and cultural diversity of the time. In tune with Hofer, Khatiwoda et al. (2021) also state how *Muluki Ain* brought the diverse people into five caste groups based on categories of purity and impurity:

- 1- Sacred Thread-wearing castes (tāgādhārī): mainly Bahun and Chhetris, including high Newars
 - 2- Non-enslavable Alcohol-drinking castes (namāsinyā matuvālī): privileged ethnic groups, predominantly Magars and Gurungs, both entitled to join the army;
 - 3- Enslavable Alcohol-drinking castes (māsinyā matuvālī): ethnic groups who speak mostly a Tibeto-Burmese language such as Bhoṭe, Cepānga, Mājhi, Danuvāra, Hāyu, Darai, Kumāla, Paharī, etc.;
 - 4- Water-unacceptable but Touchable castes (pāni nacalnyā choi chiṭo hālnuna parnyā): castes who deal by profession with impure substances; into this category also fall Muslims and Westerners;
 - 5- Water-unacceptable and Untouchable castes (pāni nacalnyā choi chiṭo hālnuparnyā): castes who are so impure that higher castes cannot touch them and if accidentally touched, the members of higher castes need to purify themselves through expiation or penance.
- (30)

By legalizing concepts like unacceptable, untouchable, and impure (polluted) related to the castes, *Muluki Ain* strengthened the hierarchy of the caste system. Hofer (2004), in his study of *Muluki Ain* of 1854 argues, “Caste ‘interferes’ in marriage, inheritance, occupation, in the relationship between servant and master, between patient and healer, between the individual and the State’ (p. 196). He is critical of the legal code as its ‘caste hierarchy was a system conceived by, and for the benefit of, these higher castes, and its protection was in their own interest’ (p. 3). His critique highlights that the legal system was primarily designed to safeguard the interests of higher castes, reinforcing their dominance and perpetuating social inequalities.

4.1.2. Finally, Casteism was Banned Legally

Finally, the original legal code of 1854 was replaced by the *Muluki Ain* of 1963, making it illegal to discriminate against people based on caste. The 2015 Constitution of Nepal, the country’s criminal code, and the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offense and Punishment) Act, 2011 have prohibited caste-based discrimination. There is the provision of legal punishment for any caste-based discrimination. Despite these legal provisions, caste-based prejudices are still common occurrences in Nepal. It is because such legal reforms are not always implemented as Rup Kumar B.K. (2013) writes, “The lack of strict implementation has left *Dalits* vulnerable to discrimination and brutal attacks” (p. 6). Madhusudan Subedi (2016) notes that the direct implications of the promulgation of *Muluki Ain* of 1854 exists even today. The seed of casteism sowed by *Manu-smriti* was codified by the *Muluki Ain* of 1854 but finally banned by the *Muluki Ain* of 1963 legally. However, they still exist in day-to-day practices, and we argue that proverbial expressions and their usage are evident to this phenomenon.

4.2. An Analysis of Caste Specific Proverbs in Nepal

This study mainly analyzes caste-specific proverbs to examine how they perpetuate caste discrimination in Nepal. A proverb is a classical saying frequently used to express ideas, morals, norms, values, and practical societal issues. It is a short and condensed saying which

is popularly known and loaded with traditional norms and values and repeated and passed throughout a culture from generation to generation with a slight or no variation (Sarwet, 2015, pp. 54-55; Inchley, 2010, p. 12; Pervaz et al., 2021). Wolfgang Mieder (2008) asserts, “Proverbs, like riddles, jokes or fairy tales, do not fall out of the sky, and neither are they products of a mythical soul of the folk. Instead, they are always coined by an individual either intentionally or unintentionally” (p. 14). The verbal coding of cultural values and assumptions circulates in the form of proverbs in such a way that such values and assumptions become part of the culture. Proverbs are significant in examining caste discrimination as they instigate, depict, and sustain power dynamics in society.

The Nepali language is highly dominated by proverbs (*ukhan*) touching different aspects of people’s lives. In Nepal, proverbs remain prominent in oral and written traditions and vital to everyday discourse. They are not only prevalent in spoken language but also feature prominently in various forms of literature, including textbooks, magazines, newspapers, and academic works. In this study, we are not concerned with proverbs as a linguistic unit but as a discourse. Using Foucault’s idea of discourse, we analyze how proverbs construct and reinforce social reality, shaping individuals’ perceptions, identities, and behaviors. Within this framework, proverbs are viewed as discursive formations that contribute to producing and reproducing power relations, reinforcing dominant ideologies and marginalizing dissenting voices. By analyzing proverbs as discursive formations, this study aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics and social inequalities embedded within them to suggest how they perpetuate caste-based discrimination in Nepal.

As a discourse, caste-specific proverbs are studied not in isolation but in a social context. A total of five proverbs are studied and analyzed using critical caste theory and critical discourse analysis (CDA) “to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted and legitimized” (Wodak, 2001, p.2). Using Norman Fairclough’s (1989) idea, this study views proverbs as a social practice that focuses on socio-cultural contexts in which such proverbs as practice occur. The selection of five caste-specific proverbs out of many is intended to provide insight into multiple layers of caste discrimination. All five proverbs are strategically selected to highlight the diverse issues related to caste discrimination, such as fixed categorization, heritability, power dynamics, dehumanization, stereotypes, and the intersectionality of gender and caste. For each selected, a literal meaning (translation) and basic meaning are provided since the original proverbs exist in Nepali language.

4.2.1. Proverb 1: मरेपछी डुमै राजा (Mare Pachhi Doomai Raja)

Nepali Proverb: मरेपछी डुमै राजा

Literal Translation: A *Doom* can be a king only after death.

Basic Meaning: An upward mobility in the caste system for the lower caste people is impossible.

The *Doom* (also known as the *Doom*, *Dum*, or *Dumar*) are the low caste considered ‘untouchable’ and ‘water-unacceptable’ in Nepal. They have been traditionally defined by the low occupations of alms collecting, grave digging, cremating, drumbeating, singing, dancing, as well as making of bamboo baskets (*sirki*) and mats (*chatai*). Of the *Doom* in Nepal about 25% are Muslim. As they are from the low caste, they are expected to live a low life until their death. They can imagine themselves as king only after death. Here king is the metaphor for the upper caste. That means their upward mobility in the caste system is possible but only in

imagination, not in reality.

This proverb, when interpreted through Gramsci's notion of hegemony, suggests how the discourse of casteism as a fixed or rigid category has been established by the upper caste to make the lower caste give consent for the domination by the upper caste considering it as their fate to live a miserable life without any hope of upward mobility into the caste system. Before Gramsci, hegemony was used to refer to control by means of politics or the military. Gramsci defines hegemony as control by analyzing how the dominant class dominates in a capitalist society, but unlike the previous conceptualization, Gramsci believes that such power and control come not through force but through cultural domination. For Gramsci, hegemony is "domination by consent...(which) is granted ideologically" (qtd. in Villanueva, 1992, p. 20). The proverb establishes the ideology that caste hierarchy is fixed, and the circulation of such proverbs helps the upper caste maintain the caste hierarchy. A *doom* is made to believe that there lies an unbridgeable gap between themselves and the upper caste (symbolized by the king here) which (if) can be bridged only after death. Such an acceptance of the belief hegemonizes human subjects into caste discrimination. In addition, this proverb reflects a discourse that makes the lower caste people hopelessly optimistic about a change in their caste (they can be like the king) after death to divert attention from earthly inequalities.

To continue the line of demarcation between themselves and lower castes, Brahmins (caste at the top of the social hierarchy) also provided heritability; that is, casteism passes from one generation to another. Wilkerson, in her discussion of heritability as one of the pillars of casteism, states that people born to a certain caste remain in that caste forever, subject to high status or low stigma. It is important to note that the lower caste people, like the *Doom*, remain in the same caste. That means, no matter what one does, non-Brahmins can never be Brahmins. Why is this provision of 'no-entry' into the upper castes? The answer lies in the fact that it is because of the rigid structures only that casteism as a discourse can (could) get power and survive. The fluidity would be disruptive, shaking the structure's foundation, which Brahmins did (do) not want.

4.2.2. Proverb 2: सार्किको सरापले डिङ्गो मर्दैन । (Saarki ko Saraple Dingo Mardaina)

Nepali Proverb: सार्किको सरापले डिङ्गो मर्दैन ।

Literal Translation: A *Saarki*'s curse cannot kill an animal.

Basic Meaning: Hate from lower caste has no effect on higher caste.

This proverb reflects how the low caste people, *Saarki* in this proverb, are perceived as powerless and inferior, with indifference by the upper caste. The *Saarki* are a lower caste considered 'untouchable' in Nepal. In terms of occupation, traditionally, they are prescribed leather work, a menial profession. This proverb reflects the superior sentiments of the upper castes, who do not have any concern for the feelings and sentiments of the lower caste. In Gramsci's theoretical lens, the upper caste people here are in the role of traditional intellectuals as they attempt to continue the existing parameters of society. The lack of effect of the lower caste feelings on the upper caste also reflects the feeling of indifference of the upper caste towards the lower caste.

Similarly, by metaphorically projecting themselves as animals (*dingo* here), the upper-caste traditional intellectuals do not dehumanize themselves. Rather, they present themselves as someone powerful, untouched, and uninfluenced by the concerns of the lower caste people. As Gramsci asserts, they have become "the dominant group's 'deputies' exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government" (qtd. in Villanueva, 1992,

p. 25). This proverb reinforces the notion of consent to existing power structures, as those in higher castes are not concerned with challenges to their authority from below. The *saarki*, as the representative of the lower caste, might raise their voice of dissatisfaction and protest against the discrimination, but such voices are unheard and unacknowledged, making them feel that their voices have no significance at all. Such ‘unhearing’ and ‘unnoticing’ of their voices make them feel that it is their fate to be dominated by the upper caste as long as they live.

Foucault’s (1984) concept of discourse highlights how this proverb reinforces social hierarchy by framing the voices of dissent from lower castes as insignificant. It perpetuates a discourse of obedience and acceptance of one’s social position. Wilkerson (2020) writes, “Caste, like grammar, becomes an invisible guide not only to how we speak but to how we process information, the autonomic calculations that figure into a sentence without our having to think about it” (p. 18). The grammar of casteism operates through language/proverbs, which expects the lower caste people to be silent, obedient, and strictly follow their position in the hierarchy as they are made to believe that their voices have no impact at all. Moreover, the voices of the lower caste people have been historically silenced by the people of the upper caste. So, this proverb also reflects the centuries of history and assigning assumptions and values to physical features in a structure of human hierarchy.

Norman Fairclough (1989), in his CDA model, advocates discourse as “a social practice” (24), arguing that in the analysis of a text, proverbs here, the context has to be paid attention as it is where the text takes place. Blending Fairclough’s idea of discourse/proverb as a social practice with Wilkerson’s idea of pollution, we would like to suggest how the idea of pollution is associated with the *Saarki* caste. Since the traditional role of *Saarki* caste is to rip off the leathers from the dead bodies of animals, they are projected as someone polluted. It might have been true that *Saarki* may not have maintained hygiene in the past, so they might have been tagged ‘polluted.’ However, the irony is that even today, people with the *Saarki* caste doing the work like other upper castes are also viewed as polluted. The belief in the pollution of the lower castes is essential to mark the purity of the dominant caste reinforcing the differences between them and leading to caste discrimination (Wilkerson, 2020).

4.2.3. Proverb 3: टुप्पी भन्दा माथी थात छैन, बाहुन भन्दा माथि जात छैन (Tuppi Bhandha Maathi That Chhaina, Bahun Bhandha Mathi Jaat Chhaina)

Nepali Proverb: टुप्पी भन्दा माथी थात छैन, बाहुन भन्दा माथि जात छैन

Literal Translation: Above the pigtail (of a Brahmin), there is no space and above the Brahmins, there is no caste.

Basic Meaning: Brahmins hold the most superior position in the caste hierarchy.

This proverb reflects the hegemonic power dynamics within Nepali society, reinforcing the belief in divine will. The Hindu text *Manusmriti* has codified casteism through the narratives of the creation of man, stating that Brahma “created the Brahmin, the highest caste, from his mouth, the Kshatriya from his arms, the Vaishya from his thighs, and, from his feet, the Shudra, the lowest of the four *varnas*” (Wilkinson, 2020, p. 101). In fact, the religious text explains the creation of men to encourage the idea of labor division as Brahmins were supposed to get involved in religious works, Kshatriya in wars, Vaishya in trades, and Sudra in menial works and services. However, the problem began when the words of religious texts were prescribed as absolute, with flexibility and fluidity. In addition, the Brahmins, as the interpreters of the religious texts, projected themselves as superior and other castes lower to

them in the hierarchy as inferior beings. So, casteism is the byproduct of the interpretations of the Brahmins.

The proverb reflects Brahmin's ideology that one's position or status in society is determined by caste or lineage. The pigtail (*tuppi* in the proverb) here comes as the metonymy for the Brahmins as they carry a pigtail. To suggest that there is no space above the pigtail is to imply that there is no one superior to the Brahmins. This sort of belief perpetuates the hegemonic control of higher castes (here Brahmins) over the others, reinforcing the dominant ideology that equates social status and position with caste identity. By highlighting the importance of caste, the proverb attempts to legitimize and perpetuate caste-based discrimination and inequalities in Nepali society. Furthermore, it marginalizes lower caste groups by denying them the possibility of upward mobility, thus maintaining the status quo of caste-based hegemony. In addition, the discourse of Brahmins as the most superior caste privileges certain groups while marginalizing others based on caste identity.

4.2.4. Proverb 4: लिम्बुको बुद्धी घुँडामा (Limbuکو बुद्धी घुँडामा)

Nepali Proverb: लिम्बुको बुद्धी घुँडामा

Literal Translation: The intellect of the *Limbu* lies in their knee.

Basic Meaning: The *Limbu* lack intellect.

This proverb reinforces the stereotype about the *Limbu*, a non-Hindu ethnic nationality of Nepal, and contributes to a discourse that marginalizes the *Limbu* community by perpetuating negative stereotypes about their intelligence. Generally, the human mind is considered the storehouse of the intellect, but by projecting the *Limbu*'s intellect in the knee, this proverb implies that the *Limbu* lacks intellect, suggesting the intellectual inferiority of the *Limbu* community. Such a stereotype also functions to reinforce the intellectual superiority of the upper castes. If the *Limbu* were physically powerful, the upper castes like Brahmins and Kshatriyas are intellectually powerful.

Fairclough's (1989) model requires us to analyze the context in which the proverb is used. This includes considering who is using the proverb, where it is being used, and what social, cultural, or historical factors may influence its meaning and impact. Therefore, understanding the context would help to understand the meaning of this proverb. The *Limbu* were previously called "*Matwali*," meaning alcohol drinkers, and are now termed as "*Janajati*". Since the *Limbu* do not fit into the four Hindu major caste systems as they are non-Hindu ethnic/indigenous groups, they have been rendered stereotypes by the Brahmins. As the *Limbu* were simple-minded, physically strong, and brave, it was assumed that they lacked intellect. They did not know the trickery and deception, but such good nature was (mis)interpreted as a lack of reason. The Brahmins had to assert their superiority over the *Limbu*, and they did so on the ground of intellect.

Stripping the *Limbu* community off their intellect is an act of dehumanization. By perpetuating the idea that *Limbu* people lack intelligence, the proverb serves to dehumanize them, treating them as inferior or less worthy of respect and empathy. Dehumanization is a process, a programming. Wilkerson, throughout the book, argues that casteism takes energy and reinforcement to deny what is self-evident in another member of one's own species. It is reason and intellect that make one human being, but by denying these human qualities to the *Limbu* people, the proverb dehumanizes them. A caste system relies on dehumanization to lock the marginalized outside of the norms of humanity so that any action against them is seen as

reasonable. Therefore, while the *Limbus* were labeled ‘matwali’ (alcohol drinkers) and accused of being like animals, such stigma was justified as reasonable through dehumanization.

4.2.5. Proverb 5: दिनमा कमिनी कपाल कोर, रातमा कमिनी घोचा चोर (Dinma Kamini kapaal kora, raatma Kamini ghocha chora)

Nepali Proverb: दिनमा कमिनी कपाल कोर, रातमा कमिनी घोचा चोर

Literal Translation: *Kamini*, comb your hair in the daytime, *Kamini*, steal the ‘sticks’ at night.

Basic Meaning: Low-caste women beautify themselves to sexually seduce the men.

The proverb reflects deep-seated societal prejudices and discrimination against low-caste women. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes and objectifies women reducing them to mere objects of sexuality and pleasure. The symbol ‘sticks’ in the proverbs symbolize ‘phallus’ referring to sexuality. In other words, the proverb commands women from low castes to be ready for sexual activities. *Kamini* is the feminine word for women belonging to the Kami (ironsmith) caste. Kami communities are known for metalworking. They are divided into two groups: black smiths and gold, silver, and copper smiths. They supplement smithing with agricultural work. This proverb exemplifies the dehumanization and sexualization of low-caste women, depicting them as solely existing for the gratification of others. By instructing low-caste women to beautify themselves during the day and engage in sexual activities at night, the proverb reinforces oppressive gender and caste norms that dictate the roles and behaviors of women, particularly those from lower castes.

In fact, women from the lower caste are doubly marginalized as they become the victim of the intersection of both gender and caste. The concept of intersectionality, as put forward by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) draws attention to the fact that the experiences of women of color are often a result of intersecting patterns of sexism and racism (p. 141). Stephanie A. Shields (2008) defines intersectionality as “the mutually constitute relations among social identities” (p. 308). Borrowing the ideas from Crenshaw (1989), we focus on the intersection of gender and caste to shape the experience of discrimination of women of lower caste who become the victim of both patriarchy and high caste people. On the one hand, women are expected to be beautiful, and on the other hand, such beauty is expected to serve the sexual desires of men, which, in both ways, is a hegemonical expectation from women.

This proverb contributes to a discourse that perpetuates the dehumanization and sexualization of low-caste women. For Foucault (1984), discourses are about what can be said and thought but also about who can speak, when, and with what authority. In other words, discourse is controlled in terms of objects (what can be spoken of), ritual (where and how one may speak), and privileged or exclusive right to speak of certain subjects (who may speak) (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013, p. 24). This proverb projects the *Kamini* in the listener’s role, who is ordered to act, in which she is devoid of agency. Looking at the derogatory address *Kamini*, it can be assumed that the speaker is someone from the upper castes. The speaker speaks with authority as if he knows the ‘reality’ of the ‘subject’, commanding her what to do in the daytime and what to do at night. As a discourse, this proverb functions as a meeting point of knowledge and power (Layder, 1994, p. 22). This proverb, as a discourse, reflects the attitude of the upper castes towards low-caste women as objects of desire and pleasure rather than autonomous individuals with agency and dignity. This discourse serves the interests of the dominant caste groups by legitimizing the subjugation and exploitation of low-caste individuals, particularly women, while simultaneously marginalizing and silencing their voices.

5. CONCLUSION

The above discussion of the selected caste specific proverbs through the lens of critical discourse theory and critical caste theory implies how proverbs function as discourse perpetuating caste discrimination and reinforcing caste hierarchies in Nepal. By unpacking the diverse issues related to caste discrimination, such as fixed categorization, heritability, power dynamics, dehumanization, stereotypes, and the intersectionality of gender and caste embedded within the proverbs, this study sheds light on the role of language and discourse in reinforcing caste hierarchies and legitimizing discriminatory practices. The implication of this paper is double folds. Firstly, it makes a call for the critical examination of linguistic and discursive practices that sustain caste hierarchies and by doing so, secondly and most importantly, it makes a call for challenging and dismantling caste-based discrimination. On a pessimistic note, we may not completely get rid of casteism as it is deep-rooted in society. However, on an optimistic note, we can at least challenge it, and this sort of critical inquiry and examination of language and discourse initiates a step in challenging casteism.

REFERENCES

- Bhattacharya, J. N. (1896). *Hindu castes and sects: An exposition of the origin of the Hindu caste system and the bearing of the sects towards each other and towards other religious systems*. Thacker, Spink.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 138–167.
- Fairclough N (1989) *Language and power*. New York: Longman.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *The Foucault Reader* (P. Rabinow, Ed.). New York: Pantheon.
- Hofer, A. (2004). *The caste hierarchy and state in Nepal: A study of the Muluki Ain of 1854*. Patan, Nepal: Himal Books.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370926479_Nepali_Ukhan_Tukka
- Inchley, V.M. (2010). *Sitting in my house dreaming of Nepal*. Ekta Books, Kathmandu.
- Karki, B. (2020, June 10). Justice for Nawaraj. *My Republica*.
<https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/justice-for-nawaraj/>
- Khatiwoda, R., Cubelic, S., & Michaels, A. (2021). “*Mulukī Ain*” of 1854: Nepal’s first legal code. Heidelberg University Publishing (heiUP).
- Layder, D. (1994). *Understanding social theory*, London: Sage.
- Mieder, Wolfgang. (2008). *Proverbs speak louder than words: Folk wisdom in art, culture, folklore, history, literature and mass media*. Peter Lang.
- Pervaz, A., Azher, M., Abbas, S., & Saeed, S. (2021). A comparative analysis of the portrayal of femininity in multiple identities in urdu, sindhi, saraiki and punjabi proverbs. *Palarch’s Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology*, 18(10), 1705–1714.
<https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/10073>
- Pitsoe, V., & Letseka, M. (2013). Foucault’s discourse and power: Implications for instructionist classroom management. *Open Journal of Philosophy*, 3(1), 23-28.
- Rasul, S. (2015). Gender and power relationships in the language of proverbs: Image of a woman. *FWU Journal of Social Sciences*, 9(2), 53–62.
- Shields, S. A. (2008). Gender: An intersectionality perspective. *Sex Roles*, 59(5), 301–311.

Perpetuation of Casteism through Proverbs: A Critical Discourse Analysis

- Subedi, M. (2016). Caste/ethnic dimensions of change and inequality: implications for inclusive and affirmative agendas in Nepal. *Nepali Journal of Contemporary Studies*, 16(1), 1-16.
- Sundas, B. (2020, June 10). Nawaraj: The spark that will light the fire. *My Republica*. <https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/navaraj-the-spark-that-will-light-the-fire/>
- Uprety, S., & Thapa, B. B. (2017). Constitutional nationalism and structural violence: A study of the Muluki Ain and the constitutions of Nepal. *Contesting Justice in South Asia*, 322.
- Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. *The handbook of discourse analysis*, 466-485.
- Villanueva Jr, V. (1992). Hegemony: From an Organically Grown Intellectual. *Pre-Text: A Journal of Rhetorical Theory*, 13, 17-34.
- Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.
- Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA is about—a summary of its history, important concepts and its developments. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, 1, 1-13.

AUTHORS' BIOS

Hem Lal Pandey is a Ph.D. Candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). He is also an assistant professor of English at Tribhuvan University, Nepal. He currently works as an Assistant Instructor for First-Year Composition courses at UTEP. His research interests include representation, discourse analysis, visual rhetoric, and rhetoric and writing.

Sanjeev Niraula is pursuing a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). He currently works as an Assistant Instructor of First-Year Composition and Assistant Director of the Rhetoric and Writing Program at UTEP. His research interests include digital rhetoric, cultural rhetoric, and pedagogy. .