

PaaneekoThopaa: A Science Fiction for Children

Parshu Shrestha

Background

Science fiction is a distinct type of fiction that uses scientific rationale besides having the regular features such as plot, characters, setting, action and point of view. It speculates about the situation of human beings in the world of science and technology; real or imaginary; present or future. Despite being imaginative in quality, it is different from fantasy because of the content of science used in it.

Since the publication of *Frankenstein* (1818), a precursor of science fiction, by Mary Shelley, English literature has got several works that have used explicit and coherently developed scientific principles. They are divided into two main groups- hard and soft- by the critics. The former uses much of scientific knowledge and gadgetry along with scientists and engineers as its protagonists. The latter exploits the ideas from other branches of knowledge such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. while raising moral questions about human existence in the world of science and technology.

Recently, a new type of science fiction called cyberpunk has come into existence in English literature. Its characters, either human or artificial intelligences, are set in 'virtual reality' created by the use of computers and computer networks. It seems to be a combination of science fiction and fantasy.

Despite being greatly influenced by English literature's universal presence, Nepali literature is still far behind in this genre. Moreover, it is a very novice idea in Nepali literature for children.

In this context, this article tries to discuss, in short, the presence of science fiction in Nepali literature written for children. The major discussion is focused on how a novel, *PaaneekoThopaa*(The Drop of Water), written by Kavitaran, for children, can claim its position as a science fiction. The conclusion is based on the findings of the discussion.

1. Science Fiction in Nepali Literature

Science fiction is in a marginalized state in Nepali literature. It is a less heeded genre by Nepali writers. After *Biraat Parva*, the first published narrative work in Nepali, translated by Shakti BallavArjyaal from Hindi (in 1827 B.S.), Nepali literature had to wait almost seven decades more to get its first original fiction *Rupmati* (1991 B.S.) by Rudra Raj Pandey. (Baral and Atom 2056 B.S.:73) Since then, several works of Nepali fiction (long and short) have been published, but science fiction is still in the marginalized state.

Critic Krishna Chandra Singh Pradhan says that early Nepali novels (written around 1970s and 80s of Bikram Sambat) were similar to either folk tales or miracle tales, or social and reformatory novels since they borrowed ideas from *Veda*, *Braahmana*, *Upanisads*, etc. (quoted in Shrestha 2008: 12). Along with time, literary works based on different isms such as Idealistic Realism, Social Realism, Historical Realism, Socialist

Realism, Human Psychology, Existentialism, Feminism, Post-modernism, etc. appeared (ibid:pp 12-20). But hardly a few works have science as their subject matter.

Aatmaako Meemaansaa (2011 B.S.) by Shankar Lamichhane is said to be the first Nepali science fiction that encouraged many other Nepali writers such as Ramesh Khanal (*RoboTkoMaanabiya Astitwa*), Vijay Malla (*Engineer koTaauko* and *Pravesh Nishidda*), Saru Bhakta (*Padaarthaharuko Geet*, *Chhoree Bramhaanda* and *Saayad Mahaavisphot*), Madan Mani Dixit (*Kaanch*, *Shubra raDevyaanee*), etc. into this genre. Some other science fiction writers who have mainly written for children are: Kavitaran, Gorakh Bahadur Singh, Vijay Chalise, VinayKasaju, Dhruba Ghimire, Kapil Lamichhane, etc. Their works can be categorized into three- mechanical, adventurous, and social- based on the subject matters included. (Atom, 2068 B.S.,pp 100-11)

1.1. Science Fiction for Children in Nepali Literature

Most of the works in Nepali literature written for the children seem to have only one motto: to entertain while teaching moral lessons to the readers. Therefore, most of the works for children are influenced by folk tales because of simplicity, imagination and entertainment found in them (Rai, 2067 B.S., p. 77). And many other works are based on myths.

Laxmi Prasad Devkota's *RaajKumaarPrabhaakar* (1997 B.S.) is regarded to be the first published work for children in Nepali (Pradhan, 2057 B.S., p. 27). After him, some other Nepali writers such as Madhav Ghimire, Dev Kumari Thapa, Krishna Prasad Parajuli, Parashu Pradhan, etc. published their works for children. But they have not included science in their works.

Critic Pramod Pradhan (2057 B.S.) has given credit to Kavitaran as the first Nepali writer of science fiction for children (28). According to him, Kavitaran's published books on the genre are *Bandevae* (2036 B.S.), *Paaneeko Thopaa* (2038 B.S.) and *Kamilaako Kathaa* (2048 B.S.).

2. A Study on *PaaneekoThopaa* as a Science Fiction

2.1. Summary

The novel *PaaneekoThopaa* (The Drop of Water) is an account of the adventures of the main character called PaaneekoThopaa. Written in the third person narrative form, it presents many scientific facts about water in a simple and lucid language suitable for children.

PaaneekoThopaa evaporates off the sea, becomes cloud and drops to the earth as a hailstone. A small boy's mother puts it into a freeze and prepares ice-cream. It enters the boy's body through his mouth and is dragged into different organs by an unknown force. Together with other drops of water, it falls into the toilet and reaches in a sewer pipe which leads it to a flooded river. Flowing down, it reaches the deep mines of gold, diamond, silver and coal and comes out to the earth's surface along with a stream of hot water. It reaches into the plain as a dirty river contaminated with the human created pollutants and germs. A farmer collects it in a pot and waters a flower plant whose roots

suck it into. From the leaf of the plant, it reaches to the sky through evaporation. Flying over the Himalayas, it falls down into a glacier as snow. Reaching over the snowline, it melts into water to be collected into a pond. From there, it falls upon a turbine used for the production of hydro-electricity. Then, it falls upon a wheel of a water-mill used by a farmer for grinding flour and reaches into a pond. A group of children having picnic on the pond pollute the water. The germ-laden PaaneekoThopaa drops into a kettle of a small boy through the nozzle of his house tap. When the boy boils the water for making it pure, it comes out of the kettle in the form of vapor and gets stuck on the window pane. The next morning, the house owner opens the window and PaaneekoThopaa reaches up into the sky being evaporated by the heat of the sun.

The wind pushes it toward south and, after all, it reaches over the sea, its home. It becomes frost and falls down into the sea, and gets reunited with all its relatives.

2.2. Use of Science in the Novel

Prarambha (2010) says the majority of Nepali fiction for children is based on myths that are hardly believable in the modern context and they cannot fulfill the modern generation's need for "intellectual input in the art of story-telling". Therefore, myths should be recycled with "a scientific taint" (ibid) to win the children's hearts.

Paaniko Thopaa has no myth. The whole novel is based on one complete cycle of the journey of water from the sea to the sky and finally to the sea again. The scientific description through the narration of PaaneekoThopaa, the protagonist of the novel, who encounters various odds and evens along its adventures, is delightfully knowledgeable to the children.

The heat of the sun evaporates PaaneekoThopaa, a drop of water, off the sea. The vapor flies high up in the sky and changes itself into a cold cloud. (Kavitaram, 2059 B. S., p. 2) A hurricane pushes and tosses the cloud that turns into hailstones that fall down to the ground with rain.

Water freezes when it is kept in a fridge. This theory is applied when a boy's mother makes ice-cream from PaaneekoThopaa.

Water, when drunk by someone, reaches into different parts of human body and do the appointed works. When it reaches into the blood stream, it helps to reduce the temperature in human body. Water also helps in the formation of tear, saliva, mucous, urine, etc., and in cleaning the body. PaaneekoThopaa reaches into the urinary bladder as urine after cleaning up the body (Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., p. 9) and waits there to be thrown out.

When water is polluted with harmful germs, nature tries to purify it in its own way. As the narrator describes:

*soorya tantalapur chamkiraheko thiyo.
safaa haawaa pani bahiraheko thiyo. Sooryako taap ra haawaa ma
bhayeko aksijanle usma bhayekaa kitanuharu bistaarai mardai gaye.*

(Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., p. 11)

(The sun was shining brightly in the sky. The fresh wind was also blowing. The germs he (PaaneekoThopaa) contained died slowly due to the sun's heat and the oxygen in the air.)

Thus, water restores its natural freshness with the help of oxygen and the heat of the sun.

Streams of hot water are found to be flowing under the surface of the earth. The streams spring out at various places on earth where humans take bath for healing purposes. PaaneekoThopaa finds a boy taking bath in one such spring. (Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p. 16)

How does lava burst out of the earth? The process is described in the novel in simple words of a drop of water through its own narration:

...tala tala pugēpachhi ma yesto thaaunma pugēn jahanka dhunga, mato, khanijharu sabai pagliyera paani jastai taral bhayeka thiye. Tyahaan ma matra pugēko thiyina. Ma jasta asankhya thopaharu pugēka thiye ra sabai pugnasaath baafmaa parinat bhaisakekaa thiye. Ma ta baaf hundaaa afno yo aakaar bhanda satra saya guna failiyen ra tyahaan tyasari failane ma maatra thiyina. Haami ekarkalai thelamthel gari tyahaan nai atesmates garirahyaun. Thaun ekdamai saano thiyo ra tyaha naya thopaharuka dharaharu uttikai aundai baaf bandai jandaithiye. Antyama hami sabaiko thelamthel le garda tyahan jamin nai futyo. Tyas futeko thaunbata sabai baafharu bahira niskiye. Baafharusangai tyo taato le pagliyeko aagojasto taral padartha bahira bhutututu niskiyo. Ma tyo baafko rupma aakashma pugisakeko thiyen. Tara tala maile dekhen, tyo aago jasto taral padarthale waari-paariko jangal ra manchhekaaa gaunharu sabai dadhayera bhasma paaryo.

(Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p. 18)

(... going deeper into the earth, I reached the places where soil, stone, minerals, etc. had melted into liquid. I was not the only one. Innumerable drops of water like me had immediately been changed into vapor. My volume increased by seventeen hundred times, and I was not alone there to have the fate. We kept pushing and pulling each other for some time. The space was very limited and the new trickles of water were being changed into vapor. At last, the earth split open at a place due to our force. Then, the vapor came out of the rupture. The melted hot liquid was also spilled out all over the surrounding forests and the villages which were immediately burnt down by the excessive heat.)

There is also a description of the scientific process of the formation of water. A science teacher and his students conduct an experiment in the lab where they mix two parts of Hydrogen and one part of Oxygen in a glass tube and put a burning match-stick into it. Drops of water are formed with a loud bang in the pot. (Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p. 20)

When water is polluted, it is full of harmful germs due to which the aquatic animals die of diseases. (Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p.21)

Water also helps in photosynthesis in plants. A flower plant absorbs water through its roots. Then, it is sucked into stalks, branches and leaves of the plant in turn. (Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p. 24)

PaaneekoThopaa turns into snow and falls down on a mountain. It reaches into a glacier which flows very slowly, not more than one and a half inches everyday (Kavitarām, 2059 B.S., p. 26). After years, PaaneekoThopaa arrives at the snowline, the

place where the temperature is enough for snow to melt automatically, and becomes water again.

Water is led into a reservoir through a canal and is dropped upon a big wheel through a tunnel. The force of water turns the wheel round and produces electricity. (Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., p. 27)

There is also a watermill that is run by the force of water falling down through a tunnel. Human beings pollute water by carelessly throwing dirty things. But it can be purified by heating it for twenty minutes in a high temperature. A boy puts the kettle with PaaneekoThopaa and other drops of water on a stove and boils the water for twenty minutes. All the germs in water are killed. (Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., p. 31)

The water vapor has been a very useful form of energy in the human history. Many descriptions about vapor engines that pulled trains, ships, etc. can be read in books. In the novel, PaaneekoThopaa sees the lid of the kettle being pushed up by the force of water vapor. (Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., p. 32)

The vapor rises high up into the sky, becomes cold mist and starts coming downwards to the sea at night. At last, the mist gets into the sea water. Then, another cycle of water starts. In the same process, PaaneekoThopaa reaches into the sea. (Kavitaram, 2059 B.S., pp 33-5)

Besides PaaneekoThopaa, there are many other assisting characters that come along the events in the novel. No character has any specific name. Perhaps it is the writer's effort to generalize events and the characters in the novel.

No hard and fast scientific theories or rules are explained in the novel. The language used and the information included target the general reader, preferably children, without any prior knowledge on science.

3. Conclusion

The novel provides knowledge of various scientific facts about water in an interesting third person narrative with omniscient point of view. It is entertaining as well as knowledgeable to the children, the targeted readers, due to its simple and lucid language. Also, it describes human behavior towards nature and water, one of its main ingredients. Water is life for human beings and all living creatures in this world, but only a few people know everything about it. On the whole, the novel is focused on showing through an interesting narrative how water is useful for human beings and how it reaches from one place to another.

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[(Parshu Shrestha (1981) teaches English at SOS Hermann Gmeiner Secondary School Itahari and VishwaAdarsha College, Itahari, Sunsari. He writes short stories and research articles, in English and Nepali.]