

Technium.

43/2023

2023
A new decade for social changes

Technium
Social Sciences



Students' Creative Writings Mirroring the Social Reality

Pragya Paneru

Tribhuvan University, Nepal

pragya.miracle@gmail.com

Abstract. This article analyses a total of forty-six students' writings from Grade 11 to master's level published in one of the college's annual magazines. Among them 24 are females and 22 are males. This research uses a qualitative content analysis method to analyse the students' writings under various topics and genres to unearth their concerns within them. Although there are various studies on students' creative writings focusing on the technical and gender aspects, only a few studies focus on the issues reflected in their contents. This research believes that students' creative writings are significant as they give information about the issues, interests, and concerns from students' perspectives. The students' writings also reflect concerns and awareness of students regarding various social issues in their writings. The findings from this study revealed that students are concerned about various social political issues in Nepal such as poverty, political corruption, cultural issues, gender discrimination, caste discrimination, and women issues. Moreover, life is a dominant theme in both male and female writings and they are concerned about their life, future goals, and responsibility toward their parents. Some shared themes are the challenges of staying away from parents for study purposes, caste discrimination, gender discrimination, poverty, child labour, and women related issues. Females have written personalised writings with varieties of issues and dark themes than males and the themes in their writings suggest their struggle in a patriarchal society, social restrictions, gender discrimination, and women violence against males' writings on general themes such as loss of human values, loss of culture, and struggle of orphaned children.

Keywords. gender, content analysis, social issues, college magazine, student writings

Introduction

Students' writing content is significant from a social perspective. Studies claim that students' writings often reflect intense and personal incidents representing the social reality they live in (Morgan, 1998). If the contents of the students' writings are focused, they can contribute to our understanding of the real social issues coming from the vivid reality of the students. Students' writings can also represent the concerns significant to them, their awareness, and their understanding of the various issues expressed in their writings. However, students' writings have not gained enough attention from the researchers as there are limited studies in the exploration of social issues exposed in the students' writings. The available studies on students' writings are more focused on the issues of academic and language correctness rather than the issues represented in them. Therefore, this research focuses on the contents of their writings published in one of the college magazines to unearth the themes and issues exposed in them. The creative writings published in the magazines are in various topics and genres thus, it is

expected that students have freely chosen their topic of concern and the genre to fit their expression. This research underpins the idea that analysing students' creative writings is one of the most reliable ways to look at the issues on which the participants are concerned.

This research uses qualitative content analysis as an approach to analysis. It includes a total of 46 published writings by students from Grade 11, Grade 12, Bachelor's, and master's levels. The upcoming section sheds light on the literature in this field.

Related Literature

Most of the literature on students' writing focus on the writing performances of students and language aspects in various contexts (Hasan & Marjuki, 2017; Abasi et al., 2006). Some literature focuses on the impact and use of creative writing for developing students' writing skills and interests (Arshavskaya, 2015; Tappenden, 2010). Another significant area of student writing is the gender gap in the writing assessments and results in favour of girls (Isci et al., 2019; Ulu, 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). These studies also suggest that other variables such as diary writing and reading habits contributed to better writing performance. A large part of the studies also focusses on gender issues in students' writings. Studies in these fields claim that gendered attitudes were reflected in students' writing including the preference for their gender rather than the opposite gender in their writings (Poulsen, 2015; Gurkan, 2021). Moreover, some studies explore students' interpretation and focus of the text they have read in their writing (Johansson, 2022).

Peterson & Parr (2012) in their writing claim that the studies on students' writing have a history of 4 decades which in 2022 have crossed exactly one more decade making it 5.

Studies suggest that students' writings can relate to social issues (Bomer & Bomer, 2001) and they represent the society that they live in (Morgan, 1998). Personal writings by students can be expressive and can have psychological and social implications (Gere, 2001; Morgan, 1998). However, this field has not got much attention as there is limited contemporary research in this field. Available studies are limited to writing performance and gender issues. Nevertheless, this research underpins the idea that creative writings give flexibility and freedom to the students to write about the issues of their concerns in the genre they feel comfortable with. Going beyond the achievements and writing techniques, students' writings can give a reflection of the society they live in and the issues that are important to them. Since there is a gap in the studies that look at the issues reflected in the students' writings, this study attempts to explore the issues reflected in the student's creative writings published in a magazine of a Nepali college.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This research will take a quantitative approach to data. Especially, it will adopt critical qualitative analysis skills (Saldana & Omasta, 2018) to analyse the themes expressed in the creative writings of students published in a magazine from a college situated in Kathmandu city. This approach follows various steps before interpreting data starting from condensing data, noticing the patterns, grouping them, and looking at the various social processes in the data. Following this method, first, the creative writings were condensed into themes after thoroughly reading them. Then, the emerging patterns from their themes were highlighted and grouped. Focused human actions, reactions, and interactions were observed in the writings and the final interpretation was done. This qualitative analysis process can be used in any data source

however, in this study this approach is used in the published written samples of the students from Grade 11, Grade 12, Bachelor's, and master's levels.

Participants Information

This research includes a total of 46 published creative writings by the students. Although there were 49 writings by the students 3 samples were not included in this research as they were writings on a given topic not on the topic they voluntarily chose and the ones that participated in essay writing competitions. Among the rest 46 writings, most of the students were from bachelor's level (33 students), followed by grade 12 (7 students) and 3 students each from grade 11 and master's level. Gender-wise, there were altogether 24 girls' and 22 boys' writings involved in this research. All the students studied in the same college located in Kathmandu.

Results

This section presents the findings based on the student's writings contents. When the themes of the writings were condensed and grouped, life was one of the most repeated themes expressed by the students in their writing followed by the various social issues, local issues, and information regarding local culture. It was found that female students had written about varieties of issues than male writers. The themes of female writings also suggested women related issues, their struggle in a patriarchal society, restrictions due to social norms, and social pressure of proving themselves as capable as boys. The themes reflected in the students' writings are discussed in the following topics.

Life as a Dominant Theme

It was found that the most repeated theme by students was life. A total of 10 males and 9 females wrote on this theme. These writings had a personal flavour with autobiographical contents. Most of the writings about life reflected life as a struggle, change, and an amalgam of hope and despair. It was surprising that most of them took life as something serious and difficult indicating their understanding that life in their social context is difficult.

Females' view toward life included longing for independence, fear, lack of confidence, determination, school memories, the impact of teacher's acts, family problems, care for parents, social pressure to prove their capability, friendship, people's selfish nature, life away from home, contemplation about life, and life including all the organism in the earth. Whereas males' themes regarding life included childhood memories, school memories, career choice, life as a struggle and success, life away from home, maturity, care for parents, living a Dalit life, independent struggle, and life as love.

It seems that most of the concerns of students are about their lives. The students' concerns regarding their lives suggest that they are aware of the problems of lives due to various social and economic conditions. It also suggests that they are not quite optimistic about their life and future. The political and social context of the country might be a major cause for pessimism in youths which is also reflected in the migration of one-third of youths to a foreign land for employment (The World Bank, 2018). The female pessimism comes from the impact of a male-dominated society as they mention in their writings that they are continuously under a pressure to prove themselves as capable as males and struggle to live according to the male norms.

Life away from home was among some commonly recurring themes expressed in the students' writings. It reflects their situation as they are away from their home and residing in Kathmandu to pursue education.

An important but contrasting tendency was noticed in the life related issues in both male and female writings. It seemed that females were more uncertain about their future than males. This uncertainty was a result of the social attitude toward women in general and due to uncertainty of the kind of family, they will have to adjust to after marriage. This shows women in Nepal are never free as before marriage their life depends on their parent's home and after marriage, their life depends on the in-laws' home.

It was noticed that Females' writings regarding life expressed feelings of dilemma, lack of confidence, self-doubt, social pressure, and fears. Their writings reflected dark themes such as women's violence, dowry, social restrictions, gender discrimination, poverty as a cause of crimes, caste discrimination, child labour, and suicide.

In contrast to female writings males have a sense of maturity, acceptance of situations, and a strong theme of independence. They represented fewer issues such as caste discrimination, poverty, the Sati system, and the state of parentless. Among these, the sati system is a female social issue that is not in practice at present.

The differences in the expressions and the variations of social issues in both male and female writings suggest unequal gender social status of the males and females in Nepal. From the writings, it can be inferred that males are relatively free from the problems coming from gender discrimination and social gender norms whereas females are the victims of discrimination based on gender. The available studies in the gender context also suggest that women in Nepal are discriminated against and are the victim of violence in Nepal (Updhyay, 2016).

Social Issues

The second repeated themes reflected in the students' writings were that of social issues. A total of 8 females and 6 males brought references to the various social issues in their writings.

The issues raised by females included the issues such as dowry, caste discrimination, women violence, bad politics, poverty, child labour, social restriction, gender discrimination, and the impact of dominant culture on minority culture. Whereas males' issues include the issue of the sati tradition, loss of humanity, irresponsible behaviours of people, loss of local culture, caste discrimination, poverty, and struggle of orphaned children.

Among social issues, more gender-related issues belonging to females were reflected in both male and female writings though females had raised this issue extensively. Caste discrimination, poverty, and child labour were other common issues reflected in both male and female writings. These issues suggest that the students are aware of these issues still prevalent in Nepalese society. It also suggests that the students are impacted by these negative issues prevalent in society resulting in pessimism.

Gender Variations in the Choice of local and Cultural Contents

Some of the writings by students were based on topics related to local incidents and culture. These local and cultural contents represented some common and some specific topics. It was noticed that males and females had distinct choices regarding topics and their focus.

The female writings were more inspired by specific individuals unlike males' writings on general topics. For example, females' writing included an issue of a woman florist in the *Pashupatinath* area, a plight of a young water seller in Basantapur, a teen boy's infatuation with a senior lady in her college, and a zoo visit and reflection on the feelings of caged animals in the zoo. Only a few of them wrote about general issues such as the importance of education.

Unlike females, males have written more about general issues that are not targeted to any individual. The local issues represented by males are also different than the females in the contents and their variations. For example, the males have written about the issues regarding the importance of investment at a young age, deforestation, loss of tradition, human rights, biography of an international politician, and writings on their college/school.

There were only three writings related to culture by a male and two females. Among them, a female's writing was about a female-based ritual in the Newari culture called *Ihi* and another female writes about the history of Nepali culture. In contrast to them, a male provided general historical information about *Kirant* culture.

More Variations in Female Writings

Although there were themes related to life, social issues, local issues, and informative writings under various topics. It was found that females' writings reflected more variations than males.

The females' issues included topics such as culture, life, friendship, wish for independence, school memories, the selfish nature of people, zoo animals' issues, dilemma and fears, restrictions due to social norms, a local flower business, child labour, crime, poverty, women violence, teen love, education, nation, caste discrimination, and dowry. Although most of these issues mirrored problems and the darker side of human life, the positive themes like a desire to come out of those problems, empathy, understanding, and compassion toward animals and humans were also reflected in their writings.

In contrast to females' males expressed limited issues in their writings. Their issues included the topics of investment, childhood memories, biography, film review, dream, culture, human rights, life, career, struggles, maturity, caste discrimination, school, nation, how things should/should not be, deforestation, independence, and loss of humanity.

Same-gender preferences

Another important tendency noticed in the findings was the same-gender preferences of the students. This was suggested by a focus on same gender characters, role models, and writings based on autobiography. This tendency was found in both males and females.

Female writings mostly represented social issues related to females, their own life, female child labour, women in business, and on culture based on female-based rituals. Whereas males' writings included male politicians, male investors, autobiographical writings, and writings on general topics. A boy however wrote on the female issue in a film review because the movie was based on the female issue. Except this and apart from some writings on a general topic majority of the students' writings focused on their gender in their writing supporting the findings of the studies before that claim same gender preferences in students' writings (Poulsen, 2015; Gurkan, 2021).

Caste and Gender Discrimination a Major Social Problem

Caste and gender discrimination is presented as a major social problem in Nepali society and impacts are even felt by the students as reflected in their writings.

The impact of caste discrimination is presented as a bitter reality by a female and a male. The male comes from a Dalit background, and he relates the caste system with his first-hand experience. The male in his writing very desolately expresses how he was differently treated by the next seater on the bus to Kathmandu and denied a room for rent by the locals in Kathmandu when they knew that he belonged to the Dalit community. In his autobiographical writing, he mentions that caste discrimination is prevalent in both cities and villages, and he is aware that how many of his communities have been the victim of caste-based violence and have lost their lives in Nepal. The female has related the issue of caste discrimination with an inter-caste love affair and the tragic murder of the girl by her father who dreams to marry a boy outside her caste. These dark themes present the caste system as one of the cruel discriminations that are still in practice in Nepal.

Another important social issue inferred from the writings is related to gender discrimination. The issue of gender disparity and its effects are mostly raised by females. Within gender discrimination, there are various issues such as discrimination in household chores especially in cooking among males and females, son preferences in the family, restrictive social norms regarding hair and clothes norms for females, girl feticide, women violence, rape, Chhaupadi, widow, dowry system, and suicide.

Various life events and situations are presented by the female students indicating their first-hand experience of gender discrimination. One of the females writes how she had to stay back with her brother in the city during her vacation just to cook food for him as he did not know how to cook food. Writing about dowry, another female writes how females are victimised to commit suicide due to the pressure and violence from the in-laws demanding more dowry. Similarly, another female writes about how she can't have the haircut of her choice and how these restrictions make her life difficult. One of the males has written about the sati tradition in which widows were made to sacrifice their lives in their husband's funeral pyre. However, this tradition is not followed at present.

These social issues based on caste and gender-based discrimination presented in the students' writings suggest that they are aware of these issues and want change. Although the constitution denounces any kind of discrimination as a criminal activity, issues such as caste discrimination (Pariyar, 2018) and gender discrimination (Khanal, 2018; Gupta et al., 2020) are still prevalent in Nepal. This also suggests that even if there are laws against these kinds of discrimination the social reality is still stained by these bitter realities.

Conclusion

The above findings suggest that students' writing contains important social and local issues that can be relevant to critically reflect on them as they represent some of the central issues from the view of students. Limiting students' writings for their language and academic aspects can often ignore the contents and issues that are significant to the students and are part of the society they live in. As suggested in the findings students are impacted by ongoing social issues, gender relations, caste discrimination, family situation, and school incidents. They face difficulties growing apart from their family in search of higher and quality education. Not only these, but students are also inquisitive and aware of the cause of some crimes and social problems because of poverty rather than the criminal mindset. Their writings indicate they are equally aware of the problems related to the environment, culture, and human rights. The topics from multiple dimensions and areas in their writings suggest their understanding. Therefore,

creative writing can be an important threshold to look upon the issues from the bottom and contribute to addressing the social justice.

References

- [1] Bomer, R., & Bomer, K. (2001). *For a Better World: Reading and Writing for Social Action*. Heinemann, 88 Post Road West, PO Box 5007, Westport, CT 06881.
- [2] Hasan, J., & Marzuki, M. (2017). An analysis of student's ability in writing at Riau University Pekanbaru-Indonesia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 7(5), 380.
- [3] Abasi, A. R., Akbari, N., & Graves, B. (2006). Discourse appropriation, construction of identities, and the complex issue of plagiarism: ESL students writing in graduate school. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 15(2), 102-117.
- [4] İşçi, C., Kırmızı, F. S., & Akkaya, N. (2020). Evaluation of creative writing products according to content and some variables.
- [5] Ulu, H. (2019). Investigation of Fourth Grade Primary School Students' Creative Writing and Story Elements in Narrative Text Writing Skills. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 15(5), 273-287.
- [6] Zhang, M., Bennett, R. E., Deane, P., & van Rijn, P. W. (2019). Are there gender differences in how students write their essays? An analysis of writing processes. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, 38(2), 14-26.
- [7] Arshavskaya, E. (2015). Creative Writing Assignments in a Second Language Course: A Way to Engage Less Motivated Students. *InSight: A Journal of Scholarly Teaching*, 10, 68-78.
- [8] Tappenden, C. (2010). Out of our minds: Exploring attitudes to creative writing relating to art and design practice and personal identity. *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice*, 3(3), 257-283.
- [9] Gürkan, S. (2021). Sociological Inferences Deduced from Creative Writing Activities: Analyzing Gender Perceptions and Stereotypes of Children in terms of Child Development. *Bartın University Journal of Faculty of Education*, 2021(1), 218-231.
- [10] Poulsen, C. (2015). Student writing: gender and visibility; then and now. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*.
- [11] Johansson, M. (2022). "It was Difficult. And a Little bit Boring." Swedish Middle School Students' Reception of Narrative Texts. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 1-14.
- [12] Morgan, D. (1998). Ethical issues raised by students' personal writing. *College English*, 60(3), 318-325.
- [13] Peterson, S. S., & Parr, J. (2012). Gender and literacy issues and research: Placing the spotlight on writing.
- [14] Gere, A. R. (2001). Revealing silence: Rethinking personal writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 203-223.
- [15] Saldaña, J., & Omasta, M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life*. Sage Publications.
- [16] Uprety, S. (2016). Triple headed patriarchal hydra: Masculinities and violence against women in Nepal. *Sociology and Anthropology*, 4(7), 509-522.
- [17] Khanal, S. (2018). Gender discrimination in education expenditure in Nepal: Evidence from living standards surveys. *Asian Development Review*, 35(1), 155-174.

- [18] Gupta, A. K., Kanu, P. K., & Lamsal, B. P. (2021). Gender Discrimination in Nepal: Does It Vary Across Socio-Demographics?. *Journal of Contemporary Sociological Issues*, 1(2), 145-165.
- [19] Pariyar, M. (2018). Caste Discrimination Overseas: Nepali Dalits in England. *Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture and Community in a New and Old Diaspora*, 404-434.