

Broken Mirrors of Memory: Postmodernism and the Search for Meaning in *Palpasa Café*¹

Bhanu Bhakta Sharma Kandel

Abstract

Narayan Wagle's novel *Palpasa Café* is well known among Nepali readers and has been interpreted as a travelogue or as an account of the Maoist insurgency and its impact in Nepali people, society, and the socio-political scenario of Nepal. However, rejecting linear storytelling and totalizing explanations, the novel foregrounds uncertainty, subjectivity, and multiplicity of truths through its self-reflexive narration, blurred boundary between fiction and reality, and fragmented structure. The novel destabilizes grand narratives of nationalism, revolution, and progress by exposing their contradictions and by privileging individual voices, silences, and ambiguities. *Palpasa*, as an elusive figure, symbolizes both absence and possibility, further intensifying the text's play with incompleteness and deferred meaning. From a postmodern viewpoint, *Palpasa Café* claims that reality in the midst of war is plural, contingent, and constructed through discourse rather than fixed or absolute. The novel has opened a new avenue in Nepali literature that the truth is plural and subjective—there is no single, authoritative narrative of the Maoist conflict in Nepal. Through Drishya's fragmented experiences, shifting voices, metafictional narration, and the blurring of fiction and reality, the novel asserts that human life under war can be understood only through personal stories, contradictions, and partial perspectives, rather than through totalizing ideologies, linear histories, or grand narratives.

Keywords: Coincidence, fragmentation, irony, isolation, postmodern, victimization

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Introduction

During his career as a journalist, Narayan Wagle traveled to many regions of Nepal with 'reporting assignments' and he has a ringside seat to the country's political conflict and the dramatic transformation from monarchy to republic, marked by a transition from war to peace. He has traveled to remote corners of the country, bringing stories of neglect and apathy to the government's attention, far from Kathmandu, in his career as a journalist. So, he has presented the social realities, his feelings, and his experiences about contemporary Nepali society in a semi-fictionalized form. In a way, this novel is the extended version of his 'fictionalized fact'.

Wagle's novel *Palpasa Café* depicts the life of Drishya, the protagonist. Drishya dreams of a Café named Palpasa Café in memory of his beloved, Palpasa. She is a daring woman who returns to Nepal from America to be with her grandmother and pursue a significant career in documentary filmmaking. He dreams of a café, a resort to be built in the local architectural style. He imagines that the café would have a library and a gallery blending art and coffee house on the canvas of the Western hills. Drishya travels to the countryside to materialize his dream, but he fails. His dream is the dream of an artist. It is also the dream of all Nepali people to be free, equal, and to enjoy peace and security. His dream, though not fully realized, represents the dreams of all Nepali people during the Maoist insurgency. His work is an example of the situation during the Maoist insurgency, which lasted 10 years and was marked by bloodshed and clashes. Describing the novel, Toffin (2015), in an article says, "The story is overall melancholic, sad, sorrowful, just as the 10 years of civil conflict were" (p. 3). Like Drishya's dream, the protagonist of the novel, everyone has their own dream project, but they are only victims of the tragic aftermath of crossfire, bombardment, and hatred at the borders. Like the protagonist of the novel, the writer's life is full of unexpected twists and turns and a series of coincidences during the Maoist insurgency in Nepal.

Literature review

Narayan Wagle's best-selling novel *Palpasa Café* has been reviewed in several ways. Most reviewers stress the author's poignant depiction of the country at the height of the Maoist insurgency and its effect on the individuals and Nepali society. The critics have analyzed the novel through the lens of experimentation, blending fact and fiction in contemporary Nepal. They have also explored style, examining whether it aligns with the writer's aims and the book's theme. Most of the reviewers have focused extensively on

the facts and realities of the country, including its ideological structure and its effects on the individual unconscious, as well as conflicts among different identities and groups within contemporary Nepali society.

Reviewing the novel's world, Sharrock (2010) focuses on the contemporary problem facing the country and its place in the social milieu. He foregrounds his idea and writes:

Wagle's best features are in the broader canvas he paints firstly into the disappearances and general description of the post royal massacre in Kathmandu and then of the conflict into the hills. Wagle's description of school being blown up, emptying villages, indiscriminate bombs, Maoists' attack on district Headquarters, and mourning Nepali families is extremely hard-hitting and powerful. Wagle, too, uses the novel to protest against both warring sides. (p. 3)

Sharrock argues that the novel depicts the devastating situation in our country caused by the Maoist insurgency. During this time, ordinary people are compelled to spend their days and nights under the control of a handful of people, who are full of horror and terror.

Francon (2008) views this novel as a war novel. According to him, in ancient times, war was a part of civilization, and even today, we are occasionally inundated with war news in the name of development and change. He further foregrounds his idea and writes, "when no one had an idea how the war was going to end and intellectuals were too staid to assess the consequences of loss, Narayan Wagle wrote a novel neglecting the alchemy of violence" (p. 27). Francon views war as an integral part of human life, civilization, development, and change. War can bring about change and newness in human society. However, the novel's dominant themes are against war, making it an anti-war novel. Commenting on the timing and setting of the novel. Lal (2008), a columnist for *Republica and Nagarik Dainik*, writes that Wagle has tried to introduce a new style of writing. He further writes:

The book deals with the first few years of 21st century. It is the story of the mountains of Nepal. Drishya, the protagonist has tried to understand himself. He has tried to understand other people's feeling. He has tried to understand the inner mind of the one who has gone for the revolution. He has tried to understand the city where he lives, the village where he was born, the country and the horrors of the time. (p.25)

Wagle has portrayed the facts of the turbulent situation of his surroundings. The situation of an individual during the war period is presented experimentally, illustrating how he lives. The people, each with their unique identities, living in various situations during the revolution, are reflected in the novel. Lal observes that Wagle has essentially presented Nepal's contemporary sensibility. He has also noted the conflict between the character's gender identification and the male narrator's biased, traditional ideology in the novel. He views "from the feminist perspective the book is male-dominated; from the Dalit's perspective the book has shown its affection to that unprivileged group. However, it has failed to include the feeling of the member of that community" (p. 4). The identities of minorities are excluded, and their voices are suppressed in the novel.

Wagle's message about war through the novel is summed up by a boatman who rows Drishya away from death, "the boatman strained against the current and says, 'It's so sad to see war in our country he says, 'It's terrible to see our own people die. Don't you think so, Bhai?'" (Wagle, p. 169). Critic Bishnu Sapkota says the novel is a post-modern war narrative. Sapkota (2005), in an article called '*Palpasa Cafe: A PostModern War Narrative*', expresses:

Palpasa Café needs to be read on two levels. A postmodern work of fiction and a narrative of war. Post-modern novels are avant-garde, experimental in their form . . . *Palpasa Café* as a war narrative, the novel has a silent preamble that it is important to look at an individual life revised by a pang of war. (p. 4)

Wagle has a unique ability to explore the subject matter experimentally, as a postmodern experience of Nepali citizens during and after the Maoist insurgency. Facts are more dramatic than fiction in a society worked by messy conflict. Acharya (2005), a reader of *Palpasa Café*, in an article entitled "Reading *Palpasa Café*: An Experience," states:

But the smiles on my face faded out as soon as the novel progressed. With the short tales of people's lives under the Maoist and the state's threats, it's all about tears. It's all the reality of the country under the insurgency. I couldn't help thinking about the country for a few minutes and how life feels like in the villages and consider myself unfortunate to experience all these. (p. 3)

Acharya believes that the Maoist insurgency and the real situation of the country and society can be understood through reading the text. Sing and Jaiswal (2024) observe that the sufferings of state terror and insurgency fractured the memories of the sufferers who witnessed horrible incidents, and Wagle very vividly portrays the vulnerability of rural

people (p. 151). The novel certainly reflects the war and its destructive effects on contemporary life and culture; however, it is more a postmodern piece of writing, a new experiment in Nepali literature.

Postmodernism: A different lens of reading literature

Postmodernism is a movement in the arts, architecture, and criticism as a reaction to modernism. Tarnas (1990), in his book *The Passion of Western Mind*, describes postmodernism as "an antinomian movement that assumes a vast unmaking in the western mind, deconstruction, decentering, disappearance, dissemination, demystification, discontinuity, dispersion, etc." (p. 401). It includes a skeptical interpretation of culture, literature, art, philosophy, history, economics, architecture, fiction, and literary criticism. It is a wide-ranging cultural movement that adopts a skeptical attitude toward many of the principles and assumptions that have underpinned Western thought and social life over the last centuries. Postmodernism follows most of the common ideas, rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, defying rigid genre, highlighting dislocation, emphasizing pastiche, parody, irony and playfulness. Postmodern art favors self-consciousness, discontinuity, fragmentation, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the decentered and dehumanized subject; it does not lament fragmentation and incoherence but celebrates them. Postmodernist thinkers foreground the idea that the world is meaningless, so they do not believe that art can make meaning. They enjoy playing nonsense.

Lyotard (1979), a leading postmodernist thinker, has foregrounded his distinct perspective on postmodernism. In his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism," he states, "It is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which can't be presented" (p. 314). He argues that totality, stability, and order are maintained in modern societies through a grand narrative, or master narrative. Every belief, system, or ideology has its own grand narrative. For him, for instance, the grand narrative is the idea that "capitalism will collapse in on itself and a utopian society's world will evolve" (p. 9). He explains, "All aspects of modern societies, including science as the primary form of knowledge, depend on the grand narrative" (Lyotard, p. 11). Postmodernism, then, is the critique of grand narrative, the awareness that such a narrative serves to mask the contradictions and instabilities inherent in any social organization or practice. Postmodernism, rejecting grand narratives, favours mini-narratives; it favours local events rather than large, universal, or global concepts. Lyotard

(1979) in his book, *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* warns us, "We can hear the muttering of the desire for a return of tenor" and suggests us to " . . . wage a war on totality. Let's be within the unrepresentable. Postmodern will have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)" (p. 82). For him, fragmentation and celebration of chaos are deliberately formed because postmodernism happily accepts and enjoys them.

Rowe (1992), talking about postmodernism, writes, "The postmodernism claims to understand how language functions by means of the strategic deformation of verbal conventions, implying that any significant social change would depend on our knowledge of language and its determination of thoughts and values" (p. 13). He argues that social change depends on our knowledge of language and its role in shaping thought and values. He says that irony is the distinctive characteristic of postmodern literature and that postmodernists lack confidence in and belief in the redemptive power of individualism. Abrams (2024) enunciates postmodernism as:

The term postmodernism is often applied to the literature and art, which involves not only continuation, something carried to an extreme of the counter-traditional experiments of modernism, but also diverse attempts to break away from modernist forms which had inevitably become in their own conversions. . . . is to subvert the foundation of our accepted modes of thought and experience so as to reveal the meaninglessness of existence and the underlying "abyss," or "void", "nothingness" on which any supposed security is conceived to be precariously suspended. (pp. 167-68)

Hence, postmodernism involves a kind of absurdity and meaninglessness in the literary text that seeks to subvert the foundations of possible truth and established modes of thought. To write about postmodernism is to engage with a variety of problematic issues related to boundaries and definitions. According to Jameson (1991), postmodernism is a cultural movement rather than only a style. Postmodernists question modernists' emphasis on a rational, individualistic, responsible unified self (p. 2). He claims that postmodernism is a new cultural logic of capitalism, a fragmented image. Postmodernism insists on pluralism of truth. It is overcoming past structures and foundations that have opened up a wide range of unforeseen possibilities for addressing the intellectual and spiritual problems that have long exercised and confounded the modern mind. Postmodernism is an era without consensus on the nature of reality, yet it is blessed with

an unprecedented wealth of perspectives with which to engage the great issues it confronts. Derrida (1978) is concerned with the deconstruction of text and the relationship of meaning within texts. Moreover, a text employs its stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself through an entire system. He attacks Western philosophy in its understanding of reason. In his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Science," he sees reason as dominated by "metaphysics of presence" (p. 3). He has also declared that "the center is the center of totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere, and the center is not the center" (p.1), that the presumed meaning is not the final meaning. Michael Foucault's (1979) works upset the understanding of history as a chronology of inevitable facts and replace it with layers of suppressed and unconscious knowledge in and throughout history. These underlying layers are the codes and assumptions of order —the structure of exclusion that legitimizes the episteme by which societies achieve identity. Thus, Postmodernism is a broad intellectual and cultural movement that emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction against modernism's emphasis on reason, progress, and universal truths. It questions absolute meaning, objective knowledge, and grand narratives, instead embracing relativism, plurality, fragmentation, and skepticism toward authority. In literature, art, and philosophy, postmodernism often employs irony, parody, pastiche, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity to challenge established norms and highlight the instability of meaning. At its core, it emphasizes that reality is socially constructed and that truth is subjective, shaped by language, culture, and power.

Discussion

Coincidence

Coincidence plays an essential role in the novel *Palpasa Café*. Though scenes appear simple, they bear many marvelous points that touch" (Wagle, 2005, p. 3). The main protagonist, Drishya, and Palpasa's first meeting in Goa, India, is a coincidence. In Anjuna Beach, Drishya sees Palpasa reading an art book he has written about his paintings. There, they introduce themselves, get along well, and fall in love. Drishya describes their first meeting in the first chapter and writes:

'Fate smiles on me' she said

Do you think I'm an opportunist?' I asked.

And do you think I'm a fatalist?' She replied. I laughed.

We don't need to tie ourselves to any "isms". Our meeting itself is a pleasant coincidence, that's all.

'May be we could ourselves coincidentalists?' (Wagle, 2005, p. 12)

Unknowingly, Drishya goes to Palpasa's house and meets an old woman. She is found rolling cotton *batti*. He observes the house, which is old, and "The floors were wooden, and the cracks of the walls seemed to belong to another age. There were things of beauty everywhere. Small statues of God sat in niches on the walls, alongside paintings and photos that hung above them. The rooms in the houses were wonderfully peaceful. None of the doors was locked" (Wagle p. 58). Drishya describes Palpasa's decorated house when he coincidentally reaches it. He observes everything in the house and wanders for hours, looking at the decor. He feels delighted to be there, at his beloved Palpasa's house.

We can find another coincidence in the name *Hajur Aama* in the novel. The conversation reveals:

'The Gods in the walls might laugh.'

'Well, I'd love to hear the God's laughing.'

Do you really think Gods laugh? She said. I meant I'd look ridiculous?'

I insisted. 'You yourself look like a goddess, so what are you afraid of?'

'Do you know something? My name is actually Devi.'

'A divine coincidence.' (Wagle, 2005, p. 59)

Here, Drishya's journey to Palpasa's house and her meeting with 'Hajur Aama' are a great coincidence. Hajur Aama makes Drishya dance with her in the house. She dances like moth around the light. Drishya tries to copy her dancing. However, in the time of dancing, Palpasa arrives there and by coincidence they meet again. This extract describes, ". . . loud laughter interrupted our dancing. It was Palpasa standing in the doorway watching us. I was obviously surprised and delighted to see her. After so many months! I'd come straight to her doorsteps" (Wagle, 2005, p. 60). Again, Drishya and Palpasa meet each other three times by coincidence.

Moreover, they meet the same night bus on the way back to Kathmandu. Palpasa talks to him, "Oh, my God! She says. How amazing to meet like this! All after those months! How are you? 'I have had an incredible journey. I said. 'I can't believe the things I have seen, but meeting you here like this is the most incredible thing that's happened so far!'" (Wagle, 2005, p. 201) However, Palpasa is killed on the same night bus as the bus is set ablaze due to an ambush, and by coincidence, Drishya remains alive because he is

coincidentally outside the bus. Then, they depart forever without having a conversation as deep as they wanted. Here, Drishya's life and the death of Palpasa are a great coincidence.

Identity crisis

Identity crisis is a primary characteristic of postmodernism. In the novel *Palpasa Café*, the narrator faces an identity crisis. He is a stranger to his own village, where he was born. The air feels different from the way it was when he was a small boy. The flower has taken different shapes. The hills are the same, but they are tense. Everything in his village seems sad and different. After observing the whole situation of his village, Drishya almost loses his senses. He walks on, feeling sad. For him, finding shelter for a night in someone's house is difficult. No one knows him. Even his friends and villagers are unaware of his profession. He finds his identity crisis and talks to himself:

I walked on feeling weary at the thought of perhaps not being able to sleep well for a second night in a row. No one here believed I was neutral. I'd become stranger in my own home district. Who was I? My identity was linked to my profession but who would respect my profession here? No one knew my art. My identity as an artist wouldn't win anyone's trust. (Wagle, 2005, p. 165)

The protagonist questions himself about his identity. He imagines himself having a gun in his hand like a Maoist cadre. However, the situation is different. The Maoist group has captivated the villagers as their prisoners. No one can go anywhere without their permission. No one is ready to believe and trust each other. They suspect each other. In a tea shop, the shopkeeper, asking for tea for him, says, "What a strange person! He laughs alone... he must have lost his mind!" (Wagle, 2005, p. 168), which is a simple but significant example of how people have lost trust in each other.

Drishya crosses a river by boat on his way back to Kathmandu from his village. While rowing his boat, the boatman cannot identify him and suspects: "I don't have a clue who are you," he said. If I say one thing you might take out a gun and shoot me. If I say something else, you might still take out a gun... this boat is my livelihood, he said. I feed my wife and children by rowing it. But I fear this boat might get me killed some day" (Wagle, 2005, pp. 187). The boatman suspects Drishya, who he actually is. The situation is fearful and very terrible. There is no more faith and belief in each other.

Critic and columnist Lal (2005) views: "The novel is a product of Wagle's own search for answers about his identity. The protagonist, Drishya, is very similar to Narayan.

Through the novel *Palpasa Café*, he has tried to understand himself (p. 12). Lal finds Wagle essentially presenting Nepal's sensibility of contemporary time. He finds many similarities between Wagle and the novel's protagonist. Wagle depicts the turmoil in his country due to the Maoist insurgency. An individual's situation during the war period has been presented experimentally, based on where they live. The different identities living in distinct situations during the Maoist insurgency period are reflected in the novel. Nobody is able to assert one's identity, nor is anyone ready to reveal one's identity.

Isolation and alienation

Almost all of the characters in the novel suffer from a sense of isolation and alienation, which can be taken as a postmodern phenomenon. Manmaya, *Hajur Aama*, *Mit Ba*, *Mitini Aama*, Phoolan, Christina, Harila Damai, Kaka, Palpasa, Siddhartha and Drishya are isolated and alienated characters in the novel. Against this backdrop, the novelist portrays the condition of isolation and alienation as follows:

A journalist met Manmaya on her way to the district headquarters. She was carrying only a small bag. The wrinkles on her face were filled with rivulets of tears. Old and stooped, she was making her way towards an uncertain future. People had been climbing up and down these hills for centuries but Manmaya's journey was different one. (Wagle, 2005, p. 252)

Here, Manmaya is a representative figure of common people who are isolated and alienated in old age. Having uncertain futures and destinations, they are compelled to live their lives in deep sorrow and tears. They are on their journey, but they have no fixed destination. Like Manmaya, *Mit Ba* is an alienated character with an uncertain future. He is frustrated and isolated since "His oldest son is dead. The younger ones have joined the Maoists, and no one knows where they are. The two old folks never leave their house anymore. They just sit there and listen to all the conflicting stories passers-by tell them" (Wagle, 2005, p. 152). Everyone feels alienated as no one can easily make friends of anyone else.

The situation in the country is critical, and widespread frustration among the people is growing. Everyone is frustrated, alienated, and isolated due to the situation in the country. Every day, the same events are reported in the news. The case of abduction has increased, and there is no security, and there is fear everywhere. Many couples are forced to live apart from their children. This extract depicts:

And there is another old couple. They're no better off than your *Miit Ba* and *Mitini Aama*. They have poor eyesight and can't go anywhere. They are waiting for their sons to come back. One's in the army and the other's joined the rebels. The one in the army sent them a message saying that if they wanted to see him, they should come to Kathmandu because it's too dangerous for him to come back here. But the old folks can't go Kathmandu . . . their grief's going to kill them one day. (Wagle, 2005, p. 155)

The couple is alone in the village. In their old age, they need a lot of help and care. However, they do not have their sons with them to look after. They have poor eyesight and cannot go anywhere. Instead of help and care, they are in great sorrow and grief. One of their sons has joined the Maoist rebels, and another one has joined the army. They are isolated and alienated. The same plight is that of Mit Ba and Mitini Aama, who have lost their son Resham. He was Drishya's best friend from his childhood and was killed a month earlier.

The common people in the village, especially the young ones and daughters, are abducted without any reason or prior notice. They are arrested without a warrant. In such a situation in the country, the politics has no fixed direction. As a result, the country's sense of isolation and alienation has increased in the whole society. The protagonist, Drishya, is an isolated and alienated character from the beginning of the novel. We gain insight into his alienation through the letter he received from Phoolan, his secretary. She writes:

I want the best for you. You are alone, you don't have any family, I'm the only one who's close to you. You live a solitary life, that's why you can wonder of when you feel like it. Now you need to practical and organized life. I haven't asked for anything from you so far...I'm sorry if what I have said makes you feel uncomfortable. Take care of yourself and think about what I have said. (Wagle, 2005, p. 225)

Drishya roams everywhere he likes. He meets many friends and relatives, yet he remains alone, living a solitary life.

Palpasa feels alone and travels to many unknown places. Due to the sense of alienation, she leaves her home with her camera. She leaves her grandmother alone at home, without any information about her. On the other hand, Phoolan leaves the art gallery because of her sense of alienation. Siddhartha joins the Maoist group and carries a

gun alone. The main protagonist, Drishya, appears to be alone from the beginning and remains so throughout the novel. All these are the result of the war on individuals from both sides- Maoists as well as the state.

Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a way of talking about postmodernism. Most of the characters in the novel *Palpasa Café* are fragmented. All characters in the novel are victims of the contemporary situation in their own country. They are really fragmented as “The old couple sometimes weep, sometimes they mumble things. There are days when they do not say a single word and days when they never stop talking” (Wagle, 2005, p. 152). The abduction of common people has increased day by day from both sides. Drishya himself faces the case of abduction. The police force can conduct inquiries in common people’s houses at any time, whether during the day or at night. The situation is terrible.

Palpasa is a fragmented and frustrated character. She quarrels with her parents in America and returns to Nepal to be with her grandmother. In Nepal, she is again frustrated because of Drishya, whom she loves and likes very much. Even in Nepal, she leaves her home and grandmother without any information. She writes a letter to Drishya expressing her agony and frustration caused by him. Expressing her agony and frustration, she writes:

I want to disappear from your life in exactly the same way you have disappeared from mine. I have to go far away from you to find peace. I want to be out of the search of your lies and deception. I know you will tell me you left for something to do with your work. I’m also leaving for work-related matters. You’ll tell me you didn’t have time to let me know. I want to tell you the same thing. I’m leaving with my camera the way you left with paintbrush. I want to go where you can’t find me. (Wagle, 2005, p. 215)

Being a fragmented character, Palpasa starts her journey with her camera to no destination. She is psychologically fragmented. She again expresses her sense of fragmentation and writes in her letter:

The evening I read your letter to *Hajur Aama*. I felt completely unsettled . . . I want to say something. I want someone hear what I have to say. I want to share my feelings. I want to go around my neighborhood, my city carrying your letter and the feelings it gives me. But you are nowhere to be found. You have been

gone for so long now that my feelings are now returning to bitterness. (Wagle, 2005, p. 214)

Palpasa wants a serious conversation with Drishya to discuss several issues. However, she believes Drishya does not take her seriously, never seeing her as his equal. She also thinks he fails to understand her internal feelings. That is why she becomes aggravated and frustrated.

Such events are common due to the state's force, and this situation is worsening daily. The condition of insecurity is prevalent everywhere. As a result, ordinary people feel physically and psychologically fragmented. For them, there is no hope of a certain, golden life, nor do they see any golden future ahead.

Irony

In the novel, the protagonist, Drishya, appears to be a much more ironic character. He is a playful fellow. He gets captured by some Maoist guerrillas on the way while he is heading to his birthplace. They blindfold him. They inform him that the situation is not good and warn him strictly not to say a word in such a situation. However, ignoring their warning, Drishya talks too much and asks them many nonsensical questions. He especially asks such trivial things to a Maoist girl who leads him without so much glancing at him. The conversation reveals his nonsense talking:

Are you married Bahini?

'Does it matter?'

Those pants suits you.'

'It seems you have never seen a bullet.'

'What makes you say that?'

'If you had, you wouldn't talk such trivial things'.

'You should be a heroine in an action movie'.

'Didn't my friends tell you to be quiet?' (Wagle, 2005, pp. 177-78)

Time and again, Drishya shows his ironic manner and childish behavior. He is controlled by a Maoist group, and his life is in danger. He knows that the village and the whole country are in mourning, hundreds of houses have been abandoned, and thousands of people have faced an uncertain life and future. His own future and life are not inevitable, either. His journey and its destination are not fixed. However, without caring about it, he talks about trivial things even in such a dangerous situation. He talks about marriage, a girl's dress, films, love, heroines, and so on.

When the Maoists capture him, he asks a girl whether she is in love or not. Without any hesitation, he tells her that the man will be lucky. Even in the time of chatting with a sixteen-year-old girl, he again questions her virginity. Talking about such trivial and nonsensical things in such a terrible situation is really ironic. He wants to take an interest in her physical appearance. While chatting with a young, unknown girl, he directly talks about her virginity and questions, "Are you a virgin"? (Wagle, 2005, p. 42) However, later, he finds out that the person is Tshering, his friend, who is kidding him by changing his e-mail address. The ironic situations and instances explain the disillusion faced and internalized by the characters.

Victimization

All the characters in the novel are the victims of death, insurgency, violence, abduction, and terror. The protagonist really suffers and gets traumatized by the death of his loved one, Palpasa. He cannot express the incredible death of Palpasa with her Hajur Aama when he reaches Palpasa's house. After the death of his beloved, he almost goes mad. He displays his lunatic personality, walking insanely in the middle of the road. He does not care about the vehicles running on the road. He walks carelessly, reading the letter from Palpasa, which he received from Hajur Aama. For him, nothing is a matter of concern. He says, "When a car honked at me, and I realized I was walking down the middle of the road" (Wagle, 2005, pp. 212). He bumps into someone again and lets them pass, too. He only remembers the bus accident at night. He is now empty. This extract reveals his condition:

All my dreams and desires were suddenly gone, as if they'd been a bird flying off the branch of a tree. I'd survived only because I'd gotten off the bus. And Palpasa had been killed only because she hadn't. It was absurd-the reason I'd survived and the reason she'd killed. There was no reason behind it. It's not that I'd survived because of some act of courage and she'd died because of some weakness. None of it made sense . . . why was I alive and Palpasa dead? (Wagle, 2005, p. 206)

Palpasa's death shatters Drshya's dreams and desires. He is in a cloud of distress and dilemma. He feels very cold even on a hot and sunny day. Leaving him unspeakable and insane, Palpasa's death destroys his creativity. He is mentally and psychologically affected by the death of the woman whom he loves. He continues to paint and plans to establish an art and internet café in the hilly region of his birthplace in his beloved's name.

After meeting with Palpasa, Drishya makes many plans and wants to share them with her. He plans his own way so that he would give his voice, and Palpasa would give it a tune. They happen to end up in the same seat on a night bus while both are heading to Kathmandu. However, they no longer share their experiences and feelings. Drishya gets off the bus to pee, whereas Palpasa does not. Unfortunately, the bus is ambushed and ablaze. Drishya, not hearing any screams from Palpasa, feels his whole body shake like a leaf. "No one in the bus could have survived. With a shudder, its metal frame collapsed like a dead tree struck by lightning. It was still burning" (Wagle p. 206). Palpasa, who was on the same bus, had already died. After knowing the death of Palpasa, Drishya asks so many questions to himself:

The person who had brought happiness to my life was gone. Oh my God, I couldn't believe it. Palpasa had become the sweetest picture in my life. I had fallen in love with her dreams. I'd felt we'd travel together in a wonderful destination. Now she was gone. She'd disappeared in flames before my eyes. The poor girl, she'd struggled to hard against her family and tradition to live her own life. Now time had taken her in those cruel flames. I sat down. I stood up a while then sat down again. (Wagle, 2005, p. 208)

It shows Drishya's restless mentality, having been confused because of the untimely death of his loved one, Palpasa. His happiness has died with the death of his beloved. It is an unbearable situation for him, and it is difficult to bear such a terrible thing.

Drishya again faces the death of his nearest friend, Siddhartha. All the characters are in a devastating and disappointing situation in the novel. Even the protagonist, Drishya, almost loses his senses due to the situation he faces. He describes his real condition:

I had been haunted by my own thoughts as I climbed that hill. I'd been surrounded by images of widows, orphans and old people who'd lost their children. I was falling apart. Even when I saw a real person, I saw the face of widow, painted by my fear. I was losing my balance as I walked, sometimes in silence, sometime laughing for no reason. I must have lost my senses. (Wagle, 2005, p. 186)

Here, the protagonist shares his real experiences with readers. No one was an exception to that terrible situation during the Maoist insurgency. The condition of orphans, widows, or old men whose kith and kins have been brutally killed in the encounters made by either the Maoist groups or the security forces is really heart-rending. Even the

protagonist sometimes laughs without any reason, and sometimes remains silent as if he has lost his senses. The protagonist's vulnerable condition represents the condition of all Nepali people and society during the Maoist insurgency. He again describes the condition of ordinary people who have lost their family and relatives. He describes:

Walking behind the widow was an elderly man. He was on his way to claim his son's body. His sighs had become the sighs of the hills. He was leaning on a walking stick but it was hard to tell whether the stick was supporting him or he was supporting the stick.... as we climbed, the hill grew steeper, adding to the woes of the stopped old man. The hills in which he'd invested his sweat, blood and tears had become a burden to him. Now he was in a hurry to claim his dead son. "I just buried one son, he said. Now I have to identify the body of another".

He hobbled along, bereft of hope. (Wagle, 2005, pp. 173-74)

Drishya depicts the sorrow, grief, and torture of innocent people. Common people are compelled to lose their lives at a young age, leaving their dreams and desires incomplete. They are unable to send them to school to read and write, so they cannot understand the difference between right and wrong. However, who is killing them? How and where are they being killed? Who abducted them, and why? These questions remain unanswered.

Meta-narration

There is no grand narrative in the novel, nor is there any omniscience; I am an intrusive first-person narrator. In the novel, the protagonist, Drishya, narrates the story through the eyes of a painter. He narrates the events of his life, his village, and its surroundings in a nonlinear style, using his own voice. He depicts the accurate picture of our nation and its trauma, and the fictionalized account of some actual events, the lives and deaths of ordinary Nepali people, caused by the voice of war, very lively and vividly. Journalism narrates the real condition of the country as its reports reflect. The condition is horrific because of the ongoing war between the Maoists and the state. Wagle reflects on this situation in the novel. Both fact and fiction are combined in a way that reflects the situation of contemporary Nepali society.

The country's vulnerable situation has had a profoundly negative impact on each individual's unconscious mind. The protagonist is also totally affected by the traumatic situation of the village caused by the war. This very condition of Drishya reflects the condition of victimized people from both sides. Many foreigners are also affected by the country's situation. Christina, a foreign journalist, writes in her mail to Drishya, "Nepal's

my first international war reporting assignment" (Wagle, 2005, p. 230). Not only Christina but many other journalists and organizations have observed the situation in Nepal. It has attracted many foreigners to Nepal amid the ongoing civil war.

The novel's narration is excellent. The novelist Wagle has employed the double-narrative technique. Being a war narrative, *Palpasa Café* has a silent ramble that is important to look at the individual life ravaged by the pangs of war. It studies an individual character by situating them within the broader concept of war, a framework that becomes increasingly important for an individual victimized by violence. The novelist has observed the real situation of the country, events of landmines, the killing of children, the abductions of students, young women, and men disappeared by security forces, and other heart-rending family tragedies.

Wagle has the unique ability to present the country's situation in an experimental manner. He also possesses a great individual style, which is a reason for considering his greatness. Critic Sapkota (2005) expresses his view: "From a literary critical point of view, *Palpasa Café* needs to be read on two levels: a postmodern work of fiction and narrative of war" (pp. 4). He takes the novel as a postmodern war narrative.

Wagle's writing style differs from other Nepali traditional writing styles. There is a contrast between the Nepali people's modern and traditional lives. Toffin (2015) claims, "Today all Nepalis have one foot in the modern world and another in traditional life. *Palpasa Café* illustrates these two opposite trends" (p. 9). Regarding the novel's style, Lal (2005) writes: "Wagle has tried to introduce a new style of writing" (p. 3). While reading the text, everyone gets her/his feelings overflowing. The style of character presentation is very effective and unique. He has presented the facts and realities in a semi-fictional way.

Dixit (2006) analyzes:

The story of the novel weaves the fragile and undeclared love between Drishya and Palpasa, the first-generation American Nepali who has returned to the land of her parents after becoming fed up with 9/11 social stereotyping in the United States, into the artist's reunion with his old friend, Siddhartha, who is now a Maoist guerrilla (pp. 97).

The narration Wagle has crafted is a meta-narrative, a postmodern style of writing, as there is no grand story to be told, nor can the writer have the patience to narrate a story at such a length that readers wait for it to be completed. Many stories can be told at once and understood in part, in fragments.

Conclusion

The novel employs numerous symbols and images that are related to postmodernism and the contemporary situation in our country. Firstly, the green leaf, which appears to be falling, symbolizes Nepal's perilous and challenging situation. Secondly, mourning is the symbol of the death of the people who died during the Maoist insurgency. Thirdly, rain is often seen as a symbol of fertility and a better environment. Moreover, the 'vermillion on a woman's forehead' symbolizes life, while the 'Pool of blood' in which Siddhartha is found symbolizes death. Next, the vivid image of violence, killing, or abduction is presented in the novel. The suffering of common people seems unbearable; they are mentally tortured, and they speak frantically, or they insist on something much more than usual. The novel is a fragmented narrative that blurs the boundary between fiction and reality, history and imagination. The novel rejects a single authoritative truth; instead, it weaves together multiple voices, shifting perspectives, and subjective experiences to capture the disorienting impact of Nepal's civil war. Through the interplay of the narrator Drishya's artistic reflections, Palpasa's idealism, and the violence of the socio-political landscape, Wagle destabilizes linear storytelling and foregrounds the uncertainty of meaning, memory, and identity. The café itself emerges as a postmodern space—both real and imagined—symbolizing a longing for connection, dialogue, and cultural hybridity in a fractured world, like that of a broken mirror.

Thus, the novel *Palpasa Café* has embodied several postmodern features in both its narrative style and thematic depth. The novel blurs the line between fiction and reality, beginning with the author himself appearing as a character—a hallmark of metafiction. The novel also demonstrates fragmentation and nonlinear narration. The story shifts between past and present, memory and imagination, mirroring the disordered reality of a nation torn by civil war. Through this fractured structure, Wagle presents the uncertainty and chaos of post-war Nepal, a common postmodern concern. There is a strong sense of subjectivity and relativism, where truth is seen as personal and constructed. Characters like Drishya and Palpasa represent differing worldviews—one rooted in art and introspection, the other in activism and idealism—showing that no single perspective can define the truth. The novel also employs intertextuality and cultural hybridity, weaving together references to global art, photography, travel, and Nepali socio-political realities. This mix reflects the postmodern blending of the local and the global. Finally, the novel's open-endedness and ambiguous conclusion reject the traditional demand for closure,

emphasizing life's complexity and the impossibility of neat resolutions. In essence, *Palpasa Café* is a postmodern narrative that questions completeness and reality while celebrating multiplicity.

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