



The Illusion of Renewal in Sherchan's "New Year"

Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari, PhD 

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Tribhuvan University, Pokhara, Nepal

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Corresponding Author: Nagendra Bahadur Bhandari, **Email:** nagendra@pncampus.edu.np

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Abstract

This article examines how Bhupi Sherchan's poem "New Year" destabilizes the conventional association of the New Year with renewal, exposing the instability of meanings attached to temporal change. The existing scholarship on Sherchan's poetry discusses the use of day-to-day language, social irony, and socio-political engagement, drawing on thematic and contextual analysis. Departing from such readings, this article focuses on the internal dynamics of language and meaning. Through the theoretical lens of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, particularly the concept of *différance*, this article explores how the poem deconstructs the culturally dominant notion of temporal renewal. It examines the patterns of repetition, binary oppositions, figurative disruptions, and rhetorical tensions within the poem in a qualitative interpretive methodological approach. The analysis reveals that the poem not only shows disillusionment with the cyclic process of time; it also demonstrates how the very idea of "newness" is perpetually deferred, undermining reference to the stable meaning. Difference, absence, and contradiction used in the poem generate meaning that remains inherently

deferred, unstable, and open to continual reinterpretations. This study reveals the intrinsic instability of meaning while reexamining Sherchen's poetic practice. It contributes to expanding the critical practices in Nepali literary scholarship with a focus on language, textuality, and philosophical inquiry.

Keywords: Difference, disillusionment, temporal renewal, binary opposition, instability

Introduction

Bhupi Sherchan occupies a distinctive position in Nepali literature by constantly raising his voice against social and political injustices. In his formative years, he went to Banaras, the then educational hub for Nepali students in India, where he was influenced by leftist ideologies, which shaped his literary orientation. Initially, writing under the pseudonym "Sarvahara" (proletariat), he raised problems and concerns of poor and oppressed people. However, he moves beyond political rigidity to broader social and political themes in his writing (Hutt, *Himalayan Voices* 120). His collection *Ghumne Mecha Mathi Andho Manche* (1969) (*A Blind Man on a Revolving*

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Chair), with its sharp irony, simple language, and engagement with social and political realities, establishes him as a major voice of Nepali modernism. Michel Hutt observes that Sherchan's popularity lies in his ability to lend voice to common experiences while maintaining a critical voice (*Himalayan Voices* 120). Besides, his writing bears a complex poetic sensibility marked by personal disillusionment, public engagement, hope, and skepticism within the simplicity of expression.

The critical appraisal of Sherchan's writing emphasizes the socio-political context and thematic issues and examines the depiction of despair, nationalism, satire, and realism. Moreover, his poetic form- the rejection of metrical pattern in favor of free verse- also draws critical attention. Critics such as Theodore Riccardi and Hutt credit Sherchan for democratizing poetic language in Nepali literature. Additionally, his contemporary writers Shankar Lamichhane and Parijat demonstrate a contradiction between his intellectual rigor, with social and political satire, and simplicity in expression. While these critical responses engage in the reflection on socio-political realities and manner of expression, they pay less attention to the internal workings of language in his poetry. Situated in this gap, the present study examines how Sherchan's poem "New Year" destabilizes the very idea it seems to affirm- the temporal renewal in the New Year. Based upon the deconstructive approach of Jacques Derrida, the article reveals how the meaning of the poem is not stable and fixed. Rather, it is constantly deferred and shaped by internal contradictions. Following the close textual reading strategies, the analysis of the poem pays attention to repetition, imagery, binary opposition, and rhetorical slippages. The analysis reveals how the central signifier new year signifies the inherent instability of the meaning. The findings of the analysis suggest that the poem exposes the impossibility of achieving a stable

meaning of newness within the language system, despite the poet's insistence on the expression of disillusionment in the cyclic process of temporal change in the New Year. Such a reading of a poem has broader implications in situating Nepali literature within contemporary theoretical debates by encouraging a shift from contextual and thematic reading to the exploration of language, meaning, and textuality of literary texts.

Critical Perspective of Bhupi's Poetry

The critical scholarship on Sherchan's poetry focuses on the socio-political context and his poetic diction. Some of the readings appreciate his contribution in democratizing poetic diction- simplicity in expression and the use of day-to-day language. Critics such as Hutt and Riccardi relate his poetry to a broader spectrum of literary modernity in Nepali literature. They highlight his role in resisting the traditional metrical pattern in poetry in favor of free verse style. Moreover, his contemporaries, authors such as Parijat and Shankar Lamichhane, interrogate his intellectual rigor and experimental form. These scholarships on his writing construct his image as a poet of contradictions- oscillating between disillusion and hope, simplicity and rebellion, realism and irony.

A dominant strand of literary criticism shows existential despair and social injustice in Sherchan's works. Lamichhane characterizes him as someone whose exterior cheerfulness hides deep social and political despair and uncertainty, and explains that "anyone who studies Bhupi finds despair in his heart beneath his cheerful face," resulting from social uncertainties, fear, and dissatisfaction of the contemporary society (quoted in *The Life of Bhupi Sherchan* 182). Such a reading associates his writing with the public disillusionment of the post-Rana and Panchayat periods. Literary figures often articulate their frustration and anger in their writing. Such readings restrict Sherchan's poetry to only a reflection of the socio-

political situation. They ignore the role of language in producing meaning. Besides, Parijat, an author and critic, interrogates the intellectual seriousness of Sherchan's writing. Borrowing others' perspectives, she remarks that "Intellectual friends say his poems are at a low intellectual standard," and she expresses her doubt on his intellectual caliber (quoted in *Life of Bhupi Sherchan* 162). Her observation may rest on the gap between the established literary tradition, metrical writing, and Sherchan's deliberate resistance to it. His conscious choice of simplicity in expression, moving beyond the elitist practices, makes his writing a more inclusive mode of expression.

Sherchan's style and form of writing situate him in the critical debate of the Nepali literary tradition. Critics such as Uttam Kunwar and Michel Hutt note that Sherchan's dismissal of traditional metrical verse as artificial reflects his modernist impulse for free verse. In a similar way, Riccardi credits him for reshaping poetic language in Nepali literature. Such critical analyses situate him as an avant-gardist to bring poetry close to everyday life. Besides his formalistic innovation, he equally focuses on the exploration of social issues. Bhuwan Thapliya examines the reflection of national identity and social consciousness, focusing on the political and emotional depth of his poetry (4). Similarly, other critics, including Ghataraj Bhattra and Yuba Nath Lamsal, take his writing as a strong form of satire in the depiction of the struggle of common people. Overall, these critical reflections enhance our understanding of his thematic issues, including social and political critique, nationalism, and his deliberate choice of simplicity in poetic expression with a modernist impulse. They take the meaning of a poem as stable and accessible. However, these readings overlook a close textual analysis reflecting on the nature of language in producing unstable and indeterminate meaning.

How Sherchan's language produces and

postpones meaning simultaneously remains a less explored area. The existing scholarship reflects his thematic concerns and innovation in language; however, it ignores rigorous theoretical engagement with linguistic and philosophical dimensions of his work. In such a context, analyzing Sherchan's poem "New Year" through Derrida's concept of difference with a focus on instability and the deferral of meaning retains its novelty as a subject of study. This gap retains its significance in the poem where the idea of renewal seems deceptively stable on the surface, but it is undermined by irony and contradiction. In this context, this study applies Derrida's concept of difference to analyze the poem "New Year" and argues that it not only expresses the sense of repeated disillusionment in the temporal change of the New Year, but also shows how the idea of renewal is never fully realized.

This article focuses on the workings of language instead of focusing primarily on themes or historical context. Employing Derrida's concept of *difference* to Sherchan's "New Year," the study contends that the poem is simply an expression of a sense of repetition or disillusionment. Rather, it argues that the very idea of renewal is never fully realized, revealing the meaning as an ongoing process of deferral and contradictions. Situating Sherchan's poetry in a broader theoretical debate in contemporary literary studies, this study aims to enhance the critical insight into the poem.

Deconstruction as a Conceptual Framework

This article takes its theoretical underpinnings from the deconstructive insights. It analyzes the poem "New Year" to show how it expresses skepticism about its apparent meaning, a clear expression of renewal. In the general perception, the New Year is associated with hope, a new beginning, and continuity; the study deconstructs such connotations as unstable and contradictory. Derrida, in his criticism

of "metaphysics of presence," challenges the concept that meaning is ever fully present, stable, and complete (*Of Grammatology* 158). He further elaborates this concept in his notion of *différance* in which meaning is produced through difference and is always deferred (*Margins of Philosophy* 8). In this perspective, "newness" in the "New Year" is not a stable reference; it is a sight of semantic slippage, in which presence is constantly contaminated by its absence.

The operation of the literary language in the poem further highlights the instability of meaning. Theorists J.H. Miller and Paul de Man point out how literary texts do not simply refer to something; rather, they undo their own claims through their rhetorical strategies. de Man's idea "blindness and insight" foregrounds the tension between the rhetorical strategies and meaning, as the rhetorical devices obscure the referential clarity (109). In the same way, Miller regards texts as a site of undecidability, in which final interpretation is perpetually deferred (15). In the same line of argument, Barbara Johnson explains how texts generate meaning through internal contradictions and subvert their apparent claims (5). In this perspective, Sherchan's "New Year" does not convey the thematic message of renewal but functions as a linguistic process in which the promise of renewal is destabilized by its own expression. The poem seems to convey hope and a new beginning; however, its literary devices, including linguistic features, refer to futile repetition and fatigue.

Derrida's concept of *différance* and iterability helps understand the notion of repetition and treatment of time in the poem. The concept of *différance* refers to the meaning that is produced not only through the spatial differences- relations among signs- but it is also temporally deferred, never fully present. Similarly, Derrida's iterability illustrates the temporal postponement as he explains that a sign must be repeatable to function; however,

each repetition brings some alterations (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 7). In the poem, what is "new" is entangled with what has already happened and is never fully present. Such a concept aligns with Martin Heidegger's conceptualization of time as complex and non-linear (377). The disruption of the temporal sequence in the poem creates a tension by collapsing the binary between new and old, beginning and ending, and hope and despair. Barbara Johnson associates this tension in the gap between what a text claims and what it performs (12). In these perspectives, the poem "New Year" expresses the sense of renewal; however, it simultaneously signifies the repetition, deferral- undermining its own claims.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research approach. It is based on the close textual reading of Sherchan's poem "New Year" in Derrida's deconstructive critical framework. It examines the instability, multiplicity, and undecidability of meaning in the poem. Rather than offering a single and stable interpretation, the analysis traces the internal contradictions and semantic slippages.

The analysis of the poem follows the four interrelated stages. In the first stage, I mark the lexical units and thematic markers "New Year," "time," and "hope," and examine their apparent meaning in the poem. This initial mapping of the surface seems to offer relatively stable meaning. In the second stage, I identify and categorize the binary oppositions, such as new and old, hope and despair, beginning and end. This analysis process also shows how one term occupies hierarchical privilege in the pair. This stage questions the logic of binary and undermines the text's apparent meaning.

In the third stage, the analysis demonstrates semantic slippages, paradoxes, and ambiguities by involving a close reading of the poem. This analysis of these rhetorical strategies shows how

meaning is constantly deferred in a chain of signification and undermines the possibility of any fixed and stable interpretation. Finally, the analysis demonstrates how the poem undermines its initial claims- the New Year as hope and a new beginning. There is a gap between what the text seems to assert and what it finally performs. Thus, the poem deconstructs its semantic reference, showing the impossibility of stable meaning. The following Table no. 1 illustrates the analytical procedure applied in this study.

Table 1
Analytical Framework

Theoretical Premises	Conceptual Constructs	Textual References
Deconstruction	Critique of Presence	"New Year" as an unstable origin rather than a fixed point of meaning
Différance	Deferral and Difference	Continuous postponement and shifting of "newness"
Iterability	Repetition and Re-inscription	Cyclical temporality and recurrence of meaning
Binary Logic	Instability of Oppositions	Deconstruction of hierarchical binaries (new/old, hope/despair) (Please justify this concept in analysis section)
Rhetoric vs. Meaning	Textual Contradiction	Tension between thematic assertion and rhetorical performance

Analyzing the poem in Derrida's deconstructive approach in four systematic procedural stages demonstrates how Sherchan's "New Year" undermines the very concept it appears to assert.

Sherchan's "New Year": A Deconstructive Reading

While analyzing Sherchan's "New Year" through a deconstructive approach of Derrida reveals tension both in the gap between temporal renewal and social reality,

and in destabilizing the apparent claims of the meaning. The poem destabilizes the general assumptions of the New Year- the moment of renewal, revealing inherent contradictions, futility, and instability of the meaning as language, time, and expectation work against each other. The following analytical sections consist of how the poem undermines and postpones the sense of a new beginning by showing the cyclic moment of time, deconstructing the binary, and refuting its own claims.

New Year" as Unstable Origin

The poem announces a new start in the very beginning. The image of a "postman newly transferred" (Sherchan 1) signifies the arrival of Baisakh, the first month in the Nepali calendar, which suggests movement, change, and anticipation. However, the sense of beginning does not sustain for long. It turns out to be slow, and motion of oscillation as "Baisakh is walking on the roof,/moving with slow heavy steps,/making the walls swing like a pendulum" (3-5). Thus, what seems to be new initially becomes something mechanical, unenthusiastic, and repetitive, reflecting Derrida's ideas of an origin, which is never pure or self-contained and carries the traces of the past (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158). In this way, the New Year undermines a clear and new beginning, entangling in a series of recurrence.

Deferment of "Newness"

The repetition of the phrase "so once more" (16, 18, 21, and 23) refers to the postponement and uncertainty of "Newness". Instead of underscoring the significance through repetition, the poem signifies deferred fulfillment. Every time, the repeated phrase 'once more' seems to push the meaning of 'newness' further away, as the final meaning of "New Year" is always postponed. This postponement reflects Derrida's notion of difference, in which the meaning is constantly deferred

rather than fully present (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* 8). In the poem, the 'New Year' is suspended in anticipation instead of being presented as a promised new beginning. Moreover, the juxtaposition of other imageries of disease, disorder, and exhaustion, such as "diarrhea" (Sherchan 10), "Bishnumati's choleric waters" (11), "rockets and airplanes bearing horrific bombs" (23-24), reflects the antithesis of the idea of celebration in the 'New Year'. The speaker describes 'New Year' not by its general assumptions, but by its failures to fulfill its anticipated potentials.

Temporal Circularity

The poem presents time not as a linear progression but as a cyclical moment, reinforcing the sense of delay and postponement. Here, repetition functions not as a formalistic device but as a meaningful strategy to capture the experience of time. The repeated phrase "once more" (16, 18, 21 and 23) gently refers both backward to what has already happened and forward to what is yet to come. Thus, time appears to move in circularity rather than in linear progress, signifying a continuous return, which deconstructs the clear sense of beginning and ending. In this circularity, the 'New Year' loses its uniqueness and becomes a part of a continuous cycle. Such repetition resembles Derrida's notion of 'iterability'- repetition recreates and alters the meaning simultaneously (Derrida, *Limited Inc* 7). The poem's recurrence of emphasis on the idea of renewal undermines its own persuasive force. The movement of time does not meaningfully lead forward; it revolves back in circularity, rendering a sense of unavoidability and familiarity.

Destabilize Binary Opposites

In the poem, the familiar opposites lose their clear distinctions, rendering a sense of overlapping. The distinction between 'new' and 'old' becomes less visible as the 'New Year' carries the same sense of familiarity,

burden, and stagnation as the old year.

New Year has come,
so once more
I must hang my life's visa
in a new calendar on the wall,
so once more
I must draw up a list of my friends,
once more,...
wishing them success,
peace,
long lives. (Sherchan 17-28)

The hope and anticipation of change are overshadowed by persistent and repeated awareness of routine formality and despair. The demarcation between new and old blurs, conveying the overlapping sense of stagnation and repetition. The clear hierarchy in this binary, like in Derrida's deconstruction of binary, turns out to be unstable as the 'New Year' depends on the old. The 'new' does not have an independent existence; it is shaped and defined by the old. Thus, the poem in its emphasis on the interdependence destabilizes the binary of the new and old, and undermines the apparent newness.

The poem refutes what it initially appears to say, revealing a disparity between rhetoric and praxis. The speaker wishes "success", "peace", and "long lives" (26, 27, and 28) to his dear friends and relatives, extending the gestures of goodwill. However, the speaker undertakes this action as a part of social obligations- "I must write" (25), which signifies mechanical social action without genuine intention. The sharing of good wishes on the onset of the New Year lacks sincerity and genuineness; it turns out to be a mechanical performance of social obligation. This gap between what it expresses and what it really means reflects Barbara Johnson's ideas- deconstruction often reveals a gap between a text's explicit meaning and what its underlying operation (Johnson 12). Thus, the poem's tone, imagery, and repetition reveal a routine repetition despite expressing a sense of renewal. It reveals a powerful contraction

between intention and effect.

Overall, "New Year" does not convey a sense of renewal and revitalization; rather, it destabilizes the inherent meaning of the very act of renewal, revealing contradiction, instability, and postponement. The speaker challenges the general assumptions of 'New Year'- the time of a new beginning- through repetition, unsettling imagery, and the gap between its intention and effect. Instead, poet Sherchan depicts time as cyclical, meaning as difference and postponement, and language is inherently unreliable. In such a presentation of time, meaning, and language, the poem reflects Derrida's idea of deconstruction, revealing that the promise of a 'New Year' is shaped by contradiction, repetition, and absence.

In recapitulation, the poem "New Year" acts less as a temporal marker and more as an unstable signifier, gesturing a sense of renewal and simultaneously undoing this possibility by use of repetition and inherent fractured structures. This sense is further reinforced in its destabilizing of the binary oppositions such as hope and despair, new and old, and beginning and end by revealing their interdependence. Sherchan reveals the complex interplay of linguistic tension in the apparent simplicity. The simple and accessible style reflects deeper philosophical uncertainties. Moreover, the poem shows the gap between the expression and its meaning. The speaker's obligatory wishes- peace, prosperity, long lives- do not reflect the speaker's sincerity, but reflect the mechanical expression of social obligation. Contradictorily, the language in the poem expresses hope even when there is no belief in hope. In New Year, the customary optimism is not unreasonable; it is entangled in a process of repetition that both sustains and erodes its meaning. These insights signify that the poem "New Year" is not only a reflection of disillusionment, but it is a deep reflection on the limits of language and the inherent instability of meaning. Beyond the thematic concern, the

notion of the "illusion of renewal" functions as a subtle linguistic construct that unsettles the sense of a stable meaning. The promise of freshness and a new beginning is caught up in a play of difference and postponement. Thus, the poem resists closure, signifying the renewal as repeated experiences in different contexts.

Conclusion

This article approaches Sherchan's "New Year" not merely as an expression of social frustration in mechanical repetition of time, but as a linguistic text that destabilizes the very idea, it appears to assert. In the theoretical insight of Derrida's deconstruction, the analysis reveals that the poem does not simply lament the failure of renewal, it reveals how the concept of "newness" is itself not stable within the language system. What initially appears as a moment of anticipation- a promise of a new beginning- gradually turn into a repetition marked by delay, deferral, and contradiction. The repeated phrase "once more," together with the shifting imagery and the gestures of hope, collectively signify not a stable meaning, but a continuous process of deferral.

The significance of this study lies in its effort to move beyond the familiar thematic and contextual interpretation that have long shaped Nepali literary studies. Instead, it focuses on the internal workings of language through a close reading, revealing how meaning is produced, unsettled, and deferred. In doing so, Sherchan's poetry- often situated in socio-political realism- can be repositioned in wider philosophical discussion of language, meaning, and temporality. Such interpretations open up fresh critical possibilities in Nepali literary scholarship.

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