



Research Article/ Nepali Literature

Narrating the Nation: Identity, War, and Media Representation in Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* (2005) to explore the interaction and interplay between identity, conflict, and media representation during the Maoist insurgency that spanned from 1996 to 2006. Against this backdrop, the novel illustrates the fright, displacement, and ambiguity Nepali people experienced, constructing an alternative view towards the Nepali nation and nationalism. The study uses the qualitative methods, particularly the thematic and textual

analysis methods to analyze the narrative structure, characters' interaction, motifs and themes, and representational strategies through lived experiences and the mediated storytelling. The protagonists of the novel, Drishya and Palpasa represent two distinct but interconnected aspects of Nepali identity. As an artist, Drishya has profoundly been moved by the direct experiences of violence while Palpasa searches for meaning, identity, and belonging through a diasporic gaze in a war-torn homeland. The different but interrelated experiences of both characters show that a common national identity, built by more than just war, but shaped by cultural memory, moral duty, and personal grief. Thus, the study utilizes Anderson's (1983) theory of "imagined communities," Foucault's (1977) notion of discourse, and Hall's (1996) insights of identity to back up the research issue and support for textual analysis. In this way, the paper addresses a gap in current scholarship to enhance the comprehension of how Nepali war literature contributes to the construction and reconstruction of a national identity, during the harsh political upheaval.

KEYWORDS: Nation, identity, conflict, belonging, media representation

INTRODUCTION

Nepal endured a decade of Maoist insurgency from 1996 to 2006 that reshaped the nation's political and cultural

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settings, challenging collective understanding of identity, belonging and nationalism. During a decade of conflict, Nepali literature served as a medium of capturing how ordinary people negotiated fear, displacement, and ideological conflict. In this context, Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Cafe* (2005) recounts and reflects fictional and journalistic experience to depict the realistic picture of Nepal as a nation through narratives of displacement, conflict, loss and destruction. The narrative depiction of devastations in rural areas, urban uncertainties, and shifting social relations in the novel provides insights into how individuals imagine the nation during the time of conflict. In this relevancy, the paper examines how the novel constructs the idea of the nation through the intertwining lenses of identity, conflicts and media. The major characters, Drishya and Palpasa show contesting yet interconnected personalities of Nepali identity—local and global rooted in chaos and confusion. The journey they undertook illustrates how national identity is constructed not only by political violence but also by cultural memory, ethical responsibility and personal loss. Drishya embodies the dilemmas of an individual artist whose life and worldview are reshaped by encounters with violence and displacement whereas Palpasa represents the diasporic gaze for seeking meaning in a fractured homeland.

The scholarship in war literature in Nepal has expanded significantly over the past two decades. For Hutt (2009), Nepali literary narratives of war blur the distinctions between reportage and fiction, utilizing storytelling to document rapidly changing political conditions. Gogoi (2022), however, comparatively researches two Nepali novels—*Palpasa Cafe* and *Seasons of Flight* to explore the “shift in identity in the context of the late twentieth-century Maoist movement in Nepal” (p. 1). The insights assist in positioning *Palpasa Cafe* within a

tradition of Nepali war literature that seeks to humanize conflict and offer alternative imaginings of the nation beyond political rhetoric. In this regard, Shresth (2008) argues that *Palpasa Cafe* presents Drishya, the main character, as an artist based on aestheticism and subjective perception in order to express individual mood and vision rather than political and ideological forces. Kattel (2021) analyzes the novel as a representation of cultural trauma, and the collective psychological disruptions due to state oppression and the Maoist insurgency. The novel exposes deep trauma of people through the narratives juxtaposing western traumatic insights (Singh and Jaiswal 2024). Nonetheless, Panthi (2016) examines the novel from a biopolitical lens to exhibit how bodily precarity, disappearance, and disrupted routines inscribe political violence on both individual and communities. Scherer (2019) explores the interplay between religious imagery and revolutionary discourse, implying that spiritual metaphors complicate ideological certainty. Kandel (2025) contends that the novel exposes the sense of fragmentations, narrative rupture, and multiple truths as structuring devices that resist authoritative interpretation of the conflicts through postmodern insights.

RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study employs textual analysis under qualitative methods to examine how *Palpasa Cafe* narrates the nation through the intersectional themes of identity, belonging, war, and media. The methods retain close reading of narrative structure, characters development, symbolic motifs, and representation strategies of the narratives. Using interpretative and thematic analysis method to explore how meaning is constructed in the texts, the paper categorizes the themes based on the narratives. The paper further pinpoints literary evidence with existing scholarship

on Nepali nationalism, conflict narratives, and media discourse to ensure the justification. Thus, research articles, critical essays, critical commentaries, and scholarly books have been used as the secondary sources to analyze the texts within its socio-political moment. For the theoretical and conceptual supports, the paper utilizes Anderson's (1983) theory of "Imagined Communities", Foucault's (1977) discourse theory, and Hall's (1996) the notion of identity for enabling the research to analyze what is narrated, how it is narrated and why certain narratives dominate in the construction of national identity. Anderson's notion of imagined communities lays a foundation for examining how the idea of nation is constructed through collective narratives while Foucauldian discourse theory helps interpreting how power shapes what can be spoken, remembered, and silenced relevant to the novel's media representation. Hall's identity theory assists to view identity as fluid, constructed and shaped through experience and discourse of fictional characters.

Benedict Anderson (1983) conceptualizes the nation as an "imagined community" that underscores its constructed and mediated nature, arguing that nations are framed by shared system of representations such as myths, language, print publications, and collective narratives. Such manifestations enable each individual to imagine a sense of belonging even beyond the boundary and direct interaction. The ideas of Anderson play a key to interpreting *Palpasa Cafe*, which recounts Nepali nation as fragmented, and affective, shaped by memory, displacement and history. The fictional narratives challenge the unified national discourse, focusing on localized and subjective experience and demonstrate how the nation perpetually reimagined through cultural memory and stories (Anderson, 1983). This is why, the

fictional texts not only reflect the nation, but also actively participates in reconstructing the narratives through alternative imaginative and cultural frameworks. The insights into discourse, knowledge and power also assist in analytical frames of the texts. For Foucault (1977), discourse functions as a regime of truth to determine what can be known, said and legitimized and marginalize alternative perspectives.

The dominant narratives of the state and then insurgents attempt to fix meanings in the midst of violence and nationalism; however, the textual narratives of the protagonists disrupt the fixity of the meaning through personal and artistic articulations that bring suppressed voices forth. The novel, as such, exposes discourse as contested, and unstable, showing multiple, competing truths layered with representations of conflicts. In this sense, the literary texts intervene in dominant discourse by framing meanings and opening spaces for the counter-narratives to resist ideological stands. The notion of identity by Hall (1996) assists in reading the characters who negotiate identity and belonging amid war, reflecting fragmentation and transformation. Since identity functions as a process of "becoming" shaped by history, culture, and representation rather than a fixed entity. The evolving subjectivities Drishya and Palpasa develop also illustrate that identity is constructed through discrepancy, memory and experience, highlighting the instability of national identity during the conflict. The process of identity formation reveals that individuals continuously reinterpret and judge themselves vis-a-vis changing social and political landscape.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WAGLE'S *PALPASA CAFÉ*

The fictional narratives in *Palpasa Cafe* construct and reconstruct the nation through an interweaving of personal

memories, political anxiety, cultural negotiation and evolving identity of the characters. The notion of the nation in the novel does not exist as a stable and singular identity, rather it is narrated as fragile, imagined and continuously reproduced through lived experiences and realizations. The narrative techniques construct the nation as an affective and discursive entity by situating individual lives within moments of uncertainty, migration, loyalty and political instability. The narrations of pervasive political violence and uncertainty from the capital city to remote areas of the country defines the nation of then contemporary times. In this light, Drishya's narrative— "A bomb might explode in the city, claiming one of their lives...Anything, anything could happen to deprive the couple of another afternoon like this" (p. 36) foregrounds the precariousness of day-to-day life people live and experience. The repetition of 'anything' stresses the randomness of violence, and unpredictability that rules over the country. The nation is not romanticized, rather it is imagined as a site constantly affected by disruption not by the construction as Anderson's (1983) notion of the nation as an "imagined community" sustains through the shared experiences. The imagined national space Drishya lives in stands as one where individuals internalize political condition as part of their emotional landscape. In this way, the nation exists something that permeates intimate relationships as Bhabha (1994) contends that nation is narrated through everyday life, rather than solely through official histories. The threat and uncertainty Drishya feels and faces becomes a narrative device that situates the characters within a national context defined by the crisis and instability.

The narrative representation of violence against the people recounts how people perceive and realize the nation as a painter, Drishya sketches a site of devastation and gloom in the paintings. He

explains, "There was an explosion there recently... A girl in grade two was killed. The bomb left another student with a broken leg" (p. 79). The moment situates the nation within a moral crisis and ethical dilemma since schools, traditionally associated with the temple of peace and knowledge become sites of violence, injury and death. The state has been imagined not as a protective entity but as a space incapable of safeguarding its most vulnerable citizens. According to Anderson (1983), nations exist as imagined entity through shared narratives and emotions that bind people together. The shared narrative in the novel functions as a collective trauma, implying that the nation stands together less by pride than by loss. The painting Drishya sketches depicts the scene of the violence into memory and representation. The paintings and arts serve as a counter-narratives to the dominant national discourse to show how the state and rebels erase civilians' trust and optimism. The notion of art Drishya forwards in his painting closely aligns with Chatterjee's (1993) concept of nationalist mission that privileges political sovereignty over social justice. The killing of the girl studying in grade two and student with broken leg due to bomb explosion expose the ethical limits of nation-building through armed struggle, interrogating whose lives are considered to be dispensable in the construction of the nation.

The ethical ambiguity of nationhood gets reflected when Siddhartha, a Maoist rebel leader, seeks shelter in Drishya's room in Kathmandu. Drishya confesses, "I was afraid of him. He'd turned to violence... It was a Catch-22 situation" (p. 81). The state of dilemma Drishya faces shows how the conflict obscures a moral issue and positionality. The fear Drishya embraces appear to not be political rather an existential and survival that shapes his emotional response. The nation exists in a space where neutrality does not function

completely free from bias rather every action causes some kinds of menace. According to Anderson (1983), national communities exist under conditions of partial understanding and uncertainty as Drishya experiences the moments. He does not side with either the state or the rebels in a similar line with Hall's (1996) idea of identity which is positional and dependent rather than fixed entity. Drishya experiences the nation not as a unified moral community but as a contested realm as other characters. The ideology that Siddhartha embraces provides a competing narrative of the nation and he declares, "Destruction in order to create... To cure this diseased country, its fundamental structures must be changed" (p. 86). His rhetoric of the nation draws on a revolutionary logic that shapes violence as regenerative what Fanon (1963) similarly contends that conflict for the progressive reasons can serve as an elevating force in deeply unequal societies. Siddhartha's narratives of "disease" and "cure" place the rebellion and the rebels as transformers and healers of the nation.

Nonetheless, Drishya critically interrogates the vision of Siddhartha who articulated, "People do not need peace... They need justice" (pp. 86–87). This articulation challenges state-centric nationalism which centers on symbolic peace over structural reformation. King Birendra's declaration of a "zone of peace" metaphorically suggests the emptiness of national slogans failing to address inequality and inequity. The idea aligns with critical theories of nationalism forwarded by Chatterjee (1993) that views the state as masking injustice through ideological narratives. The narratives consistently weaken Siddhartha's ideas of certainty by juxtaposing his rhetoric with feelings of trauma and sufferings. The mobilization of young boys and girls in the villages show how revolutionary nationalism utilizes marginalized people into the circles of struggle. One of the girls

say, "How long do we have to keep carrying these Dokos [bamboo baskets]? ... Our mother did the same thing... Girls from other villages are joining up as well" (p. 96). Her remark shows both awakening and exploitation they have been exposed with. The girls vocalize generational frustration, and the revolutionary fervor based on inherited hardship rather than transformed conditions. From this point of view, the nation is imagined through perpetual suffering of common people in the rural areas and urban alike. This aligns with Hall's (1990) concept of identity as historically produced as the girls' voices echo the labor and silence of previous generations. This suggests that national identity is constructed through repetition of struggle, conflict, and contradiction. Therefore, the nation strongly grows and develops out of sacrifice rather than pity and justice.

The revolutionary weakens when the security personnel shot Siddhartha. Drishya recounts, "I heard three shots and he fell... He was lying in a pool of blood" (pp. 170–171). The killing of Siddhartha signifies the stoppage of ideological certainty, symbolizing the incompleteness of the nationalist revolution he represented. This shows that nation remains unrealized, exposing the futility of violence as a transformative tool. In this connection, Drishya recounts, "I'd survived only because I'd got off the bus. And Palpasa had been killed only because she hadn't" (p. 191). The survival suggests the indiscriminate nature of conflict people underwent during the war. Palpasa, a photographer and civilian, becomes collateral damage in a struggle she did not choose. The abduction by the unknown forces recounted by Drishya, "I didn't know where I was being taken... All I wanted was to be able to tell day from night" (p. 238)—reduces the nation to a space of disorientation, erasure and uncertainty. The act of blindfolding and confining implies the loss of agency because of the

conflict. Hall (1996) contends that identity requires narrative continuity, but violence breaks that continuity. The nation no longer remains an imagined community but a site of enforced silence. The nation is constructed through the lived realities of conflict to reveal both the ideological appeal and ethical failure of violent nationalism while the revolutionary narratives frame destruction as necessary for justice and healing. The nation emerges not as a unified community but as a fractured and morally unstable entity in which competing ideas of justice, peace, identity and belonging collide.

Drishya embodies identity as an unstable, and negotiated entity that is produced through memories, collective culture, movements, encounters, and exclusions. The narratives and scenes of leaving, intergenerational contestation, migration desire, and racism in *Palpasa Cafe* show how belonging is not an ontological granted, but a social and discursive token. The idea of belonging can be affirmed, withheld, or contested with collective agreement and contradictions between the fictional characters. The insights and ideas of identity, diasporic belonging, and hybridity (Hall, 1990; Bhabha, 1996) elucidate how Drishya represents identity as relational, historically situated, and subject to socio-cultural, political, and state institutions. His memory of his childhood in his village, — “I remembered the day I left my village. I’d run all the way through the paddy fields... ‘Look. Our teacher’s son is leaving for boarding school’. It seemed like yesterday” (p. 38)—captures the dynamics of belonging and displacement simultaneously. The village he was born and grown-up functions as a place of his origin scene where identities are socially recognized; being “our teacher’s son” signifies a communal belonging grounded on the kinship and place. Meanwhile, the act of leaving home and village marks a rupture,

symbolizing that mobility becomes the state that forges a new subjectivity and identity. In this connection, Hall argues that identity as a “production” is ever ongoing process that never completes. This argument justifies that identity is constructed through ruptures and trajectories rather than a smooth process.

In a similar line, the grandmother recounts about Palpasa, “She says this is her country. She wants to work here. This is where she belongs” (p. 55). This foregrounds choice as an affective link of identity. According to her, belonging can be claimed as an ethical commitment to a place, not only as the outcome of structural immobility. In this context, Anderson’s notion of the nation as an imagined community illuminate how collective attachment is produced. The grandmother’s insistence that “this is her country” endorses a narrative of membership and idea of nationhood. Scholarship on belonging insists that common attachments are unevenly available shaped by gender, class, and risk (Brah, 1996) as Drishya stands for very unevenness. The former generations pass on the cultural and religious practices to mark boundaries of belonging. As the grandmother responds to migration— “Who’d go to a country where they eat beef? ... ‘Well, the gods are here and so are their temples’” (p. 53)—, she asserts a sacralized geography as the basis for the identity. The notion of cultural hybridity by Bhabha (1994) asserts that identities form in the “in-between” of cultures and practices. The stable and fixed position the grandmother set resist to the idea of hybridity. However, Drishya embodies a tension between rooted traditionalism and cross-cultural entanglement. This contradiction emphasizes that belonging serves as both a strategy of resisting to assimilation and a means of limiting mobility or dialogue.

While the novel depicts the intergenerational conflict in the fictional

narratives and dialogues, Palpasa's refusal to accept parental matchmaking— "They wanted me to marry someone with a PhD... My parents put people into boxes. I couldn't go on living with them" (p. 202)—discloses familial generational disagreement, contradictions and displacement in a family frame. The issue of marriage displaces herself from familial expectations in order to claim an autonomous identity. As Hall (1996) asserts that identity is positional, Palpasa reproduces her identity to create an agency, believing that belonging is not only inherited but also actively negotiated against social scripts. The fictional narratives in the novel show that denial of youthful autonomy has been surfaced through the conversation of Palpasa with her peers in Kathmandu, suggesting that displacement from home does not guarantee emancipation. Contrary to the ideas her friends articulated, the notions of belonging and exclusion in the context of global dimension is illustrated by Palpasa's American anecdote, "an Asian man sits beside a white American who moves away" (p. 203). The belonging in a diasporic frame is mediated by racial hierarchies. Scholars on diaspora emphasize that migration and mobility produce new dislocations and conditional forms of belonging. Brah (1996) for instance, contends that diasporic people experience 'home' as both affect and contested practice shaped by power and authority. In the same way, Clifford (1994) focuses on notions of partial connections and routes rather than stable roots to designate how migrants direct fragmented attachments.

The displacement necessarily fragments identity along with the moments of emotional rootedness articulated by the grandmother while invoking of the temple. Palpasa's insistence to work in 'here' in Nepal illustrates that place serves as durable moral ground and meaningful solidarities. The novel is yet alert to how

the moral ground can be melancholic or limit rather than liberate. The narrator's memory of the paddy field and other landscape attached to the past functions not only as an anchor but also a scene of loss and changed perspective. The ambivalence resonances with Hall's (1996) idea of cultural identity that includes continuity with a shared past and recognition of historical transformation. The scholarly framing and textual evidences show two structural dynamics: first, identity is relational; and second belonging is affective as well as discursive. The relational identity is constructed through interactions and reactions with family, institutions, and strangers and mediated by the modern technologies. The affective and discursive identities are enacted by the speech acts, rituals and social memories. The combined theoretical insights of Hall, Bhabha, Anderson and Geertz illustrate how Drishya neither romanticizes rootedness nor endorses migration. Instead, this depicts that belonging exists as an ongoing negotiation of power, history, and emotion. Drishya concedes identity as a contested field where attachment and displacement coexist simultaneously. The narratives in the novel—'leaving the village' (p. 38), 'the grandmother's assertions' (pp. 53–55), 'Palpasa's refusal' (pp. 202–203), and 'the visa conversation' (p. 211)—collectively exhibit that belonging is continuously claimed and is frequently mediated by structures beyond individual control.

Along with narrating the nation, elucidating the identity and belonging in *Palpasa Cafe*, media serves as powerful narrative that shapes how people perceive, interpret and emotionally process the national events. The novel reveals the roles of the global and regional media networks in shaping the meanings around political crisis while simultaneously foregrounding the limits and distortions of media representations. The fictional

narratives demonstrate how media do not merely report reality but actively produces and reproduce it through moments of breaking news, transnational communication, and cultural translation. This examines how Drishya both supports the authority of media narratives in shaping national consciousness and resists their dominance by showing lived experience and a state of dilemmas. The royal massacre embodies a defining instance of media-mediated reality when Drishya recounts, “BBC and CNN were carrying breaking news. The Indian television Channels had also picked it up. I felt engulfed by a cloud...the king and queen had been murdered” (p. 74). The simultaneity of reporting across the globe and regions illustrates how national trauma is immediately absorbed into transnational media circuits.

In this respect, Anderson’s (1983) the idea of the nation appears to be relevant as media synchronizes emotional responses, allowing dispersed individuals to experience the event as a shared national moment. The repeated scene stressed by Tshering to Drishya, “Put on BBC” (p. 74), underscores the authenticity of international media as reliable and principal source of verification. Drishya, however, reacts, “I felt engulfed by a cloud. I could not see anything” (p. 74) that signifies emotional responses due to media saturation. It engenders a shock rather than understanding, positioning similar argument with Chouliaraki (2006) who contends that ‘breaking news’ privileges swiftness and spectacle over contextual depth. The use of metaphor, the cloud signifies that the media reproduces some kinds of obscurity and vagueness of visibility. The media engenders simultaneity as well as obscurity in different contexts like Drishya’s house owner’s call from the US signifies how media circulates transnational mediated narratives. He asks Drishya about Kathmandu and royal palace massacre just

to assess: “I already know that from the Internet...I wanted to hear your thoughts on the subject” (p. 81). This shows the contemporary media circulation that surpasses the geography as Castells (2009) contends, networked media reconfigures power by enabling instant information flows. The landlord, however, seeks reinterpretation to verify media mediated knowledge.

In the fictional narratives of *Palpasa Cafe*, intercultural mediation serves as a representational mechanism similar to media, as Drishya’s elaboration of artistic aesthetics— “Westerners understand the relationship between paintings and the colors that surround them” (p. 72)—shows how local meanings are reframed through shared interpretive global lens, siding with Hall (1997) who asserts that meaning is generated through representation rather than inherent in objects. The act of intercultural mediation—local and global also expose inequality in representation of power and politics. To judge Nepali art through Western aesthetics parallels to rely on BBC and CNN to validate national tragedy. The cultural translation not only enable cross-cultural understandings, but also reinforce dominant norms by positioning Western perspectives as universal. Thus, Drishya critiques the global media representation despite the prominence of mediated narratives of global media. When he hears noises in the neighborhood and runs outdoors “terrified” (p. 74), his acts in the narratives shift from screen to street. The sounds of the neighborhood re-anchor the event in communal experience, challenging the detachment of televised images. Juxtaposing televised narratives with personal fear, transnational information flows with local interpretation, and global codes with cultural translation, Drishya reveals that narrative power is never absolute. Media may frame the nation, but its meanings remain open to negotiation,

resistance, and re-articulation through lived experience, and shared values.

CONCLUSION

The paper contends that *Palpasa Cafe* constructs the Nepali nation as a fragmented and evolving imagination shaped by conflict, displacement, and narrative mediation rather than as a stable political entity during the Maoist insurgency. The novel situates the nation within the frames of everyday experiences of people through the depiction of rural devastation, urban uncertainty, disrupted social relations, war, bloodshed and trauma. The journeys Drishya and Palpas undertake from two distinct but interconnected location disclose that national identity emerges from personal encounters with loss, fear and ethical responsibility, reinvigorating the notion that nation is lived and shared. Thus, the findings emphasize on the central role of identity and belonging in framing the national imagination during the Maoist rebellion. As an artist, Drishya replicates the moral and emotional dilemmas confronted by individuals trapped in between aesthetic detachment and social responsibility while Palpasa's diasporic gaze emphasizes the tension between distance and attachment to the home land. The intersecting identities show that Nepali national consciousness in the text is neither homogenous nor fixed, but plural, and continually negotiated through experience and memory. Finally, the study exposes how the media representation narrates the nation during times of conflict by foregrounding journalism, mediated storytelling and narrative silence. The novel unveils that power exercises through discursive narratives to shape collective understanding of the nation and the war. The fictional narratives resist to authoritative historical narratives by exposing partial truths and subjective perspectives. They also offer an alternative mode of imagining the nation in shared

frameworks in even during the conflict. In this way, the paper expands the scope of Nepali war literature, redefining nation, nationalism, identity, and memory in the periods of political conflict.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently without financial, political, or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence the study's interpretations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

We declare that this manuscript is our original work and has not been published anywhere previously. Nor is it under consideration for the publication elsewhere. We have contributed substantially to the conception, framework, and interpretation of the study. Both of us have agreed to be accountable for the work.

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