

Fragmented Narratives in Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*: A Postmodern Condition

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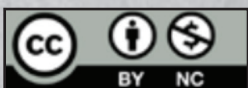
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Abstract

This paper examines Narayan Wagle's novel Palpasa Café from a postmodern perspective, highlighting its multifictional elements, fragmented narratives, and the coexistence of conflicting ideologies and identities. The novel portrays tensions between traditional and modern worldviews, diverse social identities, varying living standards, and differing beliefs regarding the nature and forms of governance. The primary objective of this study is to explore how the novel promotes hyperreality and fragmentation in order to construct meaning and truth through diverse human experiences. Issues related to postmodernism are analyzed through the theoretical insights of Jean-François Lyotard's concept of anti-metanarratives and Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this paper reviews relevant critical commentaries and scholarly works on Narayan Wagle and Palpasa Café. The novel, used as the primary source, provides textual evidence of postmodern features by revealing multiple viewpoints through the actions and interactions of its characters. By examining the text through the lens of the postmodern condition, the study demonstrates how characters prioritize individual choices and personal concerns over collective ideologies. Since postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation and rejects unified or totalizing narratives, the findings of this study offer insight into the fragmented nature of contemporary society, where meaning is not fixed but generated through multiple and often competing perspectives.

Keywords: Fragmentation, hyperreality, multiple narratives, pastiche, postmodern condition

Introduction

Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* (2005) is widely regarded as a significant Nepali novel that captures the psychological, cultural, and ideological consequences of the Maoist insurgency. Rather than presenting the civil war through a unified or linear historical account, the novel foregrounds fragmented experiences, subjective perceptions, and discontinuous narratives. Narrated by Drishya, a painter based in Kathmandu, the text privileges individual consciousness, memory, and perception over objective historical representation. The encounter with Palpasa, a Nepali woman raised in the United States, introduces an alternative worldview that destabilizes Drishya's fixed artistic and ideological assumptions. Her urge to explore rural Nepal functions not merely as a narrative event but as a catalyst for exposing multiple realities shaped by war, displacement, and ideological conflict. In this sense, *Palpasa Café* reflects a postmodern sensibility in which meaning emerges through plurality rather than coherence.

The novel resists linear historiography by interweaving memories, images, dreams, and episodes of violence that disrupt chronological order. Such narrative fragmentation reflects the postmodern condition characterized by instability, moral ambiguity, irony, and conflicting interpretations of truth. Wagle's representation of the civil war does not attempt to totalize or resolve ideological oppositions; instead, it exposes the collapse of grand political and moral narratives. Through the juxtaposition of personal relationships and political turmoil, the text reveals how individual choices increasingly replace collective ideologies, a key feature of postmodern subjectivity. The depiction of war operates less as factual documentation and more as a mediated experience filtered through perception, trauma, and artistic imagination.

The presence of characters associated with opposing ideological positions further complicates any singular interpretation of reality. Figures such as Siddhartha, a former schoolmate turned rebel, embody ideological contradictions that resist moral absolutism. The destruction of institutions such as schools and villages functions symbolically, representing the erosion of social structures and shared values. Rather than presenting clear distinctions between victim and perpetrator, the novel foregrounds uncertainty, guilt, and dislocation, thereby reinforcing a fragmented worldview. These narrative strategies align with postmodern aesthetics that privilege multiplicity, ambiguity, and partial truths.

Almost all characters in *Palpasa Café* experience psychological fragmentation caused by prolonged violence, displacement, and fear. Trauma, alienation, and uncertainty dominate their lives, making stability and collective meaning increasingly unattainable. Social relationships weaken, and communal bonds dissolve, reflecting a broader cultural disintegration. Within this chaotic landscape, reality is continuously mediated through images, memories, and representations, suggesting the dominance of hyperreality over lived experience. The Nepali civil war, therefore, is not presented as a singular historical event but as a series of fractured perceptions shaped by ideology, memory, and media.

This study departs from purely historical or sociopolitical readings of *Palpasa Café* by approaching the novel as a postmodern text that reconstructs war through fragmentation, subjectivity, and representational instability. It argues that the novel challenges the possibility of objective truth by privileging localized narratives and individual experiences over totalizing explanations.

This paper aims to demonstrate how the postmodern condition is articulated in *Palpasa Café* through fragmented narration, nonlinear plot construction, and the rejection of grand narratives. Drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's concept of incredulity toward metanarratives and Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality, the study examines how representations of war generate simulated realities that often replace lived experience. The novel serves as the primary source of data, while secondary sources include philosophical texts, scholarly articles, journals, theses, and critical reviews. Adopting a qualitative research approach, this study employs a descriptive and analytical method based on library research to examine how the Maoist insurgency produces fragmented narrative structures and postmodern subjectivities.

Review of Literature

Narayan Wagle's novel *Palpasa Café* has been criticized from multiple perspectives. Numerous scholars have different opinions about the book. Usha Kiran Regmi says that the book is the portrayal of people's life during the civil war as it written by a journalist in fictional form (202). She emphasizes that the novel is about the trauma of war that portrays the suffering people have faced during that time. The slogan of the war reflects to make the country free from all kinds of inequalities and people have shown concerns in it. Hardev Kaur and Abdalhadi Nimer Abu Jweid study the novel as a war allegory. They say that the novel is a story about anti-war as it reflects the negative effects from the perspective of Drishya utilizing the literary techniques like intertextuality, author's self-reflexivity and narrator's comments on plot (3). They mean the novel is a document of the civil war which is against the traditional socio-political balance. The novel reflects the negative consequences of the war. They talk about the trauma caused by war on the lives of the ordinary people. Sometimes such people face tortures from both sides. The novel also emphasizes the liberation of women as it raises the women who have been dominated so far by male dominated principles. Female characters in the novel are portrayed as vital as they appear with strong voices. Asmita Bista states, "Wagle has liberated his female characters from the stereotypical presentation. His female characters overcome their pitiable existence and are empowered"(51). By presenting the voices of women, the novel attempts to empower women for their participation in all sectors of lives.

Another critic, Bee Scherer analyzes the novel from the perspective of religion. He reports that the novel is a blend of religion and revolution as it reflects the raising arms of the Buddha amid socio-political changes, civic unrest and revolt (12). The war contrasts the peace propounded by the Buddha as the nation undergoes the havoc and trauma of civil war. The destruction created during the insurgency cannot be made up by

the faith of God. People in terror begin to ask the validity of their religion and God as they become helpless. People's faith in gods or deities is questioned due to the chaos caused by civil war. Michael Hutt reports that the novel was trailed first in media and it was welcomed by reviewers who describe it as a novel of contemporary consciousness, sensitive image of life, reality in broken form, postmodern war narrative and more fictional than reality (20). As being a novel written by the reporter of a famous newspaper, the novel includes many things concerning contemporary issues. The events described in it are more fictional than real.

The novel is about the problems faced by ordinary Nepali people as it shows the contemporary problems. The novel by the integration of multiple issues attempts to draw the attention of the world for the problems Nepal is undergoing. In this regard, James Sharrock states:

Palpasa Café, almost incidentally, neatly notes individual stories in other aspects of modern Nepal. This includes diaspora Nepalese (especially those connected to the USA), retired Gurkhas, Nepali-foreigner relationships, trekking tourists (endlessly laughing over their photos in Thamel) and internal migration for school and work. (206)

The novel attempts to draw the attention of the international society by presenting individual story. It includes diverse views concerning war, human rights, economic exploitation and the problems faced by people. Similarly, the novel shows the domination faced by women in a traditional society. Women are found to be dissatisfied with the traditional gender roles. Lakhipriya Gogoi reports, "Drishya, the narrator and protagonist of *Palpasa Café*, meets one such female combatant who shares the ideology of Bijaya and Yam Kumari, one who dreams of bringing an end to gender discrimination through the assumption of masculine power, significantly symbolised by a gun" (6). Women who involve in war believe that patriarchy can be uprooted by arms not by arguments. He studies the novel from feminist point of view but he misses the postmodern perspective.

The novel has also been analyzed from the perspective of traumatic experience as its main subject is war. Many incidents are embroidered concerning the civil war to reflect the trauma experienced by the people of rural area. As Sujit Kumar Singh and Ayushi Jaiswal report "Wagle's *Palpasa Café* seems enough to represent trauma and fragmented memories in words on pages" (151). Many incidents are skillfully combined by the narrator together the reporting of the war. The horrible incidents have affected ordinary people a lot as they cannot escape. They emphasize on the devastating situation of war but they miss the issue of postmodern situation. All the above mentioned critics have analyzed the novel either from the trauma of war or domination faced by women or economic disparity or religious point of view. Extensive studies have been underexplored from the perspective of fragmented narrative. There is a lack of focus on how civil war and social problems have disconnected the coherence of the social norms. This way departure can be created by showing gap in previous studies. For this reason, it is viable to study the novel from the lens of postmodern condition. This paper tackles these gaps

by exploring how multiple narratives are constructed in the novel to reflect the trauma of war.

Theoretical Perspective: Postmodernism

Postmodernism emerged after Second World War questioning the foundation of modernism. Modernism emphasizes on the singularity of meaning, solidarity, perfection and wholeness. Postmodernism introduces a different outlook from modernism by emphasizing on secularism, individualism, skepticism, rebellion, openness, ambiguity, fluid, ambiguity, playfulness and fragmentation of identity. As Richard Tarnas writes, “...an open-ended indeterminate set of attitudes that has been shaped by a great diversity of intellectual and cultural currents”(395). It means postmodernism encompasses all currents questioning the expected and fixed conventional meaning. It plays with multiple meanings, trickery and deliberate projection of shocking and sometimes with unexpected end. It is an experiment with new techniques such as intertextuality, metafiction, merge of fact and fiction. Postmodernism is different from modernism in terms of social life, thinking style and creation of different lives. In this connection, Ayşe Derya Kahraman says, “Modernism as a result of enlightening after the 18th century has taken its place in every area of the society. Postmodern world has been defined as the further level of modernism” (3991). Postmodern period enters in our lives by the floods of transition in values, norms and culture awakening us about the situation. While institutionilizing modernism under cultural society and consumption, postmodernism emerges. In such society individuals consume popular equipment creating their own culture and sub-culture using mass media. .

As a philosophical, literary and cultural movement, postmodernism rejects the beliefs like grand narratives, absolute truth and progress which are the foundations of modernism. It came out as the reaction to the limits of modernism and global crises. The crises are caused by the events like Second World War, rise of consumer culture, global media expansion and the destruction caused by atomic bombings. Such events cause expansion of global media that fuel doubts about human rationality, progress, and universal moral code and aesthetic values. Modernism seeks coherence, universal meaning and artistic renewal whereas postmodernism embraces uncertainty, scepticism towards absolute truth and fragmentation. In this regard, Mohan Kumar Tumbahang reports that postmodernism encompasses every sectors life and science and technology of this era displace traditional beliefs questioning against established norms end reflecting everything is in the state of flux (122). It opines that there is no fixed or absolute meaning. Thus, such upheavals inspire the questioning or critiques of knowledge, culture, identity and uncertainty of about human existence, social stability and values.

Instability in Meaning and Language

Postmodernism holds the belief that absolute truth cannot be determined by knowledge but it depends on the tricky use of language because truth is context specific. In this regard, Jean-Francois Lyotard writes:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. (81)

In postmodernism the meaning is not predetermined as there is no fixed rules but the rule made after text is written. In this way, it promotes multiple meanings. It also promotes liberation as it attempts to free man from the world of illusions, and myths. It questions the central argument by undermining, dispersion, audit and demolition. Ultimately, it has a goal to create new values by dismantling the old traditions and hierarchy. It also relies on destruction, chaos and disruption of ideas. It also promotes plurality, multiple identities theory, diversity intertextuality, gender and ethnicity. It also yields fragmentation, disorder and disintegration by denouncing repression, authority, and power.

Postmodernism refers to diverse set of ideas, practices and disciplines that challenge the established ways of thinking. It opposes the narrow rationalization and singular disciplinary thinking by dismantling the concepts like grand narratives and universal truth. It also questions the established sets of beliefs and principles like, epistemological, ontological and ethical conventions to open new set of possibilities for multiple discourses. In this connection, Abdulazim N. Elaati states that postmodernism philosophy rejects the faith of absolute right by leading to the loss of beliefs concerning religion or matters stating that there is no true religion or belief (5). It accepts marginalized voices, minority thoughts and opens ethical responsibility for otherness by its promotion of diversity. By this it attempts to elevate those who are marginalized, subjugated and in minority. Likewise, Jean Baudrillard uses the term simulacra which is composed of references with no referents that is hypereality and in such a context counterfeit people or objects appear as real and the things or people stand in the form of novelty or holiness or royalty but do not exist in reality (166). In the spirit of fabrication one stands for others by concealing the reality that a person or thing does not really have it.

Palpasa Café: Critical Analysis

Fragmented Identities in Palpasa Café

The central character, Drishya is a painter who paints many pictures portraying the contemporary Nepali society during the time of Maoist insurgency with fragmented narratives. The novel does not follow linear plot development as it switches with the thoughts and actions of Drishya. His thoughts transforms from the movements he meets Palpasa to the descriptions of war, his meeting with Siddhartha, his desire to art and his plan to set up a café. The inclusion of such events reflects fragmented narratives as many things are scattered in the novel without coherence. The narrator's plan to how the café

would look like portrays fragmented view. He thinks that the visitors would be interested to see the painting of his dream girl, Palpasa and the café would be like a resort. As he thinks:

I already knew which painting she wanted. It was the one called *Palpasa Café*. Café-gallery-resort with internet facilities. I'd decided that each room in the resort would be a gallery in itself. I'd hang my art in these galleries. I wanted my guests to feel they were living in a gallery. But it was difficult to say whether the painting *Palpasa Café* showed me more as a painter or as a designer. (221)

Even the plan of the narrator for making the café with lots of empty space, rooms with paintings hanging on the walls, the natural perfume of flowers, the warm rays of the sun and the breeze coming through the window reflects fragmentation.

The story of the novel is set against the backdrop of Nepal's civil war. It follows the life of Drishya, a young man who returns to Nepal after living abroad. He discovers the emotional impact of the war as many people are dislocated and many others are living among chaos. He plans to portray the scenario of civil war by his art and combines his profession of artist with the profession of a reporter. Scherer states, "*Palpasa Café* is mainly a reflection on real-life war vs. art and love as both a quixotic and selfish middle-class pursuit during the recent political shifts in Nepal"(9). Through the interactions of the narrator, the novel depicts pain, hope and indomitable spirit of the people affected by conflict. The novel also portrays socio-political change, civil unrest and revolution. The novel can also be interpreted as a frame narrative as it intertwines the story of war inside his plan of establishing a café full of paintings. It includes the voices of many people like the voices of the villagers, dislocated individuals, rebels, Siddhartha including the voices of both Drishya and Palpasa. The masterful and vivid descriptions of civil war with the harsh realities of the society together with political awareness move the plot forward.

As the narrator immerses himself from the chaotic yet vibrant life of Nepal during the time of Maoist insurgency, he begins to understand the deep scars left by the civil war. The novel reveals the story of loss and resilience capturing the essence of nation striving to heal. It attempts to explore the validity and morality of creating beautiful paintings while the country is tearing apart. In movements of quite connection between Drishya and Palpasa the joy of friendship amid the chaos surrounding them. They find solace and shared experiences forging bonds that reflects the beauty of human connection in time of despair. Drishya remembers what Siddhartha has said earlier, "...he'd joined the movement to give a new tune to the times. Today he was nothing but ashes.....But I'd always have the memory of his life and his dreams"(173). The aim of the novel to reflect against the war bringing the story of devastation and conflict and the memory of the victims. Drishya's paintings and the dreams of Palpasa Café are fictional artworks within the larger fiction of the novel. As he confronts the reality of loss and remembrance he struggles with the weight of history that impacts his life and the lives of those around him. Palapsa's art seems as reminder that even in darkness there is potential for hope and healing.

Palpasa Cafe presents the story between memories, events of the war, reflections and the unfulfilled desire of the narrator of establishing a café exploring the relationship between fiction and reality. The novel also presents fragmented consciousness of the narrator as the world around him has lost coherence. As the author of the novel writes, “Drishya disappeared long ago. Tired of vainly searching for him, I’ve completed this novel based on whatever information I’ve been able to piece together. I haven’t been able to stick to the style of most traditional novels since this is the story of a man’s life” (239). These lines clarify that the novel adopts different style as it breaks conventional patterns of plot development. The conflict in the novel originates fragmented views about sociopolitical scenario of the country as Drishya’s paintings reflect. The portrayal of chaos, uncertainty, and dislocation caused by the Maoist insurgency is one example of fragmented narrative. Similarly, the novel reflects the disjointed lives of the characters as they separated by war having disjointed experience as the country is in turmoil. In fact, the novel attempts to depict the theme not from unified set of order but from gaps, silences, loss, illusion, and fragments.

Uncertainty in the Novel

The novel *Palpasa Café* reflects the trauma faced by Nepali people during Maoist insurgency. For the portrayal of trauma, it integrates militarization, political turmoil, ravaged sentiments, unlawful killings, the dislocation of people, Royal Massacre, public mourning, paintings, war, love, deaths and so on. It also investigates how people cope up with the brutalities of war and psychological and physical consequences. In this connection, Khagendra Acharya states that the novel presents various traumatic situations Wagle has witnessed and they are presented from the perspective of Drishya in which people have felt in trouble from both security forces and rebel groups (98). The novel is a poignant exploration of the traumatic situation in the lives of ordinary citizens. It also reflects how violence enters the personal lives, psyche and dreams of individuals. Similarly, Kaur and Jweid analyze the novel from the perspective of suffering and painful situations faced by common people. They report, “In *Palpasa Café*, the tragic consequences of war inflict painful memories. People experience hopeless and upsetting situations” (8). The novel also portrays graphic details of war by the precise reflection of its deep pervasive and psychological impact on individuals and society. The trauma and uncertainty caused by war is the central issue that permeates the overall aspect of the society.

The narrator of the novel feels himself powerless when he confronts the war as an eyewitness. He observes, watches and analyzes but remains powerless to act due to the havoc created by war. The constant reporting and exposure to horrific events through news and stories about war desensitize all. The chilling matters of fact reflect a common traumatic environments. A seventy year old woman named Manamaya has been ordered to leave her village within seven days by the ‘People’s Court’ as a punishment. She makes her way towards an uncertain future during her old age. She cannot start a new life as she is stooped and the wrinkles on her face signify a sense of loss. Nobody in the

village can enter without their permission as it is in their capture. In this connection, Palpasa says, “They’ve made the villagers their prisoners! No one can go anywhere without their permission. It’s simply a dictatorship. It shows how they’d run the country if they ever came in power” (189). They believe to come in power not with the support of people but at the barrel of a gun. The version of both Palpasa and Manamaya confirm the state of fear. Such collective expression of fear and anxiety complicates the larger picture of war.

The novel shows miserable condition of rural people during the time of insurgency as they suffer from multiple ways. The characters in the novel have undergone through various incidents of traumatic symptoms. The sufferings and the vulnerability of rural people is highlighted to reflect the trauma of war. In this regard, Singh and Jaiswal state, “Wagle’s only novel *Palpasa Café* highlights the trauma of the common Nepali people in a countryside mired by political violence. His depiction shows that he is well at displaying the trauma of common Nepali people and their memories”(151). The novel has the setting of war and it presents the large number of people affected by horrendous events. Similarly, Achut Raj Kattel states, “*Palpasa Café* is a novel of cultural trauma as all the characters as members of society collectively feel the effect of horrendous event which leaves permanent marks on their group consciousness”(13). The novel has included many incidents that traumatized many people as they have no certainty of life and no guarantee of their secured future.

Postmodern Condition in Palpasa Café

The novel presents the crisis of grand narratives as it reflects two narratives one is of the state that emphasizes on national unity, peace, progress, order and development on the other hand, the rebel group emphasizes on revolutionary ideas, transformation, prosperity, class struggle and violence for the utopian future. The narrator is caught between these two stories as he cannot believe in either. *Palpasa Café* never exists in reality as it is an idea or a dream that is the copy of reality. Similarly, for the people living peacefully in Kathmandu the reality of the trauma of war is a fragile and artificial. They have never experienced the reality the people of the affected area have felt. There is also another element of postmodernism in the novel that is open-endedness as the author says, “...all written works are incomplete. Something’s always missing. There’s always more to add”(242). There is no close ending of the novel as it ends with the note of uncertainty. He also makes it clear when he states that the is presented from the perspective of Drishya but his character is not fully developed whom he knows but he has never met Palpasa and if he has met her, that would have given the novel another dimension(242). These lines indicate that the novel departs from the traditional convention of closed-ended narration

The novel depicts Drishya and Palpasa’s first meeting in Goa and then in Kathmandu. It also portrays Drishya’s personal as well as artistic sufferings. Their journey to conflict-wrecked areas strikes tragedy and conflict relating to the themes of love, art and politics. The inner explorations of the central characters which is reflected

from their dialogue do not relate to the external violent and conflict in the country. After the royal massacre there remains a sense of havoc that is reported by the novelist as, “A thick fog of uncertainty hung over us all. The state-owned radio and television stations were broadcasting sorrowful dirges”(72). Many events including the royal massacre have created the situation of uncertainty arousing terror and threats. As being a novel of postmodern narratives, it has transformed the literary scene. In this regard, Hutt states, “The publication of *Palpasa Café* signaled a radical shift in the production and consumption patterns of Nepali literature”(19). Due to contemporary consciousness, the novel has presented sensitive image of life with postmodern war narratives.

The narrator is a visual artist and he engages with the world through sight that he sees disfigured world that is destroyed by war. This shatters his ability to see the beauty. The captivating hills and mountains of Nepal idyllic residences have been turned into places of terror. People are terrified by violence and fear. The artistic vision of the narrator is shattered by trauma leading to the situation of uncertainty. The narrator and Palpasa encounter with violence as they travel through countryside. They witness brutal consequences, stories of disappearances, executions, and the constant state of terror among ordinary people. Palpasa is a character in the novel who becomes the real victim of trauma. Drishya directly imprints the horror of war from her death as she is being caught in crossfire. Ronald L. Boyer states that postmodernism encompasses interpretive suspicion, pluralism, ambiguity, epistemological and moral relativism, distrust for conventional authorities, rejection of grand theories and ideas, obsession with fragments, privileging of marginal voices and perspectives (26). Similarly, the novel integrates the voices of marginal groups, rejects traditional authorities and presents fragmented narratives.

Conclusion

Palpasa Café is a novel that talks about the civil war and its consequences as it is set in the context of the upheaval situation. It has presented characters as creations of their time who have undergone various tortures, trauma, abduction, rape, brutal behaviours during insurgency. The novel is a profound exploration of hyperreal and uncertain world by the reflection of trauma faced by people. It has broken the tradition of grand narrative by avoiding the issues like religion, progress, nationalism, unity, coherence and so on that society practises to give meaning. The central metaphor of the novel is Palpasa Café that does not exist in reality. This representation becomes more real than reality in the novel as similar to the concept of Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality in which reality is distorted an illusion is presented as real. The narrator by the presentation of fiction as real has lost his persuasive power. The urban reality or the reality viewed from Kathmandu is disconnected from the reality of the trauma of war that the nation is facing. The non-linear plot construction of the novel which is constructed between war, romance and art represents fragmented narratives. The blending of events like travelogue, war trauma, politics, romance, philosophy and journalism creates the novel a form of pastiche. By blend of multiple narratives, it is a novel of quintessential of

postmodernism. From the example of the novel meaning can also be deciphered from the minor events. Future research can be conducted how illusions and hyperreality contribute to make meaning as real in this postmodern world.

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