

Mobility, Nostalgia and Self Transformation in Nepali Literature: Reading Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* as Travel Narrative

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Abstract

“To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. Possibly this journey is epic in scale [...]and takes place within the limits of the traveller’s own country or region, or even just their immediate locality”. (Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p9). The travel, whether it is long or short, necessitates the presence of space as its ulterior dependence. Narayan Wagle, the Nepali travel journalist, in his first experimentation of fiction, named *Palpasa Café*, brings in his travel encounters in the up skirts of Nepalaya. Fusing fiction with journalism, Wagle presents the blurring division between fact and fiction. In this manner, Wagle can be called as an “embroider”, what Bruce Chatwin coined instead of traveller, as Chatwin advocated the use of adventures with fictional embellishments. The postmodern idea of travel introduces tourism. “Tourism herald postmodernism, it is a product of the rise of consumerist culture, leisure and technological innovation” (Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel*, p 27). Attributing the terms embroider, tourist and lifestyle-traveller would analyse the Nepaliness in *Drishya* or the “I” in the book in three different strategies. The first term induced Wagle to fictionalise the travel without losing its factual representation of Nepal. The second gives him confidence to see the places as a stranger to introduce alterity by drawing similarities and differences. The third transforms himself to check his identity in terms of a person who evaluates the life of the people of Nepalaya. This paper analyses how the novel portrays mobility, nostalgia and self-transformation in the form of a travel narrative.

Keywords – *Travel Narrative, Nostalgia, Self-transformation, Embroider, Tourist*

Introduction

Palpasa Café exists as a new narrative treatment in the history of Nepali Literature. It is for the first time that a journalist, residing in Nepal, who writes for a Nepali Newspaper, explores Nepal and writes about Nepal. The task attributed to Wagle is to unleash Nepal and to study its ethnography, thereby reporting the events unknown to the public. Wagle never limits the history and facts of Nepal in a mode of writing which is going to be existed only as a non-fiction. Instead, he creates characters, through which he sees Nepal and detangles the political situations. Thus, Wagle's Palpasa Café is a deconstruction of travel narratives which caps its strategy in the telling of facts.

In the prologue, Wagle tells that he is planning on writing a book inspired by his friend Drishya who gets kidnapped. Drishya's story begins with his meeting with a Nepalese girl Palpasa who is on a trip in India. They have a number of meetings and there seems to be a spark between them but neither of them pursue on. We then follow Drishya to Kathmandu. There Drishya has a chance meeting with Palpasa. They kind of start seeing each other but still no one takes things further. After some time, he had a fortuitous meeting with Siddhartha, his friend from college, who says that he is Maoist in hiding and asks for shelter. They start talking on the situation of the nation. They both disagree on many points and finally Siddhartha challenges Drishya to visit the 'world they created'. He accepts and treks the hilly regions under the insurgent control; visiting many villages including the village from where he is and soon finds that his childhood friend had died due to war. Near the end of the journey, Siddhartha gets killed in front of him because he mistakenly points him out to the army. Heavy hearted he is on his way back when he happens to meet Palpasa on the ride back to Kathmandu who is on her way to make documentary on the war. There she gets killed when the bus explodes due to a mine. Drishya survives because he was out of the bus. He returns to Kathmandu and tries to continue with his life. But her death haunts him for a long time and he feels a bit at peace when he completes a series of paintings 'Palpasa Cafe'. Then later he is kidnapped and his whereabouts is unknown. In the epilogue, Wagle meets with a girl named Gemini who is searching for her lost friend who happens to be Palpasa.

"Mobility, travel and cross-cultural contact are facts of life and on everyday reality, for many people". (Thompson p 2). The major part of the novel deals with the travels of the characters Drishya and Palpasa. Travel is celebrated as a means through which the plot moves. But it never ends up in mere entertainment or information transfer as Hanusch in his *Dimensions of Travel Journalism* opines. Rather, it dwells into the representation of Other. Drishya and Palpasa, confronts the rural culture which appears to be new and otherised. Nepal's wide view of postmodernism in the city of Kathmandu and the modern and realistic lifestyle of villagers seems to be in opposite poles in Nepalaya. An "other" can be another culture as well. Drishya and Palpasa, in their vogue, experiences

this otherness as they understand the real turmoil in the villages of Nepalaya. But in most part of the novel, Drishya and Palpasa witnesses the changes brought about by mobility of Nepalese across cultures.

During the middle Ages, travel was only meant for high class society. But in this era of mass tourism, middle class comes forefront in travelling worldwide. Nepal is a country that was never opened to public till 1950. After the unification, there was a sudden flux in tourism in Nepal. In the beginning of the novel, the character's tourist ventures happen to start in Goa, which is one of the prime location of travellers worldwide. Drishya and Palpasa visits the historical museum of Goa, which clearly depicts the postmodern travel. To get amazed at the wonders of the past is one of the motives of travel. The proposed journey to Kerala defines displacement as a continuous action. And both of them hopes to see each other in Kathmandu, back home. It refers to the modern travel in which the traveller finally reaches the destination from where he starts. Thus travel metaphors the journey from birth to death, from the starting point and to be back to it. Drishya tries to create an imaginary homeland wherever he goes which is substantiated by "We Nepalis can't do without rice, no matter where we are". It's not the I who speaks. Instead, the collective nostalgia for any Nepali to feel in another place is portrayed. Palpasa, unlike other women travellers who are believed to be transgressive, appears as a determined woman with a desire to travel. Her nostalgia for homeland is evident when she says she would prefer East to West for the gap it provides to enhance her creativity.

The travel made by Drishya to the countryside after getting inspired through the words of his Maoist friend Siddhartha, tends to be a 'back home' experience. Unlike the journey he made to Goa, Drishya's desire to travel rests only as a means to explore it, to study the conditions of his native village after got struck by Maoism.

Everything in the village brought back memories. I remembered the harvest season, when I used to sleep on a bed of hay beneath a blanket of hay. We used to whip our ox to make it walk faster on the grain and to jump on a koal to produce mustard oil. In winter, we used to drink hot sugarcane juice. I looked at the mound where the koal used to be. Tears came to my eyes. (Wagle, p 114)

Travel, displacement and Nostalgia are the elements which functions trilaterally in the lines. The journey acts as a displacement to his geographical setting as well as the mental setting about the old image of his countryside. Drishya laments the beauty of the past which results in nostalgia for the homeland.

As Drishya travelled through the countryside of Nepal, the image of then Nepal with her traditional pastoral outset took a turn to the realistic antipastoral turn. Nepal, in its realistic mode accepts the geographical, political and economic hazards that waits for them. "There might be mines

in the forest” told by the cowherd exemplify the Mao stricken Nepal. The immediate blast that can happen any time and that may take the life of any person always exist as a challenge. Yet travel for a Nepali is as close to them as life which is signified in the words of Nepali soldier, “Come back when you have time to spare. We could develop a trekking route. If we could establish a route to the base of Dhanchuli Himal, it would attract people from all over the world”. (p 121)

The idea of a global village in the mind of a villager itself shows the postmodern outlook of Nepal. Drishya also reveals his responsibility as a Nepali who looks forward to the progress of Nepal, “My village was looking for a future. It deserved prosperity, and I could help bring it. I wanted to give a new life to my village.” (p 124)

Drishya declares himself to be the ambassador of the future growth in Nepal. According to Susan L Robertson, “travellers are people who put themselves— if only for short periods of time— in the situation of being strangers and who derive enjoyment from this status”. (p 48). The displacement sought through travel gives the tourist the confidence to reveal himself as he is the only person who knows him. This mental and spiritual freedom is a way to lead to forget the worries of human life. Drishya says “My forgetfulness was probably a combination of the relaxed atmosphere, my own mood, and the fact that I’d drunk so much wine. These things happen in a place where you lose your identity and become just another anonymous tourist” (p 14).

Travel equips Drishya to conceal his identity for some time and be a stranger in the land. The traveller in the novel is also an ambiguous thought as it takes the first person narrative with another name. The I in the novel is hidden in between the writer and the traveller. Seeing things for oneself is the greatest motivation of travel.

Palpasa, who wishes to be a nun, if she fails end up in documentary filmmaking, wants herself to be active in nunnery. She says: “I want to understand things. I want to know myself”. Palpasa admits that it is for the first time that she reveals her identity to another person. Thus, the status of being two strangers, helped them to understand each other, and to be free.

The traveller/writer often has a feeling of alienation in the new/foreign environment, creating notable changes in his/her subject matter. This signifies that there is a mental and physical displacement or dislocation that occurs when the traveller visits a foreign place. Encountering a new culture could be seen as a method of conditioning the traveller/writer’s preconceived ideas of a new culture through the various experiences that he/she had. This may make notable changes in the texture of the travel narrative.

Drishya’s journey accompanied by Austrian environmentalist and Maoist leaders happens to be a new exploration in the hills of Nepal. Though he fails from the same hill, he had to make his travel as a stranger as he is not known with the new life created to his fellow beings by the Maoists. Drishya

says: “I’d become a stranger in my own home district. Who was I? My identity was linked to my profession” (p 155)

Drishya as a traveller looked confusing when he saw a woman crying over a single shoe placed in front of her home by the Maoists. Only after having explained by a boy that it is a message to send the boy of that family for war, Drishya got to know the real scene. Immediately he sketched the woman. And the act of painting only denotes Drishya’s curiosity to look at new life of Nepal rather than being sympathised. Here, the traveller stands as distant human. The sterility of Nepalese life is again portrayed in the chapter where Drishya visits a temple which he addresses as “never spoken a word”. The traveller is toroid in an explosive scented air inside temple instead of the smell of incense. The futility of Nepali life in a vigorous political scenario is described. The Maoist Insurgency appeared to be a striking event to write about his homeland during the travel. The following sentences depict how war affected the life of common man of Nepal of diverse class and gender:

Walking ahead of me was a woman who’d been widowed the day after her wedding. I felt as if I were stepping on her tears. [...] Walking behind the widow was an elderly man. He was on his way to claim his son’s body. [...] Behind me was an old woman. She was also on her way to claim a body, the body of her daughter, which had been crammed into a basket and placed on a river bank across the hill. I was climbing surrounded by bereaved people. But when we came to the crest of the hill, I’d take a different path. (p 163)

The image of ‘widowed woman’, ‘elderly man’ and ‘old woman’ exemplify the state of Nepal during insurgency. They are the representatives of millions of people who are deprived of anything good as they lost their son, daughter, husband and dear ones. The travel for Drishya is painstaking one, yet he says he would take different path at the end of journey which reminds his own duty to be back to Kathmandu as a traveller.

Drishya as a ‘lifestyle traveller’ focus on his travel meant for transformation of his self. It does not mean “the active pursuit of mobility for its own sake, rather it is to realize identity challenge and transformation” (*Travel and Transformation* p 29). External mobility is undertaken to realize an internal mobility when Drishya travels to the hills. The transition from a defamiliarised traveller to an affected one is revealed only when he finished his travel. As he puts it:

I’d 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 a widow, painted by my fear. I was losing my balance when I walked, sometimes in silence, sometimes laughing for

no reason. [...] My thoughts had been all over the place. I'd had no equilibrium. (p 174)

Attributing the terms embroider, tourist and lifestyle-traveller would analyse the Nepaliness in Drishya or the "I" in the book in three different strategies. The first term induced Wagle to fictionalise the travel without losing its factual representation of Nepal. The second gives him confidence to see the places as a stranger to introduce alterity by drawing similarities and differences. The third transforms himself to check his identity in terms of a person who evaluates the life of the people of Nepalaya.

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