

The Absence of History in Samrat Upadhyay's Arresting God in Kathmandu

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the absence of history in Samrat Upadhyay's Arresting God in Kathmandu (2001) and compares it with other Nepali writings. In this regard, I would apply the theoretical framework of New Historicism which is a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of the literary texts. It shows how Upadhyay has disregarded social and historical turmoil such as the Maoist Insurgency (the Nepalese Civil War (1996-2006)) from his literary peace. Upadhyay's Arresting God in Kathmandu, a collection of short stories, was published in 2001 when Nepal was going through a series of political and historical upheavals, but while reading the text, I found no trace of history as Upadhyay has overlooked these historical events and upheavals. Nepal has experienced more than a decade of war, bloodshed, and violence which caused considerable human loss which remained irrecoverable for a long time. The conflict engendered more than Lakhs of Nepali people who left their birthplace and settled in some other part of the country to spend life peacefully, but some of them crossed the border forever in fear, and many were injured and disappeared from the country, many of them remained disabled in counter-insurgency between Royal Nepalese Government and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist).

Introduction

Samrat Upadhyay, a contemporary Nepali-born fiction writer, is writing in English. He was born and brought up in Kathmandu. His literary writings basically deal with the issues of adulterous relations, polygamy, incest relationships, early marriage and alcoholism etc. These are the recurrent themes of his works which seem like Upadhyay is fond of painting the pictures of the conjugal issues, adulterous relationships and domestic chores. Regardless of historical and political upheavals, he is solely concerned with the personal and domestic aspects of his characters' lives as the book portrays unlike the other contemporary Nepali writers such as Manjushree Thapa, Narayan Wagle and Yug Pathak, who have portrayed the real and recent face of Nepal, dealing with socio-political and historical events. He authored *The Guru of Love* (2003), *The City Son* (2015), *The Buddha's Orphan* (2010), *The Royal Ghost* (2006), *Mad Country* (2017). Although he is a diasporic writer but his themes are based on Nepal.

New Historicism

As New Historicists believe that history itself is 'subjective' according to which history is not telling about the facts rather interpreting the events. Presently, historicism is inclined to portray itself as the most recent literary theory development and thus "new." A book devoted to historicism ought to discern an essential pattern of historical analysis that manifests itself in various forms throughout various times periods. Scholars including Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon have placed significant emphasis on the self-referential aspect of historiography, demonstrating how the formation of history mirrors the narrative conventions found in literary works. They argue that history is a literary phenomenon in which the rhetorical devices underlying its construction are revealed. They then pose the question of whether these mechanisms are capable of transforming any facet of actuality into textual substance and whether history as a piece of writing can portray any event by incorporating it within a logical narrative. In *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*, Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton assert that the emerging historicist and cultural materialist theories signify a "return to history" in the criticism of literature and that their greatest contribution to current scholarship in literary analysis was likely their emphasis on the position of history in literary texts. Anton Kaes asserts that the term "New Historicism" has been applied to practically every scholarly work that emphasises the historicity of the text and the textuality of history throughout the past the last ten years. In a nutshell "New Historicism" examines the intricate pathways through which political life, society, and culture intersect and converge. When viewed from this perspective, literature appears to function less as a reflection of conventional social conventions and more as

a conduit for a nuanced adaptation and interpretation of the world (Kaes 155). The preeminent critical movements of the late twentieth century, namely postmodernism and poststructuralism have ultimately been comprehended in terms of the historical pictures they suggest. The text plays a crucial role in disseminating the historical knowledge constructed out of past memory. The writing of history is a matter of interpretations, not facts. Thus, all historical accounts are narratives and can be analysed because “we can’t understand a historical event, object, or person in isolation from the web of discourses in which it was represented because we can’t understand it in isolation from the meanings it carried at that time” (Tyson 286). In contrast, Upadhyay has insisted his reader to interpret the text in their own way as he has isolated his text from its historical context.

The history of Nepal is marked with major social upheaval and political turmoil, and geographically, Nepal is blessed with natural and unsullied beauty in the Himalayan region. Despite being a small mountainous country, it has deep and conflicting historical and political movements. Before going through the historical background of Nepal, firstly we have to understand the concept of history as stated by Raman Seldon in his book *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, that history has two meanings in which the first is- ‘the events of the past’ and the second is- ‘telling a story about the events of the past’. Poststructuralist asserts that history is ever ‘narrated’, after poststructuralism, history becomes textualized. A re-evaluation of the interactions between literature and history is required. An unaltered and unchanging "history" that can serve as a "background" contrary to this literature can be projected is non-existent. All history (histories), according to Seldon is "foreground." History is perpetually the process of retelling a narrative about the past through the use of other manuscripts as intertexts.

Upadhyay’s works substantiate that he doesn’t depict anything related to historical background, whereas “New Historicists believe that the relationship between individual identity and society is mutually constitutive: on the whole, human beings are never merely victims of an oppressive society, for they can find various ways to oppose authority in their personal and public lives” (Tyson 285). The country was plunged into chaos between the state and its people. It is a well-accepted fact that Nepal has gone through an extreme situation since 1996, such as great massacre during the reign of Rana dynasty, the first achievement of the democratic system, the fall of existing government, the Party-less Panchayat system, Maoist Insurgency and Royal Massacre of 2001 which have left the Nepali society shattered; socially and psychologically. Nepal has gone through a period of conflict, chaos, destruction, and uncertainty before a couple of centuries when old monarchy bowed down to the people’s demands for a republic state. Nepal adopted its first democratic system in 1950, following the Rana regime’s overthrow; it remained in power for a decade, until 1960. King Mahendra ousted the people’s government in 1961, assumed power, and instituted the Party-less Panchayat System, which lasted until 1990. In 1990, following widespread demonstrations, authority was consolidated at the royal palace and other political parties were outlawed; the aforementioned year also marked the conclusion of the autocratic-people-led party conflict and the establishment of a novel constitutional parliamentary democracy. The mass protest leads back towards the multi-party system but it started favouring the people of the elite and high caste which failed to provide a satisfactory need in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the ineffectiveness of the newly developed system precipitated the "Maoists" insurgency that began in 1996, and the preexisting social and economic difficulties persisted without resolution. "From November 2006 to March 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) waged a decade-long Maoist insurgency in Nepal, which resulted in a number of abhorrent instances of traumatic experience. Statistically, there were approximately 17,000 fatalities, 1500 missing persons, 75,000 injuries, and 250,000 internal expulsions. The reality that the aforementioned numeral fails to recognise is equally abhorrent: an incalculable number of individuals were subjected to torment, rape, abduction, and physical brutality (Acharya 80). Despite the legal prohibition of caste distinctions, caste dynamics continue to influence contemporary social stratification: The Untouchables remain the most impoverished segment of society, whereas those from higher castes are predominantly affluent and politically influential. Most of the causalities and injuries caused by the conflicts went unknown and unreported, until the political change of 2006 which brought ‘New Nepal’ to the world. The period of conflict bore tremendous energy of creativity in Nepali writers writing in, both, Nepali as well as English language. The newly implemented constitution in November 1990 introduced additional liberties of publication and expression, breaking a government's stranglehold on the printing press. Consequently, the literate populace experienced a sustained growth. A high flow of books swept through the post-conflict Nepal in response to the suffering and the loss caused by the decade long political conflict with armed forces backing it. The rural countryside suffered the most where the insurgents had their bases. These conflicts gave rise to immigration as the people left with no choices other than migrating from one place to another. It was only after the Royal Massacre in 2001 that the national and international media came to learn about the deepening of conflict in the faraway countryside of Nepal.

In the present work of Upadhyay, I find the lack of historical evidence as Upadhyay has followed that literature is not, however, simply a medium for the expression of historical knowledge so he has just presented the personal affairs and domestic chores of his characters. As Sten Pultz Moslund has argued that the

conventional distinctions between “story and history, fiction and non-fiction” as modes of rendering the past are blurred” (Moslund 24). The other Nepali narratives, favours Moslund’s statement that the authors have merged history with the story and effaced the distinction between it. After going through these works viz. *Arresting God in Kathmandu* and *The City Son*, we can argue that these works lack the historical insights.

Samrat Upadhyay’s short story, *Arresting God in Kathmandu* manifests personal, domestic and adulterous relations of the characters, by effacing the historical events from this literary piece. The opening story of the collection is, “The Good Shopkeeper”, is about the personal struggle of a couple Pramod and his wife Radhika who were striving to achieve their livelihood in odd circumstances. Pramod works in a bank as an accountant but soon he lost his job due to lack of computer knowledge. Being jobless, he tried his best to find a new job but got failure. Now, they have the question how to earn their livelihood meanwhile in this grim condition he started an illicit affair with a peanut selling woman. This story evidences that reiterative themes of Upadhyay’s works are intriguing love relationships and familial issues.

The only story “The Cooking Poet”, which gives a scanty amount of historical happening i.e. the Rana rule which lasted for 108 years. The axis of the story revolves around the poet, Giri and Acharya who raise their voice against the Rana rule. In that particular story, he mentioned that Acharya, a renounced poet was an outspoken critique of the Rana rule. During this period, several writers, poets, and critics had been jailed for criticising Rana rule. The writer has exhibited, how a new upcoming poet named Giri has been shot dead in a huge protest but the writer has not mentioned any certain time period of History. This work evidences a complete elimination of the major historical event named Maoist Insurgency.

Another story “Deepak Mishra’s Secretary” deals with the issues of alcoholism, adulterous relations and family fragmentation. Deepak’s ex-wife, Jill, who again returns to his city, and her presence keeps disturbing him. He has an affair with his secretary Bandana ji yet he also tried to reconcile his relationship with his ex-wife Jill but she replicated negatively saying, “It’s hopeless Deepak. You are insisting on something that’s not possible” (Upadhyay 46). In his odd situation he starts drinking excessively, cuts himself off from his duties and started living in solidarity. Consequently, Bandana’s presence, which used to give him relief now it also started giving him pain. At the end of the story both, his ex-wife and Bandana Ji left him alone forever.

The next story is “The Limping Bride” as the title gives the gist of the story which is about Moti, a drunkard and his limping wife, Rukmini. Moti’s excessive habit of drinking is the root cause of his parents’ tension. They thought marriage is the only solution, the marriage would improve his living style. This is a conventional problem that if they (girls/boys) have some problems or physical disorder, they can’t get a perfect match or partner. It happened with Moti, his parents married him with a girl who is lame and the fact of lameness of the bride was hidden to him. Rukmini’s parents accepted the marriage proposal of Moti, saying that at least a drunkard is ready to marry their lame daughter. Both are unaware of each other’s deficiencies. After the revelation of the truth, Moti was not ready to live with her, he starts drinking more than before. This grief of Rukmini can be seen in her words, “First, I get married to a drunkard and then, he calls me ‘langadi’ (lame) and walks out on my wedding day” (Upadhyay 69). Now the burden, to support his daughter-in-law, came to Moti’s father. Further, we saw that there was an incest relation developed between father-in-law and daughter-in-law. In this piece of the story, Upadhyay has dealt with the theme of adulterous and incest relationships and alcoholism.

The next story is “During the Festival” is about Ganesh’s thrust for the stable identity in which firstly, Ganesh was suffering from the rumour that he was not his father’s legitimate son, but the result of his mother’s adulterous relationship. He has a beautiful wife but he also suspects his wife of having an affair with someone. Since his childhood, he was bullied by his own friends; his friends mocked him by saying “The boy needs a father”. A phrase that had plagued his childhood always echoed in his mind: ‘mama’s boy’. That’s what his friend mocked him whenever they saw him cling to his mother, his fist clutching the end of her sari. Throughout his childhood, he had been haunted by this so-called lover of his mother and he tried to find this lover but failed. Subsequently, the story ends with confusion whether his wife has a lover. This story too revolves around the familial issues and love affairs.

The next story is “The Room Next Door” which tells the story of a girl who got pregnant when she was in her school. The boy, who promised her to marry, had left her. She was already four months pregnant when her parents came to know about her, the news was shocking to her mother. In Upadhyay’s works, it seems that being pregnant before marriage is very common as it also happens in his other novel *The Guru of Love* in which Malati brought up her daughter without marriage. Her lover was a taxi driver who left her when she became pregnant. The culprit left Durga when was pregnant also happens in Manjushree Thapa’s novel *All of Us in Our Own Lives*. Her husband left her pregnant and in shame she poisoned herself. But in the present story, “The Room Next Door” the news of her daughter’s pregnancy terrified her mother; she wanted to hide the news from her neighbours. So, her parents married her to an aged servant who works in their home and she could not resist this marriage. The story shows a mother’s grief about how she tackles the issues of shame that her daughter brought in her family. The other shameful issue for the mother is her daughter’s marriage to the servant.

It's very common in Samrat Upadhyay's works that husbands start losing interest in their wives and commit illicit affairs or involved in polygamy. It occurred in his next story "The Man with Long Hair" which is about Aditya and his wife Shobha, and a theatre man with long hair. He married Shobha only because his mother forced him. Soon after the wedding, Aditya loses his interest in his wife and starts hating her because he was obsessed with the long hair man. Here also, Upadhyay has dealt with the issue of homosexuality and conjugal issue.

In the subsequent story "The World" he raises the issues of alcoholism and a mother's longing to marry her daughter. The story revolves around Kanti and Jaya who live in New York and fall in love. They returned to Nepal and they are about to marry each other. In this story too, Upadhyay has played with his characters' personal affairs only, without taking the concern of other prominent issues. Further the last story of the collection "The Great Man's House" depicts the life of a man who is 60 years old and brings a new young wife and, his servant Mohan Ram. In the beginning, everything goes well but when he grows older, his wife starts an affair with other people. After 5 years of his second marriage, he was surrounded by several diseases and became bedridden.

Samrat Upadhyay raises the issues that look the ground reality of domestic and conjugal life of Nepali society where women are considered weak and vulnerable and their lifestyles are constructed by their parents and the society. He basically deals with the issues of family, love and how these relationships are being shattered among the residents of Nepal.

Another novelist of the period is Manjushree Thapa, who is concerned with the past, present and future of her country, she almost remains obsessed with politics, poverty, and corruption of Nepal. Her debut novel *The Tutor of History* (2001) was published in the same year in which Samrat Upadhyay's *Arresting God in Kathmandu* (2001) was published. In her novel, Thapa has minutely depicted the historical events and woven it with her characters and events. The novel is set around the context of the 1990s style election campaign in Nepal with a depiction of warmly alive and gossipy town in the time of the election, which, at the same time, contrasts with the violent Maoist insurgency that has altered the life of Nepalese people. Her novel deals with political greed and corruption, bossism, the excesses of politicians and hypocrisy. The novel is a veritable portrait of contemporary Nepal in its political, social and cultural aspects. In the process, the history of Nepal from the days of pro-democracy people's movement of 1990 to the rise of Maoist opposition to the monarchy has been telescoped. The novel also portrays the criticism of the political leaders, caste and class berries, religion and sex etc.

Her other book, *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* (2005) published 4 years later to *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, in which she has depicted the tangled politics of Nepal and brought the political unrest in front of the world, as she sees the ongoing democratic process after 1990 fallible due to the wrong direction in politics. Through this book, the world came to know about the war that was being fought to achieve democracy in Nepal. The book begins with the historical account of the Narayanhiti massacre and its aftermath, she goes a couple of centuries back to trace the history, often chaotic, of Nepal's monarchy since unification in the 18th century, and of the struggle, in the 20th century, for genuine democracy. She ends with a record of her trek into Maoist held territories in west Nepal, where the majority continue to live in poverty, human rights abuses are on the rise, and boys and girls as young as thirteen have taken to the gun. It also recounts the massacre of King Birendra's family in 2001 in which King and Queen along with their several family members were shot dead by crown prince Dipendra. The theorist, Paul Hamilton says that past is to be understood on the model of interpreting a text; and texts, literary or otherwise, only have meaning within an economy of other texts. This line is justified in the context of other Nepali writers viz. Manjushree Thapa, Narayan Wagle but in Upadhyay's term, it is not applicable.

The next contemporary writer is Narayan Wagle, whose only novel *Palpasa Café* (2005), was published in the Nepali language during the year of Maoist Insurgency. "In Palpasa Café, Wagle gives an allegorical account of the Civil War. One of the tragic outcomes of the war was the murder of Nepal's king and queen. This event triggers the imagination of the narrator to mourn the present situation. The murder of the monarchs left a national void which brought on much tumult. He is surprised by a noisy outburst between the police and people. He is flustered by this turbulence wherein people suffered persecution at the hands of the police" (Kaur and Jweid 5). The text has drawn widespread reader's attention to the three characters—Drishya, Palpasa and their friend Siddhartha. Siddhartha, now an underground Maoist guerrilla, narrates the bitter reality of the countryside. Drishya yields to Siddhartha's persistence to get awakened to a series of shocking occurrences in the countryside – forceful recruitment of the children, merciless sabotages and brutal killings of the civilians. Siddhartha was brutally shot dead by the cordon's and Palpasa was killed in bus explosion while heading towards Kathmandu. Some unidentified men came to Drishya's home and abducted him. The novel is one of the most media-hyped texts written surrounding the events of people's war. Kunda Dixit in Nepali Times' book review, claimed: "Narayan Wagle's book can be called an anti-war novel. He further adds, "Not only is this

novel as fresh as an open wound, the author's imagination makes Nepal's real unfolding tragedy come alive with raw urgency" (2).

Written along the same line of style is *Chhapamar Ko Chhoro*, a collection of short stories in Nepali language by Mahes Vikram Shah, which presents social realities including the plight and state of society and the people during the insurgency. Among the fictions, *Facing My Phantom* (2010) by Sheeba Shan presents the sufferings of an elite family and the changing political and social scenario of Nepal during the conflict. Martin Chautari's *By the Way: Travels Through Nepal's Conflict* (2008) is a collection of travel journal which represents village life from the field during the conflict. The next work, *Chhapamar Yubati ko Diary* (2010) is a memoir by Tara Rai written during her captive life in the army camp. Kunda Dixit in his *A People's War: Images of the Nepal Conflict 1996 to 2006* (2007) represents a decade-long conflict in photographs with descriptive and introductory text. The photo-text presents the mayhem: deaths and destruction caused by the conflict. Narayan Dhakal's *Pretkalpa* (2008) set during the reign of Chandra Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana in the early years of the twentieth century, tells the story of a young Brahman named Balkrishna Acharya. The novel shows caste conservatism and the writer has also mentioned the historical event of King Tribhuvan's coronation in Kathmandu. Yug Pathak, *Urgenka Ghoda* (2009), a novel that tells the story of Tamang warriors who keep battling with the King's army. The events of this novel's central narrative take place during the 'People's War' in the country. Yug Pathak, himself, was in custody by the time its fifth and final part was published and while writers and journalists campaigned for his release, he was tortured in jail. Interestingly, the authors of *Urgenka Ghoda* and *Pretkalpa*, have all delved into the past and drawn lessons from it for contemporary Nepali society. In contrast to Upadhyay, there are some other Nepali writers who have poured these conflictual themes into their Nepali narratives (autobiography, memoir, drama, short stories and fictions etc.) which are able to remind the readers of the traumatic grief that they have individually gone through and they have successfully poured those mnemonic pasts on the papers.

After the above dissection, I wind up that the book, *Arresting God in Kathmandu*, has a complete historical gap, the major historical events of Nepal such as The Rana Rule, the Nepalese People's War, Party-less Panchayat, and the Royal Massacre are completely absent in this particular piece. Though Upadhyay's book was published in 2001, means he has seen 5 years of Maoist escalation with the state force, still, his story seems absentia of historical truth. He has not interwoven his characters with the real face of Nepal's history. Being a prominent writer of Nepal, it is expected from him to depict the reality of the country through his creative writings because Nepal had experienced full of chaotic history and suffered complete instability. The only shadowy image of history can be seen in his short story, "The Cooking Poet", in which he envisaged a glimpse of the historical background of the uncertain period of Rana rule (1846 to 1951). While the depiction of other Nepali writers of the political happenings and social realities experienced by the people are disturbing but they ring true, whereas, Upadhyay has not depicted Nepal of the last few decades through his fictional lens. The short story, *Arresting God in Kathmandu* is punctuated by these conspicuous informational gaps and narrative ellipses related to the central enigma of the story regarding history. This paper argues that Upadhyay incites us to read in these gaps an ineffable absence that resists textual representation, whether historiographic or literary.

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