

Narayan Wagle. 2008. *Palpasa Café*. English translation by Bikash Sangraula. Kathmandu: Publication nepa ~ laya.

Fiction is one method of portraying war and conflict. Fictional narratives can demand to be taken seriously as an equally legitimate branch of knowledge about war by the strength of their own verve and written power. However telling authentic fictional stories about real war is a difficult, high wire balancing act. There are dangers of never escaping history and also never developing a narrative, neither being factually correct nor descriptively interesting. Novelists may successfully walk the tightrope and, at times, go on to produce moments seemingly more authentic and powerful than the mass of typically sterile and academic reports usually spawned by war. Like travelogues, journalism and personal testimony fiction can provide another, perhaps more human way of talking about conflict and tumultuous recent history as well as in writing words against war.

The English language translation of the best-selling Nepali novel *Palpasa Café* by the editor of the newspaper *Kāntipur*, Narayan Wagle, is one attempt to write about war and traverse this high wire act. Like all bestsellers it may be more widely bought than read. It mostly fails to gain

fictional take-off but is worth reading, reviewing and discussing seriously not out of sympathy for Wagle's or the translation team's large effort, but as a rare attempt to write fictionalised truths in English about the Nepali conflict.

The novel also, obviously, reflects the author's own experience as a Brahmin male based largely in Kathmandu. I hope to show that Wagle's journalism background rather than his caste identity is crucial in understanding *Palpasa Café's* successes and failures. It is to Wagle's credit that he has written about what he knows and not attempted to include many different aspects of Nepal which would, incidentally, be a very boring exercise in paint-by-numbers prescriptive fiction. Unfortunately *Palpasa Café* currently seems to be more discussed for a literary prize that it should or should not have won, as well as for its marketing process than for its actual content.

One intention of translating the novel into English is surely to help foreigners, both tourist and expatriates alike, to understand what happened in the recent Nepali past. The novel contains a short helpful glossary and does not overburden the text with overlong explanations of detail for non-Nepalis (as Manjushree Thapa's otherwise excellent *The Tutor of History* tends to). Like the Nepali edition the book is perhaps also aimed at the Nepali urban middle-class, whom Wagle presumably knows well, as well as diaspora Nepalis. The real dedicatees of the novel are all victims of the war and the novel as a whole can be seen as a fictionalised attempt at not forgetting, during a time when, perhaps, many wish victims would move on.

Palpasa Café is the story of a Kathmandu-based artist, Drishya, who falls in love with a Nepali American returnee, Palpasa. Along the way Drishya also sees for himself the devastating effects of Nepal's conflict in the hills, via a mysterious old college friend (named Siddhartha) turned Maoist. These are the main characters who tell Wagle's story. The novel stands out primarily not as a fiction tale with authentic characters but, instead, as an embodiment of what Drishya calls "the stand...of the people who resisted the war-mongers on both sides" (p. 213). In broad brushstrokes, like the artist Drishya, Wagle tries to use the novel to protest "against both warring sides....., my colours showing my support for the third camp" (p. 213).

The novel begins with a description of the central character, Drishya, being abducted. This is told within a post-modern introduction which, like the similarly ironic ending is deliberately out of place with the rest of the novel's straightforward narrative style. The introduction is post-

modern in the sense that Wagle introduces himself as a character, a journalist who has written the true story of Drishya during the conflict. In his final second cameo appearance within the pages, Wagle uses the format to acknowledge with a wink that he might not have done his characters justice and that “all written works are incomplete. Something’s always missing. There’s always more to add” (p. 231). Using the author-as-character is a risky fictional device suggesting a paucity of original material and an overly self-referential style (especially for an existing full-time journalist). By limiting it to the bookends Wagle nearly carries it off but his final cameo appearance suggests a lack of confidence in his first published fictional material as well a need to spell out and reiterate his main intentions to the reader.

The main part of the novel begins with a portrayal of Drishya and Palpasa’s first encounters in Goa and then moves onto Kathmandu covering Drishya’s artistic and personal torments. A large and dramatic section of the novel is then given to Drishya’s journeys across conflict-wrecked hills before inevitable tragedy strikes and he returns to Kathmandu. Throughout long sections are taken up by dialogues between Drishya and Palpasa, or Drishya and Siddhartha. These dialogues explore individual tragedies and conflict inside the main protagonists concerning the well-worn themes of love, art and politics. These inner explorations are not well connected with the outer violent conflict in Nepal. This is symbolic of a wider indecision in the novel between portraying what Wagle the journalist saw and what Wagle the novelist wishes to write; between Wagle’s journalism and his fiction.

Wagle’s best observed sections, perhaps unintentionally, are in the broader canvas he paints using his journalistic brushes – firstly in the disappearances and general tension of post-royal massacre in Kathmandu and then of the conflict in the hills. Wagle, through Drishya, writes with reflective knowing of the feverish and out of control atmosphere after the royal massacre and how “a thick fog of uncertainty hung over us all” (p. 72). Wagle, ever the journalist, also notices small details like how “it was risky for men to walk about without having shaved their heads in mourning” (p. 72). Wagle also cannot help noting the cavalcade of foreign journalists suddenly arriving in Nepal, as tourists leave. The “desperate journalists” swarm on Durbar Marg “erecting satellite censors and positioning their cameras for live telecasts” (p. 75).

The novel also carefully portrays the particular impact of the conflict in the hills. Wagle’s descriptions of schools being blown up, emptying villages, indiscriminate bombs, abduction, and mourning Nepali families

are generally hard-hitting and powerful. Wagle finds a particularly credible voice in his description of a Maoist attack on a district headquarter. The attack is described as briskly as it happens: "I held on tightly to my cot. 'Shoot! Shoot!' Myriad noises assaulted my ears. The cat wailed" (p.132). Then, dazed and wearied, the market awakes and the shell-shocked inhabitants "looked at each other as if surprised so many people were still alive" (p. 133). The post-attack shock of a lodge-owner is also distressingly well-represented through her "incomprehensible mumbling," violent "trembling" and her son having "wet his pants" (p. 133).

As elsewhere the purple passages involve more of what Wagle the journalist saw and heard about and less of what the reader might expect a painter like Drishya to feel and note. Wagle bitingly mocks his own profession again when a helicopter full of journalists lands in the district headquarter after the Maoist attack. Hunting for fast answers they "all rushed away" herd-like before Drishya "could answer the last question" (p.135). The journalists demonstrate a habitually short attention span as they move from questioning Drishya to a nearby policeman to the police inspector to the chief district officer in rapid succession.

Mourning families in the hills are also closely observed such as those of his dead ritual friend, Resham. Miit-Ba is "in despair" after Resham's death and he and his wife "sometimes...weep, sometimes they mumble strange things. There are days when they don't say a single word and days when they never stop talking" (p. 140). Drishya hears about another old couple who have one son in the army and one in the rebels. He is told "The one in the army sent them a message saying....they should go to Kathmandu because it's too dangerous for him to come back here. But the old folk can't go to Kathmandu....Their grief's going to kill them one day" (p. 143). Wagle wishes to tell the common tales of individual and family trauma from the conflict. Whether fiction or journalism is the best vehicle for him to do this is debatable.

Palpasa Café, almost incidentally, neatly notes individual stories in other aspects of modern Nepal. This includes diaspora Nepalis (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. There is a touching description of young boys entering the Kathmandu valley for the first time which leads Drishya back to his own childhood. When Drishya finds out that the young boys are from the same region as he, his "eyes welled with tears..." and says "When I entered the 'Nepal' valley for the first

time, I'd been like these boys, excited and uncertain" (p. 38). Wagle too moved to Kathmandu for study from Tanahu and part of the power of this passage may come from his own autobiographical recollections.

There are many aspects to criticise about *Palpasa Café* and things also perhaps lost in translation too. Wagle's main characters are not believable except as two-dimensional archetypes, railroaded into standing up for art, politics or creativity in extended and overlong dialogues. Palpasa represents the creative spirit, and the younger generation and is mostly there as the perfect foil for Drishya's banter. Her side of the story is never told and as Wagle states in the post-modern end piece that "would've given my novel another dimension" (p. 231). Many readers may be tempted to skip the weak characterisations and dialogues all together in order to reach Wagle's more interesting and well-written description of war-time events.

The style for the awkward dialogues model is set at the start of the novel proper when Palpasa and Drishya meet in Goa. At one point Palpasa says "Oh, didn't I tell you where I was staying?" Drishya replies "No, and I didn't ask." Palpasa replies "Then you're a fool as well!" Drishya then replies "I wasn't before I met you". Palpasa asks what he means and he replies "I lost my senses when I met you" (p. 12). The dialogues barely evolve beyond this kind of he-said, she-said repartee and schoolchild level of male-female taunts. When it does Drishya is the authoritative model artist-philosopher proclaiming on the one hand that "artists care very much, especially when they find someone who appreciates their work..." (p. 19), while later, typically, pondering aloud that "There's energy in inner conflict....It drives human beings to search for clarity and resolution...." (p. 30).

Later too the Maoist underground figure Siddhartha and Drishya argue, occasionally with verve, around the age-old debates of art and politics and whether it is "possible to create without destroying" (p. 82). These debates are slightly more nuanced and realistic than those between Palpasa and Drishya. However, even here Siddhartha does not develop an actually existing character but, instead, is only really alive as an ideologue served up to fit Wagle's demand for an art versus politics debate. Siddhartha, the old college friend and confirmed Maoist, sums up the difference between him and Drishya saying "You give too much weight to the importance of the individual" (p. 84). Drishya, the artist, believes "in the supremacy of the free individual" (p. 84) and cannot accept violence and deaths in the name of a supposedly greater communal good.

The image of Siddhartha largely comes not from a short physical description (Wagle only says he has a “bony face,” “a cap and dark glasses” and was “unshaven, tall and lean, with prominent cheekbones” (p. 75)) but from his stereotypical torrent of leftist vocabulary. Siddhartha mouths the words we expect of a Maoist ideologue: ‘totality’, ‘objectively’, ‘fundamental structures’, ‘a scientific approach’, ‘reactionary’ and so on (p.79, 82, 83, 86). Drishya responds in kind as an artist and ordinary citizen and the characters remain underdeveloped straw men.

In general, the Maoist figures and security forces have no real role in this novel and are intentionally shadowy, almost non-human ideologues. Interestingly when Wagle later met Prachanda (and Baburam Bhattarai) as editor of *Kāntipur* for a secret interview in February 2006, “Demystified!” was apparently the first word Wagle uttered after leaving the interview venue (<http://blog.com.np/united-we-blog/2006/02/12/a-rendezvous-with-prachanda/>). Their representation as another species in *Palpasa Café* dates the novel to a time before Maoists came above ground and on TV.

Language and translation issues also hinder the novel. At Drishya and Palpasa’s first meeting in Goa, the repetitive description of Palpasa’s eyes as “fresh, juicy” like “slices of pineapple” which “were dripping with juice” is embarrassing and downright corny (p.16, 17). The nauseating language continues in the following Drishya-Palpasa dialogue. Drishya asks “What did I steal?” Palpasa replies “My heart.” Drishya responds “So, you’re calling me a thief?” and later says “Is it only your heart I’ve stolen?” “I wanted to steal all of you...” (p.31). The book also contains several small grammatical errors such as the sentence: “I wanted to my art to contribute to the transformation” (p.120).

For some reason the language in the letters from Drishya and Palpasa appears to have been much more closely revised than passages elsewhere. For example Drishya writes a letter filled with uncharacteristically attractive English to Palpasa via her Grandmother:

Your hopes are pinned on the gods, the farmers’ on the mountains and mine on you. I made you dance and you were happy. The day I saw you dance was the happiest day of my life. It was as though the snow on the mountains was melting in the sun and a magnificent rainbow had appeared on the horizon (p. 96).

There are also problems concerning the book’s narrative structure. From the end of chapter nineteen a series of devastating events occur in rapid

and very unbelievable succession. The reader is asked to believe that the central character, Drishya, is spectacularly unlucky in terms of being affected by the war. Since the reader does not know Drishya as a fully-rounded character, only instead as the fountain of wise home truths around art, then we consequently care less about what happens to him or those he loves.

Wagle's simple message throughout the novel seems summed up by a boatman who rows Drishya away from death:

The boatman strained against the current. "It's so sad to see war in our country," he said. "It's terrible to see our own people die. Don't you think so, bhai?" (p. 169)

This message could have been conveyed in other ways more suited to Wagle the journalist. As it is *Palpasa Café* ends up being an unfulfilling mixture of occasional journalistic insight, weak characterisation and poor dialogue. Fiction has something to offer as an attempt at writing another form of the truth, to be another kind of historical record and memorial for victims. And *Palpasa Café* has these noble aims of writing against war, bringing home the personal devastation of the conflict and remembering the victims. A translated novel will always lose something in the process of translation and perhaps loses more when it tries to honestly write about such disputed recent history and war. However, Wagle would have been better to convey his thoughts, experiences and feelings about the war in a factual context, perhaps in the form of a travelogue or snapshots of different conflict-affected lives around the country.

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