

# Impressionistic Aestheticism in *Palpasa Café*

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## 1. Introduction

Aestheticism was developed in the late Victorian era in England. It was a movement against the then Victorian moralities and hypocrisies in an attempt to inspire people to seek pleasure instead of morality and utility in art.

Walter Pater (1839-94), regarded as the father of English Aestheticism, was the first person to introduce the views of French aestheticism into Victorian England. He advocated of “the supreme value of beauty” and of “the love of art for its own sake” (Abrams, 2004, p. 3). Pater’s aestheticism is impressionistic aestheticism, i. e. he gives importance to beauty and subjective impressions of an object.

This article is an analysis of the novel *Palpasa Café* by Narayan Wagle on the model of Pater’s impressionistic aestheticism. It is based upon the article writer’s M. A. research. It contains: 1) Introduction, 2) Assumptions of Pater’s Aestheticism, 3) Presence of Aesthetic Ideology in the Novel, and 4) Conclusion.

## 2. Assumptions of Pater’s Aestheticism

Walter Pater’s ideas expressed in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) can be summarized as follows:

- a) ‘Beauty’ and ‘impression’ of an object are important. A beautiful object produces ‘special impression of beauty or pleasure’.
- b) A work of art is judged subjectively. An art which has a complete union of form and content is an ideal art. Art must give pleasure and exert charm as it excites or surprises the observers.
- c) Beauty is relative. Beauty should be defined in the most concrete terms possible. Beauty should be manifested.
- d) Beauty is untranslatable. Beauty is an order of distinct impressions.
- e) Each art has its own peculiar and untranslatable sensuous charm. It is also possible that each art may seem to be impressed by some other arts. The arts are able to lend each other new forces.
- f) Music is the most perfect art. All the other forms of art strive to reach the position of music. Music is a very high art because, in it, it is impossible to distinguish the matter from the form.

- g) An artistic genius employs all details with refined and complicated thoughts and passions to create a happier world than we are living in.
- h) Art is for Art's sake. Impressions of an art work may vary person to person. But art should not be judged for its objective or goal.

### 3. Presence of Aesthetic Ideology in the Novel

#### 3.1 Summary of the Plot

The novel is in double narrative form. The first narrator is a newspaper editor who has written a novel *Palpasa Café*. It is the story of Drishya, his artist friend. So the core story is told by Drishya. The novel is just finished, and the editor waits for Drishya in a restaurant. Meanwhile, Drishya is abducted from his gallery by five unidentified people. The novel ends without providing his whereabouts.

In the story, Drishya meets Palpasa in Goa. Then, they fall in love. Meanwhile, Drishya goes to his village on trekking with Siddhartha, his former college friend and now an underground Maoist leader, without informing Palpasa. He describes his encounters with various people and their sorrowful stories. While returning from village, Drishya unexpectedly meets Palpasa on the bus, which falls prey to a bomb explosion caused by Maoist shortly after. Drishya escapes, but Palpasa is killed.

After the mishap, Drishya returns alone and makes a series of paintings. He has also a plan of establishing a resort, Palpasa Café, with a library, an art gallery and internet facilities, at a hillside. But his plan remains incomplete.

#### 3.2 Conflict between two Perspectives: Marxist and Aesthetic

Drishya travels a lot and makes paintings, which he auctions in his own gallery in Kathmandu. He is not just an ordinary painter. He has own ideology on arts and artists. For him, an art work doesn't have any prior objective. He says, "Paintings aren't meant to change society" (Wagle, 2008, p. 85). This responsibility is that of politics. Art should be free of politics. If politics is mixed up with art, it becomes "mere propaganda" (ibid).

For Drishya, painting is "like music, removed from day-to-day life". He says it is "a medium that touches the heart and mind simultaneously" which seeks only "the synergy of brushstrokes and colours" (Wagle, 2008, p. 85).

Drishya doesn't have a special purpose while painting pictures. He creates them according to his experience of a particular place or time.

His ideology has greatly affected his manners. He is liberal and supports individual freedom. He says, "The spirit should always be free" (Wagle, 2008, p. 11). He even says, "We don't need to tie ourselves to any 'isms'" (Wagle, 2008, p. 12). He freely roams around for he believes that one should be free to express oneself freely.

Once, in the middle of the novel, Drishya openly declares that he is an anti-Marxist. Answering a question by a customer, he says he isn't a Marxist. He says, "If I believe in any ism, it's aestheticism" (Wagle, 2008, p. 80).

On the other hand, Siddhartha is a Marxist. He says we should look at things in "their totality" and we should analyze individuals "objectively" (Wagle, 2008, p. 79). As per him, objective perception helps us realize the hope in the society.

Siddhartha and Drishya have their own priorities. Drishya believes in "the supremacy of the free individual", whereas Siddhartha talks about "institution" (Wagle, 2008, p. 84).

Siddhartha's perspective on arts and beauty, too, differs from that of Drishya. Siddhartha thinks artists should have "urge to change society" (Wagle, 2008, p. 85). Drishya believes the opposite. For Siddhartha beauty lies "in the bitter truths of life" (Wagle, 2008, p. 85). Siddhartha says that Drishya's colors express only fantasy, so his paintings are meaningless. Siddhartha accuses Drishya of being lost in a cacophony of culture, songs and dances, a fantasy world of colours. It is a big insult for Drishya, an aesthete.

Drishya feels that Siddhartha's ideals are sweet to hear, but they are not practiced in his comrade's behavior. When Drishya goes to his village with Siddhartha, he meets many characters suffering in vain just because of the 'people's war' Siddhartha and his comrades started. Drishya hates the violent way they have chosen to get their genuine demands fulfilled. Therefore, Drishya exposes their dictatorial manners through his narration. He is rather ironic to them.

While roaming around the village, Drishya feels Siddhartha is also not less responsible than the oppressive state for the plight of the innocent and straight-forward villagers. Despite Siddhartha's claim that he is fighting to free these people from poverty and injustice, these things were added more to their life.

Drishya says Siddhartha is "out of tune" (Wagle, 2008, p. 169). Siddhartha is killed by the security forces in front of him in a village. He has remorse that he helped the soldiers to recognize Siddhartha mistakenly calling out his name. Otherwise, he is not so much sorry about his death. He feels rather free of the relationship with Siddhartha. He says: "I was free from the bonds of that friendship. I'd left it behind" (Wagle, 2008, p. 182).

The death of Siddhartha has a symbolic meaning. It shows that one who always seeks harsh reality dies without knowing beauty. Siddhartha's objective view doesn't help him see the beauty Drishya discerns on things and people.

At the climax of the plot, Palpasa is killed in an explosion by Maoists. Symbolically, Palpasa's death is the destruction of beauty, art and innovation by Marxists.

Drishya is very sorry and shocked at Palpasa's death. He feels he has lost his dearest asset, his sweetest dream. He returns alone from the village. Then, he openly declares his fight against over-powering forces.

### 3.3 Subjective Impressions in Creating and Judgment of Arts

Drishya paints his pictures according to the impressions of objects or people around him. He tries to incorporate his personal feelings and interests about something, i. e. inspiration. He has his own style of using colors, shade and light. He doesn't paint an object as it is. Therefore, he paints the Chandragiri Hills "orange" (Wagle, 2008, p. 46) instead of using the usual green colour for it.

After Palpasa's death, Drishya doesn't see any difference between blood and vermilion. He is intoxicated with bloody impressions. So, he uses colour as his "weapon" to fight against his opposite forces. He also mixes the colours according to "the mood" (Wagle, 2008, p. 221).

After Drishya returns from Goa, he reaches to Palpasa's house in Kathmandu. At first, he doesn't know who the house owner is. He is there in search of a book about painting. He likes the structure and decoration of the house and its garden very much. He especially likes the Buddha statue in the garden. He thinks "... Artists live on a higher plane. They create a separate world, another reality. They conjure characters from their minds." (Wagle, 2008, p. 49). His idea is similar to that of Walter Pater about an artistic genius. For Pater, the artistic genius has the ability of "conceiving humanity in a new and striking way" (Pater, 1873, p. 213). A person who has this genius can create a world happier than the mean world we are living. S/he can select, change or modify the images according to his or her own imaginative power.

Drishya appreciates the Buddha idol's eyes, and imagines himself creating the same art. Certainly his present mood would affect his creation of art. He is in illusion, and so he admits that the eyes of the Buddha idol would be "crowded with illusions" (Wagle, 2008, p. 49).

When Kapil, Drishya's friend, asks the meaning of his painting *Langtang 1995*, at a get-together party, Drishya suggests him to "go beyond what's represented and try to feel the mood" (Wagle, 2008, p. 67), i.e. to be subjective. His painting doesn't represent the real object *Langtang*, but it has captured just "the mood of 95". Mood is related to mind. It is not always the same. It gets changed in due course of time.

Drishya frequently admits, many times in course of his narration, that his art is impressionistic. Drishya has been very much impressed by his village surroundings. He says he has learnt different skills of his art from natural things like hills, mustard fields, wind, water, etc.

After Palpasa's death, Drishya goes to Palpasa's house to meet her grandmother. There he again sees the same idol of Buddha which had fascinated him with its beautiful eyes. This time, he sees no peace in the eyes. He thinks: "If this Buddha were made today, he'd carry a gun in his hands" (Wagle, 2008, p. 191). Definitely, the creator of the Buddha would incorporate his present impression into his creation.

After losing Palpasa, he starts making new paintings which he has named *Palpasa Series*. These paintings are “a reflection” of his journey and his sufferings, so he can’t “be objective” (Wagle, 2008, p. 212).

After completing the paintings, he puts them in auction in his gallery. When his customers, a Japanese couple, ask him about his way of mixing colors, he replies that he does it “as the mood takes” him. He further says, “The language of colour depends on the eye of the viewer ...colors depend on the way you see them” (Wagle, 2008, p. 221).

Drishya admits a relationship between the hills, the seasons and the colors in the painting, and says that his painting carries the impression because he grew up with “the colors the flowers painted the hills” (Wagle, 2008, p. 225).

Palpasa, a fan of Drishya’s paintings, has also many subjective impressions. Drishya’s works seem “romantic” and having “something new” every time (Wagle, 2008, p. 20) to her.

Palpasa is very much charmed by a particular painting named “Rain”, in which a long yellow leaf is falling. “The leaf falls and falls but never touches the ground”, Palpasa writes in a letter to Drishya, “I feel like that leaf” (Wagle, 2008, p. 28). The picture represents Palpasa’s unstable mood.

Palpasa thinks that a viewer understands a painting or an art work according to his or her inner state of mind. The same painting might carry different meanings for other viewers. So, she writes to Drishya that the true depths of a painting “lie in the mind of the viewer” (Wagle, 2008, p. 21).

Palpasa also says Drishya’s work has “left its mark” (Wagle, 2008, p. 24) on her. She tries to know Drishya through the pages of his book because she believes that “Words can be a mirror of the self” (Wagle, 2008, p. 25).

### **3.4. Desire for Beauty and Pleasure**

An aesthete has “the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects” (Pater, 1873, p. x). An aesthetic critic possesses the “temperament” with which he or she identifies “the virtue” of a beautiful art object which produces the “special impression of beauty and pleasure” (ibid). It is the critic’s attitude to find the source of that impression and the condition for its experience.

In *Palpasa Café*, Drishya is often in search of beauty and pleasure in any object or person around him. He finds beauty and pleasure in Palpasa. He is attracted to her physical beauty, i.e. manifest beauty. Her “dark, beautiful” eyebrow and “large and clear” eyes remind him of “fresh juicy slices of pineapple” (Wagle, 2008, p. 16). He has the temperament of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful Palpasa. At his first meeting, Palpasa is only an object of pleasure. So he is in a mood to romance with her.

Palpasa's first letter is "the most beautiful" (Wagle, 2008, p. 29) one in Drishya's life. Palpasa observes Drishya's obsession to beauty as she says, "You see beauty in everything" (Wagle, 2008, p. 30).

By the time Drishya writes a letter to Palpasa's grandmother, he is already known to another dimension of her beauty, i.e. her inner beauty, talent. So, he writes that she is "beautiful, intelligent...every aspect of her is beautiful. Her intelligence shines like a snow-covered slope in the sun does" (Wagle, 2008, p. 98). Here, Drishya, as Pater says, finds Palpasa's beauty in more than one form, i.e. many forms of beauty manifested in Palpasa.

While walking along the trail in his village, Drishya doesn't want to miss the pleasant sight of the beauty of rhododendron flowers. He is "thrilled" and "overwhelmed" to see them all around him (Wagle 2008: 130). In fact, Drishya has instinct for beauty and pleasure.

#### 4. Conclusion

The study confirms the presence of main assumptions of impressionistic aestheticism in the novel. Drishya's protest against the influence and involvement of politics in art, his objection to Marxist objectivity and appreciation of subjective approach for the judgment and creation of arts, and his almost all time quest for beauty and pleasure in arts are the qualities of a genuine aesthete. The whole novel is dominated by Drishya's aesthetic ideals.

#### References

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