Journal of Tikapur Multiple Campus
Vol.7; February 2024
ISSN: 2382-5227
Published by Research Management Cell (RMC)
Tikapur Multiple Campus, Kailali, Nepal

Feminist Narrativization of trauma in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*

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Abstract

The study explores on the feminist standpoint of trauma narration in Julia Alvarez's magnum opus, *In the Time of the Butterflies*. Set against the tragic backdrop of the Mirabel sisters' 1960 massacre and the pervasive exploitation of women during Trujillo's cruel reign in the Dominican Republic, Alvarez intricately weaves personal and political struggles. In this backdrop, the research focuses on Alvarez's use of storytelling techniques to illuminate the traumatic experiences of women, particularly highlighting Dede Mirabel as a testimonial figure in the broader feminist strife. So, the study purposes to unravel the complex layers of feminist discourse within the novel. Utilizing a descriptive based qualitative approach grounded in narrative procedures, this research integrates insights from trauma studies scholars such as Leigh Gilmore, Cathy Caruth, Laura Stark, Hawkins et al., and Jeffrey C. Alexander. The overarching goal is to develop a theoretical framework that elucidates how the novel depicts traumatic experiences within patriarchal structures. This research is significant as it uncovers the intersection of gender and historical trauma, offering a subtle understanding of women steering their experiences amid political oppression. The findings are expected to deepen our grasp of the novel's feminist dimensions and serve as a foundation for future inquiries into the juncture of feminist literature encouraging further exploration of how women's stories shape societal perceptions. Thus, this study lays the groundwork for future research in similar themes across trauma literature.

***Keywords*:** Feminist discourse, traumatic memory, Mirabel sisters, resisting patriarchy, intersectionality

Introduction

Julia Alvarez's 1994 novel "In the Time of the Butterflies" recounts the brutal violence under General Trujillo's regime, focusing on the unspeakable massacre of the three Mirabel sisters− Patria, Minerva and María Teresa Mirabal, in 1960. Alvarez tries to highlight the massacre of Mirabel sisters to liven the terrifying trauma and exploitation using Dede, the surviving Mirabel sister, as a witnessing tool for the event. In this backdrop, the title frames an in-depth study of how Alvarez utilizes a feminist perspective to narrate the sisters' historical struggles, underscoring the enduring effects of trauma on women.

Alvarez's novel is fictionalized account of the story of the three Mirabel sisters− Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa (Mete), who were brutally massacred by the Dictator Rafael Trujilo on November 25, 1960, shortly after the Alvarez family fled to the United States. The novel plays a crucial role in publicizing the traumatic plight of women under the oppressive regime where "they were raped, tortured and ultimately killed as the soldiers killed their opponents" (Silva Sirias, 2001, p.71). Dede serves as an onlooker to the brutal regime, contributing to the broader narrative of the Mirabal sisters' sacrifice, narrating the harrowing impact of tyranny on women in a society gripped by patriarchal oppression. She becomes a symbol of resistance trauma testimony.

The study intends to uncover on how Alvarez unravels the layers of narrativization of women trauma that goes beyond the mere documentation of events. Again, this study tries to illuminate the ways in which the narrative strategies contribute to a feminist discourse on trauma, exploitation, and resistance. The study applies a research design that uses a descriptive method with a qualitative approach for the analysis of textual data. This study is important for ongoing discussion on the intersectionality of women's experiences and the importance of feminist storytelling in challenging oppressive systems. As a whole, the study finds that Julia Alvarez strategically utilizes Dede Mirabal in her novel as a testimonial tool to depict Trujillo's atrocities via a mediatization and storytelling process for recounting memories and highlighting the profound impact of trauma on both survivors and those who hear their stories.

The research is structured into five main sections, beginning with an introduction that covers title specifications, the problematic, and an overview of

the text, objectives, theoretical justification, sources, tools, and the significance and anticipated findings of the study. The second section focuses on a review of secondary sources to provide a comprehensive literature review. The third section outlines the methods and procedures employed in the research. The fourth section is dedicated to discussions and findings, while the fifth and final section presents concluding remarks.

Literature Review

The examination of feminist narrativization in literature, specifically focusing on Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* has gained significant scholarly attention and criticisms. This review searches the existing research, identifies key themes, and pinpoints research gaps within this specific scope.

Feminist literary criticism has evolved to encompass a wide array of perspectives and methodologies. Scholars such as Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* have laid the foundation for feminist critique by emphasizing the role of women in literature. This foundational work is crucial in understanding the broader context of feminist narrativization. However, the study intends to theorize trauma intensely incorporating with patriarchal havoc to broaden and politicize the traumatic experiences of victim women. This is what, the researcher finds lacking in Gilbert and Guber's aforesaid criticism.

Likewise, Alvarez's work, particularly *In the Time of the Butterflies*, has been a focal point in discussions on feminist storytelling. Alvarez (1994) intricately weaves the narrative around the Mirabal sisters and their sisterhood providing a nuanced portrayal of their lives and struggles in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo regime. Although, the novel revolves round the tormenting stories and attributes of sisterhood of Mirabel sisters but what I feel lacking here is on the way Mirable sisters resisted against the cruel Trujilo's reign to maintain the same level of freedom and right as men possessed.

Further, Tegan Zimmerman (2020) in his article "Unauthorized Storytelling: Reevaluating Racial Politics in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*" revisits Julia Alvarez's critically acclaimed historical novel as "historiographic metafiction and its depiction of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo's regime (1930-61)" (p.

96). Zimmerman's way of analyzing the novel is appreciable but he has overlooked the real voices of pain and exploitation raised by the female characters in his study. Additionally, as to Sandra Aravena de Herron writes, Julia Alvarez in her novel *In the Time of the Butterflies,* "by immersing herself in both cultures, United States and Dominican, overcomes all the adjustments a foreigner generally faces in becoming multicultural" (2003, p.406). Through this analysis, she can make deliberate and self-aware literary decisions to effectively convey her message to audiences from both cultures but remains close in the case of publicizing the traumatic cases of victim women and the sacrifice of three Mirabel sisters.

In addition, Smith (2002) argues that Alvarez's novel empowers female characters, presenting a feminist narrative that challenges traditional gender roles. This perspective is supported by Jones (2005), who highlights the flexibility of the Mirabel sisters as they direct oppressive societal structures. Both smith and Jones seem near to the problematic issue of the study, however, they remain partially disclose in overshadowing the oppression and domination of patriarchy on women.

The literature highlights a research gap in analyzing the Mirabal sisters' resistance against Trujillo's regime and their pursuit of gender equality. Notably, there is a lack of exploration of intersectionality in Alvarez's work. Scholars like Zimmerman and Aravena de Herron touch on aspects but overlook explicit voices of pain from female characters. Smith and Jones acknowledge female empowerment but partially reveal the oppressive impact of patriarchy. This study aims to fill these gaps through an intersectional approach, examining how the Mirabal sisters' feminist struggles intersect with their identity. A scarcity of contemporary analyses emphasizes the need for updated perspectives on Alvarez's relevance in current feminist discourses, covering women's exploitation, patriarchy, and trauma politics.

Methods

Utilizing the narrative techniques as textual analysis for the novel, the study employs a feminist viewpoint. This approach is complemented by a descriptive method, which intensively searches the echoes of trauma within the text. Drawing upon key scholars in trauma studies such as Leigh Gilmore, Cathy Caruth, Laura Stark, Hawkins et al., and Jeffrey C. Alexander, the study seeks to theorize how the novel engages with and represents traumatic experiences, particularly within the context of patriarchal structures.

Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001) and Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, and the Possibility of History* (1996) provide foundational insights into the complexities of trauma and testimony. The insights emphasize on the analysis of the inherent challenges and limitations in representing trauma through biographical vein. Contrarily, Stark in her *The Limits of Patriarchy* (2016) contributes to the examination of patriarchal structures, adding a dimension to the analysis by exploring how gendered power dynamics may shape and limit the expression of trauma. In the same line, *Undressing Patriarchy: Redressing Inequalities* by Hawkins et al. offers a multidimensional perspective on patriarchy and inequalities. Moreover, Alexander's *Cultural Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012) becomes a tool for analyzing how the novel addresses collective experiences of trauma within a feminist narrative.

This study uses a qualitative approach as a research design for secondary data-based textual analysis. It is employed to delve into the nuanced and subjective aspects of trauma representation in the novel. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the feminist dimensions of trauma. The primary method involves a close textual analysis of the novel. This includes identifying instances of trauma, examining narrative techniques, and analyzing character perspectives to unveil the feminist undertones in the representation of trauma.

Results and Discussion

In *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Julia Alvarez masterfully weaves a narrative that describes the unspeakable experiences of Dede, the surviving Mirable, on being a witness for the massacre of three Mirabal sisters− Patria Mirabal, Minerva Mirabal, and Maria Teresa Mirabal, in 1960 under the animalistic regime of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. Alvarez uses strategic narrativization to highlight the impact of trauma on individuals and society, stressing the role of memory and testimonial narratives. The novel unveils the patriarchal norms perpetuated by Trujillo, illustrating women's struggles and resistance against exploitation. Thus, she skillfully intertwines historical events with personal stories, creating a powerful portrayal of resilience, political activism, and the enduring legacy of the Mirabel sisters.

Alvarez begins the novel with "gringa dominicana" (p. 1) signaling the concept of an American Dominican. This term identifies the strong Mirabel sisters and their

bold challenge to American notions of superiority. Through her narrative, she takes a feminist stance, even though she herself is American Dominican. It illuminates the sense that even female like her can also publicize women's pang and via many fictional and non-fictional narratives in excellent English. Besides, Alvarez making Dede as a witness of the brutal assassination of other Mirabel sisters is to collectivize and politicize the series of death, exploitation and pain that has been victimized the women of Trujillo reign.

Strategically, Alvarez establishes a contextual backdrop for Dede by posing a series of pertinent inquiries, akin to the approach endorsed by Gilmore, with the aim of eliciting a comprehensive understanding of her historical experiences of trauma. In this vein, Gilmore (2001) opines−"memoire" as an evidence of any sort of historical event which can be emerged by redrawing the biographical memory" (p.2). Dede's cognitive landscape is densely occupied with distressing recollections, wherein she possesses an intricate and vivid recall of each detail. In an effort to mitigate and contextualize her trauma, Alvarez guides the interviewer through a mediatization process as:

> I'll tell myself, Dede, in your memory it is such and such a day, and I start over, playing the happy moment in my head. This is my movies−I have no television here. "It works?" "Of course', Dede says, almost fiercely. And when it doesn't work, she thinks, I get stuck playing the same bad moment. But why speak of that. (p.3)

Alvarez tactically employs Dede to transform the victim's memory into a testimonial instrument, narrativizing the traumatic event. According to Gilmore (2001), "memoir" of the surviving witness acts as "culture of confession" and "culture of testimony"(pp.1-2) for traumatic events. Dede, haunted by the brutal massacre and Trujillo's atrocities, recognizes the deceased sisters' historical impact on the living through the medium of memory, likened to cinematic narratives.

Moreover, Alvarez directs her attention towards the preservation of the surviving character's memory, aiming to enhance the veracity and vitality of traumatic events within the narrative. She states such reference as "The impact of trauma in our male dominated society falls upon surviving victims and listeners,-women who listens to the surviving character" (p.67). Further, Dede Mirabal, the surviving sister from the Mirabal family, engages in Alvarez's interview strategy. The

inaugural interview unfolds at the Mirabal familial residence situated in Ojo de Agua, serving as the house of Dede, venue for disclosing a painful memory of the massacre. The phrase "THE SISTER WHO SURVIVED" (p.5) indicates Dede, the living martyr of the massacre 1960 and the entire letter in the phrase are capitalized to make her as an agency for communicating the harrowing sight of trauma.

Likewise, the novel also historicizes the reign of Trujillo in the form terrific event with no peace and security where victims shatter by their traumatic memory. Such events, as Cathy Caruth (1996), "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrences of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (p.181). Dede's memorial witness activates Alvarez's thought to historicize the marked events of trauma from feminist standpoint that stresses on the profound and lasting impact of traumatic events on women's experiences. The line Alvarez quotes as "Dede often loves to be in the same garden where she and the other murdered sisters used to play and enjoy in their childhood" (p.98) is her literary plot of turning back to the memory of terrific history of 1960 massacre that alienated Dede from her sisters. Further, her connotative tactics of historicizing horrendous memory of the massacre of Mirable sisters, so far I comprehend, becomes the tool for solidifying victim women with a binary dissection ─sympathy over victim women and outrage over animalistic reign of Trujillo.

The novel has not only established Dede as an agency dedicated to recovering the collective memories of women but also endowed her with the role of a woman adhering to the values of a patriarchal society. The society focuses on "the rights and responsibilities assigned to the married couple, with the husband enjoying more rights and privileges than the wife (Laura Stark, 2016, p.18). This theory underscores Dede's unwavering commitment to honesty in her relationship with her husband and devotion to traditional socio-cultural ethics. So, Alvarez indirectly foregrounds this scenario in the words of Dede's father as: "Yes, of course, our Dede here is going to be the millionaire in the family…You, *mi napita,* you will be our little coquette. You'll make a lot of men's…a lot of men's mouths water" (p. 4), Consequently, Dede, distinct among her sisters, embodies a peacekeeping character, rejecting war and bloodshed. In depicting Trujilato patriarchy, Alvarez discloses societal norms subjugating women, illustrating Dede as a symbol of traditional female victimhood and conformity to patriarchal values.

Additionally, Minerva's growing body indicates the state of insecurity and fear in the reign of dictator like Trujillo that possesses extreme patriarchy. Extreme patriarchy, as analyzed in his "Feminist Narrativization of Patriarchy in Swosthani Vrata Katha", Nabraj Pandey (2022) "is mainly concerned with the idea of sex differences that culturally emboldens male dominance. Yet, it blocks women from their rights and makes them dependent on men" (p.92) mainly for their sexual contentment. Referring Minerva's case, Alvrez narrativizes the shared fear of women in the novel. More from the quotes:

> I could feel my breath coming short again. At first, I had thought it was caused by the cotton bandages. I had started trying around my chest so my breasts wouldn't grow. I wanted to be sure that what had happened to Lina Lovation would never happen to me but every time I'd hear one more secret about Trujilo. I could feel the tightening in my chest even when I was not wearing bandages. (p. 23)

In this setting of the whole chapter described by Minerva, the development in her concerns about Trujilo is telling. She has moved from the innocent doubt she felt at the age of twelve, first hearing of his misconducts, to a very real fear of becoming a reluctant object of sexual suppression by the Dictator.

Alvarez again unmasks the cruel patriarchy of Dominican Republic referring the ending paragraph of Minerva's Part I. "Cruel patriarchy emphasizes on power dynamics, social constructions of gender, and the intersectionality of oppression" (Hawkins et al., 2013). Alvarez notes:

> On the way home, Sor Ausncion scolded us. "You were not the ornament of the nation. You did not obey my epistle." As the road darkened, the beams of our headlights filled with hundreds of blinded moths. Where they hit the windshield, they left blurry marks, until it seemed like I was looking at the world through a curtain of tears. (p.15)

When Minerva rejects to fulfill Trujillo's sexual appetite, many males of the community pronounce Minerva as a disobedient female because for patriarchal male, "women are compared with beautiful ornament and easy commodity (Stark, 2016, p. 21). Sor Ausncion, a civilian of Trujilian reign, is just an example of living with rooted patriarchal ideology. In this way, Alvarez narrativizes such unspeakable women trauma.

Furthermore, Alvarez exposes the perpetration of patriarchy in the form open sexual exploitation on the young body of Women during Trujillato. She bridges the claim tying the way Minerva's friend Sinita hears Trujillo's saying about his secrecy in her interview as:

> According to Sinita, Trujillo became president in a sneaky way… all the people who were above him kept disappearing in the night … the head general was fallen in love with another man's wife…under the bridge in Santiago where people meet to do bad things. (p. 9)

Alvarez highlights the sexually charged manner of the men, aligning with Minerva's description of Trujillo's secrecy when she confides in her friend Sinita. This serves as a reference point to discuss sexual exploitation within her narrative of trauma.

Likewise, Alvarez crystalizes the violence on the young body of women that stagnate them from their growing political awareness in the contemporary male-driven society. Such political awareness against trauma occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a dreadful event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander, 2012, p.6). The subsequent vignette approves Alvarez's stance as:

> Bad things? Minerva interrupted. 'Trujillo was doing bad things?' It was as if I had just heard Jesus had slapped a baby or Our Blessed Mother had not conceived Him the Immaculate Conception way. 'That can't be true,' I said, but in my heart, I felt a china-crack of doubt. (p.17)

This way, the bad things that Trujillo had been doing are top-secret and of collective concern as the truth behind the girls' sexual bodies embody. Yet, Minerva's interruption while saying Trujilo's top-secret on her young body unfolds the savage image of male imposition where women had to be politically aware and matured for struggling.

In addition to it, the narrative illuminates facets of Minerva's life during pivotal stages at the ages of twelve, fifteen, and eighteen. In an anecdote entitled "*Pobrecita*!", Minerva's growing age is thematically muddled as her escalating anxieties about Trujillo coincide with her admiration for her classmate Lina Lovatón, whose beauty and sweet character attract the dictator's attention. Her friends quickly become aware that she has joined the ranks of his numerous female companions,

each assigned residences dispersed across the island. Subsequently, Minerva discovers that, due to the dictator's possessive spouse, Lina was moved to Miami where she lives "all alone now, waiting for him to call her up" (23). In this way, Alvarez politicizes collective trauma of women issuing the reference of Minerva's body exploitation.

The voice of Patria Mirabel, on the other hand, is quite distinct from that of Minerva, contributing to the magical voices in the novel that together conveys the experience of living under Trujillo's regime. The fearful and harrowing reign, as Alexander (2012) "severely causes pain" in her "psyche with grow of vengeance" (p.21) against such perpetration. Patria ultimately commits herself to the resistance through realizing the dictatorship's threat to the most important parts of her life, the church and her family. The many episodes that Patria recounts in each chapter illuminate the nature of her psychological Trauma and its growth: as she reflects at one point, "I got braver like a crab going sideways; I inched towards courage the best way I could, help out with the little things" (p.54). This is why that Patria solidifies and becomes dangerous like a crab.

The bold and conspicuous depiction of Minerva Mirabel's role as an underground rebellion for overthrowing Trujillato in her narrative signposts Alvarez tones of resistance against women trauma. To be more specific, what Alvarez dares to argue is resisting trauma for "politics of transformation". To substantiate such tone and theory, these lines become supportive as:

> Minerva and her husband led the forming of an opposition cell in 1957. Minerva's chapters are interlinked with a chronology of traumatic stories and her heroic deeds. I mean in my head after I got to Inmaculada and met Sinita and saw what happened to Lina and realized that I'd just left a small cage to go into a bigger one, the size of our whole country (p. 122).

Alvarez, thus, makes Minerva an agent for "feminist politics of trauma" that is "a resistance to objectification of women in society, in literature, art and culture" (Alexander, 2012, p.13).

Alvarez asserts that political life of women becomes so threatening and unsafe than their personal life in the rule of dictator. Minerva's involvement in the underground revolution ruins her personal life. In such situation, "balancing

between one's personal life and political life becomes very much frightening and risky" (Alexander, 2012, p. 64). Minerva reminds such situation as: “I’d argue with myself. What’s more important, romance or revolution? But a little voice kept saying, *both, both, I want both*. Back and forth, my mind went, weaving a 'yes' by night, and unraveling it by day to a no” (p.86). For Minerva, her conjugal struggles are closely linked to her political struggles. When Minerva and her husband Manolo reconcile after he was seeing another woman, Minerva tells Mate, “The struggle’s brought us together again” (140). Thus, Minerva's inner struggle is difficult for others to perceive. When she requests Patria to look after her son Manolito while she is away handling revolutionary matters, Patria finally comprehends the emotional difficulty Minerva experiences in making personal sacrifices for the sake of political involvement.

Additionally, Alvarez exposes the women's poignant pain and torture bringing the case of Mete, the youngest Mirable sister. Mete becomes the focal point of attention in Trujillo due to her exceptionally romantic nature among the sisters. She experiences various forms of bodily torment on her young body. When the men of Trujillo prohibit her journal, Mate senses emptiness as she bids farewell to her cherished writing: “Minerva was right. My soul has gotten deeper since I started writing in you. But this is what I want to know that not even Minerva knows. What do I do now to fill up that hole?” (p. 43).This episode indicates Mate’s later sacrifices. She pledges to repair the hole left by Trujillo's heinous acts. Mete tragically endures the loss of her child in confinement, a result of an imposed miscarriage. Mete recounts her own sorrowful and distressing narrative as, “Still very weak, but the bleeding has stopped. I cannot bear to tell the story yet. Just this—I have either bled a baby or had a period. And no one had to do a thing about it after the SIM got to me” (p.140). The entries in her journal detailing the events are missing, and they are only revisited and reconstructed towards the conclusion of the chapter. Reading through these segments of her diary is a deeply emotional and distressing experience.

In her epilogue, Dede convinces Alvarez on her memorial series which she mentions that her mind is overwhelmed with a vivid and distressing reel of traumatic experiences, likening it to a complete disc of distressing movie as "this is my movie−I have no television here" (p. 3), recounts again in the final paragraph of her epilogue chapter. In Caruth's word, the witnessing sights of any terrific memory akin

to Dede "leaves a recurring and overwhelming mark in the mind of trauma victim" (Caruth, 2001, p. 38). Here, Alvarez testifies Dede's series of memory as witnessing device for the massacre of her sisters in 1960 and publicizes the trauma and atrocity of brutal Trujillo.

Ultimately, Julia Alvarez hints up on the demythifying role of the murdered Mirabel sisters vocalizing as a female tone in the postscript of her novel. Alvarez patterns Mirabel sisters in the front line of feminist politics. She wills for "the spirit of the real Mirabel's" (p. 174) for she says "I want to immerse my readers in an epoch in the life of the Dominican Republic" and stops her pen with a slogan as "*Vivian las Mariposas*!" (The Mirabel's/the butterflies) (p.174).

Overall, the findings of the study shows that in her novel, Julia Alvarez strategically employs Dede Mirabal as a testimonial instrument to narrativize the traumatic events of the 1960 massacre and Trujillo's atrocities. Through a mediatization process, Alvarez makes Dede an agency for recounting memories, emphasizing the impact of trauma on surviving victims and listeners. Dede, representing the living martyr, becomes a living witness to the devastating events. Alvarez unveils patriarchal norms, portraying Dede as a symbol of traditional female victimhood and conformity to societal values. Thus, the novel underscores the intersectionality of oppression and the collective trauma experienced by women under Trujillo's regime, underlining resistance and political engagement for feminist transformation.

Conclusion

Julia Alvarez's novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* explores the intersection of feminism and trauma. The narrative delves into the lives and massacre of the three Mirabel sisters− Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa (Mete), who resisted the brutality of Trujillo regime in the Dominican Republic. She uses Dede Mirabel as a witnessing tool for the trauma narrativization. Focused on a feminist perspective, the analysis scrutinizes how the novel portrays the female experience of political violence, patriarchy and the resultant trauma. Alvarez employs a feminist lens to depict the characters' struggles, emphasizing the resilience and agency of women in the face of adversity. Through this lens, the narrative not only unfolds the historical events but also illuminates the intricate dynamics of gendered trauma, offering a comprehensive grasp of the sisters' intricacies and contributing to a broader discourse on feminist

literature and the depiction of trauma in fiction. Thus, this study not only contributes to the understanding of trauma narratives but also provides a valuable resource for future researchers interested in the intense search of women's voices and experiences in the context of trauma literature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my indebtedness to all those who assisted me throughout the completion of this paper. Special thanks go to my esteemed Guru and PhD Supervisor, Prof. Dr. Bireendra Pandey, for his invaluable guidance. I also want to express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, Vice Chancellor of Far Western University, for his encouraging support. My thanks extend to Prof. Dr. Jiblal Sapkota, Head of the Central Department of English at Tribhuwan University and my PhD Co-supervisor. I am also thankful to the University Grants Commission (UGC), Nepal, for granting me the PhD Fellowship. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my colleague Jnanu Raj Paudel, Chairperson of Research Management Cell (RMC) at Tikapur Multiple Campus, for his constructive ideas and suggestions in publishing the article.

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