

The Downfall of Political Idols in Sanjeev Uprety's “Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Leader”

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Abstract

*This paper explores the use of dramatic mechanisms in Sanjiv Uprety's novel **Ghanachhakkar**, to examine the rise and fall of a political leader. The narrative, set in the socio-political context of Nepal, depicts a mass gathering in Basantapur Durbar Square where the people, filled with hope, celebrate the arrival of a new leader they believe will bring prosperity and change. The leader is initially hailed as a heroic figure, with public ceremonies, rituals, and symbolic acts such as the chanting of patriotic songs and the offering of garlands. However, their expectations are shattered when the leader is revealed to be a hollow figure, devoid of substance—a “failed hero” who cannot fulfill his promises. This paper aims to analyze the dramatic mechanisms used to construct and deconstruct political heroism, focusing on how these performances are employed to manipulate public perception. Drawing on performance studies, particularly the theories of Joseph Campbell, Richard M. Merelman, Victor Turner, and David E. Apter, the study examines how politics mirrors drama, with leaders acting as performers on a public stage. Through the lens of the “failed hero” archetype, the paper also connects these dramatic failures to broader political implications in Nepal's volatile political environment, where the gap between the people's hopes and the leaders' reality often leads to disillusionment. It highlights how the leader's downfall, as depicted through the theatrical use of rituals and ceremonies, reflects the broader political dynamics of betrayal and unmet expectations in Nepal.*

Keywords: Hero, politics, dramaturgy, audience, performativity, nation, onion

Introduction

In Sanjeev Uprety's “Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Leader”, the rise and fall of political heroes are examined through a dramatic lens, shedding light on

the complexities of public perception and leadership. The narrative presents a mass of people eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new leader, whom they believe will solve the nation's political issues and lead them to prosperity. However, Uprety subverts this expectation, revealing the hero's transformation into an onion, a metaphor for political disillusionment. By applying theoretical frameworks from Joseph Campbell's concept of the "hero's journey" and Richard M. Merelman's ideas on the dramaturgy of politics, this analysis explores how Uprety critiques the illusion of heroism in political systems. The application of these theories reveals how political figures are often constructed as heroes, only to collapse under the weight of unfulfilled promises and the harsh realities of leadership. The socio-political context of Nepal, characterized by ongoing instability and the failure of successive political leaders to address the nation's challenges, intensifies the dramatic impact of this narrative. In a nation plagued by corruption, poverty, and unrest, Uprety's work serves as a satirical commentary on the cyclical nature of failed political figures, exposing how political theater operates within this volatile landscape. Through the lens of heroism and performance, this analysis will examine how Uprety's narrative reflects broader social and political dynamics in Nepal, particularly the collapse of idealized political figures under the weight of public expectation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, thematic, and discourse analysis approach to examine Uprety's "Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Leader," focusing on the rise and fall of political heroes and the shifting public perception. The methodology begins with a thematic analysis that explores the characterization of political figures in the novel, analyzing how themes such as heroism, disillusionment, and betrayal emerge throughout the narrative. This analysis is rooted in the socio-political context of Nepal, where frequent regime changes, political instability, and corruption shape public sentiment. By examining these themes, the study seeks to understand how Uprety's depiction of political leaders reflects the broader socio-political realities of Nepal, where leaders are often initially embraced with optimism but ultimately face public disillusionment. The methodology further incorporates discourse analysis to investigate how political narratives, media representations, and public speeches within the text shape the construction of political heroes and their eventual downfall. This analysis is enriched by the application of theoretical frameworks such as Campbell's Hero's Journey and Turner's Liminality, but with an emphasis on the socio-political landscape of Nepal. These theories are used to interpret the symbolic journey of political leaders, mapping their rise and fall onto the broader political instability and public expectations in Nepal. This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis that links literary themes with real-world political

dynamics, providing insight into the complex relationship between political figures and the public's perception of their leadership.

Review of Literature

The concept of the hero has been central to human storytelling for millennia. Joseph Campbell's seminal work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, outlines the hero's journey, an narrative archetype that spans cultures and eras. Campbell identifies the hero's journey as a universal pattern where the hero embarks on an adventure, faces trials, and returns transformed, often bringing new wisdom or power that benefits society (Campbell 28). This archetype is not confined to myth and literature but extends to political leaders, who are often constructed as

heroes by their followers. In political contexts, the hero's journey can be seen as a metaphor for the rise of leaders who are expected to lead their people through crises and bring about transformative change. However, as Campbell notes, the hero's journey is fraught with challenges, and not all heroes succeed in their quest. The failure of a political leader to fulfill their role as a hero can lead to their downfall, resulting in public disillusionment and a loss of trust (Campbell, 43).

Joseph Campbell's *hero's journey* offers a well-established structure for analyzing the rise and fall of political leaders, with stages such as the call to adventure, trials, and the ultimate transformation of the hero. In Uprety's work, this structure initially appears relevant, as the new political leader is portrayed as a messianic figure who embodies the hopes and aspirations of the people. However, Campbell's framework, rooted in Western mythological traditions, is inadequate for fully addressing the specific nature of political heroism in Nepal. Uprety's narrative subverts Campbell's model by illustrating how the leader's journey is not one of growth and transformation, but one of failure. The people's initial faith in the leader gives way to disillusionment, as the hero fails to live up to their expectations. This disillusionment reveals that political heroism in Nepal, as depicted in Uprety's work, is cyclical rather than linear, and Campbell's hero's journey cannot adequately capture the complexities of this failure.

Richard M. Merelman's essay "The Dramaturgy of Politics" offers a valuable framework for understanding how political leaders use theatrical techniques to shape public perception. Merelman argues that politics, like drama, is a performance where politicians assume roles that resonate with their audience (Merelman 217). The success of a political leader, therefore, hinges on their ability to effectively manage their public image and create a narrative that aligns with the public's expectations. However, Merelman also warns of the inherent risks in this performance, noting

that a leader's true nature may be exposed, leading to a dramatic loss of credibility (Merelman 220). Richard Merelman's dramaturgy theory, which views political leaders as performers engaged in the art of impression management, is another lens through which Upreti's work can be analyzed. Merelman suggests that political figures craft public identities through deliberate performances, projecting an image that aligns with the desires of their audience. Upreti echoes this concept by illustrating how the new leader presents himself as a savior, carefully performing the role of a hero. However, Upreti critiques this performative aspect by revealing its hollowness. The leader's public persona disintegrates when it becomes clear that his performance lacks substance or genuine political action, culminating in his transformation into a monstrous, decaying onion. This critique of the performative nature of political leadership highlights a limitation of Merelman's dramaturgy: while the theory focuses on the construction of political images, it does not fully address the disillusionment that arises when these images fail to deliver tangible results.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality, as explored in "Liminality and Communitas," provides further insight into the transitional phases that define political heroism. Liminality refers to a state of ambiguity and transition, where normal structures are suspended, and new identities are forged (Turner 90). In the context of political leadership, the liminal phase represents the period during which a leader is elevated to heroic status before their true nature is revealed. Turner's exploration of ritual and communitas is particularly relevant in understanding how leaders are constructed as heroes through public ceremonies and collective experiences (Turner 93). Victor Turner's concept of *liminality*, which describes a transitional phase where individuals are neither here nor there, is also pertinent to understanding the political leader's journey. The leader enters the political scene as a liminal figure, poised to transform the nation but ultimately caught between conflicting expectations. Turner's framework suggests that liminal figures undergo a transformative process, which is expected to yield new roles or wisdom. However, Upreti's critique challenges this, as the leader does not evolve into a figure of unity or strength. Instead, the liminal leader disintegrates into absurdity, symbolized by the leader's literal transformation into a giant onion. This portrayal of the liminal figure's failure highlights Turner's limitation: while liminality is often a transformative phase, Upreti shows that the process can lead to the collapse of the hero, rather than to their fulfillment. Therefore, Turner's theory does not fully

account for the breakdown of the liminal figure in Uprety's critique, where the anticipated transformation fails to materialize.

David E. Apter's examination of political performance in *Politics as Theatre* emphasizes the importance of public spaces as stages where political narratives are enacted. Apter argues that political success often depends on a leader's ability to convert the audience into active participants in the political drama, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy and authority (Apter, p. 221). This performative aspect of politics is particularly evident in societies where public perception plays a crucial role in determining a leader's success or failure. In Nepal, political leaders are often expected to embody the qualities of traditional heroes, with the power to bring about significant social and political transformation. However, as Uprety's narrative illustrates, the gap between the public's expectations and the reality of political leadership can lead to profound disillusionment. The narrative critiques the political system by highlighting how public expectations are manipulated through theatrical performances, only to be ultimately betrayed by the inadequacies of the leaders (Uprety, p. 385).

Uprety's narrative does not merely align with these frameworks but actively critiques them, particularly in the context of Nepali politics. While Campbell, Turner, Apter, and Merelman offer useful lenses for analyzing political heroism, their theories are limited in explaining the cyclical disillusionment that characterizes the rise and fall of political figures in Nepal. Uprety's work emphasizes that political heroism is not just a process of individual transformation or performance, but also a collective experience shaped by the failures of the political system. In the Nepali context, the people's expectations of political leaders are repeatedly dashed, resulting in a perpetual cycle of disillusionment that these theories fail to adequately address. Uprety critiques the political system by illustrating how the hero's journey, liminality, and political performance are insufficient in solving the systemic issues that plague the country.

Moreover, Uprety's critique of the political system diverges from the optimism often associated with these theories. While Campbell's hero's journey typically leads to a triumphant resolution, Turner's liminality suggests eventual reintegration, Apter's emphasis on the importance of public spaces as stages, and Merelman's dramaturgy emphasizes successful public performances, Uprety's narrative denies the possibility of such resolutions. Instead, Uprety highlights the failure of political leaders to fulfill the promises of transformation, using the grotesque image of the onion to symbolize the decay and corruption inherent in the political system. By explicitly connecting each theoretical framework to Uprety's work and discussing their limitations, this review highlights how Uprety critiques

the political system, suggesting that the rise and fall of political heroes is not just an individual journey, but a reflection of deeper, systemic issues in Nepali politics.

Public Disillusionment in “Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Leader”

In “Heroes and Onions,” Uprety presents a vivid portrayal of a mass of people eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new leader at Basantapur Durbar Square. The leader is depicted as a savior, a figure who is expected to solve the nation’s political problems and usher in a new era of peace and prosperity (Uprety, p. 384). The people’s actions—sprinkling ‘abhir’, singing patriotic songs, and decorating the stage—symbolize their deep-seated desire for a hero who can fulfill their collective dreams (Uprety 384). This construction of the leader as a divine figure aligns with Campbell’s notion of the hero as a godlike being, capable of transcending ordinary human limitations and bringing about significant change (Campbell, p. 136). The anticipation surrounding the leader’s arrival is palpable, as the public’s hopes and dreams are projected onto this figure. The leader is not merely a political figure but a symbol of redemption, expected to deliver the nation from its troubles. This construction of the leader as a divine figure is a common theme in political narratives, where leaders are often elevated to the status of heroes by their followers. However, Uprety quickly subverts this expectation, revealing the fragility of this constructed heroism (Uprety, p. 388).

The basic understanding of a hero is someone who gives of themselves, often at great personal risk, for the greater good of others. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, a hero is defined as “a person, especially a man, who is admired by many people for doing something brave or good” (p. 608). In Greek mythology, heroes are depicted as men and women of exceptional strength, courage, or ability, often of divine ancestry, and are known for their extraordinary acts of bravery. In “Apotheosis,” Joseph Campbell compares a hero to Buddha, stating that “this godlike being is a pattern of the divine state to which the human hero attains who has gone beyond the last terrors of ignorance” (p. 127). Here, Campbell attributes a divine quality to the hero, suggesting that they possess the potential to elevate humanity from a lower state to a higher one through their enlightened knowledge.

In the realm of politics, a hero is seen as a leader who works for the welfare of the people and the nation. Such a leader can transform the nation, much like a deity, by playing the role of a skilled actor on the stage of politics. In “The Dramaturgy of Politics,” Richard M. Merelman identifies certain “specific dramatic characteristics” inherent in politics, noting that politicians often employ dramatic devices to advance their careers. To some extent, politics mirrors drama, with

political leaders using similar techniques to actors in order to win the favor of the audience and create a positive public image.

However, in Sanjeev Uprety's "Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Hero," the much -admired new leader fails to maintain a positive political image. His symbolic transformation into a giant round onion represents a complete collapse of the peoples' expectations. He becomes a failed hero on the stage of political performance. "Heroes and Onions" is an excerpt from Sanjeev Uprety's highly acclaimed novel *Ghanachhakkar*. The plot of "Heroes and Onions" centers on a large crowd eagerly awaiting the arrival of a new leader, who is believed to be the only political hero capable of solving all the existing political problems. The announcement of his arrival over loudspeakers creates a carnivalesque atmosphere, drawing people to Basantapur Durbar Square to welcome him with hope and anticipation. Before his final appearance on the elaborately decorated stage, the crowd enters a liminal phase, celebrating the occasion as a ritual. They perform various rites, such as "sprinkling red 'abhir' on each other, singing celebratory songs, holding garlands in their hands, and responding with loud shouts and hip-hip hoorays of delight" (p. 384). The hero himself embodies a liminal persona. Victor Turner's concept of liminality refers to individuals in transitional states, or "threshold people," whose identity remains fluid and undefined. These liminal figures, like the leader in Uprety's narrative, embody ambiguity, caught between different roles and expectations. Turner suggests that during this liminal phase, a person is neither fully one thing nor another, making them a symbol of potential transformation (Turner, p.89). Turner suggests that the liminal persona is someone who engages in sacred activities to prove themselves worthy of respect from their community. During the liminal phase, their value remains ambiguous, and a series of appropriate rites serves to establish their identity and worth. This phase is crucial as it represents the middle stage of the ritualization process, during which various rites are performed to achieve a specific purpose.

According to David E. Apter, politics as theater is inherently about performance in a public space. He argues that public space constitutes a semiotic ground that contributes to authority (p. 221). These performances do not occur strictly on stage or in the audience but in the space between the two. Apter further explains that "virtually any kind of space can be made to serve: a courtroom, a war crimes tribunal, political party conventions, political rallies, and marches" (p. 224). A political actor must possess the ability to appropriate others' concerns and make them their own. Apter emphasizes that the success of politics as theater depends on "converting the audience into the play itself" (p. 222). In Sanjeev Uprety's narrative, the crowd engages in various performances between the announcement of the new leader's arrival and his final appearance on the

decorated stage. First, they gather at Basantapur Durbar Square, chanting patriotic songs and throwing 'abhir' at each other to celebrate the arrival of their hero. With enthusiasm, they buy flower garlands and greet the new leader with slogans. These rites are performed to welcome the new leader, whom they regard as a divine figure who will bring peace and happiness to their wretched living conditions. This festive scene reflects the grand aspirations they have cultivated in their minds regarding their future and the future of their nation. The people carry out these performances to honor the liminal hero, whom they believe is a divine figure, upon whom their redemption from suffering depends.

However, the peoples' expectations are shattered when their supposed messiah turns out to be an ugly figure. In the climax of the narrative, his divine mask is stripped off, revealing his true identity. In the political theater, he proves to be a poor actor. At the beginning of his first appearance on stage, he seems normal. The people adorn him with expensive shawls, jewels, red 'abhir', and flowers, "declaring that the leader of the nation will now describe his unified formula for curing all the problems assailing the country" (390). But disappointing them, he does not deliver any reassuring speech and appears to have no formula to solve the nation's pressing issues. Shockingly, he remains silent, standing behind the dais, while his body gradually begins to swell, becoming rounder until he finally transforms into an enormous onion, crushing those nearby.

This symbolic metamorphosis reveals the true nature of the hero, who had been hiding behind a fake divine mask. This false mask represents his ineffectual nature, which yields no fruitful actions. The unmasking of the so-called national hero starkly contrasts with the concept of "impression management" as described by Richard M. Merelman in his essay "The Dramaturgy of Politics." Comparing the performances of a dramatic actor and a politician, Merelman writes: "All politicians (actors as well) attempt to impress others with certain evaluations of themselves... if they are to succeed in their respective fields, they must gain acceptance" (p. 217). In other words, politicians fail if they cannot create a positive impression in the eyes of the public. In the narrative, the new leader is a complete failure in the eyes of the masses. His failure crushes the hopes and dreams of the people, stirring feelings of despair and anger. As he transforms, the audience angrily points out his failure:

"You have failed us," they shout furiously. "You've failed us, you've failed yourself, you've failed everyone. Take off your crowns, your clothes, your coat," people cry out in agitation and anger as the onion continues to grow before theirs' eyes, "throw away your shawl, your boots, your belt, you no longer need them, peel off your stockings and your new shirt." (p. 391)

Moreover, the leaders of both the combined democratic front and the united leftist front were also failures because they presented the new leader as the only person capable of remedying all the existing political ills and chaos. None of them have succeeded in creating a positive impression of national heroes in the eyes of the public. Collectively, these politicians symbolize the complete failure of Nepal's political system. The sudden metamorphosis of the new leader reflects the pervasive political corruption that has engulfed the entire nation. In the cultural context of Nepal, his fat and round body symbolizes a corrupted and morally decayed state.

Another dramatic element employed in the play is conflict. According to Merelman, a playwright uses dramatic conflict to engage the audience and accomplish other key functions. He further explains that "conflict highlights character, allows for the testing of ideas against each other, and moves the story along" (p. 218). While conflict also exists in politics, it is different. It is interpersonal and is used to shape the public's perception of important issues and to create a positive impression of a politician. Political debate and differences over pressing national issues generate conflict in politics. Politicians who effectively address these issues can cement their status as national heroes in history.

In "Heroes and Onions," politicians are depicted as antiheroes, entirely incapable of addressing the nation's critical issues, such as resolving civil war, eliminating poverty, and developing infrastructure. Even the new leader, who was believed to have the vision to build the nation, is ultimately revealed to be as useless as a vegetable. The overall failure of these politicians stems from the lack of interpersonal contests on important issues. There appears to be no conflict between the leader of the combined democratic front and the leader of the united leftist front, even though they are supposed to adhere to fundamentally different or opposing political ideologies. Instead, both present the same candidate as their common messiah, who supposedly holds the solution to all problems. They overlook the fact that they cannot enhance their public image until they prove themselves as valuable leaders by engaging in conflict with the opposition on crucial national matters.

Another powerful dramatic device is the candidate's personality, as mentioned by Merelman (1969). Wearing the mask of a charismatic candidate is essential for success in the political arena. However, in "Heroes and Onions," the supposedly charismatic candidate, upon whom all the hopes and dreams of the people have been placed, ultimately transforms into monstrous radishes, huge cabbages, immense potatoes, an enormous onion - essentially, a mere vegetable. Upon seeing the terrifying shape of the onion, the audience is filled with disdain. Their dreams are shattered, broken upon the stone pavements of old squares. Disillusioned, they are ready to leave the monstrous onion where it is and return to their homes, free from their illusions. The onion becomes

a powerful symbol of political emptiness and disillusionment. As the leader's facade crumbles, the onion's layers reveal only "vacuum and barrenness," reinforcing the void that lies beneath political promises. The people's realization that there is nothing substantial behind the leader's grand image underscores their disillusionment and the failure of the political system (p. 394).

The image of vegetables is used extensively in the narrative to convey the overall failure of politics and the negative impressions it leaves in people's minds about politicians in general. The narrative's use of vegetable imagery serves as a biting commentary on the overall failure of politics, reducing politicians to hollow symbols of decay. This theme resonates with Laxmi Prasad Devkota's poem "To a Beautiful Prostitute," where the protagonist, once revered, is reduced to the insignificance of "garlic and onion" (p. 159-160), a metaphor for her moral fall. Uprety similarly depicts failed political leaders transforming into monstrous vegetables, such as "monster radishes" and "huge cabbages," until the inevitable "onion" represents the final collapse of their grandeur and promises (p. 392). Here, Uprety deliberately uses vegetable imagery to reduce politicians to the level of non-entities—barren and yielding nothing.

The narrative is a sharp satire on Nepalese rulers and politicians, who have failed to take meaningful actions to address the problems faced by the people and the nation as a whole. Every politician claims to be a hero of the people, but ultimately, they reveal themselves to be antiheroes, incapable of accomplishing anything significant. Merelman identifies several dramatic mechanisms employed in politics, including political ideology, identification, building conflict, catharsis, climax, and symbols (p. 222-239). In the context of this narrative, the climax and symbols are the most relevant for discussion.

In the political theater, the climax brings about suspense, reversal (peripety), and unmasking. Suspense is created in the narrative by arousing the audience's curiosity about the new leader—how he looks and what solutions he will offer to address the nation's problems in his anticipated speech. However, as the suspense unfolds, nothing substantial occurs. The leader physically transforms into a giant onion, incapable of delivering any speech. Peripety is the dramatic element that highlights the rise and fall of characters. In "Heroes and Onions," the hero is highly revered at first, standing at the peak of his popularity. But as events progress, his increasing size paradoxically diminishes his popularity, leading to his downfall as he is scornfully despised by the audience. His collapse shatters the dreams of the people, who respond disdainfully: "No, we do not want to keep on chasing empty, unreachable dreams anymore" (p. 394).

Unmasking, or divulgement, is a key element in the narrative, involving the revelation of a character's true nature. The hero is unwrapped in a negative light, exposed not as a magical figure with ready-made solutions to the country's problems but as a trivial entity whose enormous body crushes the audience beneath it. This symbolizes that the new leader, like other leaders, is ineffectual and insensitive to the desires and aspirations of the people. However, his metamorphosis ignites a spirit of revolution among the people, who now realize they must take action for their freedom. The crowd's shift from passive hope to active resistance marks a profound transformation in their agency. Initially, they place their hopes on the leader, expecting him to fulfill their collective dreams. However, upon witnessing the collapse of this false figure, they collectively reject the myth of political saviors. Their chant of "We do not need any leader to lead us to our freedom anymore" (p. 394) signals not just disillusionment but a collective awakening to their power. This moment of rebellion reflects a shift in political agency, as the people take charge of their destinies, no longer entrusting their hopes to external figures but demanding the accountability of the political system.

Symbols are abundantly used throughout the narrative. The props used to welcome the leader during the liminal stage carry their own significance. The red 'abhir,' garlands, expensive shawls, jewels, and decorated stage all symbolize the respect and hope the people have for their new leader, who they believe will fulfill their rising aspirations, free the nation from the shackles of war, bring food, clothing, and medicine to their homes, and ensure lasting peace and prosperity. The onion is the most dominant symbol, representing the vacuity and emptiness inherent in the overall political system of the nation.

Conclusion

Sanjeev Uprety's "Heroes and Onions: Arrival of a New Leader" offers a sharp critique of political heroism, exploring the inevitable disillusionment that follows when leaders fail to live up to the expectations placed upon them. Through the use of dramatic devices and metaphors, the narrative highlights the performative nature of politics and the consequences of idolizing leaders. The leader's transformation into an onion serves as a powerful symbol of the emptiness of political rhetoric and the futility of relying on individual leaders to address the nation's deep-rooted issues. This imagery speaks to the collapse of hero-worship in the face of a leader's inability to provide tangible solutions.

However, while the narrative critiques the dangers of over-reliance on political figures, it also presents a broader question about the balance between collective action and effective leadership. True change may not lie solely in the hands of a single leader but in a more complex interaction between inspired leadership

and active public participation. In a society where disillusionment with leadership is prevalent, there is a need for a form of citizenship that transcends passive hope and embraces the idea that both leaders and citizens must be accountable to each other.

Ultimately, *Heroes and Onions* calls for a reevaluation of the public's role in politics. Rather than depending on messianic figures, the narrative urges citizens to take an active role in shaping their own future. This shift represents the need for a more engaged and critical political consciousness, one that recognizes the importance of both collective action and accountable leadership in the pursuit of meaningful social change (Uprety 394). In reflecting on Uprety's work, readers are invited to question the politics of hero worship and consider their own agency in contributing to a more just and equitable society.

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