

Reading Trauma and Reading History: An Analysis of Nepali Post-Conflict Narratives

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Abstract

This article tries to navigate some important works written during or after the ten year-long Maoist insurgency that happened in Nepal from 1995 to 2005 causing the death toll of more than seventeen thousand people, that illuminate the pathetic aspect of the then Nepali society gripped on the edge of a sword, hence suffering from trauma – even not able to narrate what stroke they were going through. To bring out the historical facts of the decades-long conflict, some notable trauma theorists and their excerpts have been applied. Among the various works written during and after the insurgency, fourteen works written about the conflict have been analyzed from the traumatic perspectives illuminating the painful life of the people who were badly affected by the consequences of the war between the security forces and the insurgents. The ten-year long Maoist insurgency, though seen from the negative point of view assessing the losses and agony, has brought some exemplary assumptions for creative minds by presenting their experiences in the written form – narratives.

Keywords: *death tolls, destruction, insurgency, peace, trauma,*

Introduction

The decade-long conflict caused a lot more havoc result costing the irreparable loss in the lives of people, that made many people write the narratives on the very issues. Those narratives written either by the people who individually involved in the conflict raising weapon against the regime or by the people who were victimised either by the state security force or the rebel, became the authentic resource to understand the history – the decade-long conflict that caused havoc destruction in the country. These texts, now, tell what happened, how people got victimized and even now traumatized. Hence, writing memoirs, narratives, novels, and short stories making the conflict and its aftermath is the main point to embark the history. This study has used some selected texts to bring out the traumatic facts of this time and am applying trauma theory. Now, the texts speak of the facts of history that people have probably forgotten over the span of time.

Tara Rai's *Chhapamar Yuwati ko Diary* [A Diary of a Young Guerrilla Woman], Shova Kattel's *Samarka Smritiharu* [Memories of Samar], Uttam Kandel's *Jokhim ka Paila* [Risky Steps], Sarul Pun

Magar's *Andhisanga Khelda* [Playing with the Storm], Nirmal Mahara alias Atom's *Gaurabsali Itihas ra Yuddhamorcha ka Anubhutiharu* [Glorious History and Feelings in Battlefield], Ganga Bahadur Shrestha's *Gadhidarbardekhi Simhadarbarsamma* [From Fort Palace to Singh Durbar], Ganga Bahadur Lama's *Dasbarse Janayuddha Smritika dobharu* [Ten-Year People's War Marks of Memory], Nabin Jirel's *Bhishan Dinharu* [Fierce Days], Dikshya Karki's *Diary of a Rebel* and the like are memoirs written about the authors' own experience while working as the Maoist combatants in the People's War. Narayan Subedi's *Sayadin Maobadi Kabjama* [One Hundred Days in Maoists' Grip], Govinda Bartaman's *Sorha Sanjharu* [Sixteen Evenings] and many others are some other memoirs written about how the rebellion affected the common people. Abhi Subedi's *Mayadevi ko Sapana* (Dreams of Mayadevi), Jagadish Ghimire's *Sakas* (Turbulence), Mahesh Bikram Shah's *Sipahi ki Swashni* [The Soldier's Wife] and *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* [Son of a Guerrilla], Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* (2005), Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* (2005), Govind Raj Bhattarai's *Sukarat ka Paila* and *Stories of Conflict and War* (2007), and Ramchandra K.C.'s *Rebel: Stories of War and Conflict* (2009) are some fictional writings written on the periphery of the conflict. Besides, many other texts have been created on the same issues. In this article, I have assessed fourteen works written by various writers who have closely watched the insurgency and have inherently delineated the trauma experienced by the people who were badly crippled by the conflict.

Reading Trauma

Trauma theory which helps understand both psychology and politics has emerged focusing on the relationship of words with suffering. The event, dispersing across the time, would be experienced as shattering; as a result, it creates its full impact over the years later. In its emphasis on the retrospective reconstruction of the traumatic event, a traumatic analysis is both constructive and extensive for bringing out many historical facts which would, otherwise, be unknown for a long time. Trauma can be of great value in the study of history and historical narrative, allowing for an interpretation of cultural symptoms - the growths, wounds, scars on a social body, and its repeated actions.

In the context of talking about trauma and its long lasting effect on human being, Vinuta Rau and Michael S. Fanselow argue that it becomes a means to expose to a stressful traumatic event that "may show sensitized reactions to neutral stimuli that may be related to the threatening experience" (37), whereas K. M. Fierke thinks trauma differently with "a feature of political discourse" (31) that would result many dreadful events which involve the generation of very powerful emotions that help "annihilation anxiety" (Fromm 69), and "threaten to overwhelm the ego's ability to function" (Wastell 7). It consequently helps memory overflow with very strong emotions.

Danielle Mortimer has made viable in reading narratives which contain trauma as "to understand a variety of contemporary events" (137). Not only narratives, some new directions of literary and media memory studies have been recognized to analyze presentations of war and violence in literature because "literature and film can vividly portray individual and collective memory - its contents, its workings, its fragility and its distortions by coding it into aesthetic forms, such as narrative structures, symbols, and metaphors" (Erll 2). Geoffrey Hartman, in the same way, has talked about how trauma has become a tool to represent "extraordinary historical and literary exploration" (260) with the help of fictional works in which the writers can express their own ideas too and a literary text helps readers "approach truth and acquire wisdom for human feelings – pangs or happiness" (Taras 188). Traumatic

memory, thus, works as a trace, surfacing as “a ghostly presence, troubling the mainstream family history, and signaling the unknowable” (Socolovsky 188). Derrik Silove has seen this condition as “The diagnostic category, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), has attracted criticism, the key issue being the nosologic validity of that diagnosis when applied across cultures” (319) and “systematic and pervasive traumatization over several generations” (Raphael et al. 337). They all help one gauge how much trauma and its effect aftermath impact one in life. None of the critics above has mentioned how in trauma there is some sign of embedded peace.

However, Nigel Hunt and Ian Robbin have incited how memory has tacit role to remodel the experience but “traumatic memories exist as unconscious” (67), and Polly Jones points out “how memories of terror can be remembered without gloom” (362) how traumatic memory with which the victims live a long time would be “an object of intellectual curiosity and health skepticism” (Young 358) and would remain for a long time which ultimately results in “panic, flashback, intrusive emotional state” (Briere and Lanktree 35) as post-traumatic stress disorder and “continuum disorder” (Drozdek 172) creating havoc in one’s life. These critics have only highlighted on the long lasting effects of trauma not about its solemnity in human life.

Reading History

Ten year long Maoist insurgency brought many changes in the country including the change in writing which remained a good spice for writing narratives. Many narratives have been created during this period and after that. Trauma created by such massive extremism and seen in the post-conflict Nepali narratives has been a topic for discussion. It is the cause of unprecedented death tolls nearly seventeen thousand ordinary citizens as Anindita Dasgupta claims, “It has brought every aspect of life in Nepal to a grinding halt and has adversely affected the development process” (9). In this way, the political gain could be achieved even halting peace. The rebellion badly impacted on women, children, political cadres, teachers, students, clan and caste. It was also on ethnic relatives who were inclined to be in destitute with “the institutional fragility of the State” (Kumar 168) and retaliated to the Maoist Movement in the motives of taking revenge against the atrocities imposed upon them in the name of decapitating the rebellion in different remote areas. For instance, Adhikari, in his book, *The Bullet and the Ballot Box* the story of Nepal’s Maoist Revolution argues, “. . . they were mostly arrested on cooked-up charges that included murder and theft. Policemen along with Congress activists ransacked entire settlements, harassed women, and confiscated goats and chickens” (33). The reprimand became a key point to commence the rebellion. Particularly, women were victimized from either side; “be it the victims of social violence perpetrated by army personnel, children, on the other, were another worst backlash to be noticed due to this rigorous conflict” (Aryal Khanal 32). Either warriors’ mothers or ordinary mothers living in the society underwent severe pain in raising their children safely along with other menial hardships. Both critics have shown the impact of insurgency on people but not the importance of peace in the warring societies.

Reading History and Trauma in Post-Conflict Nepali Narratives

Shantimaya Giri, known as a critic who has been known writing about trauma in Nepali war literature which can be seen in her book *Aadhunik Nepali Kathama Abhigat* (Trauma in Modern Nepali Stories), while analyzing the post-conflict Nepali narratives/stories and trauma and its various aspects.

She has classified post-conflict Nepali stories in two parts: one part shows how the stories are written villainizing the Maoists rebels whereas another part shows how the stories were written villianizing the security forces. Most of the stories are written “keeping the trauma undergone by the characters main point which would ultimately result in more tense and stress” (160). In the same way, Govind Raj Bhattarai, another writer and critic in “Srijanako Euta Uttar Adhunik Siddhant: Abhigat” (Post-Modern Theory of Creation: Trauma) from his book *Uttaradhunik Bimarsha* (Post-Modern Thought) has outlined the consequences of the ten year Maoist conflict. For the last two decades war and conflict have taken apace in Nepali literature and some new dimensions have been emerged in bringing out the truth of horrible events. The conflict that happened for a decade causing the death of more than fifteen thousand lives has been a good spice for writing stories, novels, poems etc. Likewise, Ramesh Shubhechchhu in “Parashu Pradhanko Sitaharu Akhyan Kritima Abhigat” (Trauma in Parashu Pradhan’s Sitas), while introducing post modernism and trauma theory, shows how trauma theory is a part of post modernism. He describes how trauma theory originated from the testimony made by the survivors of the Second World War and from the narratives made from those testimonies. Besides, depressed people, sexual assault, lack of safety, trustlessness, and domination are some aspects that also help trauma theory expand. One can study physical, mental and current as well as long lasting humanistic events with the help of this theory. Laxman Prasad Gautam in his *Samakalin Nepali Kathama Dwandako Prishthabhumi ra Pariwesh* (Background and Condition of Conflict in Contemporary Nepali Stores), tries to show how political, social, economic and cultural factors play an important role in shaping the contemporary Nepali stories which have mirrored the then contemporary Nepali society. Besides, he brought out the difficulty and suffering people were facing that time in his writing but he has not written the consequences of peace in the society. Once again, Govind Raj Bhattarai in “Yee Abhigatka Kathale Mutu Hallauna Thalchhan” (These Trauma Stories Commence to Shake Hearts) from his book *Uttar-aadhunik Bimarsha* (PostModern Thought) highlights the trauma in Mahesh Bikram Shaha’s *Chhapamarko Chhoro* (Son of Guerilla). After reading these stories one can easily understand the loss and destruction caused by the ten years long civil war. They are considered as incurable trauma that once gripped the contemporary Nepali society. He has mentioned only the impacts of trauma but not how narrative can have some solutions. Likewise, Shantimaya Giri, once again, in her “Euti Ra, Euta Mo Kathama Janyudha Prabhbit Patra” (People’s War Affected Characters in “A Ra and a Mo”) presents pain and suffering of lower class Nepali people caused by ten years long civil war. She has shown how ordinary people struggled and sacrificed for the termination of monarchy and restoration of democracy in Nepal amid regular strikes and curfews; which consequently brought many troubles to lower class people’ lives and they become the victims of many incurable diseases. Finally they opt for the demise in the name of bringing bright dawn in the life of Nepali people. Giri could have said that both of these characters have sacrificed for sustainable peace but she didn’t.

Ganga Bahadur Lama, a local resident of Sindhupalanchowk grown up in Kathmandu in *Dasbarse Janayuddhaka Dobharu* (Wounds of Memory of the Decade-Long People’s War) mentions how he came in contact with UCPN-Maoist from the very beginning, later worked as political commissar in Lamjung district. While working for the party at the villages of the adjacent district of Gorkha, he had to spend in a cave for five days hungry and thirsty. Later he was shot in his knee and left on the terrace for four days and nights waiting for help having nothing to eat and drink with severe hatred of local people. He heard them saying, “Because of you, our peaceful and beautiful village is being ravaged by a conflict. Innocent villagers are losing their lives for nothing” (74). With more difficulties, he was

taken to Chitwan hospital where his wounded leg was amputated and had to live with one leg and until now has been living like this. He, known as living martyr in the party, has been isolated in the party, hence, a victim of neglect and hatred. Narayan Amrit states his condition, “Like the pain of losing leg, he has many others scars of neglects borne in the party. Remembering these pains, he could hardly tolerate them” (16). He is still in agony. By writing this book, he is trying to overcome the trauma and sharing his bitter experiences. The People’s War has brought a great political change in the country, but the militants like Ganga Bahadur Shrestha, the former Maoist fighter, the secretary of the former Prime Minister, undergoing with very painful situation while working for the underground party, escaped death many times either hiding in the caves or missing army’s bullets, later imprinted his experiences in the form of book anticipating a peaceful nation in his memoir *Gadidabardekhi Singhadarbarsamma* (From Gadidabar to Singhdarbar) (iv). His memoir has better outlined the crucial facts of the ten-year conflict and its consequences loaded upon the ordinary people. In the same way, Tara Rai ‘Anmol’ who worked for the party as a member of cultural group and was arrested by the army and put in the detention for many days. The memoir *Chhapamar Yuvatiko Dayari* (Diary of Guerrilla Woman) delineates how she was sent to jails one after another. When she came out of jail, she came to realise how it was nonsense to fight for the liberation of the marginalized people in spite of frail health – heart disease (57). Now writing books, she has exposed the bitter reality of those days and how she remained in trauma for a long time. At present time, she has been leading a humble life with a new name and designation.

Among the fiction works written about the insurgency, Jadadish Ghimire’s novel *Sakas* (Suffering), though written about the historiography of Nepal’s three hundred years’ political events including the Maoist insurgency and Madhesh conflict, has deliberately outlined the trauma of the people entrapped in different political outfits. Sharad, a protagonist in the novel, has been presented as he was first kidnapped and tortured by the Maoists for spying against them, and then arrested by the army charging him working for the Maoists, later kidnapped and severely tortured by the Madhesi combatants, that he had to lose all physical strength, property and mental balance and had to live abnormally. Therefore, finally, he decides to leave the world leaving his loving daughter, Shanti and wife, Kumari, “I took the way of salvation leaving all devotion, jealousy, hypocrisy, fear and all other wishes” (304). What he wished in life is ultimate peace. Unlike Sarad, Nabin Jirel, Maoist insurgent, who fought many brawls with police and army spent many energetic fertile years for the party leaving his small brothers and sisters since his mother had passed away and father was careless to them. He could have contributed even more for the party and the nation had he not realised the facts about the behaviour of his own comrades. He had to decide voluntary retirement from the camp and is now leading a humble life working for the party and longing for peace and prosperous nation. While working for the party, how he went through different situations, in his *Bhishan Dinhari: Chapamarko Jeevanyatra* (Fearful Days Life Journey of a Guerrilla) he reminisces his traumatic experiences the fierce days, “After involving in the People’s War, everything in my life started moving differently. Piles of corpses to my innocent eyes seemed normal” (i). Each of his paces seemed to have habituated with the explosion of bombs and bullets of guns. Many times realising his death, he felt the palpitations of his heart, but found them pulsating continuously. Radha Poudel, the winner of Madan Puraskar 2071 working at Jumla hospital as a development officer, went through the whole night awake waiting for death while the Maoists were attacking the headquarter of the district including the adjacent house where she was residing. How she underwent this horrible night is imbibed in her memoir *Khalanga ma Hamala*, (Attacks in Khalanga). “After sometime a bomb seemed to have been exploded in the mid part of the town. District

Police Office and District Development Office were also guessed to have been demolished" (71). She is still working there and struggling for rehabilitation for those people who had lost their lives and displaced due to the war. The traumatic story of Narayan Subedi in his *Saya Din Maobadiko Kabjama* (Hundred Days in the Confinement of Maoists), a secondary school's headmaster, is very painstaking, who was made captive for one hundred days only to investigate whether he had defaulted school fund or not, later he was not found guilty and released making him speak at public that the Maoists were doing good for people. These hundred days were hell to him and he still remembers the moment (35). Journalist Badri Sharma has another painstaking traumatic memory of the horrible experience. Once the Maoists forced him to participate their programme that brought him in the grip of suspect of the security force. Govind Bartaman in his book *Sorha Sanjharu Yuddhaka Asarharubich Yatra* (Sixteen Evenings Between the effects of War) shows his condition, "Police arrested him and put him on custody for about a month and set free, later again arrested and tortured him to confess that he had helped the Maoists, and he is still on remand" (239). He is still in agony about what would happen later. In the same way, while reminiscing the past and memorizing it time and again one acquires the semantic knowledge of the events – how, when, where, why, how many or much happened. Narayan Subedi who spent one hundred days in the Maoist confinement changing shelters one after another about decade ago in the remote villages of Rolpa has been mesmerizing the experiences as a knowledge of living with the guerrilla having ordinary food and being shut up in tiny closets. He clarifies, "I am away from my family here in the shelter and living under the shadow of death each time. My guards with guns and other ammunition are around me and protecting me from the possible dangers or maybe chances of my running away" (241). Spending such a long time with people who almost died in the war has become a pragmatic experience what the threat of death is like to him.

Conclusion

Texts written on a particular issues happened at a certain time speak of the past which may be horrible or pleasant, but remain a testimony of the events. If such texts are about the traumatic experiences of the victims, they become witnesses and narrate the horrible stories. The outcry of the panicked people over the decade that happened about twenty years ago in the history is the main foundation of this dissertation. Hence, it is the study of what happened. History gets written in anyway whether one does anything or not, time gets on along with its own speed whether one follows it or not and the sun rises and sets on its own sites whether one observes it or not. Here, the civil war continued for about a decade, around fifteen thousand people lost their lives, many other displaced and remaining remained in panic. It probably would not have happened if the concerned people had been concerned to their duties and fulfilled the duties accordingly. These fictional or non-fictional texts written on the issue of decade-long conflict have created a havoc suffering in the life of Nepali people. This can best delineate the pangs of war in the affected people's lives in the absence of government's formal data – reports of commissions, documents and other statistical papers. Humans are capable of remembering personally experienced events from the past as an ability termed 'episodic' memory. This ability to reminisce about past events is increasingly being understood as having evolved to aid a capacity to predict of what would happen later. Remembering past events, actions and outcomes might be crucial to subsequent planning of future actions. That might lead one to imbibe the past experience in the form of narrative to let the future people know the history.

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