

Reading Conflict Narratives and Reading Peace and Reconciliation

<https://doi.org/10.3126/lumbinip.v11i01.93811>

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Submitted: 25 January, 2026 || Reviewed: 9 March, 2026 || Revised: 3 April, 2026

Abstract

This article analyzes two conflict narratives: Homshankar Bastola's "The Shadow of a Gun", and Saral Sahayatri Poudel's "We, Two Soldiers" written by the combatants themselves on the ongoing Maoist insurgency from the Buddhist perspective of establishing peace and reconciliation among the warring groups. The characters in these stories were rigorous to win the battle at any cost eliminating their enemy side as much as possible, but on the other hand they are seen anticipating for the ultimate solution of harmony. The theoretical tools for seeking the chances of peace and reconciliation are taken from the perspectives of Theresa Der-lan Yeh and Barbara Wright. The article answers the questions like what caused the people suffer in their own land? And what made them anticipate for peace and reconciliation? The aim of this article is to see the causes of human suffering during the period and to seek the ways of establishing a harmonious society away from the feud. This paper tries to establish a bridge between the canon of human suffering mentioned in the conflict narratives and the Buddhist tenets of peace and reconciliation. The application of Buddhist perspectives in the narratives written on the war-ridden Nepali society will pave the way for the chances of solidarity in many of her conflict-hit lands to those who want to transform the human feud into long-lasting peace and solidarity in their works.

Keywords: Conflict, Feud, Harmony, Narratives, Peace

Introduction

The ten-year long Maoist insurgency that engulfed the hinterlands of Nepal into a chaotic atmosphere from which hardly anyone could get released internally or externally as long as it prolonged. Commoners were seen sandwiched between two warring forces either being blamed as spies or betrayers from either side; in such condition, they could hardly breathe a sigh of relief from dawn to dusk. However, many rebels and security personnel, though involved to sabotage as many as they could from their enemy sides, were seen unwilling to pursue it long time and wishing it to end as soon as possible. Saral Sahayatri Paudel, a Maoist combatant during the insurgency is known for bringing afore the issues he faced during the event and his story "We, Two Soldiers" published in 2011, shows the different mentality of the fighters who fought against each

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other during the insurgency. Hemshankar Bastola is a prolific Nepali storyteller known for his writing on contemporary issues related to sociopolitical status and his story “The Shadow of a Gun” published in 2011 penetrates the core of the ten year long Maoist insurgency. Bastola’s rebel and army major and Saral Sahyatri Poudel’s Bijay, a rebel and Ajay, a security person at sentry are seen adamant in their responsibility, but hesitant to carry on this enmity against each other being close friends from the same village. Both groups know that war is futile and could not bear any fruit even in a long time of fighting, that fighting each other means one brother or friend is hurting another, and that the ultimate endgame is the settlement and harmony among all warring sides, so the common denizen could feel relieved and live in peace and solidarity even after the rigorous war which had made a boundary among them for a long time. Buddhist perspectives or principles can help one understand the fundamental aspects of reconciliation among the warring groups and lead a solidarity.

Literature Review

Writing about war and conflict has been an important work for many scholars as cries, tears, massacres, gun, bombs and others are such discourse which can draw the attention of many aspiring writers and the decade-long conflict could not remain aloof from the attention of such people. Anjana Shakya stated that the war between the state security forces and the rebels happened to materialize the personal avenge with each other as in her words, “many joined Maoist force to avenge for the torture, disappearances, and deaths of family members and friends by the State forces” (6). She means to argue that feudal society remained a cause to ensue the rebellion. But Barbara Weyermann’s “logic of waging the war against each fighting group sounds rather different which illustrates, the logic of development agencies and the dynamics of the highly hierarchical Nepalese social system play on each other and reinforce each other's denial of chronic fear and extreme suffering.” (iv). Any war that is fought in the world would not be about friendship and sympathizing with each other but harsh consequence of blood shading and destruction as in the word of Hruschka and Kohrt “conflict events included having family members ‘disappeared’, being detained, witnessing the brutal killing of a family members, witnessing bomb explosion, watching one’s house and land being burned, experiencing destruction of livestock, losing money and saving” (331). Common people were the scapegoats of such events which would, later be colored with political propaganda.

For all such destructive measures, peace and harmony would always remain the next side of a coin; that is; Buddhism and its role, a focal point concerned with perennial problems of human existence in relation with socioeconomic

and political realms “provide the symbol and inspiration for the building and strengthening of national life.”(Kitagawa 7), and with the pace of time, as everywhere everybody expects reconciliation among the different groups escaping from the grip of destructive measures which Dev Raj Dahal in his essay “Post-Conflict Peace Building in Nepal: A Perspective from Civil Society.” explains, “A robust interface between the state and institutions of civil society is essential to enable their efficacy in the realization of the vision of peaceful society that is both just and legitimate” (1). This could lead one to forget the previous feud and embrace right path which Abhi Subedi in his work *Dreams of Mayadevi* evoked the chances of taking refuge to Buddhism to get away from the worldly agonies as “the desire for peace that common people expected collectively. What common people needed or still need are not the warriors but saviors” (Rijal 4). The ultimate path that could soothe one from the grief would be the refuge to Buddhist thought.

Almost all critics and other writers have tried their best to bring afore the facts of the civil war and it’s fatal consequences, but they hardly illustrate how the conflict-ridden narratives can also be analyzed through the Buddhist perspectives of establishing peace and reconciliation in the war-ridden Nepali society. There is no dearth of writing about the conflict, its consequences prevailed in the war affected society from which one can hardly escape, and the solution to get relief; however, the major concern would be to invoke the chances of bringing afore the solace in mind and thought so they would forget the past agony and sign in the right path. This article focuses on the fact that how reading conflict narrative can invoke the right path in the readers’ mind.

Statement of Problem

Since the decade long insurgency has remained a spiced discourse to accomplish the research work either prolonging the issue as part of illuminating backlashes and outcry of the victims or illustrating the futility of the war across the world signifying the war is meaningless and would not fruitify any significant result. But no research work has, so far, been done bringing the painful fact along with the chances of prevailing Buddhist path in the conflict narratives. Therefore, I have attempted to fill this gap. Here emerge some fundamental research questions such as what caused the people suffer in their own land? And what made them anticipate for peace and reconciliation?

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine how these narratives Hemshankar Bastola’s “The Shadow of a Gun” and Saral Sahayatri Paudel’s “We, Two Soldiers”

delineate the causes and consequence of the decade long insurgency making people victims in the conflict-hit areas. General objectives of the paper include: to see the causes of human suffering during the period and to seek the ways of establishing a harmonious society away from the feud.

Methodology

The research design of this paper is qualitative and depends on the analytical aspects of the primary texts. Textual evidences have been interpreted and analyzed with the light of theoretical insights of Buddhist perspectives. The paper has examined various aspects Buddhist perspectives seen in the conflict narratives by using the critical insights developed by Theresa Der-lan Yeh and Barbara Wright as theoretical parameters. Der-lan Yeh's pragmatic use of Buddhist perspective to heal woes and Wright's perspectives on forgiveness to perpetrators have been used to delineate the way to understand the sufferings caused by the insurgency and healing aspects along with the ideas of harmony and reconciliation after the conflict.

Limitation

As the propositions and limitations, this paper delineates the consequences of the decade-long insurgency that caused the suffering in the common people's lives as seen in two conflict narratives: Homshankar Bastola's "The Shadow of a Gun", and Saral Sahayatri Poudel's "We, Two Soldiers". For the textual analysis, the Buddhist approaches developed by Theresa Der-lan Yeh and Barbara Wright have been used to bring out the sufferings of people and ultimate path for peace and reconciliation.

Background: The Invocation of Insurgency and Its Consequences-Human Sufferings

The decade-long insurgency in the words of Anindita Dasgupta, "brought every aspect of life in Nepal to a grinding halt and had adversely affected the development process" and its core impact was seen on women, children, political cadres, teachers, students, clan and caste" (13) indiscriminately for a long time even after the event was over, besides it was considered that some marginalized groups were to be inclined to be in destitute and joined the movement in the motives of taking revenge about which Aditya Adhikari outlines, "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 situation got even harsh when the rebellion spread when each combatant felt complacency in their mission which a rebel in Saral Sahayatri Paudel's shares his experiences, "The earth under our feet was soaked with blood; dozens of friends embraced their heroic death, but we never left the entrenchment; we continuously

moved ahead even though it meant stepping over the dead bodies” (181). Everyone living in the hinterland got badly affected by the consequences of the insurgency.

The life of survivors as seen in predicament and delusion, who remained voiceless due to the combatants from both sides was sandwiched and frozen in the name of bringing change in the country. The civil rights of such victims remained the worst backlash which Niti Aryal Khanal describes, “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” (32). People could hardly escape the consequences of the war which can be seen in Hemshankar Bastola’s story, “In the explosion of a landmine the rebel had set off, one Dhane Mailo was killed on the scene while he was plowing a field. Though the death of the pair of oxen had little effect on him, he was shocked in Dhane’s death” (156). For the decade their agony remained unheard and unnoticed from all concerned bodies.

However, the memory of these horrible events was in the minds of those people who were directly or indirectly involved in the event and they were keen to imprint the experiences in the written forms which would be a testimony of the historical consequence in the form of literary works about which Babatunde and Oluchi opine, “It must have a discussion with uneasiness and anxiety, lonesomeness, death, disappointment and hesitation, for the reason that these issues cause readers to be captive in their personality” (53). The fiction written about the insurgency would delineate better the pangs of the victims and cruelty of the perpetrators.

The literary writings about the insurgency have been used as a testimony of the insurgency which can be used as a source for bringing out the facts of the fatal consequences of the decade-long event through the characters who underwent along with severe traumatic events.

The Canonization of Peace and Reconciliation in the Buddhist Indoctrination

Buddhism as seen and understood in the world by the stakeholder is approved as a necessity and desirability of peace, order and harmony in a society threatened by war and terrorism as in the words of Joseph M. Kitagawa, “Buddhism provides the symbol and inspiration for the building and strengthening of national life” (7) and in the words of Peter Harvey, “Buddhism has tempered the excesses of rulers and martial people, helped large empires to exist without much internal conflict and rarely incited wars against non-Buddhists. Moreover, in the midst of wars, Buddhist monasteries have often been havens of peace” (239). In addition, Buddhism has always been associated with non-violence and peace which are certainly represented in its value system in spreading and establishing a harmony in the conflict-hit societies as in Bastola’s story, the mentality of the rebel is seen

changing and he realizes, “the meaning of revolution is not only to carry guns but it to carry rationales” (163) and thinks his mission to destroy the army camp is worthless.

In the same way, Der-lan Yeh while delineating an outline of the Buddhist vision of peace against violence and way to prevent violence and realize peace and the potentials of Buddhist contributions in the peacemaking efforts and the promotion of a culture of peace in today’s world. Yeh explains, “Believing that the root of violence is located within the mind, Buddhism has placed a greater urgency upon inner reflection. With the awakening to the interdependent reality, selfish compulsive responses will be replaced by loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity” (97). Following this one can feel much relieved and behave accordingly. In the same way, Barbara Wright explores how one’s heart and humanity must be opened to all things and finally has explored the integrated mental, emotional, and reconciliation moves into atonement through right action and talking about the middle path she extends her views, “The Middle Path of non-violence and compassion provides a model for solving undoubtedly political problems outside the adversarial framework implicit in partisanship” (52). Adopting and internalizing the basic principles of Buddhism, one can feel much better and peace can be prevailed and sustained in the country, which can be seen in Paudel’s story how the mentality of the rebel pleads for peace and reconciliation, “Whatever we exchanged in feelings, ultimately we both want peace and freedom” (184-85). The basic change is seen not in the behavior of the combatants, but in their mentality which is seen to be going on the path of solidarity.

Discussion and Results: Reading Conflict and Anticipating Peace and Harmony in the Narratives

While analyzing the interconnection between human and nature, Der-lan Yeh has stated that the Buddhist view of the universe and human being mingle with an imperative for all living being who would realize “the interdependent nature of their existence and the interconnection among all things, they would develop a strong sense of responsibility for their own behaviors, as well as appreciation and empathy for others” (93). If we look into the mentality of Bastola’s character, the rebel in the Maoist insurgency who has gone to sabotage an army camp disguising himself as a friend of the army chief forgetting what “he had heard the harsh voices and frantic cries of injured fighters and their miserable conditions while they were dying on the battlefield begging for life” (155) is encountered with “the realization of true nature of existence that no harming, compassionate, altruistic action” (Der-lan Yeh 93) arising within himself. His conviction is extended with the Buddhist philosophy

of four basic mental faculties (Brahmaviharas, “Divine Abidings”; also named *appamanacetovimutti*, “immeasurable deliverance of mind”): loving-kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*) (93). Human miseries from which the rebel could not come out and tormented time and again in his mind is consoled “these four mental faculties, together with the Four Noble Truths, are to be cultivated by all *bhikkhus* (Skt. *bhiksus*) and later all Buddhists through reflecting upon the sentient beings of infinite numbers who are on their way to become a Buddha” (93). As far as Paudel’s character, the rebel who has already fought in the battlefield with the state security and has helped many injured soldiers with “a medical team and providing them injection and saline water to save them from imminent catastrophe” (183). Looking his altruistic work for the enemy with whom he is fighting in the battlefield, his “altruistic mental faculties are combined with the wisdom developed along with the gradually deepening reflection” (Der-lan Yeh 93). The mental hesitation of his responsibility to fight and ordeal to save a human being from opposite side can be seen as “the guiding principle of all Buddhist practices - the middle way” (93). Following such arduous task of prevailing peace and solidarity among the fighters can be subsided with these mindful actions which is conducted with moderation and it is an ideal Buddhist state of existence that has come true-living in harmony with everything (sentient or non-sentient) in the universe. The rebels in both narratives have been obsessed in destruction and massacres either of their own comrades or the state’s security forces by “making gunpowder and explosives from water pipes and planting bombs in many places under the party’s direction” (Bastola’s 156); but the self-realization of the (mis)deeds their past life and adapting the path of peace shrink their minds like this, “The non-violent movement spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi was also a revolution; the same revolution restored freedom in India, but why are we still mad for the power of guns” (163)? One once involved in crimes and destruction can feel “resolution, reconciliation, and grace coming at their own paces” (Wright 18). Some important steps one can adapt to come out such traps which always entangle one’s mind are “to see clearly what occurred; to understand how it happened; and to learn how to survive this knowledge through relating their story to another so it is no longer buried in the heart” (18). It becomes imminent for all sufferer to find an “expression of restitution and amends with Right Action” (18). Once the path is stepped in, one can feel much better and relaxed, and he or she could not remain aloof.

In today’s world, exploring the potentials of the Buddhist contribution for peacemaking efforts and enhancement of a culture of peace remains imminent in “Believing that the root of violence is located within the mind, Buddhism has placed a greater urgency upon inner reflection” (Der-lan Yeh 91) of each sufferer and perpetrator who must have a resolution to come out of trauma which can begin to

radiate beyond two parties as in the words of Wright “that no matter how skillful one may be, the healing process requires time and diligence; it also requires cooperation from a closed heart to embrace what seems unbearable, which is for the victim to forgive the perpetrator” (19). This way, atonement and amends for the process of reconciliation must be a conscious right action to come out of the past grief one must have been going on for a long time. Bastola’s rebel had a great agony that the state security had destroyed the property and life of only innocent people like Dhane Mailo and his family, but exploring his inner thought within himself he no longer feels as antagonistic as he was earlier which he expresses like this, “Killing innocent people is our mistake; we should apologize to the innocent mothers, children, and elderly people who are victimized by the war, and to the relatives to many citizens who have been killed; otherwise, history will curse us” (157/8). Self-obsession and realizing what one had done in past can open the inner eyes which can lead one to the right path of enlightenment as in the words of Wright, “It is to explore the integrated mental, emotional, and energetic transformations that occur when reconciliation moves into atonement through Right Action” (2). The rebel in Bastola’s story better explores his inner transformation;

He raised his hands and brought them close to his face and clutched them to each other. Then he lay on his bed and slept. He remembered his gun just before he fell asleep. Before he had set out for the enemy’s camp, his hand had been holding the gun. He had fired the gun so many times with his hands, it was as if he had a hangover from it. He would think himself a fearsome person when he held the gun. He opened his hands and looked at them. He still saw the shadow of the gun. He rubbed his hand together and clapped them to clear the illusion. (163)

Both rebels, on the mood of regret of holding the arms and ammunition for the destruction of social norms and humanity for the change, but what change they realize afterwards remain an integral part in their self-realization, are to see how “victims of both of these kinds of trauma and their coaches with the methodology for using it as tool to diminish the consequences of trauma, and to provide a path out of – or at least toward reducing – suffering” (Wright 2). People like the rebels are in the modern world of turbulence are seen looking for a refuge for peace and solidarity as they are tired of confusion and restlessness and needing a right path “the Buddhist perspective on the causes of violence and ways to prevent violence and to realize peace” (Der-lan Yeh 91). Both these characters representing the mood of the combatants fought in the insurgency against each other for a long time try their best endeavors to diminish the long lasting feud and accept the right path of brotherhood, equality, fraternity and kinship in the world of peace and reconciliation.

Conclusion

Buddhist philosophy of peace, reconciliation, brotherhood, equality and solidarity among all living being, though preached quite long ago and practicing for a long time in the world, has been prevailed in today's society. These two narratives written about the decade-long insurgency of more than fifteen thousand people's life and other inexcusable heinous criminal activities in human being from both fighting groups have left some remarks of how the excessive obsession for power deludes one to the path of destruction and massacres and later, realization of what he or she had done in past makes him or her accept the past (mis)deeds and lead a normal life in peace and reconciliation following the right path as mentioned in the Buddhist philosophy. This paper has raised a significant aspect of the importance of humanity in the Buddhist philosophy in today's world marred by the obsession of grabbing power along with the bloody path diminishing the causes of humanity and their significant status for upbringing the civilization to the standard of highest mode of solidarity among all living being. It has tried at a minimal side, but for many aspirants, this area would be fertile area of research works in future.

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