

Traumatic Testimony and Remembering in “The Lankuri Tree will Blossom Again”

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Abstract

This paper examines Rajendra Bimal’s “The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again” is a post-conflict narrative which describes a poor and insurgency affected family living in the very hinterland of Nepal and their traumatic experience: fleeing away from home for safety, leaving the very adorable daughter to an unknown person and determining to live with the situation going on during the Maoist war. The story has been analyzed from the author’s narrative of adversity and trauma along with some thematic description. The themes include: perception of impending violence, trauma in the lives of commoners and gradual development from severe stress to determination to face the challenge. Nepal’s ten years long insurgency, a great loss in the country in the name of bringing peace and solidarity, has taken the lives of thousands of people and millions of others have been mentally and physically wounded. Hence, they are in trauma and their testimony has been a significant inscription of the history for those who want to know how innocent and common people were targeted. Here, I examine the story from personal trauma to the conflict generated consequences in the lives of affected people using content analysis of the personal, group, and socio-political factors associated with Bimal’s understanding of the People’s War, and of violence. Discussing the expected findings, this article centers on the common people’s fear of war and embedded peace in the country. Rajendra Bimal’s “The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again”, as a traumatic testimony of the insurgency, has been analyzed in this article to bring out the facts.

Keywords: insurgency, peace, People’s War, testimony, trauma,

Introduction

The Maoists’ People’s War ended in 2006, making the second popular movement a huge success. It united both rebels and parliamentary parties against the king who had seized absolute power, a legacy of centuries’ old feudalism of the Hindu Kingdom. It was built on a codified

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framework of social, economic, and political exclusion which marginalized indigenous people, lower castes and women. After the abolition of the monarchy with prevailing peace in the country, the country saw the first constitution assembly election in 2008. It made the rebel party the largest one that helped form a coalition government on its lead. Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', the rebels' supremo became the Prime Minister. But Nepal remained in political limbo as the country's transitional justice process remained blocked by the political impasse. Coalition governments featuring prime ministers from all major parties came and went without proper consensus on fundamental issues: federalism, ethnic identity, settlement of former Maoist combatants and the like.

In the meantime, narrative as a structure for scaffolding one's experience where people are told stories to one another since before the invention of writing, and some of our earliest recorded thinkers found the proper structure of a story to be worthy of inquiry. The intention behind creating such a narrative form is invoked in a regimented structure. There are rules that govern proper storytelling. This is an invitation for avant-garde artists to break the rules and further explore the creative space. But sometimes, it becomes very complex to justify the structure of narratives because the description, evaluation and interpretation of a given text as literary discourse depends on many purely socio-cultural norm system. Even the narratives seem complex to perceive for the readers to comprehend for the time being. The theories of trauma and testimonies are grounded in Western assumptions and traditions, which would be different from others because in their works a Eurocentric perspective is apparent in the works of individual critics such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick Lacrapa and Judith Herman, and theorists who have historicized the concept of trauma such as Ruth Levs and Allan Young. Now, the electronic syndicated version of the consciousness-raising about the painful realities of the victims has become a 'hot cake' for many means of media which offertestimonies to painful past that serves for many critics as perhaps the best example for demonstrating the limits if not an outright failure of a cultural politics of trauma. Traumatic experience has gained its ground of exploration not only in the paper forms, but rather electronic digital gadgets have obtained a good platform for both presenters and victims to let others know about the painful past. With the help of trauma theory and the importance of testimony in writing narratives, I have brought out Rajendra Bimal's "The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again" to show the trauma of the victims of the People's War instigated by the Maoists that caused the deaths of more than fifteen thousand people and how people like Kaude and Cheuki witness the horrific events and their traumatic testimony remains meaningful to unfold many truth claims.

Theoretical Discussion

Trauma a Way to Unfold the Painful Memory

In the twenty-first century, the trauma theory has become an important way to

understand a wide variety of contemporary events. In the most general sense, it is used to examine the ways in which past painful experiences are processed with the help of literary texts. It further attempts to analyze different ways by which traumatic occurrences are “demonstrated, processed, exposed, and repressed throughout a variety of literary and historical texts” (Caruth, 1995, *Unclaimed*35). Here, the authors as well as the victims might attempt to negotiate and resolve their own personal traumas with the help of their writings, and sometimes with the help of fictional characters in their literary texts they serve to record and pronounce cultural traumas.

Such pain would hardly be healed as expected generally, in the sense of a returning to the catastrophe that happened before. However, keeping the painful wound open would definitely help one to translate it via art. Caruth (1995) is still in the view that trauma occurs as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming painful violent events that happened in the past but occasionally returned later repeatedly in flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena(*Trauma Exploration* 91). In any form, the trauma would not let anyone free. Here, trauma directly, or indirectly related to social and cultural contexts as events that caused trauma in human being’s lives would be cultural, political or social upbringings.

Elucidating trauma as part of a culture, Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004) views that trauma occurs when members of the community feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event (1). It leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness making their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

But Ron Eyerman (2003) has a different point of view about cultural trauma: “Resolving cultural trauma can resolve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual story meld into collective history through forms and processes of collective representation. Collective identity refers to a process of ‘we formation’, a process both historically rooted and rooted in history” (74). Cultural trauma is deeply rooted in the collective devastation from which the survivors can hardly escape the memory of the traumatic past that generally affects the groups. To elaborate his ideas about it, he further states, Cultural trauma always engages a meaningful struggle, a grappling with an event that involves identifying the nature of the pain and the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility. It calls attention to the negotiated recollection of events and to the role of representation. There is power involved here as well, the power of political elites for example, of mass media in selecting what will be represented, and thus affecting what will be forgotten as well as remembered. (83)

Cultural trauma, in this way, makes others different as it evokes survivors to identify their own status and responsibility.

A prominent critic of trauma theory, Jenny Edkins (2003), has yet a different opinion about trauma, which she views is more than a shocking encounter with brutality or death. In a sense, it is the betrayal of a promise or an expectation. It takes place when the very power that the survivors were convinced will protect, and give them security which would become, sometimes, even their tormentors (103). In contrast, Dominick LaCapra (2001) opines that everyone can be a subject to cultural trauma. For him, the victim is not a psychological category, but it is a social, political, and ethical category because victims of certain events will in all likelihood be traumatized by them in anyway (72). Here, the victims with the memory of perpetrators and their mistreat travels socially, and culturally along with the memory of the events, that would never let the victims away.

Avishai Margalit (2005) has defined trauma in a different way. She notes that it is a shared memory of historical events that goes beyond the experience of anyone alive, is a memory and not necessarily a memory that, through the dimension of diachronic labor, ends up at an actual event. She further argues, “This kind of memory reaches alleged memories of the past but not necessarily past events” (59). Trauma, while creating void in individual and community is viable to destroy the existing principalities of culture of a group of people.

For Edkins (2003), “trauma can never be a purely individual event, in the same way as there cannot be a private language, because it always already involves the community or the cultural setting in which people are placed” (106). But Gene Ray (2005) showing the sublimity of trauma in human life after a long span of time, has delineated the importance of trauma clarifying the relationship between the artistic category as she states,

Trauma is real damage. This suggests that the sublime pertains to the artistic and cultural representation of traumatic damage. Certain art works seem to bring us to the borders of traumatic encounter in ways that are disturbing and provoking, even painfully so, but also at the same time aesthetically enjoyable. This enjoyment is made possible by the element of semblance or illusion in artistic representations. Artworks of this kind somehow seem to mimic compellingly the trauma that is their referent. The sublime work, it seems, is not the wound itself, but is the effective mimesis of the wound. (135)

On the whole, the sublime carries with it a demand. It is something like an objective social imperative, to radically politicalize the notion of mourning, and for Ray, the mourning of trauma is a critical process of enlightenment and disenchantment.

Duncan Bell (2006) has brought out the facts of wars and victims along with the significance of trauma. It has been used to explain and justify obscene brutality – conflict, torture and death in wars. For instance, “One effect of the trauma troupe has been to create a universal suffering subject outside of history. Individuals are reduced to bodies in pain. Yet pain is always local. To universalize it is to remove the specifics of an individual’s history; it is to situate in the realm of moral edification” (10). The notion of trauma can be helpful to encapsulate the impact of painful events while forming communal identities and the perception of the traumatic past is eligible to play a pivotal role in shaping different aspects of global politics.

Similarly, Jenny Edkins (2003) has quoted traumatic memory as “thread thrown” in Tony Morrison’s words, and particularly opined memories of traumatic events can be seen between the dead and those who survive “to hold the dead in our arms is an impossible gesture of solidarity and compassion in the face of ‘the wit of eternity’”. What is being remembered, or perhaps more accurately re-constituted, is relationality, that radical interconnectedness that has been so shockingly betrayed in and through the violence of trauma” (99). In one sense, it is not that death is too traumatic as survival, or at least survival in the face of particularly brutal deaths can have the same apprehension of other threats in life. She has seen it as betrayal both in the sense of giving away and of revealing radical relationality in human relationships either in community, language or symbolic order. Jenny Edkins (2003) further argues:

. . . trauma is the betrayal of a promise or an expectation. Trauma can be seen as an encounter that betrays our faith in previously established personal and social worlds and calls into question the resolutions of impossible questions that people have arrived at in order to continue with day to day life. . . . It is betrayed in two senses. First, there is a betrayal of trust that threatens that relationality: relationality expressed as national or family belonging turns out to be unreliable, for example. Second, the radical relationality that is normally forgotten is revealed or made apparent. (109)

So what trauma or painful experience does is a revelation of the way in which the social order is radically incomplete and fragile to others.

While Edkins (2003) elaborated trauma in relation to betrayal, K. M. Fierke (2006) has tried to distinguish between traumatic and ordinary memory that builds on the unconscious theory. How traumatic memory works, he clarifies:

Traumatic memory lies outside verbal-semantic linguistic representation and involves bodily skills, habits, reflex actions and classically conditioned responses. Whether through repression, dissociation, or neurological shutdown, or the impossibility of representing horrific events, the trauma is not available to

consciousness or speech. The experience of trauma, thus, becomes fixed or frozen in time. It refuses to be represented as past, but, is perpetually re-experienced in a painful dissociated traumatic present. This assumes a distinction between conscious representation and unconscious repression. (120)

Unlike traumatic memory, ordinary memory is declarative and has the ability to be consciously aware but traumatic memory helps one locate in each past moment.

Discussion and Results

Trauma and Testimony in “The Lankuri Tree will Blossom Again”

“The Lankuri Tree will Blossom Again” written on the background of the People’s War and its grim consequences, Rajendra Bimal (2007), as a neutral observer of the insurgency, has portrayed a horrific story of the trauma of a grief-stricken family living in a remote village terribly gripped by both warring forces. The story, mainly talks about Kaude, a resident of Balkot village in the western region, who has just come back to his home and old parents after fifteen years of wandering and working “like the beast of burden” (Bimal 63) in Indian cities with empty hand. He finds his parents poverty-stricken and sister Cheuki missing “having heard about the suffering of his family” (63). He is fed up with the situation going on in his village “getting gradually enveloped in fear and terror all around” (60). Having heard how the Maoists cadres destroyed the lives of common people in the People’s War by forwarding the slogan of “one family – one person” (60), he is badly shocked. The continuing struggles of the Army and the Maoists “like the stories of monsters in the fairy tales are heard every day, but only in whispers” (61). The patrolling of security force even by helicopter “hovering in the sky made the panic-stricken villagers stampede and hide in desperation” (61). The people are afraid even to pronounce “the “M” of the Maoists and the “A” of the Army” (61). He misses his sister Cheuki a lot and tries to find out her whereabouts. Actually, being afraid of her enlisting in the People’s Liberation Army from each family, Kaude’s mother had left her in Gurung dai’s hotel at Narayanghat. But later, she went with a Marwari family in Kathmandu, then “began to work as a liquor server in a cabin restaurant somewhere in the city, then ran away with a Khatri boy running a bar in Jhapa, and she again ran away with a boy from terai after getting pregnant” (61). Kaude does not know anything about her. He finds himself very helpless seeing his father bedridden and sobbing mother. But he still hopes well in future as “new buds and then the flowers in full blossom with their fragrance will be casting a spell all around” (65). Finally, he decides not to leave his aging parents and live with them, anticipating peace and solidarity in his war-ridden village.

Trauma as presented in “The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again” is somewhat different. Here, the events which are called traumatic are overwhelming, but they are also a

revelation. Such horrible events “strip away the diverse community accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of social order and in some cases, how it conceals its own impossibilities” (Edkin, 2003, 5). The revelation of certain events one after another may reverberate one into the painful past.

The events happened in the life of Cheuki and Kaude in the very hinterland of Midwestern Nepal sandwiched between biting poverty and ferocity imposed by the battle of the Maoists and the government forces are the principal force that had brought many impeccable changes in the rural life of that place. The storyteller Bimal (2007) states, “Such events question the settled assumption about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of” (5). Cheuki, Kaude, and their helpless poor old parents, along with their neighbors have anything except witnessing the horrific warmongering forces, which would make their life even more panic.

Returning to the village after fifteen years, Kaude has witnessed the scene of his village in the following lines:

. . . having returned village he has begun to experience the entire village getting gradually enveloped in fear and terror all around. Having heard how the Maoists destroyed the lives of the youth in the People’s War by chanting the slogan of “one family – one person,” cold chill went down his spine. He saw himself the whirring of security force’s helicopter, hovering in the sky made the panic-stricken villagers stampede and hide in desperation. (61)

The hilly family like this in panic-stricken and poverty-imposed conditions would not have better off life, let alone the insurgency which forced parents to leave their children in the hands of fugitives in fear of being abducted or enrolled in the People Liberation Army (PLA). After losing the children for many years as they did not return home, the family would have to reminisce them time and again of their past life and their life would be like of what Carat (2007) delineates, “The flashback, it seems, provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of conscious thought” (*Truama Exploration* 152). Kaude remembers how his lovely sister Cheuki had to flee away from the village. Bimal narrates her condition like this, “After all, his lovely sister Cheuki fled across the mountains lest she be kidnapped and is forced to suffer the extreme harshness without any care. Or she might be in the grip of the security force!” (61). It is because there was no other option except doing this.

For fear of being entrapped in the web of insurgency, her mother had to take her to Narayangadh walking on foot for seven days, and night with empty stomach. Even they did not know anyone there as it is narrated in the story:

By the time they reached Narayangadh, their legs had turned all black and blue and were swollen like the legs of the patient of elephantiasis. They kept on looking into each other's eyes, sitting in a place and shedding the tears like the incessant showers of monsoon falling off the eaves. They were so hungry that their stomachs were rumbling, but they had nothing to eat. Their seven days of incessant walking with their empty bellies had made their body as numbs as that of a leper. (62)

Selling a small silver ring, which was the sole property they ever had, both mother and daughter had meal, the mother left Cheuki to the Gerung day. After that, her life started as it is described in the story:

After some days, Cheuky went to Kathmandu with a Marwari, then having been beaten by his wife, she began to work as a liquor server in a cabin restaurant somewhere in the city, then she ran away with a Khatri, running a bar in Jhapa and she again ran with a Madhise after getting pregnant. The mother knew as far as this much. Where might Cheuki be at the moment, dead or alive? Mother does not know anything either. (63)

Even, her whereabouts is unknown, the father spends his time coughing –“ whoop .. whoop” a non-cured sickness, the mother helpless to the situation. Moreover, Kaude even more helpless has returned home empty hand after serving various places in Benaras, enduring several mistreats from his bosses. The condition of Kaude can be seen in Cathy Caruth's (1995) words, “While the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection” (*Truama Exploration* 152). He did not want to remember the past either of his or his sister's, but neither he could forget it, nor could he relieve himself from this traumatized condition.

Rather his old parents have strong aggression against the rebels because of whom they think society dismantled, and Cheuki is lost. They shower their agitation against the Maoists and compulsion to live there in spite of several calamities:

Now it has become very hard to survive in the hills. Nobody knows, what these *Mahabadido*.

The old speaks in an irritable voice – “How many times should I tell you ‘Don't say Mahabadi, say Maobadi?’”

“What will they do? The dacoits and thieves have been rampant in all villages.

Nobody even offers a shelter for anybody else, let alone any sort of work. What will we get even if we move to Nepalgunj?” Spoke the old women. (Bimal 64)

The society has been writhed, and people living there have been crippled very badly. But Kaude looks at his old parents' pathetic condition and surroundings, still does not get anything that could soothe him, instead remains in the traumatic condition, “Having

heard this, Kaude feels depressed. He retires to his own bed. In the flash of lightning, he looks up at the hills and gazes into the mountain, but all have sung into darkness. It seems to him that entire Nepal is a dark well where the worms of poverty like he himself keep on wriggling” (64). Observing each other’s painful suffering, they start shedding tears. The storyteller narrates their condition in the following lines, “The swirling flood of these three people’s tears as fresh as the spring water was sucked into the dark helm of Balkot” (65). Hoping the bright future that the Lankuri will blossom again, they try to soothe each other.

Conclusion

The traumatic conditions in the context of Nepal, therefore, are mostly caused by the decade-long armed conflict, poor governance, political instability. Moreover, they are the results of preoccupation with major national political agenda, including peace building, constitution-writing, implementation of the constitution, and state-restructuring always remain a challenge for the stakeholders. The challenges faced by peace builders include poverty, high levels of corruption, the entrenched hierarchy of the caste system, and the multiplication of ethnicities and regional and religious identities. Not a single individual has been prosecuted for war-time atrocities, and many known perpetrators of heinous crimes are occupying high positions in government institutions, including military as well as rebels. Issues concerning crimes encroached upon women and children, the conflict victims, have also been left unaddressed. This situation made many people, such as rebels, literary figures, victims, etc., imprint the decade-long conflicts and their experiences in written forms. They have presented many characters who, resembling actual experiences forborne during the conflict, have undergone with trauma – the painful past, suffering, facing death and threats each time. They are the specimen of the victims of painful horrific past, who may be among the kin of the abovementioned dead or more than one hundred thousand displaced people. They have not yet forgotten the misery. Hence, they are in trauma, suffering in any way from which they have not escaped yet because they cannot forget their past, which every time haunts them. Now, to get relief from this trauma, it is always important to share what one has forborne in life – expressing their painful traumatic past to someone keeping their feud away from the self. It can be the sole solution to heal their painful past, and to lead them to the path of peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation. They can once again live together in the same society harmoniously.

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