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People's War and Trauma in Post-Conflict Nepali Narratives

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the traumatic situation of insurgency in Nepali people in stories: Padmavati Singh's "The Silence of Violence", Bhagirathi Shrestha's "Execution", and Ghanashyam Dhakal's "Remorse", written about a ten-year-long Maoist insurgency. This research employs 'textual analysis' and the trauma theory propagated by three notable figures - Cathy Caruth, E. Ann Kaplan, and Jeffrey Alexander as a theoretical framework to critically examine the texts. It answers two questions: what made the denizen suffer from trauma? How do they suffer from the agony created by two warring forces? The primary purpose of this paper is to explore narratives about the Maoist insurgency and to show how the trauma they depict has become a valuable source for literary works. The primary texts' analysis reveals the complex situation of being traumatized by some pivotal characters – Nirmaya, Gopal, and others who have been victimized by both fighting forces in the name of escalating the revolution or controlling and maintaining peace and order in the conflict-hit society. The research offers a unique viewpoint on the intricate connectivity between the victims and perpetrators during the conflict, highlighting the trauma of the victims who are destined to suffer under any condition, holding a transformative potential for shaping or reshaping the ground reality of presenting the ideological perspective. By analyzing these texts through the lens of trauma theory, the article argues that trauma and literature are deeply interconnected, bringing historical facts to the fore.

Keywords: insurgency, people's war, trauma, narratives, testimony

People's War and Trauma in Post-Conflict Nepali Narratives

As a background of usurping the rebellion can be many, but class discrimination, poverty, lack of education, and awareness can be a few to name in Nepal as a result of the “centralized but ineffective and unresponsive state that contributed to governance crises in the 1990s and eroded the performance legitimacy of the state” (Lawati, 2010, p.21). The duration of the rebellion – a decade quite a long time in the midst of devastating crisis that increasingly threatened to tear the country apart about which Lawati further states, “Power abuse, corruption and a culture of impunity became widespread and administration was politicized for partisan purposes” (p.21) and the nation state could not do any proactive role to maintain the law and order for the safety of the common denizen. Furthermore, absence of effective participation of the state mechanism could not assure the people that they would have a better life and corruption and other malpractices became rampant about which Lawati further quotes, “As the political parties, especially the ruling party, abused state power and administration to influence electoral outcomes, elections in particular and democracy in general began to lose legitimacy, the more so because the open polity allowed the articulation of dissatisfaction (p.22). The excesses in action of tormenting the people either for safety or escalating the movement or rebellion was creating a huge dissatisfaction, hence, traumatic experiences which elucidate “an overwhelming experience of sudden of catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled receptive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1995, p.181) fuelled the further nuances among the people.

The main objectives of this study are to explore narratives on the Maoist insurgency and its aftermath, and to demonstrate that the insurgency is a valuable source for literary works. The specific objective of the study is to analyze the trauma experienced by the victims of the insurgency as described in the narratives.

The significance of the study lies in the fact that it provides a fresh perspective on understanding the past event as a political development that perpetuated the terrible life of the victims, who could hardly normalize it even after more than two decades. This paper offers a unique viewpoint on the intricate connectivity of the victims with the perpetrators during the insurgency by bringing to the fore the trauma of the victims, holding a transformative potential for shaping or reshaping the ground reality of the historical event.

Literary works that bring forth the facts as testimony that even the historians cannot bring

out would best illuminate the trauma as the testimony of the victims. This paper tries to answer two questions: what made the denizens living in the hinterlands suffer from trauma? How do they suffer from the agony created by two warring forces?

Methodology

As part of methodology, this study, by applying trauma as a qualitative theoretical parameter, examines how the narratives written in the post-conflict period in the Nepali context would be significant to bring out the traumatic facts of the armed conflict. Books written on Buddhist tenets as a secondary source have been applied to resolve the burning issues occurring in post-conflict Nepal. This article has used trauma theory propagated by Caruth, Bell, and Kaplan as a theoretical parameter for analyzing the traumatic situation as faced by the main characters of these four primary texts. The traumatic situation, as shown in these narratives, is a general phenomenon of the conflict-ridden society where oligarchy reigns out of any law and order. In the primary texts as mentioned above, the victims are badly affected by the consequences of the ongoing situation, from which common people who are always sandwiched by the warring forces are destined to suffer at any cost, let alone the fighting insurgents and their families and relatives. These texts reveal traumatic facets of The People's War's violence: detaining innocent people, abducting and forcing them to pay a huge amount of money as a donation, and facing various arbitrary punishments.

Results and Discussion –Maoist Insurgency and Trauma: Traumatic Testimony of the Victims

In Singh's "The Silence of Violence", the condition of Nirmaya as a wife of a policeman who has gone missing after crossfire with the Maoist rebels is that of a helpless rape victim who has been gangraped by the rebels. She has, then, been taken to the rehabilitation center where she meets many other similar war victims and tries to console herself seeing the agony of Bishnumaya, Ramaniya, Lakkhidevi, Malkhamai, and Pawankali, who have also been victimized either by the rebels or the security forces. Their life either they were in the villages or in the rehabilitation center has been shattered by the thought of the incident "heartrending tales" (Singh, 2011, p.60) and Nirmaya felt that "her pain assuaged listening to the harrowing tales of others (p.60). At the end of the story, the presence of Bam Bahadur who "suffered a deep head injury in the class, and all the memories of his past have been buried under darkness" (p.61) is overwhelming to the reader and Nirmaya too because he has lost the memory of his past life.

Besides Nirmaya, Bishnumaya's life was ruined when "rebels barged into her house and, suspecting her husband of spying, slit his throat in front of her" (p.58-59).

Similarly, the heartrending tale of Ramaniya is worth listening to because her husband has been disappeared by the rebels as he was serving the nation as a security person, and she has been "living a wretched life like an outlaw with her two children" (p.59). Likewise, the other three women's tales are also horrific: the police burned Malkhamai's husband alive, suspecting him of being a Maoist rebel, Lakkhadevi's two sons have been abducted and are still missing, and Pawankali has also been gangraped and mistreated by society, as a result has also become mentally sick. Similarly, the village farmer Gopal and his wife Buddhikala and their trauma while performing the duty in their farm when the Maoist insurgency was in peak "a sinister time when people were being killed and government institutions had not only grown feeble but its importance had faded away" (Bhaupanthi, 2011, p.17) and the predicament of rural life in the hinterland remained the most pointed target in Ghanashyam Dhakal's story "Remorse" penetrate the deadly "cruellest deed without any mercy, love and humanity" (Bhattarai, 2011, p. iv) and dreadful apprehension without any regression while cultivating the land at the lap of the mountain where "the waterfalls, whitened by the strength of the water, cascaded down the hills, both straight and serpentine" (Dhakal, 2011, p. 79). The ultimate consequence of the narrative is the sacrifice of the innocent farmer at the hands of security personnel in the name of taming the rebellion, until the time he is abducted, killed, and thrown in the ravine. Besides, the terroristic trauma of Gopal and other farmers is very harrowing even in mentioning as Gopal "heard the whirl of a helicopter above him in the sky, he saw the helicopter skimming over them, making three or four round and the scared oxen bellowed and tried to run from their yokes and a few oxen broke free and ran wildly with their tails raised high" (p.80). The pathos of Buddhikala after the security force abducted her husband would be worth mentioning when she is asked to go here and there in search of her abducted husband as she "set off for the headquarters to know about him hurrying like a mad woman, in no time she had covered a distance that usually took two hours" (p.88). In the same way, the deadly consequences of a family consisting of a paralyzed father, heart sick mother, helpless wife and their breadwinner son/husband who is a local district level leader and a small entrepreneur besides the havoc Maoist insurgency which saw such person their class enemy who they think should be sabotaged at any condition "present terror in such a way that no reason can control, no word can give people's assurance of their

survival” (Bhattarai, 2011, p. iv) and “bombs, gun, lethal weapon, explosion, clash, deadly attack, arson, murder, abduction, arrest, violence, torture have become common because many people from infants to elders are losing their precious lives in the maelstrom of such destructive rage” (Thakuri, 2011, p.29). The terrified son/husband Bhaskar Sharma, being threatened time and again for donation and extortion as well as leaving the village, otherwise, any deadly consequences might happen to him and his family, has been “apprehensive since these are troubling times, and anarchy is looming large around him” (Shrestha, 2011, p.65). He is not in the condition to leave the village and go to live in the town for his individual safety let alone the safety of his aged parents and growing children of which the narrator describes, “His father, bedridden by paralysis on the right part of his body; his mother with her heart ailment; his wife; the farms; and the rice mill, he would be leaving them all destitute” (p.67). By the time, he prepares to leave the village for safety, the emergence of the rebels as the death messengers for his salvation or liberation from the feudal regression sounds very meaningful because “all around the messengers of Yamaraj, the foreboding silence of death, the helpless show of time, the boiling point of terror, the guns and knives hang from the messenger’s waist, glimmering in the moonlight and a khukuri lands on Bhaskar from a girl’s hand” (p.75).

The sabotage of an ordinary individual who has been devoted for the wellbeing of his family and society brings a fore to the actual picture of the contemporary Nepali society which was devastated by the insurgency even though the security personnel whose duty was to protect common citizen from such occurrences were themselves in danger and looking for a safe haven let alone the security of the ordinary people living “with an unbearable load of pain throughout their lives” (Thakuri, 2011, p.29). The meaningless death of Bhaskar Sharma in front of his family, servants and neighbors from the hand of the rebels in the name of clearing class enemies and prevailing the revolution for the wellbeing of proletariats signifies how ordinary people living in the shadow of the terror have to cope with the dreadful traumatic situation being sandwiched “with growing sense of vulnerabilities and insecurities, despair and hopelessness (Kumar, 2003, p.175) by both the warring groups. The gunshots “leaving two holes, on in Bhaskar’s temple and the other in his chest” (Shrestha, 2011, p.76) made the scene very tragic and unbearable for the family as “a continuous wailing is heard from the room upstairs” (p.76) which delineates “the cruelest slaughter, the envoys of Yamarj start towards the dark forest in a victorious mood” (p.76). These three narratives, though written two decades ago when the

Maoist insurgency was at climax and “doubt had engulfed everyone, even the atmosphere was filled with it” (Bhattarai, 2011, p.v) estimate the penetrating emphatic human psyche of the trauma “overwhelming and unprecedented in consequences” (Kumar, 2003, p. 174) from which no one could escape as everyone is “shocked at the telephone rings, dread talking to their friends, they flee their home, bid their last goodbye and take their leave, fearing any actions from their foes and fear has filled the town and village, the cave, mountain slope, jungle and riverbanks” (Bhattarai, 2011, p. v).

Caruth, “one of the leading scholars of trauma theory” (Pandey, 2009, p.124) in the introductory essay in her esteemed book first time written about trauma as theoretical tool *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* states that the onset of traumatic pathology (post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, as “a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience” (Caruth, 1995, p.3)) which can be a sudden outcome of human psyche and he or she behaves accordingly. This situation is seen in the psyche of Nirmaya, a rape victim from the rebels who come to take shelter at her home, ask her to make them a meal, and finally play with her self-respect and leave her in her agony. The extract below better exemplifies his psyche:

Lying like a log on the floor, the terrified and anguished Nirmaya endured a mountain of pain. An endless sea of grief started to pour from her eyes. Her tolerance had reached its limits and was crumbling into pieces. She saw herself naked in each piece. In the silence of violence, she felt the rape like an ocean of pain surging inside her belly, and she pressed it hard with both her hands before she fell to the floor and fainted. Blood flowed from between her legs. The three-month-old fetus that was in her womb died an unnatural death. Regaining her consciousness, Nirmaya found herself weltered in a pool of blood. Making every effort, she screamed in agony but no one came to see her plight, not even her father-in-law. She tried to stand but collapsed on the floor, unconscious. (Singh, 2011, p.57)

She could not help herself get relief and be released from this painful situation until she found herself in a hospital bed after a long time of unconsciousness. Having found helpless time and again and seen some good hearted people willing to help her including Master Baje “ever helpful and kind to all” (p.57), she, not finding a word to express her pain, “started to wail as if ounce of pain was being squeezed from her heart” (p. 57-58) about which Kirmayer, Lemelson and Barad (2007) say “the role of gene–environment interactions in the development of normal and

pathological stress" (p.13) from which one cannot escape and behave accordingly. The posttraumatic stress disorder of Nirmaya is a mark initiated at her meeting with her husband, who has returned to the rebels' grip and has "a deep head injury in the class" (Singh, 2011, p.61) who has forgotten everything that happened in the past, including his wife too. This incident of meeting her husband and his forgetfulness of the past leaves her aghast as "she could not cry or speak, not could follow him, only the sound of silence echoed all around her and she looked on silently with her vicious eyes, as if she was in a silent protest from deep inside; it seemed that in silence, or in her silent face, a fire was burning that would explode one day and become a volcano" (p.62). The posttraumatic stress disorder found in Buddhikala and her husband Gopal, along with other villagers who have succumbed to the police raid and arrest while they are ploughing their field, would be very harrowing with the presence of the security force in the village, which the narrator mentions:

In the evening, Gopal returned to his home, but his arrested neighbors did not. They did not return the next day or two days later. There was a ripple of gossip about the missing pair, but the villagers were kept in the dark about their whereabouts. Seven days later, the villagers were told that two dead bodies were found floating in the Marsyandi River. They assumed that the bodies were those of the missing. But how did they get there? Who threw them? What condition were they in? Whose bodies could they be? Nobody knew. No one was allowed to look at them. Thereafter, riot police stepped up their mobilization in the village and scoured the area daily. In such a condition, no one dared to yoke their oxen. (Dhakal, 2011, p.81)

Gopal's abduction by the police in the charge of being involved in the Maoist armed movement and his whereabouts have created a chaotic situation to Buddhikala while visiting one after another police station and finally registering a complaint to the court, even not knowing her husband has been killed and dead body has been thrown in the ravine as she found "the whole world before her turned dark at once" (p.88). It would not be difficult to examine the relevant situation when she is "exposed to the type of very intense emotional trauma that can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD" (Bouton & Waddel, 2007, p.41). Wandering from one station or prison to another or even meeting a lawyer for the immediate release of her husband, she is unable to save him as an ultimate denouement of his false involvement in the movement for which all of his family suffer. The outbreak of the sensation of Buddhikala as "an acute

demand and the immediate emotional and bodily response” (Shalev, 2007, p.209) when she hears from a cowherd how her husband was killed by the security forces at night time and his body was thrown in the ravine unfolds the past memory as “repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors” (Caruth 1995, p.4). The outbreak of sudden sensation as a reaction of PTSD can be seen in her psyche in the form of “traumatic memory which lies outside verbal-semantic linguistic representation” (Fierke, 2006, p.23), an outcome of overwhelming and unprecedented occurrences.

Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature, by a well-known trauma theorist Kaplan (2005), delineates that traumatic situations help one understand the etiology of suffering – one’s “environment, specific institutions involved, the state of her community, its politics” (p.39) along with the sequential development of the situation. While talking about “experiencing trauma,” Alexander (2006) points out that it is a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, which gradually sets up the victims, provides responsibility, and formalizes the ideal and material consequences (p.22). Being aware of more miserable condition of other conflict victims like Bishnumaya, Pawankai and others, Nirmaya realizes that “there was no point in crying over something that had already come to pass” (Singh, 2011, p.58), and she feels that she is not only the person who suffers in the conflict, “all seemed to be wracked by the silence of violence, helpless as if they were being led down the road of uncertain future; hopelessness, grief, and anguish spilled from everyone’s eyes” (p.58). Seeing others’ agony alongside her own, she is filled with a sense of “consolation and sympathy at the plight of the women and children at the rehabilitation center” (p. 58). The same situation can be seen in the statement of Bhaskar Sharma when he gets threatening letter from the rebels and remembers his two relatives whom the rebels have killed mercilessly for not obeying them as he remembers “his parental uncle Ramnath, a popular district-level leader whom the rebels killed one night after they had locked his family in a room, they tied him to a pillar and mercilessly hacked him with a blade and continued torturing him until he died (Shrestha, 2011, p.67) and his maternal uncle Sagar Sharma was shot while he was jogging for “not coughing enough donation for their party” (p.69). Bhaskar, in spite of several troubles and threats with “fueling criminal activities” (p.66) and having been living with his family –aged parents and wife together in the same house has tried to consolidate the connectivity among all kind of people in the society with the thought “peace, camaraderie, cooperation, and cordiality can bring a positive change” (p.67).

The encounter of Gopal and Buddhikala with the security force in the field while they are cultivating the land is an elucidating factor to know the trauma of the community together, how they are approaching them time and again as they say, “Damn those sons of bitches” (Dhakal, 2011, p.83). After a long interrogation with the police, when Gopal comes back home, Buddhikala says, “Thank God, they did not kill us” (p.84); her dexterous remarks come like this, “She looked like one who returns home after winning a battle and nobody could say with certainty when or to whom tragedy might strike” (p.84). This melodramatic situation better covers the trauma of the whole community coping with the imminent enemy. Alexander (2006) has delineated the importance of cultural trauma in the context of establishing a harmonious society with more chances of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence after bloody and catastrophic disastrous events in the past by “looking to the future and forgetting the past” (p.7). Painful past is not only an issue of collective trauma, it can also regenerate a new regime of hope and a bright future.

The impact of trauma is allied with the “overreaching social, political, and cultural condition” (Kaplan, 2005, p.65) of the events deeply rooted in human psyche as posttraumatic disorder caused by such fatal situation – killing innocent people in the name of political movement of bringing peace and solidarity among the people when “a social group is the target of planned persecution and therefore not only the individual but also its social environment is afflicted” (Hamburger, 2021, p.3). The social circle of Nirmaya, Bhaskar Sharma, and Buddhikala includes common villagers whom they are assigned to bring changes not only in their houses but also in the whole community. For instance, Bhaskar Sharma has launched many “developmental projects like paved roads, water taps, hospitals, electricity, and colleges” (Shrestha, 2011, p.66); Nirmaya’s remark further clarifies the situation: “This conflict ruined the lives of many people, who have benefited from this conflict? Who will compensate us for the human casualties and rebuild the damaged infrastructure? When will the murder, violence, and destruction end?” (Singh, 2011, p.60); and the plight of the villagers would be changed with the arrival of the security force in their village which is seen like this, “The arrival of the police, whether during the day or the night, was not uncommon, it had been a common occurrence for the villager to see the police raiding their houses under the pretext of searching for someone hiding” (Dhakal, 2011, p.85). The uneasy atmosphere of suffocation for living a normal life in the hinterland of Nepal can be seen in these characters which would explore the ultimate consequence of social

and cultural changes happening in the contemporary Nepali society with an inherent determination that “war is a sacrifice and every warrior maintains a direct and unique relationship with the divine, since in warfare he or she makes a sacrificial gift of his own person, the *balidan* - a gift that results in a noble death” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2006, p.51). Having found themselves embarrassed and dominated by the perilous and emphatic sociopolitical factor, the characters, the specimens of the predicament of the horrific life each individual from both fighting groups is coping with, and awaiting a final resolution.

Elucidating trauma as part of culture, Alexander (2006), in his essay “Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” views that trauma occurs when members of the community feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event (p.1). Trauma as part of culture for the people directly or indirectly involved in leaves indelible marks upon them for a long time converting their memories forever as in the words of what Edkins (2006) “thread thrown” (p.99) and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable way as a universal suffering subject outside of history (Bell, 2006, p.10). Cultural trauma, as a “universal manifestation and occurrence and typically a response from culture” (Wilson, 2007, p.4), is deeply rooted in the collective devastation from which the victims can hardly escape. In the case of Nirmaya, once raped and admitted in hospital and a rehabilitation center respectively, she could hardly escape from the traumatic memory “her heart shattered to see the plight of the country as it ached as its pain and the whole country was taking a blood bath of murder, violence, and rape” (Singh, 2011, p. 60). Even though she is not in the condition, she could feel better and relieved while getting treatment and meeting the victims who had suffered more than hers because “she felt that it was not blood but a river of agony that flowed through her vein when she found herself among these people rendered homeless by the conflict” (p.58). Having been mentally disturbed by the threat of the Maoist rebels and seen his uncles and relatives killed by them, Bhaskar Sharma could not decide what he was doing and whom he was meeting. He could not even recognize his servant Shyame and thought he had “raised a gun” (Shrestha, 2011, p.66) against him, and the atmosphere of his surrounding is very painstaking to him as “the sweltering heat of the Terai is so suffocating that it feels as if a boulder is pressing down on him from above” (p.67). He is very depressed as “his mind is haunted by an unknown fear” (p.67). The mental dilemma that has suffocated him can be seen in these lines:

He even remembers those who were killed out of personal malice. How could he remain detached from the cruel current of dirty politics? Recalling the shocking incidents, which are imminent to him and others as well, his mind and body become weak as if Death is suffocating him. (p.69)

Until the time he is assassinated mercilessly by the rebels, taking him out of his home after his family members have been locked inside the room, Bhaskar Sharma remained in mental distress from which he could hardly escape. In the same way, Buddhikala, after the police abducted her husband at night promising to return him the next morning, and visiting one after another police station, “hanging on the hope, she reached the prison to ask about her husband’s whereabouts and there, too, she got nothing but disappointment and the possibility of finding him alive faded away losing herself in a void, she wandered on the road” (p.88). There would be many people like Buddhikala, Bhaskar Sharma, Nirmaya, Bishnumaya, Pawankali, and many others suffering such agony from which no one can escape. As the Maoist rebellion started, thousands of people were badly impacted, and many others were displaced from their own societies. Those texts are all about the pathos and traumatic pain experienced by fictional or real characters who underwent the horrific events, which still remain in them as traumatic grief in their indelible memories that haunt them time and again. These grieves have been analyzed from traumatic literary theory forwarded by some trauma theorists - Kaplan, Alexander, and Caruth.

Conclusion

The testimonies of the conflict victims who were the witnesses of the events, as presented in the primary text, bring to the fore the painful experiences in the form of trauma, an indelible mark that cannot be forgotten easily for a long time. The texts analyzed with the help of trauma theory as a theoretical parameter to bring out the two-decade old pathos of the Nepali people who were sandwiched by the warring forces, along with the cumulative distress of the conflict. The painful testimony of Nirmaya, Pawankali, Buddhikala, Bhaskar Sharma, Gopal, Bishnumaya, the fictional representatives of the insurgency, and thousands of others is worth mentioning the terroristic trauma of the contemporary Nepali society, which remained vulnerable to suffering for about a decade. The literary representation of the trauma in the form of narratives has emboldened the testimony, which should reproduce the fact objectively, so that the violence should not erupt once again due to inequality and imbalance among the different ethnicities and other marginalized groups. The twentieth century ended with many fatal casualties, causing the

annihilation of my physical and mental disruption, which did not finish immediately, let alone the physical wounds, and various forms of mentally upheld and adapted occurrences that remained in the human psyche for a long time. Though the Maoist insurgency, as an instance, is an epitome of destruction and mass exodus in history, it has been a rich source for many literary figures and other observers who have drawn on it to create narratives that serve as a testament to the historical event.

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