

TRAUMATIC PICTURES AND ETHICAL PRESENTATION OF CHILDREN: A CRITICAL INQUIRY ON *KUNDA DIXIT'S A PEOPLE WAR (IMAGES OF NEPAL CONFLICT 1996-2006)*

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ABSTRACT

The present research takes Kunda Dixit's picture collection *A People War (Images of Nepal Conflict 1996-2006)* to reveal the pathetic condition of war-affected children. Dixit in this collection demonstrates the stories of those years in pictures. Some of the pictures in this text demonize the Maoist side. This paper argues that the representation of the civil war trauma by Kunda Dixit follows the ethical line while presenting the agony, stress, and disorder of war-affected children. The play of ethical relations creates a prose of otherness towards the perpetrators of the violence condemning the victimizers rather than the act of violence. All the selected pictures are analyzed through trauma theory.

Key Words: *civil war, conflict, demonize, ethical, traumatic*

INTRODUCTION

Every war has its iconic picture; Kunda Dixit's picture collection contains the photograph that will be remembered as the symbol of conflict in Nepal between 1996-2006. The present research article takes Dixit's picture collection *A People War (Images of Nepal Conflict 1996-2006)*. It is the story of those years in pictures. Dixit, in this collection, opines, "The best way to report on a conflict is not to cover the war, but the people caught up in it. These photographs capture the anguish, pain, and suffering but also the innate Nepali ability to survive against all odds, to help others despite adversity, and to show humanity when there is inhumanity all around.

After a grueling selection process, an international jury has selected 180 images from 2,561 pictures from 113 photographers submitted for a book on Nepal's ten-year insurgency. Published by Nepa~laya the bilingual book is called, "A people war: Images of the Nepal Conflict 1996-2006." Besides the photographs, the book contains a preface and captions in both English and Nepali. The project was envisioned by Kunda Dixit.

It is well known that war affects millions of children injured, maimed, or killed; forced to take part in combat; orphaned and displaced; subjected to cruel treatment and deprived of basic rights. They witness heinous attacks and massacres. Psychologically and physically, such incidents cause to inhibit the natural growth of the witness. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of

the Child (CRC) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 is one of the most widely ratified International Human Rights Treaties. Probably, it is considered one of the most universally accepted human rights documents in the field of human rights law. In 1990, Nepal became a part of the CRC and ratified without reservation.

Although, CRC is a widely accepted human rights document and is binding for all countries that accepted it. It is a well-known fact that in every internal armed conflict, children have great risk and vulnerability. Likewise, in Nepal, children have been facing the same kind of problem. On one hand, Nepal is a party to Child Rights Convention and on the other hand, various international organizations focus on the same issue for several years but also children are part of grave crimes without fundamental human rights being protected. The UN has called for further action in the field of protection of child right through various research and recommendations, for example in a 1996 United Nations study on the impact of armed conflict on children.

It seems that since Nepal ratified the Child Rights Convention and committed to the international community it protects human rights in any circumstances, though theoretically. While practically, in times of armed conflict there were gross and systematic violations. The study will analyze to which extent internal armed conflict affected child rights and how has Nepal failed to protect children during conflict. The study analyses whether Nepal has used all resources for the protection of children not only civil and political rights but also economic, social, and cultural rights as well. What was the role of the international community to protect children in the case of Nepal and to which extent they are successful or failed in this regard?

Within the 11-year bloody conflict in Nepal, there were many cases reported that both parties occurred rape, sexual abuse, disappearance, abduction, unlawful detention, torture, killing, maiming, etc. In some cases, National Army was interrogated in army custody, and at the same time, they were abused and even raped by the revolutionary group. One of the major causes was mines and explosive devices used by conflict parties.

A recent report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (hereafter UNESCO) has revealed that "the latter part of Maoist insurgency saw a massive scale of abduction of students and teachers. The UNESCO report pointed out that more than 22000 students and 10000 teachers were abducted between 2002 and 2006" (165).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trauma study is mostly preoccupied with testimonial texts and documentary images, it remains haunted by the presence of a more general media culture. At least since the publication of Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimony* (1992), contemporary trauma studies have included analyses of film and video texts along with works of literature. But the testimony of Holocaust survivors discussed in Felman's and Laub's book were exceptional cases. Testimony appeared to assume the common criticism that news and entertainment media commodify human suffering and transform viewers into indifferent voyeurs.

Psychological theories of trauma have explained how the experience of physical harm or life-threatening situations can cause individuals to suffer behavioral and memory disorders over extended periods. Today film, television, and the Internet regularly show violence and catastrophe in the most vivid ways. Whereas the impact of these representations has been an ongoing concern in media research it would appear most people have learned to live with representations of extreme

violence without suffering obvious psychological effects. Exposure to media alone is not a sufficient cause of traumatization. Nevertheless, the price of this exposure may be an emotional and intellectual disengagement with the wider world and even a “psychic numbing” that is itself listed as a symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Dominic Lacrapa in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* talks about acting out and working in relation to cultural trauma. In acting out, “tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past relieving the traumatic scene” (21). Any duality of time is experientially collapsed or productive only of aperies or double blinds. In this sense, the aporia and the double blinds might be seen as marking a trauma has not been ‘worked through’ is an “articulatory practice to the extent one works through trauma, one is able to distinguish between past and present” and to recall in memory that something happened then realizing that one is living here and now openings to the future” (22).

Avishai Margalit shows the distinction between ethics and morality in her book *The Ethics of Memory*. To him “morality is long on geography and short on memory. Ethics is typically short on geography and long on memory” (8). As ethical values are not universal values, they are not long on geography and vice versa. Margalit associates ethics with thick relations and morality with thin relations and shows how these relations evoke our ethical and moral stand. Ethics is material and specific, whereas morality is abstract and general. In this way, community, shared history, and memory are prerequisites for ethics.

Despite the intriguing nature of the media's psychic influence, current studies on trauma and representation have tended to take different approaches. According to critics like Felman and Caruth, contemporary trauma theory focuses on the paradoxical nature of traumatic memory and the problems it presents for accepted notions of historical narrative, truth, and representation. Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis as well as the psychiatric category of PTSD, trauma theory investigates how trauma's temporality creates an event that is perpetually displaced in space and time. Even though trauma may not be recognized consciously at the time it happens, it can resurface as intrusive memories, nightmares, obsessive acting out, and flashbacks. Caruth has called trauma a “symptom of history” (5). Traumatic events can affect anyone and cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The US National Center for PTSD does an excellent job of presenting instances of traumatic, life-threatening events, such as severe auto accidents or natural disasters to "child abuse, [...] sexual or physical assault, [...] and combat or military exposure" (26). Symptoms of PTSD range from a deep sense of fear to confusion, and anger manifesting themselves so intensely that they might "disrupt your life, making it hard to continue with your daily activities" (27).

ETHICAL REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMATIC PICTURES OF CHILDREN DURING CIVIL WAR

The portrayal of ethical representation of trauma is visible in the following picture of the civil war in Nepal. Instead of a moral depiction, this picture evokes a revenge motive due to the pathetic condition of those three children. However, their pain can be less through their 'acting out' of continuous crying and weeping.



Pic. 1: Suresh Sainju 79

In the first picture, the son of a civilian killed by Maoists in Bhaktapur in 2004 comforts his sisters. This picture portrays the pain and suffering of children of the civilian during wartime. In the picture, two sisters are weeping due to the loss of their guardian. They are helpless and no one is there to share their agony except their brother. Their brother seems younger than those girls but he is compelled to sympathize with his sisters despite his misery.

In Nepali society, the father is considered as a guardian of the family. If the same father is killed brutally, the family suffered from numerous problems. The career of those children is in critical condition due to the loss of their father. The boy is in between his two sisters and his sisters are searching the strong protection for their survival so they want to be controlled by their brother. Whereas, the boy himself is in crisis of guardianship of his father. This picture is traumatic in itself and creates trauma for whoever observes it. In Lacrapa's terms, the girls are acting out of the painful event. So, after some moments their agony can be lessened but the condition of the boy is more dangerous.

The boy in the picture is repressing his pain due to this condition he will remain in a traumatic wound that can invite an unconscious revenge motive. The psychological trauma grows in his mind which can promote the rate of another traumatic event. In this picture, the girls are involved in mourning which is effective in returning to normal condition.

This picture is just an example of the suffering of children due to the Maoist revolution. Numerous events endorse trauma in the life of a youngster. Such events don't solve the political problems of Nepal but rather turn them into a dark future. There are many youngsters whose future is uncertain due to the lack of proper education, economic support, and moral support.



Pic.2: Bhim Ghimire 77

Picture second is another example of the agonistic event committed by the revolutionaries during the civil war. In this traumatic picture, Rabin Kumar 5, and his sister Tulsi Kumari 10, on the thirteenth day of mourning for their father, Sampatilal Chaudhary, who was killed by unknown assailants in April 2004. Neighbors say Sampatilal was a cheerful man who never got angry with anyone. He was chairman of the water user's committee in his hometown of Tetaria in the Morong district. Villagers believe he was killed by Maoists.

In the above picture, two innocent faces are foregrounded in the white dress-up. The young girl, Tulsi is facing to camera whereas her younger brother, Rabin is indifferent to it. Tulsi is holding the ring of the holy plant "Kush" on her finger, "Tika" on her forehead, and some holy things in her palms. Her brother is holding a piece of bread in his palm. Both of them don't know properly what is going on in their life. But from their innocent faces, it is clear that they are in great pain. They are unable to express their agony because they lost their loveliest father, the guardian of their life. No one is there to sympathize with them and return a smile on their face. The great wound of the loss of their father is growing in their mind. They don't know who killed their lovely father, why they kill him, and who will take care of them. As many trauma critics have argued that the silence of the trauma patient is dangerous. It promotes trauma instead of curing it.

This is another evidence of the cruelty of the Maoist revolution which made thousands of children orphan and traumatic. A structural trauma gets born in the psyche of the entire viewer whoever views it. Due to this monstrous event of cruel revolutionaries, the general people hate them and the government declared them terrorists. They had abused human rights and freedom killing innocent civilians and violated the child rights making them orphans and helpless.

In those pictures, Tulsi and Rabin are the representation of all the Nepali orphans whose future is uncertain but they are the passive subject whose voice is always suppressed and neglected. Their future is dark and handicapped due to extreme psychological torture and they are silent because no one heard their voice. So, they are the traumatic patients and make all the viewers traumatic.

Kaplan and Wang propose to examine "how traces of traumatic events leave their mark on cultures" (16). Following LaCapra, they contend that rather than insisting that traumatic experiences cannot be represented, it is better to allow for the possibility of "inadequate telling." However, the various functions that media representations play complicate this argument:

The visual media do not just mirror those experiences; in their courting and staging of violence, they are themselves the breeding ground of trauma, as well as the matrix of understanding and experiencing a world out of joint. The visual media have become a cultural institution in which the traumatic experience of modernity can be recognized, negotiated, and reconfigured. (Kaplan and Wang 17)

Elsaesser further complicates the relationship between trauma and media by proposing that the media image provides a site through which one's position in history is imagined as traumatic.

The pictures of Tulsi and Rabin are the breeding ground of trauma. These pictures not only represent the trauma and tension but also can be generated within the mind of viewers. Rather than normalizing the pain of the witness it generates revenge and violence. These pictures share the common problems of the wartime of Nepal which was barbaric.



Pic.3: Bikash Rauniyar 75

In the third picture, a young girl weeps as her mother tells reporters in Kathmandu the story of how her father, Dailekh-based journalist Dekendra Thapa, was killed by Maoists in 2004. The agony of Late Dekendra's daughter is visible in this picture. The innocent face of the girl and the tear in her eyes indicate that she is traumatized. If the witness and sufferer do not utter a word and suppress the pain then the situation becomes more serious. Such condition invites dangerous events.

On the basis of trauma theory, some historical events have such a profound effect on culture and individuals that they take on characteristics similar to psychological trauma, such as being unsettling for all time, being forgettable, and causing a compulsive need to release and relive. Cultural traumas are primarily, though not only, negative.

Dekendra's daughter does not know who is the culprit of her father's murder and why they kill him because she is very young to know the reality of the event. But she is the witness to her father's death and suffering due to the lack of a loving father. The lines of tear in her eyes shows that Dekendra's killing was horrendous. The cannibalistic behavior of Maoist destroyed the lives of many young children like Dekendra's innocent daughter. Dekendra was the third organ of the nation and by attacking him Maoist wanted to challenge the government. Courageous journalists like Dekendra became the prey of the revolutionaries. They violated not only the child's rights but also pushed their future into the dark arena. They made them traumatic patience and celebrated their so-called victory.



Pic. 4: Kiyoko Ogura 66

In the fourth picture, a young Maoist guerilla with a machine gun in Lribang of Rolpa in December 2005. The picture foregrounds a young guerilla heading toward his mission. His innocent face and young body indicate that he has joined the Maoist army by force. This picture shows that during the civil war, the violation of children's rights was at its peak in Nepal. Different

NGOs and INGOs were working for the protection of children during wartime but this picture raises the question on their slogans. The school-aged boy holding a heavy machine gun specifies the hollowness of the Maoist revolution. This picture itself speaks about the ethics of the Maoist revolution.



Pic.5: Krishna Adhikari 61

In the fifth picture, the thirteen-year-old comrade Ajad, commander of the 'A' section of the people's militia' in Rolpa's Bhawang, poses for a picture at a gathering in November 2004. Despite the leadership's assertion that there are no child soldiers, it is common to see children bearing arms or working as porters and sentries. Innocent school-aged children were the main targets of the Maoist revolution. They not only violated the child's rights but also misuse those young minds for their self-benefit. They use children as porters, spies, guerillas, and sentries, etc. Many children lost their lives, were raped, and got tortured by their commanders and fellow members.



Pic. 6: Durga Lal KC 62

In the sixth picture, Maoist young guerillas provide security during the construction of the 'Martyr's Highway' in the jungles near Tila in Rolpa in 2004. This picture displays the pain and suffering of young girls during the civil war period. The girl in the picture looks tired due to strict duty. In the name of construction and development, many young children suffered at the time of the Maoist revolution. They were kidnapped and admitted to the People's Liberation Army forcefully. Similarly, the next picture shows a guerrilla of the PLA at a Maoist march past in Rukum in 2005. In this picture also a young girl is carrying a heavy gun among the masses.

HRW research report shows, "Of the child combatants enlisted, 25% to 50% are estimated to be females, some as young as eight. Girls join for similar reasons than boys, but also to 'escape sexual abuse in the home'" (Human Rights Watch 70). Similarly, Southall and Abasi argue "To be socially included, and to have the possibility of a career –even if this means within the guerrilla groups- that they would not have otherwise" (49). Very often, "girls as young as 12 are more or less directly coerced into sexual intercourse with their commanders" (Human Rights Watch 50).

For girls, the correlation between being a child soldier and PTSD was twice as high as for boys. This indicates that depression and PTSD may be caused by factors like non-traumatic child soldier experiences or traumatic exposures other than those the teams evaluated; these factors are particularly significant for female soldiers.



Pic. 7: Kiyoko Ogura 105

Similarly, in the seventh picture, many students were deprived of studying English and Sanskrit subjects. They were compelled to study the 'revolutionary curriculum.' In the school also they were forced to wear military dress and cast military dress. The innocent students were misguided by the speech and threats of the PLA. The comparison between children who have been enlisted and conscripted into the armed forces (regardless of whether their association was with government forces or other armed militias) and children who have otherwise been touched by the war (as civilians victimized by the violence) but have never been associated with an armed group is what separates child soldiers from other children affected by the conflict.



Pic. 8: Amrit Gurung 115

The eighth picture shows children from a nearby school in Motipur of Kailali playing in the ruins of a police station destroyed by Maoists in December 2002. Six policemen were killed in the attack and the station has never been rebuilt. The boys knew one of the policemen who were killed and they never come here alone because, they think, the house is haunted. The picture is traumatic in itself. Like the hole in the wall, there is a wound in the mind of those children who were witnesses to that monstrous event. The cracked wall of the police station represents the cracked future of Nepali people. The innocent figures in the picture are still in shock so they think that the ghost hunts the station. They are psychologically disturbed by that attack which shows the bleak life of Nepali youngsters. This ethical representation of the picture generates a negative attitude to the revolutionary party.



Pic. 9: Narendra Shrestha 109

The last picture is horrendous, children near Mugling on the Prithvi Highway inspect an army Ferret armored vehicle that was bombed while escorting a convoy of trucks carrying supplies to Kathmandu during the Maoist blockade in December 2004. This is also the ethical representation of civil war which portrays Maoist as a terrorist. The picture is traumatic. It creates shock among the spectators. The young children in the picture don't know the cause of that blast rather enjoy watching such a dangerous event. Those children are very near to the Ferret which is a very dangerous act. There may be remaining bombs and sockets which can take their life. Many children were killed while playing with socket bombs. Child psychology is also affected by such events. They can generate negative attitudes to their life which leads to a dark future.

Young people perform a range of tasks for the Maoists. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), the main military wing of the Maoists, employs some of the youngsters not in local militias. Children work as porters, sentries, messengers, and medical assistants in both the PLA and militias. Young people enlisted in the Maoist ranks are provided with military training and armaments, which can vary from receiving full-fledged training in the PLA with weapons to receiving a single grenade or homemade "socket bombs." Whatever their stance, however, it is evident that children were exposed to combat and were especially prone to injury, even when they served with local militias (as opposed to the PLA). Human Rights Watch's battle site investigations have shown that, occasionally within a few days of the fighting,

CONCLUSION

All the pictures taken by renowned photojournalists, uncover the abnormal condition of children during and after the civil war. Children must suffer in the time of wartime. On the one hand, they lost their nearest person and on the other hand, their future turned out to be hell. During the war period, children were forcefully played the role of spies, soldiers, porters, messengers, and many more. Similarly, most of the young girls became the prey of sexual violence from both sides. Some of them were witnesses of the murder and torture of their relatives so their present condition is stressful and disordered. They dwell on the justice of the violence but didn't get justice rather than sympathy. They are living with the post-traumatic stress disorder condition. All these issues are portrayed in Dixit's collection *A People War (Images of Nepal Conflict 1996-2006)*. with a real representation of the condition of children on an ethical base. The lack of moral depiction of the traumatic images paves the way for revenge instead of normalizing the wound. The pictures indeed are traumatic and generate collective trauma among the observers. All the traumatic pictures analyzed in this article uncover the Maoist actions and generate hatred towards them.

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