

The Metaphorical Representation of a Red Tomato for Bringing out Peace and Solidarity in Dhungana's "The Eyewitness"

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Abstract

This article analyzes Bhuvan Dhungana's "The Eyewitnesses" by applying trauma theory propagated by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. In this context, Caruth's psychological approaches of trauma theory and LaCapra's middle voice have been used as a theoretical tool to analyze the story which has been written on the periphery of the ten-year long Maoist insurgency that upheld the socio-economy-political lives of Nepali people. This article tries to focus on the metaphorical use of tomato as an eyewitness which observes the demonstration during the Second People's Movement. Here, a red tomato represents the freshness and demolition of the circumstances of the conflict between the authoritarian power and need for freedom to all common denizen. The fact of destruction and demolition presented in the story is the key point to bring out the trauma of the people who either involved in the movement or remained eyewitnesses of the consequences of the historical event that was about to introduce new horizon of expectation in the life of Nepalese people.

Keywords: *Eyewitness, Metaphor, Middle Voice, People's Movement, Trauma*

Introduction

It's about a century that Nepal has been witnessing many historical movements happening time and again for the freedom and democracy. In such movements, common people as a part of most vulnerable group, have been victimized. It began from the movement against Rana oligarchy. During the Second People's Movement (2005-6), not only the rural life remained crippled by the extreme degree of violence and terror, but the urban life also did not remain untouched from the pains and sufferings due to week/ month long *banda*(strike) or closure. The nineteen day long strike made the life of workers, democratic activists, students, freedom fighters and even security personnel very painful as "the agitation, demonstration and movement had truly paralyzed the towns and cities" (Bhattarai 11). Common people like cart pullers, security personnel etc. could not do their duty and remained hungry for many days. As the Movement was on climax, "nothing worked; the government had no command over it, no curfew worked, no prohibited zone could bar them from participating or burning effigies of the king or his cohorts" (11). The victims of the movement could hardly bear the pains of such long strike. But these grief-stricken people still hope for a better life in future in spite of several troubles

they were facing in their life which some Nepali writers have tried to render in the form of narrative of short stories. Writing trauma in the form of narrative of short stories would be bearing witness of the past events that once crippled the ordinary people's lives. Writing about such historical events, in a sense, would be a testimony for other people who would be willing to know about their past.

Trauma theory has been a fertile background to understand the pains and pathos of the people depicted in the literary works. Literary depictions of trauma “function to bear witness and testify to traumatic experience, since they break the silence and also redefine discourse, challenging memory and identity”(Barrette et al. ix). It is in the engagement with writing that “the unspeakable emerges from the aporia in consciousness and releases its repressive energy” (ix). The narratives written about such atrocities, on one hand, should deal with the past events objectively not aligning with any particular groups. Such stories can help both fighting groups come together forgetting their feud. Trauma has been a subject of talking about the wound one has got physically or mentally in past and reminisces again and again in the present. But there are many things that a traumatized gets in present as a sublimity that the sublime plays the role of a jolting antidote to the pleasure of the beautiful.

But on the other hand, they sometimes might become very “inauthentic because they try to reduce the violence to the language of feud” (Das and Nandi 189), which would rather create a problem and help escalate the cycle of violence, thereby coming in the way of reestablishment of a peaceful society. Narrating the stories of war and conflict as testimony in the form of short stories becomes inherently important for the survivors to “tell and to be heard that can become itself an all-consuming life task” (Laub 63) which would help one internalize and understand the situation happened in his or her life.

The writer would narrate the events as a neutral witness objectively keeping both sides away from his or her personal and emotional attachment. The untold events would become much distorted in one's unconscious memory that one would believe that he or she was responsible for the atrocities he or she has witnessed. Sharing the testimony objectively would help one understand the past events neutrally; which would ultimately bring both groups close together.

In the above context, Bhuwan Dhungana's “The Eyewitnesses” has been analyzed with the consequences of the People's Movement and its impact on ordinary people. They bring out the bitter facts of outcome of the Movement upon the common people who remain jobless and hungry for many days. These stories show how painful and traumatic life people have to live in the urban area. While bringing out the trauma caused by the Movement, the writers, as neutral observers of the consequences of the event, have presented their testimony neither aligning one nor othering another group. Bringing such facts objectively, the narrators have helped establish peace and reconciliation in the society which had once been in turmoil for a long time.

Trauma Theory as a Methodology

Trauma has become a keyword through which scholars from different disciplines approach the experience of violence and its aftermath. The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery. In bringing out trauma theory while analyzing literary works, Cathy Caruth has been a pioneer figure who has elucidated the tenets of trauma in narratives. Showing the importance of writing history either of great people's heroic deeds and other ordinary people's painful experience, she says, “The story of

trauma, then, as the narrative of belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life” (*Unclaimed* 5). In her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she shows that the onset of traumatic pathology (post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, “a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience” (3)) which cannot be fully determined by given traumatic events which consists of “not only both human and natural catastrophes but also rape, child abuse and a number of other violent occurrences” (3).

But, while bringing the aesthetics of trauma and post-traumatic testimonies, Dominick Lacrapa is in opinion that in elucidating trauma and its aftereffects in culture and people, psychoanalytic concept is perpetuated with historical analysis and sociocultural as well as political critique. In talking about truth claims of which he opines of gathering evidence and making referential statement based on “that evidence which constitutes necessary and sufficient conditions of historiography” (1). And, middle voice, as a proper way of representing realistically modern experience, is an affirmation, which would prescribe an “insufficiently modulated rhetoric” (26) or any other forms of discourse. Memories are the root cause of traumatic experience and some memories except those of dream are social and such memories are remembered collectively on a social context. Collective memory can be seen from different angles - collective memory is developed by people in groups, discussing memories, debating, arguing, and coming to conclusions about what happened. They debate over the meaning, and come to a collective decision, creating a collective memory.

Tomato – an Eyewitness: a Metaphor to Bring out an Event

Similarly, Bhuvan Dhungana’s “The Eyewitness”, a story written on the background of the second People’s Movement, has used a ripe tomato an eyewitness of a whole day’s activities of the movement. It shows how demonstration started and how in the twilight the tomato got crushed under a policeman’s boot. It has also used the tomato – a visual image and representative of all eyewitnesses who have come to witness the event from outside and happen to die in the crossfire between the security forces and the demonstrators. The scenes and activities presented from the perspective of the tomato signify the violent events which are brought a fore objectively not aligning to any sides. The narrator with the help of this personified tomato is able to bring the testimony of the movement showing both sides’ activities neutrally, which would subsequently help them take this post-conflict narrative as “a remedial quality and healing process” (Felman 16) and a true record of the event.

The story shows a tomato’s popping up from the heap of other tomatoes kept in the vegetable market. It arrives at the side of the road “wrapping a turban of four-starred green flag round his head” (Dhungana 67) to witness the activities happening in the movement. Firstly, it witnesses the police guards “in their apron-like chest-guards standing sentinel along the roadside” (67) to see and show. Secondly, it witnesses a group of boys with college bags on their backs “roaring with laughter, sometimes jumping and sometime clapping as well, gesturing at the police” (67). Thirdly, it witnesses a taxi speeding towards the boys who bang the glasses of the car. Finally, it witnesses the demonstration changing into tumult as “the pieces of the stones are showering like the hailstones amidst the screams – ‘Auch! Alas!’” (68). It witnesses all the activities in spite of being kicked several times on the pavement. The situation gets worse when the scene of the road becomes just like “that of a raped woman” (68) as different sizes of brickbats and thick layers of red brick powder are prevalent and the place “looked like a battlefield” (68). It, then, witnesses one dog badly wounded. The last part

of the story when the tomato as an eye witness happens to be crushed and its seeds and juice “happen to be oozing at one of the corners of the pavement like the blood cells oozing from the broken head” (68), makes the situation even worse. It signifies the sacrifice of many innocent eye witnesses during the Movement. The security personnel have crushed one eyewitness, here tomato, but with it, several other eyewitnesses will germinate and movement continues for peace and stability.

The story is a testimony of an eyewitness who has closely witnessed the bloody demonstration of a political movement to bring a change in the country for the people who had been sandwiched between the cruelty of the rulers and poverty created by the situation. The situation of these people as signified by a ripe red tomato which “wishes to be the sole eyewitness of this demonstration” (67) is traumatized when people “had to go hungry and sleep in the open and there was the ever present fear of injury, torture and death” (Adhikari 94) from both sides during the movement. They were forced to witness “the heap of the red clay and tomatoes accumulated on this pavement on their TV screen in the evening and will be startled” (Dhungana 69) which is “the greatest confrontation with reality as an absolute numbing to it” (Caruth, *Trauma* 6). It signifies to one of the historical truths conferring to trauma and it “locates its ultimate origin inside and outside the psyche” (8). Referring to the subsequent metaphorical use of color – red also pertains the change which confers the blood for essential transfiguration in the society.

Truth and past events are two parts of testimony – “a privileged contemporary mode of transmission and communication” (Felman 17) which an eyewitness presents to make the history plausible as witnessing would be “the quest of testifying and of witnessing . . . the process of the testimony” (Laub 61) to begin again the plausibility of the past and to “build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life” (Ibid). The narrator in this story is trying to narrativize the historical event as a testimony for those who witnessed the events closely “from the pyre in the solitary burial ground” (Dhungana 69). As the events would rather be grave, one has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (Laub 63), and it becomes inherently imperative to share the one’s stories for relief “embodying some remedial quality and healing process” (Felman, *Trauma* 116). Writing about the movement, Dhungana is able to make a balance in bringing the fact. That’s why, it is very important to “tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task” (63). If such painful experience is not shared in time, it would be very difficult for the survivor to remain good in life.

The consequence of the second people’s movement – as outcome of the violent events which made one victims and another perpetrators and “crafted the symbols and genres of mourning that made them active in the highly contested domain of politics” (Das 301). This situation may create an ability to engage a wider public on the meaning of such violence which may “break up into tumult” (Dhungana 68). Testimony of the survivors would be “best conceptualized not through the metaphor of writing but rather through the contrast between saying and showing” (Das 300). For victims like the tomato, testimony would be a possible landmark which they can unfold the hidden truth which even the historians have ignored for a long time.

The witnessing of the tomato – a personified agent to bring the truth a fore is fundamental and indispensable relationship among other witnesses can be understood by recording of some kind, so that, one can “unbeknownst to survivors themselves, act as trustees of their testimony by ensuring its continued reception . . . whether as listeners, readers, or viewers, with the reconstruction of a sense of self and community” (Trizise 223). This trusteeship may help people related socially, politically,

historically come to the table of reconciliation while receiving testimony which would be an ethical exigency that can test one's ability to empathize.

Dhungana's narration of the historical event with the help of metaphorical illustration of tomato signals Lacrapa's use of the middle voice "as distinguished from the active voice and the proper way of representation of the Holocaust" (25) to bring the fact to "represent realistically the modern experience" (25). As a neutral observer of the movement, the storyteller presents it realistically which constitutes factual representation to take account of experiences. Here in this story the writer, Dhungana's use of language of violence is not chauvinistic; and as much as possible she is able to employ the language which has neither reduced the specificity of the experience nor nullifies the possibilities of co-existence appealing both sides' sensitivity. It has rather developed a humanistic, critical consciousness in pacifying immemorial feuds, hatred; not the notion of separation and partition (Pandey 136). Trauma resulted either from local level or national level must be cured or healed; should not be repeated in any time in the past. Here, one can argue that trauma seen in the story should not necessarily offer "a means of overcoming instability, contaminated as it is with the ideological contours of the dominant culture to which the trauma belongs" (137). It should also be implemented to pacify the warring groups with their feuds. Dhungana seems to be successful in bringing out the fact and settling the feud if still remained in the disturbed society.

Conclusion

In short, unfolding the unnoticed fact of the second People's Movement that caused many people's lives and thousands other badly injured with metaphorical use of personified tomato as an eyewitness of the event, "The Eyewitness" has been understood as a testimony to testify the violent activities during the movement. The narrator from the perspective of the red and ripe tomato has embellished the facts with truthful details not assigning with any warring groups, but as a neutral observer she has weaved the plot very objectively, which would ultimately help all concerned groups live peacefully. Besides, the story written on the background of the second People's Movement shows trauma in the life of ordinary people. It shows the consequences of the Movement on ordinary people with the use of a metaphor – a red tomato. In general, it bears the witness of the Movement and presents testimony of the facts, which would help one understand the historical development in the country. Besides, while bearing witness to the Movement and presenting the testimony of the traumatic facts, the writer as a neutral observer of the event seems to have used Lacrapa's middle voice. She has neither supported nor othered any groups of the Movement, which would subsequently help establish peace and stability in the society.

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