

## **Politics of Memory and Trauma in Parashu Pardhan's Sitas - 23 and Padmabati Singh's The Silence of Violence**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper attempts to analyze the cultural politics of memory and trauma in Parashu Pardhan's "Sitas - 23" and Padmabati Singh's "The Silence of Violence." In doing so, the paper, as an interpretive inquiry, utilizes as its analytical tools, insights from the theorists such as Dominick Lacapra, Cathy Caruth, Avishai Margalit, Geoffrey Hartman on psychological trauma and the politics of memory and trauma. As a qualitative inquiry, the paper is based, largely on, secondary sources such as books, journal articles and online sources. The purpose of this study, rather than discover new things, is to offer new interpretations on the topic which has been often ignored in the existing state of art. These stories recount the experiences of trauma and the narrativization against the Nepalese Maoists during the "People's War." The point of departure, taken in this paper, is that the memory of the stories is contaminated by the cultural ideologies during the Maoist Insurgency (sometimes termed as People's War). Memories of the characters represented in the stories, thus, takes an ethical turn and becomes a part of the larger ideological politics. Their narrativization of the ideology-contaminated traumatic memory uses the language of demonization.*

**Keywords:** Demonization, Insurgency, Ethical, Ideology, Memory, Trauma

### **1. Introduction**

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, which lasted from 1996 to 2006, was a time of great violence and trauma. According to official statistics, over 17,000 people were killed, 1,500 disappeared, and 75,000 were injured (Acharya, 2011, p. 80). However, the true number of victims is likely much higher, as many people were never reported missing or were killed in secret. In addition to the deaths, the insurgency also caused widespread displacement and suffering. Over 250,000 people were forced to flee their homes, and many were subjected to torture, rape, and other forms of violence (Acharya, 2011, p. 80). The trauma of the insurgency has, as Acharya further contends, p. 80) had

a profound impact on the people of Nepal. Many survivors suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the country as a whole is still struggling to come to terms with the violence. The insurgency has also been the subject of a great deal of writing. These writings vary in subject matter and perspective, but they all offer insights into the impact of the conflict on the people of Nepal. Some accounts focus on the experiences of combatants or security forces, while others provide journalistic or academic perspectives.

There was a vast gap between rulers and citizens, rich and poor, high caste and low caste. One of the prominent problems that have been faced by the Nepalese economy is poverty. The gulf between poor and rich is increasing day by day because the poor get little chance to explore their potentialities whereas the rich get every opportunity and become richer. The Maoist war, which prioritized the poor, has its agenda of fair distribution of land and property. They have already started this operation by capturing the wealth and land of landowners and distributing them to the poor.

At the time of war, people of all age groups have to suffer including women, children and old people. Many have lost their youthful lives. Women are the onlookers of their husband's death and the victims of rape and sexual harassment by both Maoists' cadres and police forces, finally undergoing painful traumatic experiences. The war survivors are the most miserable people who have to pass double misfortune-- firstly, they lose their near and dear ones and secondly, they have to face the cruelty of time, making them unable to bear the irreparable loss and anxiety. Regarding the issue of traumatic experience, Govinda Raj Bhattarai in *Stories of Conflict and War* states: They become the victims of unimaginable terror. They died and even if they remained alive, they lost the pace of life and normalcy; they lost human sensibility. They remained void of any feeling, shivering days and nights, unable to decide what they were expected to do (p. 11).

Both the short-term, immediate repercussions of violence and the long-term, indirect changes in society contribute to traumatic experiences during times of war. Many kids experience trauma in the near term as a result of gunshot wounds or landmine injuries. Because to their smaller size and potential to pick up landmines to play with, children are more likely than adults to be killed or maimed by landmines. Emotional issues afflict a lot of people over time. Witnessing family members' deaths, being cut off from friends and relatives, and running away to an unfamiliar location can all cause mental stress. Soldiers who kill others risk losing their sense of morality and evolving into more aggressive individuals over time. Many young girls experience the trauma of rape. Symptoms. Those who have experienced conflict frequently exhibit post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms such as worry, fear, difficulty

sleeping, exhaustion, and stomach pains.

Not everyone who is traumatized during the conflict will endure emotional or mental issues. If the traumatic patient is with his or her family, the family's resources and capacity to care for them, as well as the people's own capacity to deal, will determine how the trauma affects them. People with mental or emotional issues may cry constantly or break out in hysteria, be easily startled by strangers, under-eat, have nightmares or other sleeping difficulties, and suffer from physical illnesses like headaches, dizziness, backaches, eye strain, or stomach upsets for no apparent reason. They may also struggle to concentrate or learn, act physically aggressively or play rough and boisterously, be incredibly withdrawn, quiet, and well-behaved, or exhibit other symptoms never expressing emotions, constantly expecting horrible things to happen, etc. There is always a politics of representation in every piece of writing. The writer who has written about a text is always guided by the ideological instances that he is accustomed to, eventually making his writing a mere reflection of the representation of his ideology. For instance, writers who have a close affiliation with Maoist ideology will support Maoist act and blame opposition parties' view, showing Police forces as cruel and barbaric, whereas the one who believes in other ideology will present the horrific sight of Maoist activities and shows the police forces as the agent to end the terrorism. Every interpretation, therefore, is the mere representation of one's perspective.

Every art, thus, is a representation of the writer's ideology and trauma is the tool that he uses to show the cruelty of the opponent, representing reality according to his ideological preferences. It is impossible to present reality without being colored by some personal preferences. The writer's biasness is always present in his writing and thus making the writing a mere representation. Thus, there is politics of representation in every text and it is unavoidable fact. Psychologically, 'trauma' is a term often used to describe an unpleasant emotional experience that has a varying and largely lasting impact on the sufferer's personality and mind. It is a psychological problem seen in a patient who is the victim of rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abductions, terror and violence, etc. It becomes problematic because of its repeated nature. The traumatic patient will have recurring events of violence, thus making their lives, a living hell. They will lose the pace of life and normalcy. They remain void of feeling and often become mad. Some may even lose their memory and human sensibility. It is a behavior the disordered mind exhibits toward the body and offers a means of understanding the chaos, anguish, and destruction sparked by psychological repression. It shows the direct relation in abnormal phenomena. The abnormality is mostly psychic but is manifested in physicality which becomes more uncommon and stressful.

## 2. Review of Literature

Psychological trauma studies has become a fertile ground in literary research. The politics of memory and trauma has been largely based on Dominick LaCapra's pioneering work on historical trauma. He begins by defining trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event(s) is often characterized by dissociation, numbing, and delayed or blocked mourning" (p. 4). He argues that trauma is not simply a psychological event, but also a social and cultural one. The way that trauma is represented in culture and history can have a profound impact on how it is experienced by individuals and communities. He then turns to a critical analysis of a number of theoretical and literary works that have attempted to come to terms with trauma. He discusses the work of Freud, Lacan, Caruth, and others, and he argues that these works offer valuable insights into the nature of trauma, but that they also have limitations. For example, LaCapra argues that Freud's concept of "Nachträglichkeit" (deferred action) can be too deterministic, and that Caruth's concept of "unclaimed experience" can lead to a form of aporia, or unknowability (pp. 49-50, 87-88).

Moreover, LaCapra's work is a complex and nuanced study of trauma. It is not an easy read, but it is a rewarding one. LaCapra offers a valuable framework for understanding the nature of trauma, and he provides insights into the challenges of representing trauma in culture and history. His ability to combine theoretical rigor with historical sensitivity. He is able to draw on a wide range of theoretical sources, but he also grounds his analysis in the specific historical contexts of the Holocaust and other traumatic events. This combination of theoretical and historical insight makes LaCapra's work a valuable resource for anyone who is interested in the study of trauma. He is aware that the way that trauma is represented can have a profound impact on how it is experienced by individuals and communities. This awareness leads LaCapra to argue for a "critical" approach to trauma, one that is sensitive to the ethical and political dimensions of the problem (p. 182).

Along the same line, *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history* by Cathy Caruth (1996) is another seminal work in the field of trauma studies. In this work, Caruth argues that trauma is not simply a psychological event, but also a linguistic one. She suggests that the traumatic experience is often "unclaimed" because it cannot be fully assimilated into language. This leads to a kind of "latency" in which the traumatic experience is relived in the form of nightmares, flashbacks, and other symptoms. Caruth's work is based on a series of close readings of literary texts, including Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Poe's *The Purloined letter*, and the testimony of Holocaust survivors. She argues that these texts offer insights into the nature of trauma

and its representation. One of the strengths of Caruth's work is her ability to combine theoretical rigor with literary sensitivity. She is able to draw on a wide range of theoretical sources, including Freud, Lacan, and Derrida, but she also grounds her analysis in the specific literary texts that she is discussing. Her willingness to engage with the ethical and political implications of trauma. She is aware that the way that trauma is represented can have a profound impact on how it is experienced by individuals and communities. This awareness leads Caruth to argue for a "critical" approach to trauma, one that is sensitive to the ethical and political dimensions of the problem p. 115).

Discussing about memory and trauma, A. Margalit In *The Ethics of Memory* (2002), Margalit argues that memory is essential for the formation of strong and meaningful relationships between people. He calls these relationships "thick" relations, and they are based on shared values, experiences, and understandings. For example, two people who are both survivors of the Holocaust may have a thick relation (p. 7). Margalit argues that thick relations are essential for a just and humane society. They provide the foundation for trust, cooperation, and mutual understanding. They also help to promote a sense of shared identity and belonging. In contrast, forgetting can lead to alienation, division, and conflict (pp. 8-9). Margalit then turns to the question of what it means to remember ethically. He argues that there are two main ethical principles that should guide our memories. The first principle is that we should remember the victims of radical evil. Margalit argues that when radical evil attacks our shared humanity, we have a moral obligation to remember the victims. This is because forgetting the victims would be to deny their suffering and to make it easier for such atrocities to happen again (pp. 9, 89). The second principle is that we should remember in a way that is truthful and respectful. Margalit argues that we should not distort or embellish the past in order to make it more palatable. We should also be respectful of the memories of others, even if they differ from our own (pp. 10-11).

Geoffrey Hartman's *Trauma Within the Limits of Literature* (2003) is a seminal essay that explores the relationship between trauma and literature. Hartman argues that literature can be a powerful tool for understanding and representing trauma, but that it is also limited in its ability to do so. Hartman begins by defining trauma as "an event or experience that overwhelms the mind's capacity to process it" (p. 257). He argues that trauma can be caused by a wide range of events, including war, natural disasters, and personal violence. When a person experiences trauma, they may be unable to fully integrate the event into their sense of self. This can lead to a variety of symptoms, including flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. Hartman argues that literature can be a valuable tool for understanding trauma because it can provide a way to

represent the unrepresentable. He cites the work of poets such as William Wordsworth as examples of how literature can give voice to the traumatic experience. However, Hartman also acknowledges that literature is limited in its ability to represent trauma. He argues that literature can never fully capture the lived experience of trauma, and that it can sometimes even be retraumatizing for survivors. There have been extensive research regarding postwar trauma studies. However, in Nepal's context, this area is still an under-researched area.

### **3. Methods**

The paper is based on interpretive inquiry and uses, as its analytical tools, insights from the theorists such as Dominick Lacapra, Cathy Caruth, Avishai Margalit, Geoffrey Hartman on psychological trauma and the politics of memory and trauma. As primary texts for this study, Parashu Pardhan's "Sitas - 23" and Padmabati Singh's "The Silence of Violence" have been eclectically selected. As a qualitative inquiry, the paper is based, largely on, secondary sources such as books, journal articles and online sources. The purpose of this study, rather than discover new things, is to offer new interpretations on the topic which has been often ignored in the existing state of art.

### **4. Analysis and Findings**

The politics of memory and trauma has been best demonstrated in the text, *Stories of Conflict and War*, edited by Prof. Dr. Govinda Raj Bhattarai, dramatizes madness, forgetfulness, induced terror, and other aberrant behaviors and traumas of the people featured as characters. The dissertation seeks to examine the ethical memory and politics of the representation of trauma in *Stories of Conflict and War*. Parashu Pardhan in "Sitas - 23" and Padmabati Singh in "The Silence of Violence."

In "Sitas - 23," Parashu Pardhan brings up the topic of political conflict in which ordinary people are increasingly both the victims and the weapons of war. As he narrates:

Please do listen to me----- my husband has gone missing for the last three years. I know nothing about his whereabouts. One night some boys with slit eyes came and took him away, saying they had some business with him. That evening, a goat was butchered in the house opposite and I had cooked meat and rice. I asked them politely, "What sort of work do you have with him? May I also know it? Well, the food is ready. Go after having the food, will you? No – take him immediately." They dragged him along forcibly saying this much. Me and my children stayed vigil all night long crying. (48)



The above-mentioned lines show the sense of horror due to the abduction of her husband. People, who have overseen the conflicts have undergone painful traumatic experiences in their lives and have suffered from trauma. Conflict itself is a major cause of trauma. On the other hand, Pradhan's narration in the memory of Sita is against the Maoist "all suspects the jungle" (48). He narrates the event by using prose of otherness and focuses on collective memory from the perspective of mainstream politics. The biases emerge in the writer's tone, attitude and exclusion and inclusion of details.

That unpleasant emotional experience becomes a trauma, as a permanent effect upon her mind and the personality of individual suffering. It is a psychological problem seen in a patient who is the victim of rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abductions, terror and violence, etc. she is victimized by the terror and violence of the people's war. It becomes problematic because of its repeated nature. "Now look here! Before me appear his face while it is time for eating. No morsel of food can I swallow in. the children ask – 'Ama, when will our father come back?' what answer shall I give to them? We can't get a wink of sleep"(p. 48).

The traumatic patient will have recurring events of violence, thus making their lives, a living hell. They will lose the pace of life and normalcy. They remain void of feeling and often become mad. Some may even lose their memory and human sensibility.

Please do tell me, how you think I have been managing to survive — there is neither any news of my husband nor of children. Thinking that it would be better for me to die than to live such a life, I left home one night. I reached at the edge of the nearby pond, some distance down my home to hurl myself into it. As I was standing at the edge looking into the water, it occurred to me that all the waves were calling me. (p. 49)

It is the psyche of women who became the locations of the harshest violence. She left home at midnight because of the unbearable agony lost husband. When a traumatic experience takes place, the mind and body are found in a numbed state, and the overpowering event is revealed in the form of somatic symptoms or compulsive, repetitive behavior. That repeated memory forced her to become mad.

Although Pradhan at first seems to acknowledge the understanding of traumatic experience, he continues to transcend the gaps in this record through literature, to absorb the terrible feeling of humanity truncated, tortured, and to rehearse "the trauma of those who have suffered at the hand of history." It is a misconception of the partiality of the traumatic experience to claim that the writer can somehow "know" and communicate the experience of those who have experienced trauma, and this claim also obscures the exercise of power

through representation. He seems 'neutral' medium that can carry and convey the suffering but he indicates to Maobadis that they are not able to learn the difference between right and wrong. However, showing the enduring trauma of the people who were victimized through the violence of Maobadis, he supports mainstream politics, that is the politics of traumatic memory.

I chanted the name of my husband and children and I tried to forget myself completely. All at once, it occurred to me that a male voice was coming from somewhere afar- 'Sita, you're committing an unpardonable sin. Your seven lives may fall into the vicious eddy of hell. Who shall I call Sita when I come back home one day? Who shall I spend my remaining days with? Likewise, a young women's voice brought me down to earth, Ama! What are you doing? Don't you think you have to find a son-in-law for me? How come you are so coward and timid?' I could not commit suicide. I couldn't die, Inspector Sahib!" (p. 49)

When she reaches the bay of the pond to commit suicide, she can't due to the hallucination of the sound of her family member. She runs on the street asking people about her husband. Whenever she faces a person with having a good physique, she would follow him, "I would be embarrassed to meet such a person at the same point" (49). It is also concerned that to whom, she is narrating her story is a person having a thick relationship. That collective memory gives the shape of ideology where happens the representation of violence. Bhattarai writes, "The Sita of 23 is the female character victimized in the conflict. [...] the wife left alone and helpless, awaiting only more horrendous days. At the moment, she is about to lose her mental balance" (p. 14).

Pradhan's delicate and careful telling of a tale on behalf of those who can't, have not been permitted to say it, obliges us to investigate the limitations of representation with constraints much greater than those that have usually taxed scholars who have been working on the trauma of the war. The problematic problems surrounding the holocaust testimony, such as in what language and at what time it was given, and with what audience the unimaginable horror of the tragic event could be accurately described, have proven challenging enough for historians. He intends to emphasize that because there is no social validation of the event itself in the larger social register, the painful experiences of ordinary people during the 10 years of the people's war present us with an even bigger problem.

When I wake up- I find myself in the same giddy room, plunged into pitch dark night. I feel my body bathed with sweats due to heat. His place in the bed is vacant and cold. I have no idea, Inspector Sahib, whether I am dead or alive. Suddenly, I wake up; suddenly I go to the bathroom; suddenly, I take a shower; suddenly, I eat food. I do not know what I am eating: rice or stone,



something like a robot, something like a doll. We can remain alive without even trusting ourselves. [...] isn't there any government in the country? No law? You must tell me, you cannot remain like a stone. (p. 51)

The traumatic patient herself narrates her memory of trauma. Remembering trauma is not actual memory. Would you think someone can remember a traumatic event that never actually happened? Well, it is. No matter how absurd the idea may seem, Richard J. McNally in his book *Remembering Trauma*, explains how people do occasionally remember the violence that never came about and how they end up experiencing the “emotional distress befitting the traumatic nature of the remembered events”(p. 173). Unless there is brain damage, survivors of trauma rarely forget what happened to them. Furthermore, rather than causing amnesia, the strong emotions people feel during traumatic or stressful events help them remember key details of the incident. Trauma only becomes apparent after the fact, therefore remembering is inevitably entangled with the politics of the time's preeminent history, to which writers subscribe.

By the same token, Padmavati Singh in “The Silence of Violence” raises many events which reflect the traumatic memory of the patients. The principal character, Nirmaya, is constantly tossing and turning in bed as she experiences intense worry and restlessness. This is not the first night; she has been enduring many such nights, writhing in agony like this. She is distinctly tormented by fear and a sense of foreboding. The cause of her vexation is her husband Bam Bahadur who has gone missing in the clash with the rebels. His whereabouts are all unknown, whether he is dead or alive. She is “writhing alive like a fish sizzling in the glowing heat of fire” (p. 79). The neighbors would console her, spewing up words of sympathy, but these words only wrung her heart instead of cooling her off. They would crumble down the “walls of confidence and she would shed the incessant teardrops from the corners of her eyes” (p. 79).

The violence that caused suffering on a personal to a societal level came to represent political evil in and of itself. The Peoples War has evolved into a cultural icon. It has since become a concept that is no longer bound by location or time, leaving its mark on other instances of injustice and tragic national memories all around the nation. Or to put it another way, it is now seen as a structural trauma rather than a historical one. Padmavati narrates:

An unspeakable fear is written in the villagers' eyes due to the possible attack and clash. This has left them numb and silent. To the villagers, each night resembles the dreadful night of annihilation. To Nirmaya, the formidable silence of tonight is like the sleeping volcano simmering inside. “Hey! Open the door...” a harsh male voice questioned her grief-stricken heart, shattering the dead peace of the night. (p. 80)

The above maintain statements express the traumatic scenario of society, it is not only the pathos of the individual. Suffering is only the reward of life. No redemption is at hand. In this empty society, the possible way of authentic living is to create one's image through the right cultural trauma among many cultural traumas. Human cultural trauma is subjective because an individual's family must make their cultural traumas without help from such external standards as laws, ethical rules, or traditions to choose free individuals. As they are free, they are completely responsible too.

Two rebels entered the house. "Where have the people of this house disappeared?" (80). Trembling with fear, Nirmaya curled in her bed. They again claimed for food and shelter then she got up with no words at all and began. Her husband was a police who has gone missing since the last clash. One of them, after having food, said with a lewd gesture, catching her hand suddenly, "Where is your police husband? He might often come to sleep with you, right?" (p. 81). The gales of lewd laughter echoed in the room looking at them with contempt:

Suppose we are your husband...! Saying this, one of them knocked her down, gagging the hems of her sari into her mouth and the other stripped her naked and raped her. Having played coarsely with her body, these two friends took to their heels. The villagers wrapped in the veil of the solitariness of the night got no hint of this disgraceful incursion into her womanhood. Nobody else heard her heart-rending cry for help erupting from her soul. Let alone other people, even her father-in-law kept on curling, turning his deaf ear to her agony. (p. 81)

These lines show the psychological as well as physical trauma of Nirmaya. She was lying like a lifeless log on the floor as she continued to ascend the mountain of misery while being afraid and intensely furious. Her eyes were awash in an ocean of misery. Her patience broke down completely. She discovered herself cut up into thousands of bits, stripped naked. She pressed her hands firmly against the rape victim before passing out in the violence's stillness while experiencing what felt like an ocean of stomach pains. Her vagina began to bleed. "The three-month embryo dwelling in her womb met an untimely death. The embryo was aborted. As she came to her senses, she found herself lying in the pool of blood" (p. 81). Once she forced herself to scream out in agony, but even her father-in-law did not appear to see her calamity, let alone any others. She struggled to rise up but eventually passed out and fell back to the floor. The way of narrating trauma shows the atrocities of Maoist activists. Most of the events of torture are the cause Maoists. Padmavati, here supports the mainstream ideology as Margalit focuses on ethical memory.

## 5. Conclusions

Every piece of writing always contains a politics of representation. Writing ultimately becomes a mere reflection of his ideology, which has a close affiliation with mainstream ideologies and places the blame on opposition parties' viewpoints, portraying Maoists as cruel and barbaric. This is because the narrative structure of *Stories of Conflict and War* is always dictated by the mainstream ideological instances that he is accustomed to. Additionally, it depicts the dreadful evidence of the Maoists' operations and portrays the army's forces as the agent ending terrorism. Therefore, every interpretation is merely a representation of the perspective of the individual based on ethical memory. Trauma, thus, is a debilitating emotional experience that has an unpredictable and largely lasting impact on the mind and personality of the victim. It is a psychological problem seen in a patient who is the victim of rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, abductions, terror and violence, etc. It becomes problematic because of its repeated nature. The traumatic patient will have recurring events of violence, thus making their lives, a living hell. They will lose the pace of life and normalcy. They remain void of feeling and often become mad. Some may even lose their memory and human sensibility.

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