

# The Use of Middle Voice in Narrativizing Trauma in Bimal's "The Lankuri Will Blossom Again"

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes Rajendra Bimal's "The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again", a story written on the background of the ten-year-long Maoist insurgency in relation to trauma theory, especially Dominick LaCapra's concept of middle voice which elucidates the neutrality in narrativization of any traumatic past. The article tries to find out how the narrator while presenting his or her traumatic testimony about a horrible event narrates it - objectively elucidating all the incidents neutrally as a neutral observer of the event not aligning with any fighting groups which would subsequently help both groups to accept the testimony as their own and realize their past agony and purgare their foes. If the testimony of historical events is narrated idealizing one and demonizing another group, it, later on, cannot be accepted as an authentic one and the condition of the victims of the events would be more aggravated as it cannot appease their tension. The testimony of the ten-year-long insurgency by any neutral observer can help many people narrativize their experience in the written form.*

**Keywords:** *horrible past, narrativization, neutrality, testimony, peace*

## Introduction

This article presents a testimony of one family that was very happy and united to each other before the Maoist insurgency was at its peak and common people's life was perilous, but when it took its form in the paramount, all the members were disintegrated. It presents this family's painful traumatic condition by applying trauma theory propagated by some notable trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth and Dominick Lacapra. It is the testimony of a neutral observer who has narrativized a family's painful condition at the time of the Maoist insurgency when a mother could become ready to sell her loving daughter to an unknown stranger thinking that her daughter would remain alive somewhere. This story is extracted from *The Stories of War and Conflict* edited by Govind Raj Bhattarai which consists of stories written by various Nepali writers on People's War (1996 -2006). It is a representative testimony of all Nepali families during the ten-year long insurgency when each one would talk of terror and its extension to all the civilians in several parts of the

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nation and reveal “such condition[s] – grief and pain, fear and terror, and scenes of deaths. The psychological horror and trauma that millions of people underwent is the greatest of all shocks, unforgettable in their memory” (Bhattarai, 2007, p.8). Most of the people were badly impacted by the consequences of the conflict and even could not talk about it to any one whom they didn’t know because they no longer felt safety, justice, order and peace in their lives. It was only terror and trauma that some Nepali writers have tried to narrativize in the form of stories.

This insurgency could become a good means of bringing afore in the narratives, most of which are autobiographical in intention. Narayan Subedi, Ganga Bahadur Lama, Nabin Jirel, and Sarita Rai are some who were either involved in the conflict or deeply felt about its perilous path. The experience of violence can have different aspects and violence at the height of the crisis becomes the subject, the object, and the instrument and purpose of the action (Das and Nandi, 1985, p. 187). At the same time, there would be some stories which could not give voice of signification and “remain inauthentic, because they tried to reduce the violence to the language of feud in which violence from one side was equally balanced with violence from the other” (p.189). Hence, a portrayal of the full scale of violence could not be a matter of symbolically balancing the scales of violence.

### **Trauma and Middle Voice**

There has not been dearth of criticism written on the themes of armed conflict and its aftermath. The experience may be felt by those who are victimized and those who are the victimizers. But only those who are the victims of the conflict have the traumatic experience. In her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth 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” (Caruth, 1995, p.3)) which cannot be fully determined by given traumatic events which consist of “not only both human and natural catastrophes but also rape, child abuse and a number of other violent occurrences” (p.3). The converting trauma into narrative can help the story to be verbalized and communicated, “to be integrated into one’s own and others’ knowledge of the past” (p.153). It should accept the pain that has affected the victims. Then, he or she can feel relief. For Caruth it is literature as testimony which is one of the ways to tell one another about aspects of traumatic experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding. Sharing and unfolding the knots about past traumatic experiences can have some soothing features in reconciling the warring sides and coming into meeting points, so that both sides can live together. Stampfl (2014) shows the status of trauma in literary works and the abductive process of thought to understand traumatic experiences in semiotic terms. In his “Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma”, he has presented the

situation of unspeakable as “the explicit admission of the inadequacy of language in a given case” (p.15). There would be many things that victims cannot speak, the literary persons can bring such unspeakable with different semiotic terms.

In bringing out the past painful events, LaCapra (2014) is in opinion that in elucidating trauma and its aftereffects in culture and people, the psychoanalytic concept is perpetuated with historical analysis and socio-cultural 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” (p.1). In the same way, while talking about his concept of bringing traumatic experience in narrative, he has introduced middle voice of which he says, it is to take writing as “intransitive or to see it as self-referential, thereby bracketing the question of reference and focusing exclusively on the relation of speaker and discourse (or signified and signifier)” (p.19). Middle voice, as a proper way of representing realistically modern experience, is an affirmation, which would prescribe an “insufficiently modulated rhetoric” (p.26) or any other forms of discourse.

### **Narrativizing Horrible Past of Conflict-affected Family with Middle Voice**

“The Lankuri Tree will Blossom Again” written on the background of the People’s War and its grim consequences, Rajendra Bimal as a neutral observer of the insurgency, has portrayed a horrific story of trauma of a grief-stricken family living in a remote village terribly gripped by both warring forces. The life of hinterlands people is badly impacted by the conflict and has intensified “the experience of trauma that would seem to consist in an inherent latency within the experience itself” (Caruth, 1995, p. 17, *Unclaimed*). While narrativizing the events, he seems to have presented them objectively neither aligning one nor villainizing another. The catastrophe shown in the story is “the most striking feature of traumatic recollection”(p.151, *Trauma Exploration*) that would require “integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure” (p.153), thus, would have a message to the warring groups to come to peace and reconciliation.

The story, mainly talks about Kaude, a resident of Balkot village in the western region, who has just come back to his home and old parents after fifteen years of wandering and working “like the beast of burden” (Bimal, 2007, p.63) in Indian cities with empty hand. He finds his parents poverty-stricken and sister Cheuki missing “having heard about the suffering of his family” (p.63). He is fed up with the situation going on in his village, “getting gradually enveloped in fear and terror all around” (p.60). Having heard how the Maoists cadres destroyed the lives of common people in the People’s War by forwarding the slogan of “one family – one person” (p.60), he is badly shocked. The continuing struggle of the Army and the Maoists “like the stories of monsters in the fairy tales are heard every day, but only in whispers” (p.61). The patrolling of

security force even by helicopter “hovering in the sky made the panic-stricken villagers stampede and hide in desperation” (p.61). The people were afraid even to pronounce “the “M” of the Maoists and the “A” of the Army” (p.61). He misses his sister Cheuki a lot and tries to find out her whereabouts. Being afraid of her enlisting in the People’s Liberation Army from each family, Kaude’s mother had left her in Gurung Dai’s hotel at Narayanghat. But later, she went with a Marwari family in Kathmandu, then “began to work as a liquor server in a cabin restaurant somewhere in the city, then ran away with a Khatri boy running a bar in Jhapa and she again ran away with a boy from the terai after getting pregnant” (p.61). Kaude does not know anything about her. He finds himself very helpless seeing his father bedridden and sobbing mother. But he still hopes good in future as “new buds and then the flowers in full blossom with their fragrance will be casting a spell all around” (p.65). Finally he decides not to leave his aging parents and live with them anticipating peace and solidarity in his war-ridden village.

Bimal, being a neutral observer of the conflict enraged by both warring groups – the Maoists and the Nepal Army, seems to be successful to bring out the facts of war-stricken villages of hinterlands how people were badly gripped by the war – “the bullet has no conscience, brother. Whoever it is – the Army or the Maoist – it is we Nepali who die” (p.60). Kaude, a representative of all war-ridden villages of then Nepal, is overwhelmed by observing the chaotic and terroristic condition of his village as Bimal (2007) observes his condition like this;

He saw himself how the whirring of security force’s helicopter, hovering in the sky made the panic-stricken villagers stampede and hid in desperation. He also saw who and at what time sticks the Maoist pamphlets on the trunk of the lankuri and flees, and how anybody charged with spying has to prepare himself to get shot in the name of “operation”. . . The same terror has also struck Kaude. He wishes to speak but cannot muster courage to do so. Anybody may fall prey to the bullet the Maoists or that of the security force, if caught talking about the political matters openly, who? (p.61)

There was no political, social and cultural activity that would help them share their feelings to each others; rather everyone seems to have been expecting him or her to fall prey any time sooner or later. Kaude and his grief-stricken family are shown traumatized having lost Cheuki as a consequence of the terroristic political repression from which each one living in such village would fall prey.

The story is not written to show the condition of supporting one and villainizing another. Characters are not presented as living in hatred with antagonistic feeling towards others or othering the opposite group. In such a condition, there would be some chance

for one to live in peace; which may ultimately help all live in mutual solidarity and reconciliation. The writer is seen as a neutral observer keeping himself aloof from both warring groups. Here, in this story, LaCapra's concept of middle voice can be taken as a way to create a balance while writing the story about the conflict.

Middle voice designates the types of action where the agent remains enveloped in the released actions. Talking about the middle voice, Lacapra (2014) delineates that it harbors an affirmative or even utopian dimension and it would be desirable to explicate that dimension as clearly and fully as possible in order to facilitate informed attempts to evaluate it and submit it critically to reality testing without which affirmation would become empty and utopianism is tantamount to wishful thinking (p.32). Middle voice in writing about war and conflict should neither be written nor understood from the victims' point of view nor perpetrators,' but it should be narrated objectively not supporting either side, rather neutrally, which Bimal has used properly and written consequences of the war keeping the political ideology away from the main characters Kaude and his family.

Middle voice as a proper way of representing realistic experience, is an affirmation, which would prescribe an "insufficiently modulated rhetoric" (p.26) or any other forms of discourse that would help one understand the conflict not aligning to a particular group; rather neutrally. It can strengthen the necessity of third person referential statements, direct quotations and summaries or paraphrases that would confide the readers about the issues being narrated. It is implied as a way of presenting "insufficiently differentiated treatment" (p.26) of victims and perpetrators. It would seem to undercut or undo systematically any distinction between victims and perpetrators. In this story also it would accord with a scene beneath or beyond ethical considerations and call for representation in the middle voice. Bimal is successful in portraying the issues.

Besides, the story has brought the traumatic facts of conflict-hit people. Kaude and his parents after losing Cheuki have been shown in unspeakable pain as "the explicit admission of the inadequacy of language in a given case" (Stampfl, 2014, p. 15). While defining the unspeakable as a trope – a particular kind of linguistic expression, Barry Stampfl says that the unspeakable is only a phase in the "process of traumatization" (p.16), which they can hardly expose to anyone. Here, how a mother expresses the pain of separating from her daughter;

"Cheuki, my poor daughter, once abducted by the Maoists, both characters and life are said to be burnt at the stake. Better than this, if you do washing up in others' houses, to a large extent it is only the characters that may be stained. At least, I don't have to lose my only daughter, always full of life. How come you won't come back to your mother's bosom one day" (Bimal, 2007, p.62)

Along with the pain of separation, the mother has clearly anticipated for a better future when all the conflicts and tensions will residue. She would, one day, be able to meet her daughter in spite of the fact that she has wandered facing many ups and downs as an outcome of the conflict.

Similarly, the tree *lankuri* is a symbol to describe the traumatic situation of the family and also embedded peace that would probably be endorsed in the conflict-hit villages. As the story opens with destruction and vandalizing the society, “the branches of the *lankuri* breaking and piling on the earth” (p.64) connote how the condition of *lankuri* looks all mutilated Nepali killed in the clash. But towards the end of the story, the same tree is shown as a symbol of renovation and chances of reconciliation in the war-rift society when Kaude’s father tries to console his grief-stricken son from all traumatic situations;

My son, we are not the tree of *lankuri*... Nobody understands its whispering voice, but there is power in our voice, in our arms, in our brain, and in our heart. We can prevent our destruction ourselves. To speak the truth, at the moment, you see this raging storm has made this *lankuri* like a corpse, breaking its branches. One day you will see that with its inner power some sprouts will grow from its vary stump. New buds and then the flowers in full blossom with their fragrance will be casting a spell all around. It does not suit for the youth like you to lose the heart. (p.65)

Kaude’s father, an old man always bedridden once he fell off the roof while thatching Jimwal’s shed, has forecast that good time would come and everything would return to normal condition.

Here, Bimal has not used the prose of otherness on the other alienating either group, it has become successful in better measuring the depth of human emotion towards each other. But, if the language of revenge and sacrifice had been used, writing literary works about trauma would have turned into the redemptive, fetishistic narrative, which, sooner or later would embark on hostility and enmity. Pandey (2009) is of the opinion that the politics of language of violence should not be chauvinistic, and the writers of trauma should employ language which should neither reduce the specificity of the experience nor nullify the possibilities of co-existence. It should rather develop a humanistic, critical consciousness in pacifying immemorial feuds and hatred, not the notion of separation and partition (p.136). Following this idea in this story would ultimately help establish a peaceful and co-existing society even after the blood-shedding rebellion in Nepali society which had been anticipating peace and solidarity to come out from the years’ long hostility.

## Conclusion

In short, as a witness to the unfolding of the insurgency, Bimal has brought the facts of the People's War objectively by presenting Kaude, a victim of the conflict who neither aligns nor opposes any fighting groups that have ruined the peaceful atmosphere of his village and still hopes for the best. His story "The Lankuri Tree Will Blossom Again," along with showing the very traumatic condition of a family which has been written to describe how people in the hinterlands of Nepal had been badly crippled by the conflict, is successful in bringing out the actual facts of the insurgency neither aligning nor villainizing to any fighting groups, rather neutrally with a message of peace and reconciliation. There are many narratives which, though written about the consequences of the insurgency and very atrocity of the forces, would be unable to present them in keeping the writers' personal indulgence at bay and would try their best othering or villainizing one group. But this story seems to be appealing for peace, and would try its best to pacify the aggravated tension of both victims and perpetrators.

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