

Reading Trauma in History through Post-Conflict Narrative: Thakuri's "The Descending Mountain"

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Abstract

Maya Thakuri's "The Descending Mountain," is a testimony of an event that might have happened during the People's War instigated by the Maoists towards the end of the 20th century. It has unfolded the truth hidden behind the curtain, that is, how Nepal's geopolitical development in the post-democratic movement has made one mass depart towards the forest and raise the voice against those who were still marginalized in the name of caste, gender and ethnicity; which ultimately caused the death of more than fifteen thousand Nepali citizen and hundreds of thousands other displaced from their own homes. The theme of this article is to show a bitter truth that happened in history - the compulsion of perpetrators and victims to sabotage physically and to mourn in trauma. It is to bring the fact of Nepal's hinterlands' people's history of traumatic life – how much traumatic their life was, as well as the reluctance of the civil society to such grave tale. The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new era, in political development to grab the power from the elite group have been remarkable to heed for the historians and academicians to knit the very emotional facts in the form of narratives, which is called here post-conflict narrative. Mrs. Thakuri, to some extent, is successful to weave a plot of a mother and her daughter on the background of the People's War – a historical turning point in the history of Nepal and narrativize the painful traumatic story to the readers.

Keywords: History, People's War, post-conflict narrative, testimony, trauma

Introduction

Nepal had been a site of some of the bloodiest conflicts in the recent past including many invisible wars, visible ethnic conflicts and protracted conflicts in many hinterlands. Mass displacement, attack on civilian populations, mass losses of homes and belongings, amputations, child soldering and rape had typified in many parts of Nepal. Even following the signing of a ceasefire, the environment remained more

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violent owing to the rise of banditry and crime. This situation undermined a sense of security that was a prerequisite for psychological well-being and building of peace in the country. The political and economic disenfranchisement of a large number of youths and other people enabled their participation in the armed conflict. It was grounded in an unpredictable mixture of poverty, poor governance, and fragile political and economic system. Different kinds of conflict and violence produced different patterns of psychological distress that would lead them to suffer from trauma. Rape and other forms of gender-based violence were also integral elements of armed conflict. Even among the combatants, the main actors in the conflict, those who survived gender-based violence showed great prevalence of mental health problems. The organized and prolonged armed conflict and its aftermath bring enormous psychological and social burdens to individuals who experience them. As such, for the last two decades, Nepal witnessed the suffering and the life threatening experience that caused individuals go through traumatic reactions, which is termed as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and 'collective trauma.' These unhealed traumatic experiences may contribute to linger the ongoing cycles of violence and further thwart peace building efforts.

The narrative written after the conflict and war would be a tremendously valuable tool for identifying the condition of people during and after periods of the violent conflict. The narrative genre and the voices serve as alternatives to portray their pathetic life they were compelled to lead along with their family and expose how violence affected the people. The post-conflict narratives let the reader know the suffering and understand the dynamics of the problem and to be moved to respond. Most narratives of the conflict have identified such linguistic devices that would help create the polarization between the victims and victimizers as protagonist and antagonist that would affect the understanding of the reader. Therefore, literary texts are fundamentally about human intention organized with the help of as much as possible intelligible anecdotes, humans or human-like characters to accomplish intentions generating a sequence of actions and reactions extended as a plot according to time period. Choosing literary texts for imbibing the past experience in written form is a way of entering psychological and physical spaces where the factors i.e. weaving plot, characters along with time period and past painful experience are drawn into complexity and can be retrieved through creative reconstruction of the importance phenomenon – with the help of mind or psychology. Maya Thakuri's "The Descending Mountain," is a post-conflict narrative which is written about an event that might have happened during the war. It has been analyzed to bring a fore how much the war was destructive to human being and how much traumatized people had been and how a post-conflict narrative can be a medium to portray the history.

Theoretical Discussion

Writing trauma in History

The post-1990 Nepali polity was expected to look upon the underprivileged and down-trodden proletariat who were strongly responsible to bring political change in the nation. But it engaged in making governments with petty and selfish activities and corruption undermining the inherent role of the people. Having penetrated with the messy predicament, the elites or neo-elites remained in power and the ordinary people remained aspirants for changes in their lives and looked forward to sudden or immediate vicissitudes. In such politically aggravated condition, mostly of marginalized and disappointed people, the radical communist parties i.e., the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) and other small fringes raised the voices of the voiceless showing the demerits of democracy and dreams of being republicans. Aditya Adhikari (2014), in this regard, delineates, “To the communists in the Unity Centre, those early years of democracy confirmed that parliamentary democracy was a sham: they believed it could never bring about the necessary transformation of Nepali society making it necessary to wage war against the state and seize power” (p.15). Invoking the slogan of republican state, they started enlarging their organizations in different parts of the country especially in the hinterlands. It subsequently led them to raise weapons for their rights and privileges immediately starting a war against the state’s power, such as the police.

On the one hand, parliamentary parties were not doing any significant works for the people and their underscored rights and privileges, on the other hand, disappointment against these parties and their apathy towards the nation’s pre-mature democracy was increasing incredibly. The king was in the mood to usurp the power making any feigns. The political turmoil remained in the nation for some years from 1991 until the royal coup in 2002, undermining the role of parliamentary power and their impotence in strengthening the democratic exercise. Lok Raj Baral (2006) further clarifies this situation, “This ambiguity, however, came to an end following the royal takeover of executive power in October and its further consolidation in February 2005” (p.255). The royal visits to the districts, directives issued, and a number of civil and military decisions taken by the king make it clear that absolute monarchy had made a comeback. Along with such a condition, the radical communist groups – the Communist Party of Nepal-Fourth Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal-Mashal merged to form the Communist Party of Nepal – Unity Centre, which would float a communist wing for election and other political activities to come in the eyes of people to “expose the bourgeois system” (p.260). They had been opposing the compromising deal between the king and Nepali Congress and United Left Front for the restoration of multiparty democracy calling it a betrayal of the people.

In 1994, the Communist Party of Nepal - Unity Centre split on the issue of launching an armed struggle in the country. This option was favoured by Puspa Kamal Dahal alias Prachanda opposing other factions led by Narayan Kaji Shrestha of Unity Centre, the Communist Party of Nepal - Fourth Congress and others. Prachanda's faction later named as the Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist. On 4 February, 1996, in the leadership of Baburam Bhattarai, this party presented a forty - point demand to Nepali Congress-led Sher Bahadur Deuba government. As the demands were not fulfilled, it began the People's War thereafter on 13 February, 1996 (p.261) that continued for about ten years taking the lives of more than fifteen thousand people, making millions of other people displaced traumatizing millions of others. Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati (2012) state, "When Baburam Bhattarai submitted his demands on 4th February with the warning that an armed uprising would begin if the grievances outlined were not looked into, Deuba virtually ignored it and went off on a visit to India" (p.85). There is no evidence that the police were kept on alert during that period. The lackadaisical manner of the government and eagerness of the Maoist to instigate the war led the nation to destruction.

For a glance upon the demands, one would be able to notice that even willing Prime Ministers would not be in the condition to fulfil them, let alone the intention of the agitating demonstrators. They must be sure that the demand would not be fulfilled until the deadline and they would opt for rebellion. Needless to say, it became easy to the rebels to start the "People's War" on 13 February 1996. It was just after four days of the deadline. They started the rebellion by striking at several government institutions such as police station in different districts. The security force, in retort, responded more violently upon the rebels creating a havoc in the hinterlands with fear and doubt. The situation forced many youth to take refuge either in the forest or in the neighbouring country, India, running away from the possible arrest and intimidations. It became very good to the Maoists who were looking for an opportunity that they could get the benefit. As a result, they were able to enlist many youths in their group so they could fight against the atrocities imposed upon them by the local administration Police operations such as Operation Romeo and Kilo Sierra 2 initiated by the government not only alienated more and more innocent people but also helped them join the uprising and pledged to take revenge on the force. The beginning of the uprising was not easy for the rebels as they had to face many problems to wrangle with the situation. As they started the rebellion, they did not have enough weapons and ammunition. It seemed impossible in the beginning, but "it is quite true that the Maoists' weaponization started only after 1996" (Dasgupta, 2007, p. 32). For them as modern weapons were not accessible, hence, pressure-cooker bombs, petrol bombs made of beer bottles, 303 rifles, muzzle guns etc. were quite prevalent to ensue the violence. Later, AK-47s and SLRs, mortars

and other heavier armoury became common to them (Ibid). They, thus, believed more in arms and ammunition than in themselves in bringing safety and ultimate resolution in their lives. On one hand, the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics imposed by the rebels and the abrupt search, arrest and punishment, on the other hand by the security force became quite common. It created a big problem in the life of the people that ultimately made many die and misplace from their own places. People living in the society did not have any option to live the life freely. If they were seen helping with the rebels, they would come in the eyes of the security forces, which was supposed to be a threat to the security forces. The worst backlash remained in the plight of civil right of ordinary people with the result of thousands' death and hundreds of students, lawyers, teachers, journalists, teachers, and doctors disappearing from their working places and accommodations. Under suspicion of being sympathizers of both warring groups, it, to the large extent, impacted terribly in the life of marginalized ethnic groups or castes mostly living in the hinterlands.

While bringing out the political predicament of post-democratic Nepali polity, Dhruv Kumar (2003), witnessing the predicament of the country very closely analyses that the government took a number of measures to increase security. For example, emergency was imposed, anti-terrorist law was adopted, military was mobilized and parliament was dissolved to sidestep legislative hurdles. Despite these efforts to bolster the government's military policy to crush the Maoists, insurgency grew by leaps and bounds. Rising death tolls of the 'Maoists' caused by the indiscriminate killing by the security forces who were provided impunity by the anti-terrorist law, however, did not compensate for the loss of face of the government concerning human rights of the citizenry (p.174). Continuity of this trend would certainly make Nepal a classic case of a failed state that apparently has already occurred with the collapse of the state authority.

For the state was liable to fund more on military power despite its abysmal human right record, it ultimately led the government to militarized its approach. Military actions and collateral damages increasingly became permissible as conflict ensued. In spite of the prescient warning against such policy imposed by the state, the government prepared to inflame the conflict as the global 'war on terrorism' letting the state have losses of agriculture production, declining industrial outputs, increasing imports and decreasing exports, explosion of telecommunication repeater tower in some remote districts and so many to name a few.

Traumatic Testimony to Understand History

The present world is torn and scarred by violence, which has become integral to the human condition from the very inception of human civilization. Thus, traces are still

imprinted in the design of human bodies and brains. Enlarging the concept of trauma Kirmayer (2007) states that it has become a keyword through which clinicians and scholars from many disciplines approach the experience of violence and its aftermath. The metaphorical assumption of trauma draws “an attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery” (p.1). Now, the notion of trauma has been extended to cover socio-political events, psycho-physiological processes, physical and emotional experiences and narrative theme while explaining individual and social suffering. Similarly, Konner (2007), while enlarging the area of trauma from the normal understanding to very severe and abnormal circumstances which can be exemplified as war, rape, or other devastating natural disasters to physical, sexual and other severe emotional abuse as torture and concentration-camp experiences. It is thus, termed as label which the word trauma is no longer restricted to such extremities (p.300). The traumatic memory with which the victims live a long time would be “an object of intellectual curiosity and health skepticism” (Young, 1995, p.358). It may help one reconstruct his or her own potential to go ahead rather differently.

But Alexander Hinton (2007), highlighting trauma as psychological wound points out extensively this psychological wound has been understood as an affliction that every individual has to go through during the difficult situation and he or she has to look for the way come out of it. Besides, it unfolds the inner pains through the words written in the form of narratives. Literary writing tries to heal trauma - a sort of psychobiological malady soothing the long lasting affliction (p.447). But traumatic experiences may make one lose the self-consciousness, but consequently lead one to peaceful coexistence among the inflicted people.

For the traumatic memories about the holocaustic past, one as an audience can have shared with the whole community. There would be a potential space for retelling. If a community agrees about the existence of traumatic events and makes it part of its history, there will be a collective memory in which the individual memory can have a place or can be transformed (Ibid). If defined classically, trauma is a symptom of overwhelming event. The belated response that makes trauma includes a range of psychological effects: repeated and intrusive hallucinations, dreams stemming from the event as well as psychic numbing. It also produces physical responses such as uncontrollable behaviors or increased autonomic arousal to stimuli recalling the event. However, Susan Y. Najita (2006) has different opinions about it. She opines that trauma cannot be defined either solely by the event itself or by personal significance a person attaches to it (p.13). But the so-called pathological aspects of trauma inhere in the moment of its reception: the traumatizing event or ‘kernel’ is not experienced fully at the time, but only remembered belatedly and without conscious control.

John P. Wilson (2007) is again quoted to have drawn a relationship between trauma and culture, which is an important one because traumatic experiences are part of the lifecycle, universal in manifestation and occurrence and typically demand a response from culture in terms of healing, treatment, interventions, counseling, and medical care (p.4). A traumatic life event can be simple or complex in nature and result in simple or complex forms of post-traumatic adaptation. Similarly, cultures can be simple or complex in nature with different roles, social structures, authority systems, and mechanisms for dealing with individual and collective forms of trauma. Here, cultural importance can be liable to understand trauma. Injuries caused by trauma include the full spectrum of physical and psychological injuries.

Unlike Wilson, Lisa Tsoi Hoshmand (2007) has tried to link trauma with interpersonal and socio-cultural factors and expounded on ecological influences on traumatic experiences. She further clarifies, “The collective transmission of trauma involves the historical and social – structural hat should be included in the assessment of cumulative ecological risks that perpetuate trauma” (p.36). The historical events remain pivotal to transgress the inner feelings of the survivors.

Discussion and Results

Understanding Trauma in History through “The Descending Mountain”

The three major processes -- militarization, displacement, and gender-baseness which impacted Nepali people and society has been generated by the decade-long People’s War in Nepal. Through a study of women’s position in Nepali political and cultural history and multi-ethnographic research on the People’s War, it is important to examine “how crisis-induced displacement and violence impacted and shaped gender dynamics at the local level and Nepali people’s mobility at the transnational/global level” (Lohani-Chalise, 2008, p. ii). The crisis had multiple effects in the form of displacement, migrations, disappearances, murders of innocent people, extrajudicial killings as well as life under the state of emergency and militarization remained nightmarish to all survivors of the crisis. A situation like flashback, another fundamental change in psyche due to trauma, would provide a form of recall that survivors frequently go through. Here, Caruth (1995) argues, “While the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection” (*Trauma Exploration*, p.152). People living the hinterland were the most targeted ones who were crippled among the victims.

Rukmana, a rural woman, whose son has been disappeared for a long time and his whereabouts has still been unknown to her, is one victim of the People’s War. Her life, along with her small daughter, Muna, has even been more painful in the village.

Ramlal Baje, a retired school teacher, who is hurt by the predicament prevailing in the village, which is ravaged by the Maoist insurgency. The storyteller, Maya Thakuri (2011) narrates this event,

Our village is being deserted. Youths have left to go abroad. The children and the elders are also leaving in the village. We only see fallow lands wherever we look. The *dhiki* and *janto* have been replaced with newfangled machines. The water is continuously wasting away from the spring. The village has become an inhospitable place to live. No one ever imagined that they would have to see this nightmarish time. (p.30)

The war has ravaged the village in such way that people have been scared of living there. Once a time, it used to be fairly quiet and hospitable for each of them. If anything is heard, it is only gunshots, bomb explosion, crying etc.

Bomb, gun, lethal weapon, explosion, clash, deadly attack, arson, murder, abduction, arrest, torture, violence and so forth have been common to all people. Now there is no need “to flip through the pages of a dictionary to grasp the underlying meaning of these words. This is because many people from infants to elders are losing their precious lives in the maelstrom of such destructive rage” (p.29). The peaceful village has been targeted to be a battlefield where innocent denizens - women and children have been victims. Talking about the meaninglessness of such conflict, the writer narrates in the following lines,

What crime have the children committed when they are simply enjoying their multicolored lives, exposing life’s many layers? Why were golden dreams seized from their innocent eyes? For whom and for what reasons are they made the victims of violence? Why are our daughters being rendered homeless?

Whichever side the killed belonged to, the victims’ families have to bear the brunt of the tragedy. Consequently, women and children, in particular, will have to live with an unbearable load of pain throughout their lives. (Ibid)

The painful lifestyle prevailing around has been prevalent and has become common to all. The senior citizens of the village, Ramlal Baje and Karmabir have been seriously rendered by the insurgency. They have nothing to do except witnessing the malpractices the society is undergoing with. While comparing the past and present, they find the present predicament rather menacing to each as everything seems to be a threat to all living there. Ramlal Baje talks to Karmabir, “They used to say that a good neighbor’s duty was to help others in difficulty, but in today’s adverse situation, when one knocks at the door of his neighbor crying for help to protect his life and property, the neighbor shuts himself in so as to save his own life and property” (p.30). People living there are in threats either to live there obeying the rebels’ rules or to fleeing away from there in a cowardly manner. The harmonious atmosphere the village deserves has been faded

away with the fear of death and of being kidnapped at any time. Thus, they are in trauma.

Being threatened by the unseen fear, the villagers have given up the hope of being happy. The smile has been replaced with terror on everyone's face. Their condition is narrated like this, "The fear of war has left the country in a dreadful silent state. If the situation continues like this, today's history will be written with blood" (Ibid). Having spent some time, Rukmana and her nine-year-old daughter Muna have taken shelter in a cave as her only son has caused havoc in the society – looting, vandalizing, and drinking, thus, turned himself in the group of rebels to change the society. She is in search of both the rebels and the security force. The condition of the village is described here, "The village was ravaged by war. Huts were blown up with bombs. People were made homeless. Several innocent children, youth and defenseless elders were shot dead. It seemed that fear dwelled in the villagers' eyes and had become deeply rooted in the hearts" (p.31). Thus, the villagers have been reluctant to welcome the guests or frown at the strangers who, otherwise, react blatantly. The fear of the villagers is delineated in this way, "The villagers were forced to open their doors when a group of torchlight holders came for a night raid and landed their boots on their doors. Finding themselves threatened at gunpoint, the villagers did not even know the reason for the brutality" (Ibid). Their life was on the edge of the sword; hence, they were crippled in trauma and seem to be awaiting their own doom sooner or later.

Living for three days and nights in the cave in terror of being either killed or manhandled from either side, she was badly terrorized with any kinds of sound. They were not in the condition to return to the village, rather in the mood to go somewhere to a safe place. But the doom was nearby them as some boys – rebels being drunk came to hide in the cave to debilitate them. Her plea, "Please don't kill us. We have nothing. We will leave this place early in the morning and go somewhere else" (p.34) would not mean to them anything except some gesture of contempt, and that could not soften their cliff-like heart, which led them commit very heinous crime. Rukmana's compulsion is described here, "Removing the boulder from the mouth of the cave, the first youth grabbed Rukumana's legs and dragged her outside. She pressed her daughters tightly to her chest. She looked timidly at the boy's face, like a terrified doe" (p. 35). But, the very pathetic situation turned ever more painful when her son in his drunken position would be unable to save both his mother and daughter from the hands of his own comrades. Ultimately along with his mother and sister, he was also among the three dead bodies found thrown somewhere in the jungle. The ultimate denouement of the situation is mentioned as follows,

Three days after the incident, a man was en route to a foreign country when his eyes fixed on a ghastly sight of three dead bodies – a woman, a youth, and a child – somewhere deep in the jungle.

“Ugh! Whose corpses could these be? Which group might have killed them? What were their crimes? Many unanswerable questions overpowered him. He looked around and walked on. (p.36)

The villagers like this man remained in a dilemma in recognizing such dead bodies and fell on the delinquency that one might be the next to be lying somewhere namelessly. They would not have anything except undergoing with such a painful traumatic situation for a long time when the governmental foundation is a stake and citizenry was panicked. They could blame on destiny not what the predicament was encroached upon them.

Conclusion

It is war whether fought with other nations or within itself, which always brings destructions not only on physical body, rather on mental sphere which would be more serious and can't be healed for a long time and remains in mind as trauma. Besides, the insurgency that confiscated the lives of thousands of people without any reasons or mistakes or crimes, became a good source for writing narratives about the victims. Therefore the perpetrators and their traumatic experiences for coming generations would help all know how the traumatic period that went through with many changes remains in mind of the affected people. As Caruth opines, trauma presented in literature would be a testimony of the truthful claims of the historical facts which, otherwise would not be known to other people; and it opens the door of creating narratives in such a way that all whether victims or perpetrators would accept it as their own narratives forgetting all their unhappy feuds of the past and would be able to live peacefully hereafter.

The world has seen many ups and downs in the last two centuries. Much blood and many lives have been ushered in the name of bringing peace and solidarity. The first and second world wars happened to bring peace and happiness, but the history has shown what happened then as a consequence. Nepal also went through many ups and downs; and still has not recovered yet with many conflict victims with different testimonial experiences. The impacts of these wars have been credited from different angles. Each one is pointing fingers to others and trying their best to escape from the responsibility. But one has to bear the responsibility because the remarks of history cannot be deleted, but rather they remain as a great source of information and delineation for the generations to come in the future.

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