



## Sudurpaschim Spectrum

A Multidisciplinary, Peer Reviewed Journal

ISSN: 3021-9701 (Print)

Published by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
Far Western University, Mahendranagar, Nepal

### **Ethics of Memory in Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy***

**Sita Ram Bhatta**

Associate Professor

Kailali Multiple Campus, Dhangadhi

Email: bhattasitara5@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to explore the ethical use of memory in Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* (2005). In her book, Thapa critically observes the history of Modern Nepal and recounts the experiences of her visits to the war-ravaged regions of the Mid-Western hills during the Maoist insurgency. The study analyzes the narrative data from the text to see how the narrator remembers the impact of "bad politics" and the Maoist insurgency on the common people of the hinterlands of Karnali region. For this purpose, the study applies the memory theory of Avishai Margalit from *The Ethics of Memory* (2004). Margalit claims that too much memory is detrimental to the health of an individual as well as a society; so such excessive memory of traumatic experiences should be narrated and ventilated to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation. The paper contends that Manjushree Thapa in the selected text 'condemns' historical foul plays, attempts to reveal the anxieties of excessive thoughts induced by 'bad politics' and the civil war, at individual and collective levels, and contributes to healing and recovery. It recommends bringing the suppressed communal feelings from the 'social unconscious' into public discussion leading it to 'social catharsis' and reparation. Literature can play this role as a medium that will help society come out of 'poisonous feelings' like anger, hatred, and revenge, which ultimately contributes to the prevention of the repetition of violence.

**Keywords:** Ethics, forgiveness, politics, memory, moral witness, revealing

---

Copyright 2023 © Author(s) This open access article is distributed under a **Creative Commons**



**Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.**

## Introduction

*Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* by Manjushree Thapa, a Nepalese-Canadian writer, is “a mongrel of historiography, reportage, travel writing, and journal writing” (Thapa, 2005, p. 15). Dipendra Singh Bist (2016) calls it “a trauma narrative”, “historical cum travel account”, “war literature” or “war narrative” alternatively (pp. 2, 55, 14, 58). Spanning over seven chapters, the book carries two sections of discourse: one, the history of Modern Nepal from King Prithvi Narayan Shah to King Gyanendra in her critical observation; the other, the author’s travel account. Amidst the despair caused by “bad politics”, she visits the conflict-ravaged areas of Mid-Western Nepal, observes “the poor and excluded” suffering in the double trap of Maoists and the government, and reveals the voices of the people there, reminding the leaders the promises they had made during the ‘People’s Movement— 1990’ (Thapa, 2005, pp. 160, 153). The author-cum-narrator’s role in the narratives is that of a “political witness” with a purpose to highlight people’s suffering (Margalit, 2004, p. 166). The book ends with a peace process and the hope of “attaining full democracy” (Thapa, 2005, p. 299).

In such a context, a common reader is intrigued by the way the author has exposed the personal and collective despair and anxieties caused by the ‘bad politics’. Thapa presents a unique way of ‘war writing’ in which there is no dichotomy of good versus bad and hero versus villain. The scenes of killing or the killers are not glorified as they are generally found in traditional war narratives. A common reader would like to know why the author chose to write such a ‘narrative of conflict’ revealing the memory and hope of people. This research paper is an attempt to seek the answers to the question.

Memory is “one of the effective tools of the past” like history, myth, and tradition (Jasna C. Nimac, 2014, p. 26). Elizabeth Jelin, as cited and endorsed by Sebastian A. R. Otorola (2018), agrees with Nimac and considers memories as “part of the tools we use for thinking” (p. 12). Another scholar Margalit (2004) defines memory as “knowledge from the past”, whereas Paul Ricoeur (1999) takes it as both “knowledge” and an “action” or “a way of doing something” (p.14; p. 5). Nimac (2014) is in line with Ricoeur when she refers to memory as “doing something rather than simply being affected” (p. 26).

As “tool”, “knowledge” or “action”, memory has both uses and abuses. Tzvetan Todorov (2016) claims that memory is “neither good nor bad in itself” (pp, 160-61). Of course, the good and bad of any ‘tool’ depends on the user(s) and situations. Sometimes good use turns into a bad one. Thus memory ‘as a sword’ can cause revenge and violence, whereas if it is used ‘as a shield’, it can lead to peace and reconciliation (Nimac, 2014, p. 27; Margalit, 2004, p. 5). Such discourse of good and bad use of

memory falls within the ethical dimension of memory theories.

Christoph Bublitz and Martin Dresler (2015) illuminate ‘what’, ‘whom’, how (much/often), and/or how ‘intense’ we remember someone or something generally comes within ‘ethics of memory’ (pp. 1284-85). They are aware of our ‘limitations’ regarding our control over memory or forgetting, our duty and intensity of remembering the family (or community) members, and the influence of the past in our lives.

This research examines Avishai Margalit’s views on ‘ethics of memory’ from his book *Ethics of Memory* (2004). His concept is inspired by Sigmund Freud’s ‘theory of unconscious’ in which if repressed feelings, unacceptable or unpleasant ideas that result in harmful thoughts are revealed and recalled, that process of ‘catharsis’ leads the patients to some sort of restoration, renewal, or relief.

Margalit applied the Freudian concept of individual ‘unconscious’ into the “domain of collective psychology” and believes in “the healing power of knowing the truth in the case of communal memories” (Margalit, 2004, pp.49, 5). He relates to Freud’s ‘prison metaphor’ that has “made a strong impression on our culture” (p. 3). Socio-psychoanalysts like Earl Hopper and Haim Weinberg (2011) take society as an organism to see analogies between individual and ‘collective unconscious’ (p. xiii). In dealing with ‘communal memories’ of a war-torn society, Margalit tentatively constructs three phases: traumatic memories, truth-telling, and healing. These three sections are discussed here as ‘duty to remember’, ‘moral witness’, and ‘duty to forgive’.

### **Duty to Remember**

The ‘ethical responsibility’ of remembrance is alternatively termed “responsibility”, “obligation”, “duty”, and “imperative” to remember by different scholars. Miroslav Volf counts “duties, values and commitments and the effects of our coping with memory”, while Jeffrey Blustein (2014) underscores “values that are protected and promoted by the duty” (Volf, 2006, p. 178; Blustein, 2014, p. 6). Volf believes that *exemplary* memory focuses on certain “ends and interests” and highlights the individual and social benefits of ‘remembering rightly’, which for him is “remembering truthfully” (2006, 178).

Paul Ricoeur (2003) defines the duty of memory as “the duty to do justice” to others, someone “other than the self” especially those who are “victims” and “moral priority belongs to the victims” for the sake of “reparation” (p. 89). The justice he mentions is what Todorov calls ‘restorative justice’. Ricoeur (1999) claims that the “duty to remember is a duty to teach” (p. 11). Teaching for him is “transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation” for the construction of a better future (p. 9-10).

Friedrich Nietzsche (1874/1980) claims that a 'man' carries "the weight of the past" and is trapped by "the tyranny of memory" which "oppresses him and bends him sideways" (p. 9; Ricoeur, 2003, p. 91). Nietzsche's notion is identical to Freud's claim that "too much of the past can burden the present" (qtd in Bublitz & Dresler, 1281). So he contends that "the historical and unhistorical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people, and a culture", pointing out the equal significance of memory and forgetting (Nietzsche, 1874/1980, p. 10). To make a balance between memory and forgetting, Nietzsche suggests following 'critical history', rather than 'monumental' or 'antiquarian' history. He recommends us to 'question, judge and condemn history' (p. 19). Margalit calls it an "ethical assessment" of memory (Margalit, 2004, p. 84).

To free ourselves from the burden of the past, Nietzsche recommends a solution. That is "plastic power", the "power of man, a people, or a culture, [...] the power distinctively to grow out of itself, transforming and assimilating everything past and alien, to heal wounds, replace what is lost, and reshape broken forms out of itself" (Nietzsche, 1874/1980, p. 9). 'Plastic power' is, in Blustein's terms, "personal or cultural resilience" to overcome what Ricoeur calls 'disease' of memory (Blustein, 2008, p.14; Ricoeur, 1999, p. 7). Richard B. Miller echoes Nietzschean concept calling for a "lessening of the weight of the past and of memory" that can serve "a therapeutic purpose no less than remembering" for the health of society (Booth qtd by Miller, 2009, pp. 546, 548).

Margalit (2004) depicts that "morality is long on geography and short on memory" because it encompasses all humanity", whereas ethics is typically "short on geography and long on memory" (p. 8). Ethical relations like friends, relatives, and fellow countrymen are bound to us with love and care and they regulate and determine our memory (pp. 7, 8). Unlike ethics, morality tells us how to regulate our thin relations, the relations just based on being human (p. 8). He maintains that ethics is more subjective and morality is more objective.

Margalit concludes that we owe a 'duty to remember' those who are in our ethical community. This community of memory is integrated by shared memories of myth, some historical tragedy, religion, culture, nation, etc. If we belong to one community or nation, our responsibility over the shared memory guides our loyalty to that community or nation. Thus, Margalit claims, "Ethical relations involve partiality— that is, favoring a person or group over others with equal moral claim" "as a moral tiebreaker" (Margalit, 2004, p. 87). For instance, suppose two people, one stranger, and the other our relative, died in the same manner in a war, we remember our relative's death more accurately and acutely. With our ethical community we "form symbolic bonds" and feel connected, even if we don't know every member (p. 95).

Apart from ethically assessing, there is another way how we remember past events. That is, the “centrality of wounding emotions” and the priority of “negative politics” (Margalit, 2004, p.111). Margalit proposes to prioritize negative sides like injustice, tyranny, poverty, humiliation, etc over freedom, justice, equality, and dignity because “eradicating cruelty and humiliation is more urgent than promoting and creating positive well-being” (p.114). He calls it negative politics.

Todorov (2010) suggests remembering by separating the deed from the perpetrator, sin, and sinner, thinking that “evil is in us and we are obliged to live with it” (pp. 83, 37). He echoes Miroslav Volf, that ‘we are finite, fallible, fragile [and can] easily into the snare of evil’ (2007, p.178).

Paul Ricoeur (2003) notes that in a conflict-ridden society, “glory for some was humiliation for others” and if one side celebrates, the other is traumatized (p. 79). The challenge here is to make a balance between possible ‘humiliation’ and ‘glory’ while exposing the collective memory. In his ethical-political level’ of the problem or “obligated memory”, Ricoeur gives four reasons for the ‘duty to remember’: to fight against the erosion of traces of memory, to forgive the past wrongdoings, and to promise for the future, to preserve the relation of the present to the past, and to “keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors” (p.10). History narrates the stories of winners, whereas memory can preserve the story of the losers, too.

### **Moral Witness**

For Margalit (2004) the term ‘moral witness’ is an “unbreakable expression” which has special meaning (161). Margalit defines ‘moral witness’ as “... a species of eye-witness, who should tell us what his or her eyes saw, and not provide testimony based on hearsay” (p.163). Blustein’s catchword for ‘moral witness’ is ‘bearing witness’, and he suggests moral positioning, commitment as well a sense of responsibility in bearing witness (Blustein, 2008, p. 307).

Both Margalit and Blustein take moral witness who is “entrusted with preserving and diffusing collective memory” (Margalit, 2004, p. 147). In tune with Margalit, Blustein writes, “Bearing witness is an exercise of agency” (Blustein, 2008, p. 307). They believe that such an agent should “witness to the common lot” (Margalit, pp. 148, 182).

Margalit enlists four features of a moral witness: that a moral witness is “one who is not just an *observer* but also a *sufferer*” (Margalit, 2004, p. 150 emphasis added). Also, he or she is *at risk*— the risk of being a ‘victim’ and/or risk of being a ‘witness’. The fourth feature is *moral purpose*, not just reporting the evil (p.151). Margalit

mentions the Greek word ‘martyr’ and the Arabic term ‘shahid’ “both meaning originally “witness”” and have risk factors (pp. 152, 162).

Moral witness represents the ‘common lot’ speaking out about their suffering. As an agent of collective memory, a moral witness may “give voice to an ethical community that is endangered by an evil force” (Margalit, 20024, p.182). In the same line, Blustein concedes, “Frequently bearing witness is “speaking on behalf of the voiceless” (Blustein, 2008, pp.302, 306). He takes the idea of witnessing as a “repair work” and “restorative labor” (quoted in Blustein, 2008, p. 307). Margalit (2004) also agrees with the role of a moral witness who can contribute to such ‘repair work’ in restoring harmonious moral order (p. 152).

Moral witness, as a voice of the voiceless, accomplishes two basic functions: one is revealing the evil, and the other is rousing hope. Margalit pictures the power struggle between perpetrators and victims where the evil regimes try hard to “cover up the enormity of their crimes, and the moral witness tries to expose it” (Margalit, 2004, pp. 166, 165). Witnesses try to uncover and/or relate “the truth” about an event (Blustein, 2008, pp. 304). The truth “may be hidden or obscured or is one that others may, for various reasons, not want to be disclosed” (p. 304). Jay Winter (2007) calls them “truth-tellers” who “expose the lies and distortions embedded in the generally accepted story” (pp. 467-68).

Kindling the lamp of hope at the state of despair, as Margalit (2004) asserts, that they tell the truth so that “in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony” (p. 155). Margalit envisions “hope about harmonious moral (ethical) order toward which history is striving despite temporary setbacks” (p. 152). The ‘setbacks’ may have been caused by some evil, but there is no option for society except to repair the damage and move ahead. Likewise, Blustein shows in his remark “bearing witness may yet be sustainable by hope” (Blustein, 2008, p. 315). A witness hopes for justice for the victims.

Based on Primo Levi’s observation of ‘political prisoners’, Margalit introduces one distinct type of ‘moral witness’, which is the political witness. A political witness is relatively “better off”, with “more privileged” status, “less restricted in movements” (in war-torn areas, maybe), and has a “larger picture of life” (in war-ravaged areas or camps) (Margalit, 2004, p. 166). Such witnesses are “more aware of their role as witnesses seeing it as a political act” (p. 167). As “relatively privileged observers” and having “better conditions” they even have ‘access to paper, pencil, and documents from time to time’ (p. 167). Importantly, they are “morally motivated” and know that they are “playing an active part in the very unfolding of the story” (p. 167). Not only that bearing witness “has moral value” and exposes who we are as “it reveals or expresses our



allegiance to the good and right, our repudiation of the bad and the wrong” (Blustein, 2008, p. 337).

Witnessing spurs others to “assist the victims of injustice or violence and to work to eliminate its causes” and make arrangements for “humanitarian intervention and reparative response” (Blustein, 2008, p. 321). In more direct and concrete terms, “witnesses to wrongdoing may provide evidence that supports a finding of guilt, which in turn justifies punishment or a demand for restitution or compensation” and “to prevent this from happening” (p. 322, 323). It can be effective in bringing the guilty to justice, showing solidarity with the victims, and deterring conflicts by exposing authentic and effective testimony of a moral witness, and “it helps restore the mental health of survivors” (p. 328). In some situations, ‘confession’ of a perpetrator can be thought of as an act of bearing witness in which the perpetrator “openly admits that he had committed wrong”, “takes responsibility for” it, and “gives evidence of” the wrong he had done!

### **A Duty to Forgiveness**

Margalit (2004) defines forgiveness in lucid words as “overcoming anger and vengefulness” (p. 192). Paul Ricoeur (1999) means the same in his succinct definition, “To forgive is basically to be liberated from the burden of the past, to be untied or unbound” (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 10). We don’t want to live with ‘the burden’ of troubling and harmful memories in the unconscious that result in “the feelings of resentment and the desire for revenge” (p. 207). Margalit (2004) calls them “poisonous attitudes and states of mind” that are “subversive agents that cause dysfunctional behavior and even bodily symptoms in the individual” (pp. 207, 3).

Margalit (2004) borrows two theological models of sin and forgiveness in his ‘humanistic’ interpretation of forgiveness (p. 183). They are forgiveness as ‘blotting out the sin’ and ‘covering it up’. ‘Blotting out’ the sin is like ‘deleting’ it and “forgetting it completely”, whereas, ‘covering it up’ is like “crossing it out”, in other words, “disregarding [the sin] without forgetting it” (pp. 188, 197).

If we care about ourselves and for those close to us, we have to decide to forgive. It is that “conscious decision to change one’s attitude and to overcome anger and vengefulness” which is to be carried out not for others, but for us as “a duty to ourselves” (Margalit, 2004, pp. 193, 207). Margalit contends that the decision to forgive is “a decision to act in disregard of the injury” (p. 205). ‘Disregarding the injury’ is what Margalit names as the ‘covering-up model of forgiving’. Volf suggests we “let go of the pain inflicted both by the wrong we have suffered and by our guilt through letting go of their memory if somehow we could do so without detriment to ourselves or to our loved ones” (Volf, 178).

The 'covering-up modality, "suggests disregarding the offense without forgetting it. Traces of sinful offense remain, but the offended party doesn't retaliate by taking revenge against the one who wronged" (197). It creates a conducive environment for the former victim and the former perpetrator to live together. Todorov's restorative justice sounds identical to Margalit's 'covering-up model'. While punitive justice is related to punishment by implementing formal legal provisions, restorative justice is the other way of addressing conflict through conversation, realization, and forgiveness so that the former perpetrators and former victims can live side by side (Todorov, 2010, p. 66). Todorov prefers the second one.

The objective of restorative justice is "to restore relations that should never have been interrupted" (Todorov, 2010, p. 66). That is how it attempts "to repair the social order" and create "social harmony" (pp. 62-63). It can "acknowledge and atone for the suffering of the victims", and "employ memory in the service of social and political reconstruction" (Blustein, 2008, p. 262). For social 'reconstruction' memory should be used to repair the broken relationship between the past perpetrators and the past victims.

Margalit uses a metaphor and compares forgiveness with an extraordinary gift, "Obligation "not to reject the expression of remorse and the plea for forgiveness" is similar to "obligation not to reject a gift" (Margalit, 2004, p. 196). The benefit of forgiveness is that it "restores the personal relationship between the offender and the offended to where it was before the offense took place" (p. 197).

Margalit and Volf agree that suppressed collective memories are "detriment to ourselves or our loved ones" (Volf, 2007, p. 178, Margalit, 2004, p. 207). Saving ourselves from potential harm is a duty to forgiveness. Margalit takes forgiveness as an "ethical duty" which is "a duty to ourselves" (p. 207). He clarifies his perception of ethics concerning with how we conduct our behavior and attitudes toward" ourselves and people of our thick relations (p. 207). Margalit takes forgiveness as a duty not towards the offenders or other people but for our health and happiness (p. 207).

An important idea connected to forgiving is remorse which, as Margalit says, is a "nonmagical way of undoing" it (Margalit, 2004, p. 19). Obviously, "repentance" and "reparation" are supposed to "redress the wrongful past" (Todorov, 2010, p. 3) Through remorse "the offender presents himself in a new light" and prevents further crimes from taking place attesting that he is not evil, even if the act that he performed was abominable (Margalit, 2004, p. 199). The scars of the crime may remain alive in the heart of the victim, but the feeling of revenge can dwindle or die away from their mind.



### Methodology

The research applies the qualitative method. It uses a narrative data analysis technique focusing on Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*. It uses the theoretical concept of memory theory by Avishai Margalit from his book *Ethics of Memory*. It begins with discussing the theoretical framework and then goes on to discuss the text in the light of memory theory. Supplementing Margalit, the research paper uses ideas from other scholars like Miroslav Volf, Paul Ricoeur, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jeffrey Blustein.

### Results and Discussion

The narrator of *Forget Kathmandu* represents her memory of the civil war days of Nepal on two levels. One, is the personal level, and the other is the collective level. she experiences mental disturbance due to political chaos, and decides to expose stories of 'bad politics' by writing them that ultimately heals her. On a collective level, she picks up the voices of people in the region, who reveal the truth(s) behind the conflict, and shows how the nation cherished painful memories of the conflicts through different anecdotes of the victims. Finally, the book ends with both the government and the rebels signing the Comprehensive Peace Treaty for reconciliation.

The author admits that she wrote the book "as a personal effort to work [her] way out of [that] muddle" going on in the country and to "help save" democracy (Thapa, 2005, p. 15). The narrator reflects on this, revealing her anxieties induced by bad politics and her responsibility to do something to highlight what Margalit calls "negative politics" (Margalit, 2004, p. 112).

As Margalit envisions, to make a decent society, we should know these attributes independently and reject the negative aspects because "just by negating what is wrong we will reach what is right" (Margalit, 2004, 113). Keeping this view in mind the narrator of the *Forget Kathmandu* highlights "bad politics", "discrimination against the 'low' Dalit castes and ethnic nationalities", "corruption", "ideological bankruptcy", "hollow gestures" of the government to the needy citizens, "a wave of terror", "torture", "anxiety", "general strike", "worry", "war atrocities and human rights violations", "deep gloom" and "royal coup" (Thapa, 2005, pp. 146, 146, 148, 151, 154, 157, 162, 165, 180, 184, 192, 195). These emotions and phenomena draw a gloomy picture of the time and highlight the undesired state of affairs that needed to be addressed. This is what Margalit calls "negative politics" which are like "disease" and should get priority to maintain the health of society (Margalit, pp. 112, 114). Here Manjushree Thapa's narrator has prioritized 'negative politics' because these things were to be stopped and avoided as soon as it was possible.

Personally, the narrator was anxious and surrounded by 'negative emotions' like despair, anxiety, unhappiness, uncertainty, dread, fear, etc during the political disorder due to the political chaos and uncertainty. As she calls herself "a bourgeois, with aspirations to being an intellectual" her own personal and professional life was [sic] "quiet" and relatively safer in Kathmandu and abroad, she couldn't remain untouched by "the creeping anxieties on perils of bad politics" (Thapa, 2005, pp. 159-160). She remembers herself as "unhappy" "living in a mist of anxiety" and feeling "lost" as 'bad politics' was "ruining" her life (p. 160). She also remembers that every time she received news updates— on TV, newspapers, radios— they gave her "despair" and "disturbed her" (p. 160). Her "dread manifested itself as emotional malaise", which urgently needed some healing (p. 161). In 'an irrational fit', she even went to think that she didn't like the "years of despair" of the nation under G.P. Koirala, one of the topmost leaders of the time and that she would be "happy" again if he resigned (p. 161). She remembers that she "had expected much" from his party (p. 161).

She asserts that her "happiness [was] derailed by bad politics" and "found it so hard to keep her mood up" (Thapa, 2005, pp. 162-166). Incidents of crossfire, murders, displacements, and scandals of governments made her more and more anxious. It was "pathetic to be disabled" by the "pell-mell" of the politics although she was not politically engaged (p. 163). In such a situation, she took up a duty to herself and the nation. She confesses that she was "being of no use to society" (p. 163).

It indicates two things for her: one, she was seeking to come out of the ongoing 'despair' in her; and the other, she wanted to end it by connecting herself to 'the politics' of the time so that she could intervene in the status quo. So she took up writing, which ventilated the anxiety within her, and to some extent healed her stress. By giving a platform to common people as well as conflicting parties, she helped to reveal the atrocities caused by the 'bad politics'.

To regain her normal mood, she would either go to the garden or zoo, to a bar, to bungee jumping, consult a psychiatrist, take meditation go through some books, or go to the gym and treadmill (Thapa, 2005, p. 162). After some other events of political or armed clash, her "view (would) grow cloudy again" (p. 176). She would crack jokes with friends to forget things. Her "friends, too, were in the same state" experiencing their "nice, orderly lives" being "compromised by troubles" (p. 166). Rumors of "terrible things" like a "royal coup" happening any day then and the fear of "the king taking over" "made them worry about their career prospects (pp. 170, 173, 175, 180). This made her realize that the anxiety she was having was a collective phenomenon.

Despite this, "Kathmandu bourgeoisie, who were unaffected, in any real sense, by the failure of democratic politics" youths in Kathmandu walked care freely, but it all

made her “worry” (Thapa, 2005, p. 177). Her life had “become so aimless, so desultory” that she felt “a compulsion to link it to larger, more compelling collective narratives” ‘to lift her mood’ by taking some responsibility (p. 180). ‘Lifting her mood’ probably indicated healing herself and curing the “emotional malaise” she was undergoing (p. 16). Her self-made efforts to come out of such troublesome emotions and memories are what Nietzsche calls “plastic power” (Nietzsche, 1990, p. 9). This is her “personal resilience” to overcome the obsession of thoughts on bad politics and the loss of democratic values (*Moral Demands*, p. 14). Thus she comes out of that mental stress.

As indicated by the title, ‘forgetting’ Kathmandu or the turbulent politics and the deteriorating democracy of Nepal was not possible for the narrator. So, she chose to come out of the anxiety— “the poisonous state of mind” to stay healthy (Margalit, 2004, p. 207). It was her first duty to herself, a ‘duty to forgive’, that is, to ‘liberate herself from the burden of the past, to be untied or unbound’ (“Memory and Forgetting” p. 10). It is a ‘covering up’ model, which Margalit claims to be the better model for healing. She used the ‘elegy’ for democracy as a ‘shield’, and channeled it towards creativity before it could be a ‘sword’ and lead her to depression. In Nietzsche’s terms, she can ‘tame’ the memory. She didn’t lose hold of her ‘agency’.

Like her individual ‘despair’, the collective anxiety of people of that time was also induced by ‘bad politics’. Leaders after the restoration of democracy forgot many of those slogans and aspirations and failed to deliver “liberty and equality” to the “workers, Dalits, women, the landless, bonded laborers and other ethnic nationalities” as promised and expected (Thapa, 2005, p. 145). They came to realize that the “law did not treat women as men’s equals” (p. 145). This is a false promise of democracy that doesn’t count human beings as humans. Margalit calls this, “treating humans as nonhumans”, humiliation (Margalit, 2004, p. 119). The narrator clarifies her position in favor of democracy and justice condemning “a democracy lacking democracy” (Thapa, 2005, p. 146). She indicates “moral compromise” as “shocking” that led to apparent growth in the volume of corruption (p. 146). Opportunism and “ideological bankruptcy” of political players, rapid change of governments, and corruption were exacerbated during the post-democracy decade (p. 151). The basic human rights issues were not given ample heed by the governments or parliaments of those times. The rebels tactfully cashed the issues with public sentiment against the government and provoked people into the insurgency.

Also, the narrator remembers the report of the Mallik Commission to “identify those responsible for the excesses against the People’s Movement” was “buried” (Thapa, 2005, pp. 146, 147). She further comments, “All ethical issues were conceded to power struggles and realpolitik” (p. 146). Contrary to their promise of a developed and

well-governed state “corruption started up” and “this bad politics bewildered people” (pp. 147, 148). The narrator reveals that the political parties continued “behaving irresponsibly” and went on “wrangling for power”, and “hurl[ing] much vitriol at each other”, making and unmaking coalitions guided by their vested political interests leaders made the political scene “chaotic” while “the country was heading for all-out war” (pp. 151, 159, 167). A boy said to the team the narrator during her field visit to Karnali region, “Our government betrayed us”, which shows that they still remembered the promises (p. 244).

In such a situation the narrator raises a finger to the literary writers, intellectuals, civil society, and the Kathmandu-based bourgeoisie the party-aligned ‘democratic’ and ‘progressive’ fronts of professionals who could not explain “why personal rivalries mattered” among the leaders (Thapa, 2005, p. 148)? The ‘intellectuals’, literary writers, and members of the civil society of Kathmandu loyal to their political parties, mostly belonging to the higher ruling class, “found little to say for the poor and the excluded” (p. 153). They were, surprisingly, “not outraged” by the unfair police raids and arrests of villagers in Rolpa and Rukum districts, resulting in the displacements of thousands of people (p. 157). In response to extreme oppression of police operations like Kilo Sierra 2, only “a handful of intellectuals of Kathmandu criticized G. P. Koirala” for abusing the police force (p. 158). The “intellectuals of both democratic and progressive persuasion” stayed silent on the growing militarization of politics (p. 190). This shows that civil society, intellectuals, and literary writers failed in their duty to remember the promises made by political leaders in the past.

In “the time of deep gloom”, as the narrator mentions only two groups of professionals were able to fulfill their responsibility— human rights lawyers and journalists (Thapa, 2005, p. 192). While the “government fed the media” which served “false” and “unlikely reports”, private media reporters like Tularam Pandey of the *Kantipur* “kept writing” and exposing the atrocities, facing the threats from both sides (p. 261). Amidst the despair, “journalists would report bravely” despite the army censorship, and “civil rights activists would say something pithy” (p. 174). Human rights activists like Surya Bahadur Shahi from INSEC were also monitoring the war-time atrocities. This showed some silver lines. They were ‘political witnesses’ revealing the truth risking their own life. The “young” reporters were “bringing back first-hand accounts from the war-torn hinterlands” “for the cause of justice” (p. 193).

The issue of justice and human rights is one of the burning issues the narrator focuses on throughout her observation and reflection. Political leaders and the government showed indifference towards “constitutional quandaries or human rights issues” and forgot the rights of the deprived group of people (Thapa, 2005, p. 151).

In Rukum and Ropla districts “thousands of people were displaced from villages” (p. 157). Day per day, “war atrocities and human rights violations were becoming rampant” and “[r]ural poverty was increasing (pp. 184, 174). An example of the government’s irresponsibility is the case of a Maoist cadre Krishna Sen’s murder. The government “never released” the findings of the investigation committee (p. 193). This is an attempt of the state to ‘cover the truth’ and maintain “impunity” (p. 195). As the bus driver’s friend and the Maoist cadres realized that the “ordinary people ha[d] suffered the most” (p. 206). Raj Bahadur Budha, head of Teacher’s Union in Dailekh is cited to have said that the teachers had to suffer because the Maoists forced them to join their party and donate five percent of their salaries to them. They were threatened for life from the government side, too (p. 211).

Not only teachers, but human rights activists and other groups of people also experienced “vulnerable to threats from both sides” (Thapa, 2005, p. 211). As a man told them, “Gyane and the Maoists [we]re conspiring to end the democracy” (p. 220). A boy in Jumla, one of the “terror-struck” residents there remarked, “All the villagers, caught between the Maoists and the state security forces, and all the children and young, lost people who had joined the Maoists, wanting a better life” (pp. 288, 287). As mentioned above, Margalit enlists four features of a moral witness: people who are “observers” and “sufferers of evil, are “at risk” while telling the truth of atrocities, and also have “moral purpose” in revealing the atrocities (Margalit, 2004, pp. 150-51). The people in conversation with the narrator have all these features and can aptly be called ‘moral witnesses’.

The narrator started her journey with a British friend, Malcolm, a human rights expert, to “see what war had wrought in the countryside” (Thapa, 2005, p. 199). Since it was the time of the ceasefire, she could travel around the most affected areas and talk to various people like bus drivers, porters, government officials, Maoist cadres, army officers, common villagers, human rights, and journalists. As Margalit theorizes, she is ‘relatively better off’, has ‘more privileged status’, has a ‘larger picture of life’, and is ‘more aware of her role as witness seeing it as an apolitical act’ (Margalit, 2004, pp. 166-167). Doing her job and being ‘morally motivated’ is a perfect ‘political witness’.

Although human rights violations were done by both of the conflicting parties, the narrator shows more incidents of government atrocities than those committed by the Maoists. Being a woman, she was curious to know the position of women in the Maoist garrison and was dismayed by the fact that they were not given ample roles in the party’s negotiating team (Thapa, 205, p. 274). Her ‘partiality’ for women and the Maoists is another significant element in Margalit’s ‘ethics of memory’. The “war was devastating the lives of an entire generation” (p. 212). The narrator explicitly exhibits

her sympathy for the landless, Dalits, and other marginalized groups who were hard-hit by the conflict.

She ‘unveils’ the voices of the people who were fed up with the conflict “were in a sober mood” and terrorized by the impending threat. They told the narrator and her friend “what had happened [t]here” (Thapa, 2005, p. 241). One of the women said, “Nobody cares about what we have been through” (p. 244). People were imbued with fear when they remembered the army men bombarding settlements from helicopters, shooting their family members at their doors, blazing houses, and beating innocent villagers. The narrator cross-checked the fact that “other villagers confirmed all the stories we had been told in the upper part of the village” (p. 245). For the villagers in the state of emergency, “it turned into hell”, as a man in Raraghat told them (p. 251). That man added, “Now everyone says, ‘We don’t need the government, and we don’t need the Maoists’” (p. 251). This is how public opinions were revealed and truth-telling was possible. This is like a practice of hearing moral witness.

So, the narrator found the villagers revealing the atrocities. When the narrator questioned the army officer and the CDO, they denied it. This is what Margalit calls ‘covering’ and ‘uncovering’. The government authorities attempted to cover the atrocities committed by them, whereas the villagers did. An example of ‘covering’ and ‘uncovering’ between the victims and the perpetrators is the death of Krishna Sen, a Maoist cadre. The government didn’t release the findings of the investigation committee. Asked about the barbarity inflicted by Nepal Army personnel, Captain Ashok Khand “denied the atrocities”, saying that they “may have made a few mistakes”, but none of the beating, killings, or rapes had taken place [...] [n]either had explosives been dropped from the air” (Thapa, 2005, p. 258).

The narrator believed that the Maoists had “disabled democracy” (Thapa, 2005, p. 271). Like Captain Khand, she asked Comrade Sandesh, “You know you say your party is popular. But everyone we have spoken to who isn’t a Maoist says they are only supporting you out of fear” (p. 271). This is how the narrator exposed the truth behind the Maoists’ dominance in the rural areas, but comrade Sandesh attempted to ‘cover’ it. He denied it and tried to justify his party’s popularity by highlighting some ‘positive things’ their party had done. She notes villagers revealing another fact, “The government thinks we’re all Maoists, but the fact is nobody likes them. [...]. Whatever support we give to the Maoists, we are forced to give” (p. 247). This comment of a man reveals the terror people were living with from both of the conflicting sides. This is verified by the statement of a girl in conversation with the narrator’s team, “All the villagers, caught between the Maoists and the state security forces” (p. 287). This statement ‘uncovers’ the precarious condition of the poor people in the war-ravaged



areas, and they function as 'truth-tellers'. Margalit rightly says, "Evil regimes try hard to cover up the enormity of their crimes, the moral witness tries to expose it" (Margalit, 2004, p. 165).

In the minds of the people democracy and its promises were still lively. That's why, people got together in "the movement for the restoration of democracy" (Thapa, 2005, p. 296). 'Restoration' means an attempt to regain what they lost in the past and still remember. The journey to democracy "began in the 1930s" and briefly gained in the 1950s and 1990s, and the narrator thinks that the revolution is "yet unfinished" (p. 298). It shows that the dream to get a fully refined democracy is in the collective psyche of the people as it is in the mind of the narrator.

*Forget Kathmandu* ends with the "integration of Nepal Army and the People's Liberation Army", the two conflicting parties representing the government and the rebels (Thapa, 2005, p. 299). The peace process starts at the end of the book, indicating that both of the parties have 'overcome anger, hatred, and enmity against each other', which for Margalit is 'forgiveness' and good for 'the health of the country'. Instead of the sense of revenge, the narrative shows reconciliation showing the rays of hope in people. As a final note, the narrator remarks, "The Nepali people want neither extreme: we want both the extreme right and the extreme left to be contained by the political center" (p. 299). The narrator expects assimilation and compromise between the two sides. She still remembers "the key slogan of the 1990 and 2006 movements"— "We want full democracy" (p. 299).

The villagers' expectation of democracy is a gesture to 'let go of pains' as Volf has said. 'Disregarding the pains' they had experienced, they wish to move ahead. It seems that the narrator and the common people want 'restorative justice' because there is no hint in the book about getting the war criminals penalized through the court of law. Despite the clouds of fear, they 'hope' that the 'social order' will be repaired and regained once they restore full democracy.

### **Conclusion**

Societies undergo conflicts. Conflicts create memories. Like in the mind of an individual, there are traumatic experiences suppressed and stored in the collective minds of the victims or the losing community or nation after the conflicts. Those hidden and humiliating experiences, like that of people in the Karnali region, make the losers or victims hate and resent the winners/perpetrators and such experiences evoke the victims to seek an opportunity to take revenge in response to the past evils. So such memories are not good for the health of a society. Psychoanalysts claim that if the truth about suffering is revealed and explained publicly, the trauma of the victims can be

healed. Truth tellers, named as moral witnesses, can play that role. It is important how they narrate the truth and transfer the memories to future generations. The 'purgation' through their revelation and the perpetrators' confession can lead society to forgiveness from the victims, especially innocent victims, which opens an avenue for social harmony. This truth and reconciliation process cannot undo the past, but it can repair the cracks in social sentiments thereby helping in the prevention of future violence.

Appropriate representation of memory in art, literature, mass media, and cinema can induce an "argument of reconciliation, social healing, and prevention of future conflicts" (Otalora, 2018, p. 6). In such a context, the responsibility of artists, authors, and scholars is to generate harmony, mutual trust, and justice through the useful representation of the narratives about the wrongdoings in the past.

### References

- Bist, Dipendra S. (2016). *People's War Trauma Narratives: A Study of Their Affective Economy*. [M. Phil. Thesis, Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University]. <https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/handle/123456789/3140>
- Blustein, Jeffery (2014). *Forgiveness and Remembrance*. Oxford U P.
- (2008). *Moral Demands of Memory*. Cambridge UP.
- Bublitz, C and Martin D (2015). A duty to remember, a right to forget? Memory manipulations and the law. (J. Clausen, N. Levy, Eds.). *Handbook of Neuroethics*, 2179-1307. DOI 10.1007/978-94-007-4707-4\_167, # 1279
- Hopper, E. & Haim W. (Ed) (2011). *Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups and Societies* Volume 1: Mainly Theory. Karnac Books Ltd.
- Margalit, A. (2004). *Ethics of Memory*. Harvard U P.
- Miller, Richard B. (2009). The moral and political burdens of memory. *Journal of Religious Ethics, Inc* (JRE) 37(3), pp. 533–564.
- Nietzsche, F. (1874/1980). *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. (Peter Preuss, Trans). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Nimac, Jasna C (2014). Toward an ethics of memory. Is memory the root cause of violence or a path to violence avoidance?" *The Ethics of War and Peace*. 51st Annual Conference of the Societas Ethica (August, 21–24), 25-35. Google Scholar, <https://ep.liu.se/ecp/117/003/ecp14117003>

- Otálora, Sebastián A. R (2018). Balancing memories: The ethics of memory and the problem of the different narratives about the past. ['Applied Ethics' Master Thesis, Utrecht University] Student Theses Repository. Google Scholar, <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/31644>
- Ricoeur, P. (2003). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. U of Chicago Press.
- (1999). Memory and forgetting. In Richard Kearney, and Mark Dooley, Eds. *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, pp 5-11. Routledge.
- Thapa, M. (2005). *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy*. Aleph Book Company.
- Todorov, T. (2016). *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Princeton U. P.
- (2010). *Memory as a Remedy for Evil*. Gila Walker, Trans. Seagull Books.
- Volf, M. (2006). *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Winter, J. (2007). The 'moral witness' and the two World Wars." *Ethnologie Francaise*, vol. 37, no. 3, Aug. 2007, pp. 467–74, <https://doi.org/10.3917/ethn.073.0467>