Forgetting the Other: *Forget Kathmandu* in the Light of Cultural Trauma

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the non-fiction work Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy (2005) by Manjushree Thapa from the perspective of Cultural Trauma. It argues that the narrator of the book does not speak for the victims of the conflict, and therefore, the book should not be considered trauma-healing literature. The paper begins with an introduction to Cultural Trauma as a theory, presenting definitions from various theorists. It then contextualizes the theory, as it serves as the theoretical tool for the critical analysis of the text. Following the introduction, the paper provides a critical analysis of Thapa's non-fiction work. This analysis focuses on the argument that the text neglects to address the suffering of the victims during the conflict. Therefore, the central concern of this paper is the representation of Nepal's violent past in the text under study. Specifically, the paper examines the representation of the People's War led by the CPN-Maoist and the counter-insurgency measures employed by the government, which was under a constitutional monarchy at the time. The paper concludes with the view that literary works written about conflict should assist in the healing process for the victims, helping them recover from the collective trauma they suffered as members of a community, group, party, or institution.

***Keywords**:* cultural trauma, the Other, people's war, representation, trauma literature, collective memory

Introduction

This paper offers a critical analysis of Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy (2005), written by Manjushree Thapa, a renowned Nepalese non-fiction writer. The paper focuses primarily on the narrative representation of the conflict as reported by the author in the text. The major portion of the book under analysis is an on-the-ground narrative report of a decade-long insurgency, known among the Nepali people as the People's War (hence lowercase). This insurgency was led by the rebels of the CPN-Maoist against the constitutional monarchy. The conflict left

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Nepal socially vulnerable and politically unstable. The People's War against the contemporary regime radically transformed the country's image, shifting it from a peaceful Himalayan kingdom to a myth, while simultaneously deepening social and political divisions.

Writers who responded to the crisis through their literary works vary according to the genres they adopted to address the events. Unlike the critical responses to Forget Kathmandu (2005), this paper argues that the text lacks a representation of the victims of violence—the "Other"—those who suffered and survived the crossfire during the violent insurgency that raged in the country from 1996 to 2006.

The paper uses a qualitative method in its methodological approach, in which related theoretical texts are used to analyze the text under critical study. It applies the theoretical perspective of cultural trauma in the discussion and analysis of the text. Studying literary works written during the decade of conflict from the theoretical perspective of cultural trauma is a new field. Therefore, it is significant to study the literary works that emerged from the ashes of the villages during the conflict. This will provide a new paradigm for understanding the conflicts through literary representation and how it can affect the traumatized community's political identity. The paper's main objective is to analyze the literary representation of the conflict in Manjushree Thapa's non-fiction work.

Among the published works on the crisis of Nepal, *Forget Kathmandu* (2005) has been understood as a strong response to the crisis by the critics of history, literature and, socio-political sciences. Indian diplomat and politician K.V. Rajan opines that the text "is essentially a *cri de Coeur* from a sensitive young Nepalese as she watches her country slide downhill, as violence spreads, governance fails, institutions collapse, politicians squabble, democracy is strangulated, values disappear, hope fades. It is a well-written book—fast-paced, hard to put down, written with style and sophistication, also honesty and emotion" (1).

Similarly, Siddarth Varadarajan in *The Hindu* writes that *Forget Kathmandu* is "Written with a deep concern for the political future of Nepal cornered by the authoritarian impulses of the monarchy, the grotesque factiousness of the parliamentary parties and the anarchic violence of the Maoists, [it] is Thapa's lament for the apparent impossibility of democracy in her country" (1). According to Khademul Islam, the book was a result of "a clear-headed tour through the tortuous maze of Nepalese power politics--including that Shakespearean palace massacre that effectively was the death knoll of royal rule--that ended with an unforgettable account of a hike through the remote, then-Maoist-controlled mountainous western region of Nepal" (1).

Despite the critics' thematic opinion of the text, there are others who have observed the text in the line of its writing style. One of them is Sakhwa who finds

Forget Kathmandu "A skillful mix of history, reportage, memoir and travelogue [that] reconstructs three centuries of Nepali history as an elongated journey towards individualism and freedom." (1). Summarizing her essay she adds, "It is at once a celebration of the power of the literary monologue and a cry of outrage at the reality in which the present Nepali state and society are trapped" (ibid). The text is more than a history and reportage; it is an emotional response to the events taking place in the country. It is "a highly personal view of a country quite unlike any other, is intelligent and challenging and deserves to be widely read, not just by those with an existing interest in Nepal" (Miller 1). Not a single critic questions the text's narrative representation of those involved in the conflict, let alone studying under the critical lens of theory of cultural trauma.

Therefore, this paper focuses on the exploration of *Forget Kathmandu*'s narrative representation of the conflict victims. The theory of cultural trauma is applied to explore the nature and representation of the victim's suffering voices in the text. While exploring, the critical theory focuses on a systematic inquiry into the text as a product of traumatic phenomena and examines the possibility of resolving those traumas.

There are different ways of remembering a traumatic past; some help alleviate the trauma, while others exacerbate it. Therefore, exploring how violence is represented in literature helps readers understand whether the text contributes to resolving collective trauma. In the following sections, this paper presents theoretical concepts and definitions of cultural trauma and contextualizes the theory within the study undertaken here.

Contextualizing the theory of cultural trauma

Before contextualizing concept of cultural trauma, it is necessary to understand what is cultural trauma, the theory that is being used as a theoretical lens to analyze the text under the study. According to Israeli philosopher, Professor Avishai Margalit, "Trauma is a medical term that refers to a serious bodily injury or shock from an accident or external act of violence" (125). Professor of cognitive psychology Paola Palladino extends the medical term for trauma to a "medico-legal concept that is intimately involved in the shaping of a distinctively late modern form of subjectivity" (qtd. in Pandey 124). However, the concept of trauma has not shied away from expanding its scope; "since the mid-1990s, the medico-legal take on trauma has converged with fields such as psychology, sociology, history, political science, philosophy, ethics, literature, and aesthetics to give rise to the rapidly emerging critical category called 'Trauma Theory' […]" (ibid).

Amidst cultural theories, trauma theory, in particular, looks into the aspects of representations of trauma in the texts, fictions and non-fiction, relating them to social history, socio-psychology, aesthetic practices, philosophy, and national and international politics. As a theory "[It] tries to turn criticism back towards being an ethical, responsible, purposive discourse, listening to the wounds of the other" (Luckhurst 506). In this sense, 'Trauma Theory' intersects with other critical vocabularies which problematize the representation and attempt to confine the theoretical horizon.

Trauma, for Cathy Caruth, occurs in an individual "as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flash-backs, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (p.91). Trauma as affecting an individual's life later on extended to new category affecting collective groups of a society as a cultural trauma by Alexander et al. in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). One of the coauthors of the text Piotr Sztompka argues that the discourse of trauma prompted by rapid social change was first "borrowed as a metaphor from medicine and psychiatry and slowly acquiring new social and cultural meaning" (p.157).

Hence, culture and social contexts came under the critical investigation of the newly developed theory of trauma. The trauma in this new category "occurs when member of collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible mark upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 1). Taking the similar line of definition, Smelser provides, rather, a wider picture of cultural trauma in terms of virtue of memory: "[…] a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking and event or situation which is a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (44).

Furthermore, as opposed to individual trauma, cultural trauma is described by Ron Eyerman as "[…] a tear in the social fabric affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" ("Cultural Trauma" 60). In cultural trauma, unlike psychological one, individuals in a group continue with their life as before in the aftermath of the traumatic event. They are not personally affected by the disaster. It is only while living in a group that individuals may later realize, or be told, that they have been suffering in the same way as other members, for example, from cultural humiliation, state apathy, or other forms of suffering. This realization comes only when they identify with the group as a whole, depending on the nature of the events.

As Piotr Sztompka reminds us, "Truly collective trauma, as distinct from massive traumas, appear only when people start to be aware of the common plight, perceive the similarity of their situation with that of others, define it a shared" (160). Hence, it is a social phenomenon that shapes a group consciousness, therefore contributing towards identifying what happened in the past as a loss or disruption of a social cohesion of the group. It is for this reason Jeffrey C. Alexander opines that "trauma is socially mediated attribution" (8). American Sociologist, Professor Neil J. Smelser, too, maintains that trauma is a trauma so far as it is seen within a certain sociological and cultural context which contributes towards constituting trauma. Before departing from psychological trauma, he observes that "Freud was beginning a journey that would lead to the conclusion that a trauma is not a thing in itself but becomes a thing by virtue of the context in which it is implanted" (34).

It is because we cannot think of an individual outside of their cultural context. Everything they experience is shaped by cultural or sociological influences, whether it's their state of mind after a violent event or their life before it. A collective culture, therefore, plays an important role in shaping even the psychological trauma of an individual. Writing about the site of trauma, Hent de Vries (1996) construes that "individual in different cultures, for example: those with fatalistic religious traditions, may be less susceptible to 'traumas' as they are understood in western countries" (qtd. in Smelser 34).

Collective trauma as collective memory

Collective trauma, like many other social conditions, is rooted in both objective and subjective phenomena and experiences. It is objective because trauma is typically based on actual events. It is subjective, however, because it does not exist until it is defined in a particular way from a specific perspective. As society progresses with some degree of cohesion, the overwhelming event experienced by a group forms a collective story. The members of that society then relate to each other by remembering the shared experience.

The act of remembering of the past event constructs the story which includes all the affected members of a society. Ron Eyerman writes that "As a cultural process, trauma is linked to the formation of collective identity and the construction of collective memory" ("Cultural Trauma" 60). Yet, there are critics who have raised critical eyebrows about the notion of collective memory and Susan Sontag is one of them. She writes, "strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction. All memory is individual, irreproducible – it dies with each person" (qtd. Eyerman, "Past in Present" p.162).

However, the societies do maintain the memories of past events, whether in a form of individual story or as a collective rituals and celebrations. Even the individual memories are shaped by the surroundings, because we cannot think of an individual outside the socio-cultural context where memories are constructed. It is because of the formation of collective memory in a society "cultural traumas are enduring, lingering; they may last over several generations" (Sztopmka 162).

Collective memories play important role in knowing one's cultural history and the roots of new culture one is living, because "[It] specifies the temporal parameters of past and future, where we came from and where are going, and also why we are here now" (Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma" 66).

Hence, the theory of cultural trauma explores the question about the nature and representation of traumatic memory in the text. It focuses on systematic inquiry into the text that is a product of traumatic phenomena and explores the possibility of resolving those traumas. There are different ways of remembering the traumatic past, some help to decrease the traumas, whereas others increase them. Therefore, speculation of representation of the violence in literature paves a way of understanding whether the text assists to resolve the cultural trauma.

A text that forgets Other's suffering

Forget Kathmandu (2005) opens up remembering the result of violent past in which inflection of trauma among Nepali public is in foreground as a collective memory. The result of the violence is one which narrator relates herself with Nepalese who have shared the same fate as the social harmony is disrupted by the insurgency. She writes, "We lost thousands of lives to a violent Maoist insurgency and repressive state counter-insurgency. Thousands more were orphaned and widowed, hundreds of thousands were displaced from their towns and villages, and the count of maiming, rape, unlawful detention, extortion, kidnapping, child conscription and disappearances rose rapidly" (Thapa 1).

In the text, we do not encounter an event in which the author has directly suffered from violence on a personal level. However, the phenomenon has been registered in her mind as a traumatic event, mostly through popular news reports and word of mouth, which include her as a member of a larger social structure. It is as a part of the affected society that the members go through, what Alexander calls a "social process of trauma" where events are registered as traumatic in the aftermath of the events, through literature, media, and the passing of story of the events by carrier group to the larger public who have not been the direct victim of the violence.

The narrator has been through such a social process as she writes, "I kept up with what was happening in the country as much as any person, but watching

the television news or reading the papers or listening to the radio left me feeling defeated—personally, intimately, as though tragedy had struck me or someone I loved" (Thapa 137). From her expression we can infer that the social milieu has made quite an impact in narrator's daily living. The information she receives and the conversation she hears around influences her mental image of the insurgency. The scene of violence in television clips and the story reported from the sites are imprinted in her mind as traumatic, "for trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma" 2). The trauma is even more visible when she writes, "My dread manifested itself as emotional malaise, a lagging in the heart. I would wake up, and before starting my work I would read the newspaper and feel fatigued before my day" (Thapa 137).

We learn that the narrator, as a member of the violence affected society, is related to the trauma of the society. Yet, what makes her position different from that of the suffering of the Other is, that she does not present the gesture which would relate her to the dead and suffered in mourning. Rather, like perpetrator of violence, she draws the lines in speaking of violence and deviates from speaking of the sufferings. She draws line between state security force and the rebel force when she writes: "The impunity with which the state security forces operated was enabled by the see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil spirit of Kathmandu's frightened bourgeoisie" (Thapa 166). The narrator's full-fledged attack on state security forces casts shadows over the narration of suffering; it rather, further intensifies the demonization of the security forces. She opines that "[…] the army at home had withered into a largely ceremonial body, good for adding pomp to state occasion. Of all government branches, it was the least touched by democratic changes" (Thapa 162). What one can gather from her opinion is that army is nothing but an organization of bunch of good-for-nothing people who are frittering away national budget for their own pomp game. What she forgets is that there are people in the organization who have suffered from the violence; whose families have been the victim of the insurgency just as any ordinary people. From her description of the state security forces one can gather that she applies professional model to depict the state of violence. From her experience working in the field, Veena Das points out, "Unfortunately though, there is still a tendency to work with models of clear binary opposites in the understanding of violence–state versus civil society […], global versus locals and so on" (295).

The narrator's model in drawing the lines should not surprise us since she is related to the human rights organization. She is concerned more with human rights of the people than any other rights, for example, economic rights, educational rights and so on. It seems she is more anxious about having a smaller number of legal experts in human rights issues than the owes of the people who are still living in wilderness, when she writes, "there were no more than three or four senior advocates with the capacity–and inclination–to address legal and constitutional quandaries or human

rights issues" (Thapa 130). Although the narrator identifies herself with the violence affected people, she visits the sites of the violence, not as a victim, but as a human rights worker. Her position is clear from that of the suffering Other when she writes the purpose of the visit to the sites: "My friend, Malcolm, […] was a British human rights expert interested in seeing whether the war had been, as most independent reports had it, high in violations" (Thapa 171).

The narrator visits the sites as a human rights activist with an established image of the violence as constructed by media and news reports prior to her visit. The report she cites is: "International and other human rights groups were saying that up to half of those killed by the security forces were not Maoists engaging in combat, but unarmed Maoists and innocent civilians" (Thapa 201). Her journey to the war-torn sites is not as much to reflect the agonies of the survived as it is to confirm the idea she had of the violence. The testimonies presented in the text confirm her idea of security forces being in the wrong side. One of the testimonies given from the sites says, "I was at home when the army came by on patrol. My niece, a child of six, ran into the house in fear. They chased after her, firing at my house. […] My mother was shot in the knee. My niece was shot near the stomach" (Thapa 212). The testimony is purely instrumental to support the human rights records of violence; and the narrator does not care to record a word of the plight of the victim that who might have gone through dire situations ever since the event.

There's almost no record of what the narrator saw in the sites regarding the wounds of the victims. It is hard to believe that the victim did not show their agonies one way or the other since they are reporting the very disturbing cases. Among many, one is the report of army's perpetration as recorded in the text: "The army raped [women] when they came to search their houses. How could they save themselves?" (Thapa 213). So, the text has given reader no space to make their own judgment, other than that of the narrator's. The authenticity of testimonies presented in the text is open to questions, since what is seen in the site is absent. In the reporting of testimony of the violence Veena Das recommends that the, "Testimony of the survivors as those who spoke because victim could not, was best conceptualized […] not through the metaphor of writing, but rather through the contrast between saying and showing" (300).

Unlike Das's recommendation, *Forget Kathmandu* (2005) is a report of only of what the locals said, and not what the reporter saw in the site of the violence. It is saying alone that dominates the narrative. In fact, there is not a single word in the text on showing of the public what we can take for sign of suffering of widow or mourning members of the deceased that reader could compare with that of the testimony of the villagers. One may ask, why does the narrator of the text forget to show the owes of the Other? The answer lies in her privileged position as a human

right worker who is reporting from a safe site. She does not accept the vulnerable position for a victim, but secured and privileged one, very opposite from the position of the people of the sites whose life is helpless at the face of violence. She admits of the denial when she writes, "I left Nepal so that I might continue to write without fear" (Thapa 5). The moment she feels her privileged position being threatened by the state censorship she avoids the site of violence. She returns when her safety is assured by her status as a human rights worker. Her fear of state turns into hatred that is what encourages her to draw the lines between the good and evil, in other words, the rebel force and the state security force. Speaking about possibility of resistance to violence, Jenny Edkins reminds us, "It is only with abandonment of the drawing of lines and assumption of bare life [vulnerable at the face of violence] that responsibility and political engagement [resistance to violence] is possible" (114).

The drawing of lines not only makes the resistance impossible, but demands the narrator's effort to prove her demonization of the state security force. It is this effort that drags narrator along the lines of statistics of dead bodies instead of the victims' pangs and pains. When she passes by the Kotabada airport of Kalikot with her team what she remembers the dead in terms of is the number. She digs into her memory bank and produce the data that, "[…] on 24 February 2002, the security forces had shot dead more than 34 workers, including 17 who had come here all the way from Dhading District, near Kathmandu, to find work" (Thapa 220). The narrator's memory work becomes ever-more precise in counting the dead and dividing the responsibility for the death to two camps, in ratio and percentage, when she compares the death toll before and after the state of emergency:

> […] earlier the number of people killed by the Maoists equaled the number of alleged Maoists killed by the state, now the ratio became one to four, with the state security forces responsible for 80 percent of the killings. Of the alleged Maoists they killed, up to 40 percent were innocent civilians, said human rights worker. (Thapa 162)

She invests more words in counting dead bodies and scrutinizes their numbers in ratio and percentage to justify her dividing lines. Moreover, her proceeding accounts of death perpetrated by the state security forces helps her to give finishing touch to her project of demonization of the state army. Giving her narrative a finish touch she writes, "If I had grown up in one of these villages, and were young, uneducated, unqualified for employment of any kind, and as a female, denied basic equality with men–hell, I would have joined the Maoists, too. […] Join the Maoist is what any spirited girl would do" (Thapa 248). These last lines show that the narrator until the end of the narration does not take departure from the dividing line; rather, she invests all her effort to establish the wall between perpetrators in which she takes the

side of the revolutionary forces, with very little ground knowledge that the People's Liberation Army of Nepal, as it was called then, were not just a group of uneducated, unqualified group of youth.

Whilst investing much of her words on dividing the lines she forgets to highlight the suffering of the victims, the Other, who survived the cross-fire ensued in the violent insurgency. Lack of representation of the Other's suffering the text fails to provoke moral responsibility in both sides of the perpetrators towards those who have suffered most from the violence. Andrea Hyussen rightly points out that the issue in the literature of trauma, "is not whether to forget or to remember but rather how to remember and how to handle the representations of the remembered past" (qtd. in Zehfuss 220).

The representation without prejudice and biases invokes moral sympathy toward the victims and call upon the moral responsibility of the perpetrator. It is possible only where the narration is focused more on suffering and minimum space given to the description of the violence itself. What arouses sympathy in perpetrators and the public, who are not traumatized, is not the description of violence and the numbers of dead bodies resulted in violence, but the representation of collective suffering of the survived in whose wounds and woes the death is reflected. As Eyerman suggests, "Resolving cultural trauma can involve the articulation of collective identity and collective memory, as individual story meld into collective history through forms and processes of collective representation. Collective identity refers to a process of 'we formation', a process both historically rooted and rooted in history" (Eyerman, "Cultural Trauma" 74). But the narration in *Forget Kathmandu* (2005) lacks this very quality of "we formation"; it, rather, widens the chasm, among suffering people, created by the conflict between the rebelling forces and the state forces since the narrator herself has taken the side.

Conclusion: representational absence of victim's suffering

Finally, the text, examined in the light of theory of cultural trauma, lacks the representation of the voice of suffering of the victims, in this paper the Other. The narration fails to empathize with the victims and provide psychological and moral assistance in working through the trauma. As I have discussed in preceding paragraphs, the text creates 'us and them' gulf in remembering of the violence which encourages publics to take sides. The violence sites where publics are divided in terms of remembering the past can arouse bitterness, rather than palliating the trauma of violence ridden society. Since the literature influence peoples in a society to cultivate harmony or conflict, the literature of trauma demands the author's moral responsibility. When an author deviates from taking the moral stand whilst writing on violence, the literature might turn out to be the seeds of violence. Karahasan has

a lot to say about literature on violence, but I shall limit myself to one line where he says, "I come from a destroyed country. Bad literature, or misuse of literary craft is responsible for that" (72). Therefore, works of literature should channel the memories of violence towards reconciliation and not towards the division of the public who are affected, because "the traumatic memory reaches back to an act of violence that breaks down and reconstructs the social bond" (Giesen113). The text that forgets the moral responsibility towards the victims, cannot bridge the gulf created by the act of violence; the work, rather triggers the memory which might incite violence.

Similarly, *Forget Kathmandu* (2005) does not help to resolve the trauma, because the author forgets to represent the wounds and the woes of the Other, in other words, sufferings of the victims. It rather helps to transfer the trauma to the future generation. Therefore, it may be an excellent statistical account of the 'unlawful' killings to present at the High Commission of Human Rights Organization, whereas to be selected as a literature of trauma, the text cannot be taken as the work that assist to heal the trauma. This kind of representation rather intensifies the rupturing of the social bonds, rather than healing the already ruptured wounds. In the end, it is meaningful to take note of what Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalitt's deeply insightful sentence: "Memory breathes revenge as often as it breathes reconciliation" (qtd. in Zehfuss 217). How misrepresentation and misappropriation can trigger trauma in a group is a topic that could be explored in the text, and it could serve as a separate area of research from the perspective of cultural trauma.

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