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Trauma in Selected Post-Conflict Nepali Narratives: *Metta* and an Appeal for Peace

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Abstract

This article attempts to interpret the testimonies of six traumatized people who were directly or indirectly involved in the Maoist insurgency by applying the Buddhist tenet *metta* as a theoretical parameter. Following a qualitative methodology, this article relies solely on literature reviews, primary tests, and secondary sources for the thematic analysis of the primary texts. The article has three assets: one, the outcome of the decade-long insurgency imposed by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist); the second, the process of narrativization of the horrible consequences of trauma, and finally, the tenets of Buddhism, *metta*, the refuge of all mental wounds to eliminate all kinds of sufferings. The findings of this study shows how Ganga Bahadur Lama in *Das Barse Janayudh smritika Dobharu* (Wound of the Memory of Decade Long People's War), Ganga Shrestha in *Gadidarbar dekhi Singhdarbarsamma* (From Gadidarbar to Singhdurbar), Nabin Jirel in *Bhishan Dinharu: Chhapamarko Jivanyatra* (Fierce Days: Life Journey of a Guerilla), Narayan Subedi in *Sayadin Maobadi Kabjama* (Hundred Days in the Confinement of Maoists), Tara Rai in *Chapamar Yuwatiko Diary* (Diary of a Guerilla Woman) by Tara Rai and Sarad in Jagadish Ghimire's *Sakas* (Hardship) became the victims of the decade-long conflict. Their traumatized condition is pacified through the Buddhist tenet of *metta.* The implication of the study is to show what made them suffer from trauma during the insurgency, which is narrativized in the literary works mentioned above, and how *metta* would be a pacifying factor as a panacea to help them recover from their agonized life. There are ample research works on insurgency and Buddhist tenets. However, nobody has ever done any research work analyzing two opposite sides: war and peace, consulting the war narratives and the tenets found in various secondary texts. This study attempts to fill the gaps by bringing together the idea of solidarity and reconciliation.

Keywords: Buddhism, damma, *metta bhawana,* People's War, peace

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Introduction: Commencement of Conflict

Literary writing can be a medium to represent the horrific past that once happened in people's lives, leaving many indelible marks to bring forth the trauma experienced by the victims from which one can hardly escape and remain pacified; hence, their past painful memories remain with them and haunt them time and again. Such memories, that is to say, traumatic experiences which are imbibed in literary writing in the forms of memoirs or fiction bringing out the painful history i.e. injustices and violation of human rights either in the world like slavery in America, apartheid in South Africa or the People's War of Nepal (1995-2005) that took the life of approximately seventeen thousand innocent people in a decade and millions of others were badly injured. This war lasted about 10 years between the Maoist insurgents and security personnel. It is the literary writing that can "support the psychological evidence we obtain regarding the impact of war and help to develop our understanding" (Hunt 161)); and those who directly involved in the insurgency as insurgents or security personnel can use their memories in their writing to let others know how terrible and horrific the war would be using some meaningful literary tools like symbols and metaphors which Hunt writes, "A common way for many people to deal with their traumatic memories is to write them down as a story, this, for some, is an effective way of dealing with memories" (161). Fictional writing, even if writing about the actual events, can be characterized by the way they represent one's horrific past imbibed in the form of narratives because "the role of history plays in understanding the psycho-social response to war trauma" (96). It is either psychology, religion, history, sociology, or another social science discipline that uses new images, symbols, and metaphors to evoke past events.

The metaphorical representations of memories in the form of writing narratives which some notable war victim-turned writers like Narayan Subedi, Tara Rai, Nabin Jirel, Ganga Shrestha, Ganga Bahadur Lama and Jagadish Ghimire use in their literary creations are a few authors with narratorial viewpoints who have narrativized their painful experiences marking a clear difference between "the experiencing I" and "the narrating I" while talking either their own experiences or others. By doing so, they can distinguish between what they experienced in real life and what others experienced.

Narratives like Das Barse Janayudh smritika Dobharu, Gadidarbar dekhi Singhdarbarsamma, Bhishan Dinharu (Chhapa-marko Jivanyatra), Sayadin Maobadi Kabjama, Chapamar Yuwatiko Diary, and Sakas have manipulated their own experiences as first-person narrators, which they underwent under severe trauma while confronting the fatal truth of death very closely. In the same way, they let readers reminisce about the decade's horrific history. The writers have successfully imbued their painful past events into the article forms using different images, metaphors, and symbols. Hence, these narratives read as though not the narrators but the victims or mourners themselves are sharing their trauma; that is why they seem to be still in agony and have not worked it out.

Traumatic Past and Reminiscence

In the 20th and 21st centuries, trauma has become an important tool for studying the human suffering caused by socio-political dimensions described in literary works. By reading literary works about wars and conflicts, one can engage with several circumstances described through literary tools, as Kirmayer et al. write, "Trauma has become a keyword through which clinicians and scholars from many disciplines approach the experience of violence and its aftermath" (1). They further analyse the situation, "The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery" (1). However, one can assume how a physical wound could turn into mental stress, with several manifestations that would incorporate, repeat, and reveal innumerable forms. Hence, trauma "presents a unique set of challenges to understanding. ...because traumatic events often happen due to social forces as well as in the social world, trauma has an inherently political, historical and ethical dimension" (Marder 6). The study of trauma in literary works written about the war can open a space for a new dimension of penetrating the historical events into a new mode, which the critics like Cathy Caruth, Duncan Bell, Dominick LaCrapa, Jenni Edkins, Michelle Balaev, and many others have outlined in their approach of dealing with the mental wounds of the victims.

Trauma in the Nepali Context

For many decades, scholars have penned their literary creations with destructions, massacres, rapes, and other sorrowful events that caused trauma in people's lives, and they could hardly get relief or escape from them. Such events have made the victims live in emotional isolation. In the decade-long insurgency, thousands of people were marred by the consequences that drove them away from their own society. Tara Rai is the only character and writer who fled from her home, joined the revolt, and endured several traumatic experiences under army detention. Likewise, Nabin Jirel, Ganga Bahadur Lama, and Ganga Shrestha, either as victims or writers, have outlined their first-hand experiences while undergoing several traumatic experiences during the insurgency. However, Jagadish Ghimire and Narayan Subedi, while claiming that independent writers could not remain aloof from the war's fatal outcomes, have drawn on their own or others' sorrowful experiences.

To begin with, Rai, as a victim of the war, joined the revolt in the troupe of the cultural group, but unfortunately, she was taken into custody by the army and was about to be shot and buried in a ditch like her comrades. Ultimately, as her destiny worked and a saviour emerged on the spot, she was sent to jail for several months when she went through many mental hardships, which she describes in her memoir, that her heart turned into rock, being victimized time and again. The situation had made her "endure hardships being captivated. In the life journey, I fell, shattered and splintered, seeing my own shadow and feeling isolated from myself. How can I express my weakness and helplessness? Where to express my pain? The nights I spent weeping and crying troubled me continuously" (148). The way she has narrated her situation shows that she is still in trauma and has not come out of it.

Lama, a fighter and member of the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), was fighting against the security forces. While fighting with the army, he suffered a loss of one leg, which led him to live his life in a miserable way away from his comrades, society, family, and even from his own status. He was deprived of all his responsibilities and forced to come out of his den. To show how miserable he was, he further delineates, "The life lying alone wounded is my own choice. I was not alone having wounded from the hurts of revolutionary

works or consciousness. There were thousands in that queue. I was not aware of the communist party's conspiracy, treachery, flattery, discrimination being high and low, up and down etc. … I was inclined to omit all kinds of discriminatory facts but became victim of such ills" (107). Lama, as in his sorrowful reminiscence of the past event, could not forget what had happened to him and try his best to eliminate the trauma he is still undergoing with remaining as "living martyr" (Amrit 16).

Jirel, who joined the revolution as a combatant at a very young age with a motive of changing the society from all the discrimination prevailing in Nepali society, underwent several traumatic situations while fighting face to face with security forces, which he has mentioned in his book *Bhishan Dinharu* (Fierce Days) in this extract:

> After being involved in the People's War, everything in my life changed. Heaps of corpses at the battlefield seemed simple to my innocent eyes. My feelings hardened as much as the rocks of Mount Gaurishankar. Each of my footsteps was betrothed with the bomb explosions and gunshots. In life, many times I felt my heart, whether it was pounding to make me realize if I was alive or not, and got it beating. I felt extremely happy realizing that I was alive after going through various dangerous situations. In many places, I remained waiting to fulfil the quota for sacrifice in the war. However, that opportunity never came; was it because I was cowardly or foolish? However, the days I spent in battlefield, I spent only counting how many we killed and how many got killed. (i)

Once a combatant, but now a social activist working for the underprivileged people, has narrated his trauma of running away from death and chasing the opposite forces.

Likewise, the trauma of a headmaster of a secondary school located in Rolpa, a district situated in the western Nepal encroached by the Maoist rebellion, Subedi, was kidnapped in the charge of embezzlement of the school fund and was kept in the confinement for one hundred days letting him sleep on ground, eat a normal meal once a day, wear the same clothes and live in a darkened room. He was blindfolded and had his hands tied tightly behind his back every time they changed shelters, missing his wife and children all the time. mourning for his family. *Sayadin Maoibadi Kabjama* (Hundred Days in the Confinement of Maoists), his memoir, which he wrote after he was freed from confinement, when they did not find him guilty, but

they made him pay all the dues for his meals and other necessities. His grief is very harrowing to share; "The days and nights were the same to me, but one thing that never left me was the threat of death, which could come to me anytime. Each moment I spent anticipating that I would be killed, wondering how my family would know about it, who would inform them, what they would do and how they would face this situation etc. If the gun pointing towards me shot me, then what?" (126). With this book, the writer can show how he was badly traumatized and still being in trauma from which he could hardly escape.

In the same way, *Gadidarbar dekhi Singhadarbarsamma* (From Gadidarbar to Singhdarbar) is another memoir written by a combatant who, later, when the party came in power, worked as an advisor to ex-Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai, Ganga Shrestha. It unfolds his bitter experiences of coping with several fatal and deadly events. Besides, the reference to his comrades who lost their lives in the battle with the security forces still traumatizes him, and he could hardly come out of it, which he shares like this: "Once I was a communist fighter who was involved in the war. I confronted either death or salvation and faced death time and again as if a game of hide and seek. Now all these horrible and fearful events haunt me all the times. Time went on so far, but what we fought for, we have not found yet, and what we lost never comes back again" (v). He has had different portfolios in the country over the years, but he could hardly forget the deadly incident.

The victims of the wars and conflicts always experience such traumatic symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, such as nightmares, painful memories, emotional isolation, and others. They could hardly sleep at night and communicate with others, "experience broader symptoms which do not fit with PTSD, such as depression, displays of anger, substance abuse, or problems with relationships." (Hunt 60). Such a situation remains very painful.

The victims mentioned above who have gone with such symptoms find them in participating in socio-political activities while dealing with other victims who could also hardly escape from the experience. One important thing they could and did was imbibe those symptoms in the written forms. These narratives show how

much they were traumatized and still in trauma, but need emotional healing, which a Buddhist tenet can provide.

Methodology: *metta*, a Buddhist Tenet as a Healing Process

Buddhism has repeatedly advanced many important tenets for the healing of victims of war and conflict. Many people, whether in legend or in reality, such as Patachara, Angumal, Amrapali, Ashoka, and others, have found relief through the Buddhist path. *Metta* is the one who has only soothed one's agony and trauma and has enabled one to live a life in peace and reconciliation after severe pain, forgetting all their traumatized past experiences. This article uses a qualitative method to analyse the narratives. The methodology of this article is the application of the Buddhist tenet of *metta* for the healing process of the war victims mentioned above.

Result and Discussion: Trauma as Seen in Buddhist Principles

Craving is the sole cause of human suffering from which nobody can escape. It also craves that instigated past fateful events as well as the consequences of the traumatic past that would "trigger emotional distress, but it is important to note that the default mode of a traumatized nervous system is to experience pain, fear, and anxiety, and to anticipate catastrophe and disaster. This mode is referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)" (Alexander and Goldstein 650). As trauma is deeply related to human cravings, as in the Buddhist philosophy, human suffering is the outcome of desires, which would be the main cause of each of the traumatic past events.

From ancient times to the present day, Buddhist tenets have been important tools for promoting peace and reconciliation in a world troubled by the fatal consequences of war. *Metta*, among many others, is an important tenet that has been applied in the memoirs of the above-mentioned writers: the craving for a pleasant life or happiness, or the desire to come out of trauma or human miseries. The main motive of *metta* is loving kindness, which would lead one to live a peaceful life, along with an attitude of goodwill, wishing others' lives full of happiness, as in the words of Burgard and May: "loving kindness for others" (8). The concept of four sublime abodes (Brahmavihara), like loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity, would be used as a medium of soothing ointment for troubled people.

Likewise, people see *metta* as "an effective means: to overcome anger as it is the opposite of these violent and destructive states, to build up the required concentration base for the development of insight, and for a healthy relationship with every living being – so important for a happy family, society and the world" (Dhammarakkhita 32). Each individual who has gone through a traumatic situation would follow the Right Views to overcome evil desires and heal. In the same way, the idea of Right Actions would help one integrate mental, emotional, and energetic changes that can lead to reconciliation and atonement.

From this, we can see that *metta bhavana* (feeling of loving kindness) is a feeling which would be "practiced to some degree by everyone. Without it, one not only tends to fail in social and personal relationships but is also at a great disadvantage when involved in spiritual practice" (Heller 5). Practicing it can provide relief from the pain. Jirel, Subedi, Lama, Shrestha, and Rai were deeply affected by the painful experiences of the insurgency. They were in trauma. By writing the memoirs, they tried to release their trauma. As a researcher, I have assumed that if they practice *metta bhavana* using the *metta map*, they can experience greater relief and solace, even toward the people who caused them suffering.

The trauma that Jirel, Subedi, Lama, Shreshtha, and Rai experienced during the insurgency created a chaotic condition in the lives of ordinary people. Both Shrestha and Jirel, once combatants, have developed negative attitudes towards their perpetrators' deadly atrocities imposed upon them, and "The war is over, but our enmity towards the national security forces has ever remained" (Jirel 247). The long-lasting hostility remains agonizing to both sides.

In the same way, both Rai and Lama did not directly involve in the war; however, Lama's opinion to the situation is very painstaking which he expresses, "I lost my leg and faith in the party, I failed my responsibility to my family; this was all by the monotonous decision of the party and the security's attacks, my life is still in the chaos" (Lama 97). Likewise, Rai's heart problem at the party's work and later in prison, as well as the party's indifference and the army's good behaviour, helped her understand what she was fighting for. Her

own comrades would become her enemies, whereas the security forces treated her positively.

The condition of Narayan Subedi looks very different because the Maoist cadres blamed him of misusing the school's fund when he was on duty at school and he was put in confinement for one hundred days keeping him away from his family; which he imprinted in his book like this, "I spent my days on the gun point, changing my shelter being blindfolded at night, even though I never committed any serious crime against the rebels. If I thought anything, it would be my family and my daughters" (Subedi 243). The traumatic experiences were very painstaking to share.

The writers or victims of the insurgency, though they have come out of the traumatic event quite a long time ago, are still in the memory, and the deadly events have not left them alone. To help them come out of these traumatic experiences, the Buddhist tenet, *metta*, the idea of loving kindness, would play an important role in healing the trauma that they are still undergoing. Even after about seven or eight years, these people are not in a condition to remain aloof from the traumatic past that haunts them time and again. To cure their painful past of traumatic grief, the Buddhist principle, *metta*, loving kindness, is an appropriate tool to heal the sorrowful experience that will lead them to the way of reconciliation with those factors that once were a great threat to them. The idea of *metta* can be "used in a variety of clinical resolution scenarios, including corporate, academic, judicial, family therapy, individual, youth gangs, populations with chemical dependencies and others…….in relationship to their perceived traumas and tragedies – versus situational challenges, which are also created through perception" (Wright 2). The pain these people experience can be soothed with *metta*.

Likewise, following *metta* can be a route to lessen the pain and agony with the principles of right intention, compassion, tolerance, reconciliation which have been incorporated into the idea of *metta* for "teaching and transmitting the Dharma and also for mitigating the prevailing effects of negative circumstances and to prevent falling into the abyss of a fixed negative life orientation, which then becomes the focus of identification as self" (3). Both Rai and Lama can have a

soothing balm following the principle of *metta* i.e. "*karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *upeka* (equanimity)" (3) which would improvise their attitude and can have positive attitudes to others even to the perpetrators.

In the same way, Shrestha and Jirel, while facing their enemy time and again on the war front, have been working on a mission to bring out happiness in the face of those people for whom they had fought. Their physical wounds have been healed, but the agony of facing the terrible events cannot leave them alone. For them, taking refuge in Buddhism and following the right path, such as *metta*, can bring them relief forever. The *metta* meditation "helps us expand our compassion to all people, erasing the lines that we've drawn between ourselves, our friends, our enemies, and strangers" (Wright 5). The idea of friendliness and compassion toward all, including enemies, can soothe their trauma and help them move on from their terrible past.

Conclusion: A Way Out

The modern world, sandwiched by atomic weapons and ammunition, has been threatened by all consequences that would not support a peaceful human life. The lives of Jirel, Subedi, Rai, Lama, and Shrestha, about three decades ago, were not as threatening as today's have been traumatized by their own cravings to acquire more power to dominate their enemies. However, as much as they tried to obtain more authority, they remain agonized, hence traumatized for a long time and even to date. To come out of such grief, Buddhist tenets such as *metta* would play an important role in the healing process. Three decades is not a short time for healing, but without following the tenet, they could hardly feel permanent relief from their past dreadful event. Trauma, as seen in the books written by insurgency victims, has been a fertile subject for research, and the Buddhist tenet *of metta* is another area of study. If both areas were combined for the research, it would be a good area for further research work for all researchers.

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