

**Trauma of Maoist insurgency in literature:
Reading *Palpasa Café*, *Forget Kathmandu* and
*Chhapamar ko Chhoro***

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Testifying to the past has been an urgent task for many fiction writers Trauma narratives – fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experience – have taken an important place among diverse artistic, scholarly, and testimonial representations in illuminating the personal and public aspects of trauma.

(Vickory, 2002, p.1)

Maoist insurgency in discourse

Ten years of Maoist insurgency in Nepal, launched by Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) from March 1996 to November 2006, has inflicted some horrendous cases of traumatic experience. In statistical terms, around 17,000 were killed, 1500 disappeared, 75,000 injured and 250,000 internally displaced. The reality not acknowledged by the numeral above sounds equally horrible: countless people were tortured, raped, abducted and physically brutalized. Clearly, the period has punctuated the memory of a large number of people and become the subject of fairly substantial body of writing. The writings reveal variety in both the subject matter and the perspectives: a number of accounts record views of combatants/security forces; many other present reporting of media correspondents and a considerable number provide findings of researchers. In brief, the texts that ground on insurgency vary from analytical accounts to narrative representations.

The category of analytical writing comprises a large corpus¹. Most of these books historicize and explicate why and how Maoist insurgency grew in Nepal. For instance, *A Kingdom Under Siege: Nepal's Maoist Insurgence, 1996 to 2004* (2004) co-authored by Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati analyzes the causes of Maoist taking the gun, and “its rapid success within a few years” (2006, p.53). Similarly, Michael Hutt edited book *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion* (2004) concentrates on the emergence and radicalization of Maoist movement from multidisciplinary perspectives.

The second type *i.e.*, narrative accounts, includes writings that render the severity of insurgency and its affect over individuals and/or society. In this category too, the number of books abound². The contribution from Maoist cadres in this corpus after the peace accord is significantly high. Among others, there are Tara Rai's *Chhapamar Yuwati ko Diary* [A Diary of a Young Guerrilla Woman] (2010), Uttam Kandel's *Jokhim ka Paila* [Risky Steps] (2009), Nirmal Mahara alias Atom's *Gaurabsali Itihas ra Yuddhamorcha ka Anubhutiharu* [Glorious History and Feelings in Battle Field]. An anthology, *Marxbadi Sahitya ra Janayudda ko Saundarya* [Marxist Literature and Aesthetics of People's War] published in 2010 encompasses both

¹ For an overview of analytical books till 2005, refer to *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: A Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography* by Shambhu Ram Simkhada and Fabio Oliva. Books after 2005 include *Nepal Facets of Maoist Insurgency* (2006) edited by Lok Raj Baral, *The Maoist Insurgency and Nepal India Relations* (2006) written by Shiva Dhungana, *Maoist in the House* (2007) authored by Tom McCaughey, *The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Revolution in the Twenty First Century* (2009) edited by Mahendra Lawati and Anup Kumar Pahari, *Hindu Kingship, Ethnic Revival, and Maoist Rebellion in Nepal* (2009) written by Marie Lecomte Tilouin.

² Some of the books include Mahesh Bikram Shah's *Sipahi ki Swashni* [The Soldier's Wife] (2002) and *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* [Son of a Guerrilla] (2007), Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* (2005), Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* (2005), Samrat Upadhaya's *The Royal Ghost* (2006), Govinda Raj Bhattarai's *Sukarat ka Paila* and *Stories of Conflict and War* (2007).

the number and variety of texts written mainly after the truce.

The writings of second category evoke the concept of trauma³ rendition – narrative accounts that present traumatic experience, but not always necessarily by the firsthand victims. To critique these writings, a customary is to borrow a canonical theory of trauma based on the experience of Holocaust or trans-Atlantic slave trade or colonial encounter. The practice, which I have called import-and-fit approach elsewhere, falls back due to the fact that traumatic experience in Nepal differs in its magnitude, motives and the nature of perpetration and victimhood from these experiences. If we borrow Holocaust based theory such as of Felman or Caruth or LaCapra, it would stipulate the need to historicize traumatic experience. Similarly, importing trans-Atlantic slave trade grounded theory would advocate a manufacture of traumatized society based on the shared identity of victims. Another approach, as exemplified by Ghanashyam Dhakal, Gopendra Poudel and Rishi Raj Baral advocates either/or assessment of the texts based on the nature of political ideology the text expounds on (2010). Their critique is formulaic: any text that supports Maoists deserves admiration and the rest meet castigation. All these approaches, hence, would be more a stumbling block than facilitating method in this paper's project to answer why the rendition of Maoist insurgency, contrary to the established notion in trauma theories, render traumatic experience in diverse texture and sometime in very contradictory versions.

As an alternative, the paper borrows a communication model developed by George Gerbner and framed in the following structure by John Fiske:

³ A systematic study of trauma dates back to Joseph Brewer, Sigmund Freud and other contemporary psychoanalysts. The term came to the foreground in humanities after mid-nineties of twentieth century. As defined by Cathy Caruth, trauma is a response sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or set of events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event.

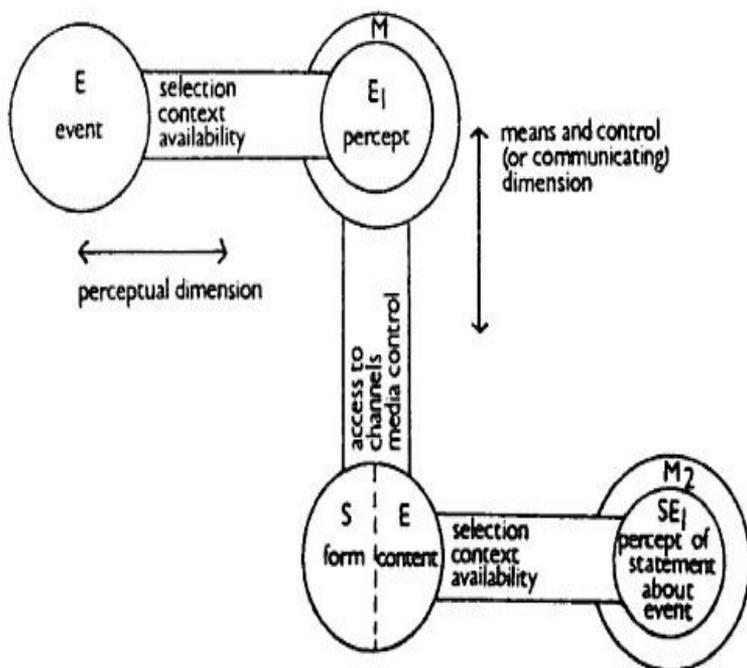


Figure 1: Gerbner's general graphic model [Source: Fiske 2002, p.25]

The elements in Figure 1, for an analysis of trauma rendition, need contextualization. E stands for traumatic event and E₁ for traumatic experience constrained by a variety of factors such as selection, context and availability. Selection, commonly known as gatekeeping in media, in my framework also means 'the processes by which countless messages are reduced to the few' (Shoemaker and Vos 1996, p.79). Context refers to the activities and occurrences in particular space and time during the event. Availability concerns both the quality and quantity of the traumatic events. When the experience meets other appropriate conditions – access to communication channels – it constitutes form and content to take the structure SE (trauma narration). The narration, which is further conditioned by factors like selection, context and availability, holds infectious nature to traumatize M₂ (second person).

The resort to communication model as a frame for analysis also bases on a level of equilibrium of elements in the model with constituent variables in trauma theories (Laub, 1992; van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995; Kaplan, 2005; Herman, 1992; Kansteiner, 2004; Alexander, 2004; and Herman and Chomsky, 1988). In a sense, multiple theories of trauma converge in this framework to incorporate the elements pertaining to both structural level (availability, context and selection) and content level (the rendition). These components, as commonly agreed among trauma scholars, are the fundamentals of trauma studies.

To examine how these elements bear their impact in trauma rendition, the paper selects three texts based on two major grounds. First, the accommodation of variety of trauma in the writings: *Palpasa Café* renders vicarious trauma⁴; *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* narrates both vicarious and historical trauma⁵; and *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* presents firsthand trauma. Second, the recognition of these writings in terms of awards/achievements: *Palpasa Café* and *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* belong to the list of Madan Puraskar⁶ winning writings; and *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* records itself as a book published from an internationally reputed publication house.

The corpus of study

Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café* (2003; 2008 trans.) counts as

⁴ Used originally in medical science where the term means traumatization of a doctor exposed frequently to the trauma victims, the term in humanities signifies traumatic impact of listening to trauma narratives.

⁵ Historical trauma derives from Dominick LaCapra's (2001) discussion on absence and loss in trauma narratives. LaCapra's defines the lexicon as the collective emotional and psychological injury both over the life span and across generations, resulting from dreadful history.

⁶ It is the most prestigious prize awarded to Nepali litterateur every year.

one of the most widely acclaimed novels. Describing the nature and subject of the novel, Wagle says, "I've completed this novel based on whatever information I've been able to piece together" and adds that the story, "was [Drishya's] story, after all, and told from his perspective" (pp. 229-31). The novel takes its exposition from Goa where Drishya, a tourist, encounters Palpasa and envisages that she "will be [his] girl" (p.16). In the next meeting, the other day, he undergoes a series of sensations ranging from romance to disappointment. Back to Kathmandu, Drishya engrosses in painting when a Dutch lady remarks that the colours used in his artwork "don't seem to suit the subject matter." Growing "increasingly depressed and reclusive," he gets hold of "a book about the balance of color and light in traditional Nepali art" (pp. 46-50). Then, he coincidentally reaches to Palpasa's grandmother to re-meet Palpasa and continue the romantic rapport set in Goa. But again, the relation discontinues when his childhood friend, Siddhartha, now an underground Maoist guerrilla, visits him unexpectedly after the Royal massacre in June 2001. Siddhartha insists Drishya to put aside his romantic ideology and witness the bitter realities in countryside. Finally, Drishya yields to Siddhartha's persistence to get awakened to a series of shocking occurrences in the countryside – forceful recruitment of the children, merciless sabotages and brutal killings of the civilians. The bleak picture finally makes him sense that Siddhartha's request proved eye-opening, "I realized Siddhartha had done me a favour by bringing me back to these hills" (p.152). Fostered by this realization, he wants to see Siddhartha before he returns to Kathmandu. But due to his gaucherie against a female guide and subsequent firing during the journey, some people cordon, arrest and blindfold him. When the blindfold is lifted, he sees Siddhartha and in excitement speaks out his name, but to become a witness to the cordoners' brutal killing of Siddhartha. Feeling guilty but gaining stoutheartedness, Drishya evades the site "soaked in Siddhartha's blood". Finally, he reaches the bus bound for Kathmandu where he accidentally becomes co-passenger with Palpasa (p.167). But, the bus during a halt for urinating gets blown in the ambush. All the passangers inside

including Palpasa exterminate making Drishya a witness to another atrocity. In Kathmandu with the scars, he visits Palpasa's grandmother to inform about the tragic incident. But seeing the condition of the grandmother, he fails to evince the reality. While living in such a state, one day, "five strangers" who do not appear "art lovers" enter his gallery to "ask [him] a few things". Any of his excuses turn defunct to deter their intention; they take him "by the arm" (pp. 225-27). Immediately after, Wagle hears the news of Drishya's abduction and makes his efforts to rescue him.

Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: an Elegy for Democracy* chronicles major happenings in modern Nepali history at the backdrop of Royal massacre. Shedding light on the need to revisit history, she writes: "After the massacre at the royal palace, garbled thoughts about the past jammed my mind" (p.51). What she finds is the need to rewrite the textbooks that prescribe treacherous Kings as glorious (p.58). Similarly, she sees ongoing democratic process after 1990 fallible due to wrong direction in politics. Thapa's take on Maoist insurgency emanates from her visit to Maoist-held territories in west Nepal along with a human rights activist Malcolm. Characteristically, she testifies that majority of the people live in poverty; very small minority abuse human rights; and teenager boys and girls take the gun. In brief, she blames Nepali history from Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification time to the first decade of the insurgency.

Mahesh Bikram Shah's *Chhapamar Ko Chhoro* [Son of a Guerrilla] is a book of short stories. The anthology comprises eighteen stories presenting various facets of the insurgency. Of them, the three namely "Pashu Awatar" [Animal Incarnation], "Kurshi Parwa" [Chair Carnival] and "Human Farming" do not rectify to be trauma narratives as they solely concern politics. The remaining fifteen can be classified thematically. Firstly, there are stories which depict the chaotic condition of remote locations and the consequent impact over the people. The story in this category – "Gaun ma Geetharu Gunjadainan" [Songs do not Resound in the Village], "Kidi Jiya le Karlalima Hamfalin"

[Kidi Jiya Plunged into the Karnali River], “Mero Kukur Aajhai Bhukiraheko Thiyo” [My Dog was Still Barking], “Bandha Dhoka ra Samaya” [Closed Door and Time], and “Bandha Dhoka ra Sapanaharu” [Broken Door and the Dreams] – demonstrate the psychology of people during insurgency. The second group of stories portrays individual’s relation with the victims of insurgency who exist in the form of decaying, dead or dying bodies. The stories that can be put under this category are “Ma ra Murdaharu” [Me and Corpses], “Ekadeshma” [In a Country] and “Babuko Kandh ma Chhoro Sutiraheko Desh” [The Country where the Son is Sleeping in the Father’s Shoulder]. The third group reveals the psycho-social dynamics of Maoist cadres. In the third category, we can put “Euta Arko Khadal” [One Another Pit], “Sadak Ma Gandhi Haru” [Gandhi’s in the Street], and “Badhsala ma Buddha” [Buddha in a Slaughter House]. The fourth group, which demonstrates the activities of security forces, include – “Mission in Nepal”, “Yuddhabiram Jindabad” [Long Live Ceasefire], “Sipahi ra Salik” [The Constable and the Statue], and “Chhapamar Ko Chhoro” [Son of a Guerrilla]. They demonstrate an interesting phenomenon which the paper analyzes later.

From the discussion above it can be concluded that the three authors ground their writing on traumatic experience. Hence, it becomes imperative to discuss on trauma process in Wagle, Thapa and Shah.

Trauma process in Wagle, Thapa and Shah

Trauma scholars argue that human brain as an initial processor during traumatic encounter perceives the event and constructs narrative based on it (known as trauma process) differently from a normal situation. As van der Kolk and van der Hart point out, “when people are exposed to trauma [...] they experience speechless terror” which “cannot be organized on a linguistic level” but “on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks” (1995, p.172). Similar is the observation of Kaplan: “Only the sensation sector of the brain – the amygdala – is

active during traumatic event...., the cerebral cortex, remains shut down because the affect is too much to be registered cognitively in the brain” (2005, p.34). Kaplan adds, there are other two ways that traumatic events are available to human brain⁷. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub has identified three distinct levels of availability: first, the level of being witness to oneself within experience; second, the level of being witness to the testimony of others; and third, the level of being witness to the process of witnessing itself (1992, p. 72). Using Laub, Kolk & Hart, and Kaplan’s insight, the paper appraises the nature of trauma availability to Wagle, Thapa and Shah. The analysis examines contextual and textual elements and thus does not utilize other resources.

The traumatic experience of Wagle ensues from (a) his witnessing of traumatic experience as an editor of national daily, and (b) the impact of Drishya’s testimony over him after Siddhartha and Palpasa’s brutal murder. The author’s own compelling account on his privilege as an editor elucidates the point:

We publish stories like it every day. Today’s newspaper already carried an almost identical story; tomorrow’s would as well. It was the same thing every day: security personnel losing contact with headquarters, land mines, bomb blast, the killing of suspected spies, deaths of victims being rushed to health posts. (2008, p.6)

Dixit points out another factor that availed trauma to him: “Wagle has visited remote corners of this rugged country, bringing stories about the neglect and apathy of officialdom to the notice of a government in faraway Kathmandu” (2005, p.96). Might be it is true, as Dixit has stated, but it does not

⁷ Kaplan mentions three types of brain function: first, dissociation in which trauma is not accessible to cognition; second, dissociation and cognition in which trauma enters conscious memory and; third, seduction where the victim of trauma involving perpetrators and their victims partly identify with the aggressor.

mean that the novel mimetically produces Wagle's encounter. The author himself has admonished readers not to interpret the novel along this line: "To write more honestly about Drishya's experience, I probably should've trekked through the hills as he did. But I'm a busy man. I don't have time for a long trek like that" (2008, p.232). Hence, a major source of traumatic experience for Wagle is the primary witness, Drishya.

Like Wagle, Thapa encounters secondary trauma. Triggered and intensified consecutively by King Birendra's assassination, she finds a sense of vacuity in her: "We lost the truth; we lost our history". The vacuum further obliges her not only to retrospect the history from Prithvi Narayan Shah but also to witness the atrocities before the ceasefire in 2003. Thapa's experience due to the sense of void and the obligation thereafter shows gradual intensification of trauma from almost an indifference to overwhelming state. Initially, not being the subject in the site of trauma, she feels the way many people experienced: "I kept up with what was happening in the country as much as any person" (p.137). Later, the media content "[leaves her] feeling defeated" and makes it tough "to keep [her] mood up", and then compels "to take up meditation" (pp.137-8). But none of them facilitate working through⁸ her trauma. Finally, on January 2003, she sets out for "the unsightly clump of wooden houses of Chupra village in Dailekh District, west Nepal" (p.171). During the sojourn, she meets a large number of traumatized ranging from the perpetrators to the victims, gets involved in both open-ended interview and in-depth interaction, and finally realizes that she has been vicariously traumatized. Hence, trauma bestows her due to bearing witness to a large and variety of people's experience.

Trauma inflicts Shah as the violent events betide him during his tenure as a Superintendent of police in Maoist infested areas.

⁸ Working through, a concept derived from Sigmund Freud and often contrasted with acting out, refers to the process in which the person attempts to gain distance from the traumatic experience and becomes successful to differentiate between past, present and future.

The proximity avails him even the catastrophic conditions firsthand. In the preface, Shah conspicuously speaks about the nature of availability: “This is a reality I have experienced. I am also a character of armed-war! I am lucky among the writers for being able to feel and experience the armed war in different time and context as an eyewitness. I have tried to transcribe the agony of war in my stories” (2007, p.ix)⁹.

In addition to the above discussion on availability, the following section considers context as it has been hypothesized to be constitutive category.

Trauma does not bear its scar uniformly over all the victims. In Herman’s assessment, social context plays dominant role: “To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context” (1992, p.9). The context, she adds, ranges from relationship with friends to the political movements. Studying context, Kansteiner has also argued evocatively, is essential in trauma studies because “the way we react to and try to make sense of our suffering cannot be separated from the specific social context” (2004, p.211). Kansteiner and Herman’s insight, due to their compability and soundness in analyzing trauma rendition, has been used to explicate the role of context in the trauma process of the three authors.

In Wagle’s case, the context comprises (a) Maoist insurgency gradually spreading to Kathmandu from their stronghold areas, and (b) the confinement of government bodies to metropolitan and other a few locations. The macro-political scenario in Kathmandu comprised the happenings from Royal massacre to King Gyanendra’s political move in October 2002. Before the massacre, people in Kathmandu had been non-intimately familiar with Maoist undertakings because their activities were

⁹ The researcher’s translation from Nepali version: यो मैले भोगेको यथार्थ हो । म पनि सशस्त्र द्वन्द्वको एक पात्र ! मैले सशस्त्र द्वन्द्वलाई फरकफरक समय र परिवेशमा आफ्नै आँखाअगाडि जसरी अनुभव र अनुभूत गर्ने अवसर पाएँ, एक लेखकको हैसियतले त्यो अवसर पाउने म एक भाग्यमानी लेखक हुँ । मैले सशस्त्र द्वन्द्वको पीडालाई आफ्ना कथाहरूमा उतार्ने प्रयास गरेको छु ।

concentrated in countryside and the media had also failed to show the intensity of insurgency. The massacre made it congenial for Maoist to enter Kathmandu and accelerate their activities. The government responded to the situation in town by detaining anyone without warrants. In villages controlled by the Maoists, the security forces would reach these places very sparsely.

For Thapa, two simultaneous conditions seem to function as context, one as a cog and the other as a wheel. The cog reveals to be King Birendra's family extermination and the vacuous vision of the political leaders at such a moment. The unprecedented massacre, according to Thapa, was pushing the country "to brink of chaos" and compel her to feel that "terrible things were afoot" (2007, p.19). Happening in political environment also hinted at the impending disaster: the Maoists were escalating their insurgency, major politicians "continued to botch and bungle", and the King "took the opportunity to steer the government back towards an absolute monarchy" (p.157). The wheel happens to be the social milieu, especially the environment of the western Nepal in January 2003 when "the government and the Maoist had agreed on a code of conduct for the ceasefire" (pp.171-72). The ceasefire agreed to permit limited mobility and granted partial right to expression. Nonetheless, the army would scrutinize people's move and interrogate anyone on any pretext; and the army's counterpart utilized the time to intensify their political propaganda.

For Shah, the context is the socio-political condition of the country between an intensification of Maoist insurgency to the forced defeat of King Gyanendra. Phenomenally, it includes the society that existed during the intermittent ceasefire between the government and Maoist. The first truce, which started with Sher Bahadur Deuba assuming the office of the Prime-minister, ended before 2002 culminating into a state of emergency. The government then handed over the responsibility of curbing the Maoist to the army. What followed then was a political turmoil: Nepali Congress split into two factions; the King usurped the executive power and appointed Lokendra Bahadur Chand as the

Prime-minister. The Chand government also declared armistice to invite Maoist for a dialogue. The democratic political parties in spite of the political ban continued their protest against the King forming an alliance. To ameliorate the condition, the King replaced the Chand government with another cabinet led by Surya Bahadur Thapa. The Thapa government too tried for dialogue but met the identical predicament after some round of table-talk. The intermittent pattern of conflict and truce came to an end only with the toppling of King's rule in 2006.

Now, I turn to selection. It has been agreed that the selection of traumatic events also depends on the proximity to the site and the milieu in which traumatic event occurs. In addition, an individual's preference which is a result of the person's outlook also functions as decisive factor. That is, people's perspectival involvement during traumatic events shapes the nature of trauma perception. Judith Herman's insight from cutting-edge research on an individual's impossibility to keep a neutral stance during traumatic occurrence throws a flood of light in this regard. Distinguishing two types of bearing witness to horrible events, she asserts:

When the events are natural disasters or 'acts of God', those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take side. (1992, p.7)

An impossibility to be impartial, as Herman explains, occurs mainly due to the bystander's inability to abstain from complicity as the perpetrator exercises "power to promote forgetting" (p.8). No doubt, the power factor operates to maintain secrecy initially, and silence later but it cannot be the sole cause: other factors, for instance, the need for social cohesion also play role to instigate partiality. Jeffrey Alexander has elucidated this aspect very succinctly: "It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and

sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but ‘take on board’ some significant responsibility” (2004, p.1). The need, Alexander states, becomes strong due to the contribution of institutional arenas – religious, ethical, legal, scientific, mass media, state bureaucracy. Indeed, multiple factors come into play in shaping selection process. In the discussion below, the paper sheds light on the three authors’ perspectives.

An examination of Wagle’s perspective reveals that two factors have played their role in the selection. One can be discerned from the reiteration of Drishya’s perspective on art and politics: “Art isn’t politics. ... It’s a medium that touches the heart and the mind simultaneously. It seeks only the synergy of brushstrokes and colours. I use colours to express beauty. I’m not involved in politics” (2008, p.85). It suggests that Wagle disregards political ideology dictated writing as it violates the principle of creativity. Another agency is the politics of peace: “The stand I’d taken was that of people who resisted the warmongers on both sides. I belonged to this, third force” (p.213). The force signifies the community of people who presume that the insurgency and counter insurgency would not be beneficial to any side. Hence, the standpoint he holds is brokered by denouncement of any violence.

The prism that shapes Thapa’s selection is also twofold: (a) the perpetual propping of her identity as “a bourgeois with aspirations to being an intellectual”¹⁰, and (b) her position as the human rights activist (p.136). The second stand point manifests frequently whereas the first appears very sparsely. Here is an

¹⁰ Confessed by the author herself, the lexicon should not be understood in canonical sense of bourgeois, *i.e.*, an individual who is involved in expanding means of production to increase surplus in order to exercise control over other forms of power apparatuses. The signifier suggests two connotations: one, individuals whose concern in knowledge production deviates from exploitation of economically challenged class and orients at super- structural concerns; and the other, people who at crucial hour of historical transition castigates the power holders who are now no longer in former position.

instance of human rights activists' position:

Of the 142 killed by the state security forces, all were alleged to be Maoists killed in combat. Amnesty 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. (pp. 201-2)

The perspective accentuates when she recalls Kotwada incident, "This was where, 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" and appraises the regulation of obtaining passes from District Police office as a "violation of the code of conduct" (pp. 220-21). Thapa's activist voice speaks loudly in the following lines:

If the insurgency was not resolved through peace talks, the girl, and so many of the people we had met on this trip, could die in the course of war: 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. I thought of all the policeman and soldiers losing their lives for an unwinnable war, all to feed and clothe and shelter their families, who were no better off than the Maoists. (pp. 249-50)

Shah's selection of the events discerns to be a function of ambiguous morality perpetuated by the intermittent truce that revealed relatively stronger position of Maoist after every other ceasefire. In this span, Shah's responsibility as a police officer instigate his writer persona to depict the brutality of Maoist and thereby leave no space for any positive note; but on the other, the fear that the government can be overtaken by Maoist which then will function with revenge motive against anti-Maoist security personals like him does not let him spare the government. This dilemma manifests in the stories with simultaneous castigation of the Maoist and condemnation of the

government. The author's explicit statement that he has been sensitive to the pain of security forces, guerrillas and civilians, and he has not been biased in representing their pain also validates that he has been obliged to ambiguous standpoint¹¹.

Trauma rendition

The knowledge of trauma that comes through the prism of availability, context and selection manifests only when the person gains access to medium. The media can be physical gestures or verbal communication or written discourse. In case of physical manifestation and/or therapeutic conversation, traumatized individuals have active access to channels. Consequently, the articulation does not suffer mediation. However, in written discourse, constraints related to publication such as gatekeeping come into operation.

Gatekeeping as a constraint, leaving aside its ample assessment in media discourse, has been very sparsely appraised. Alexander and Eyerman's study can be counted as an early example in trauma studies. Alexander remarks, "Mediated mass communication allows traumas to be expressively dramatized and permits some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others" (2004, p. 28). The media responsible for such mediation, Eyerman observes, are newspaper, radio and television. Following their line of argument, the paper calls for the attention of trauma scholars to study access to the channel and discourse control issues as well.

Access to media channels

The channel appropriate for communicating trauma as already mentioned is physiological since trauma in its manifestations usually takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations,

¹¹ The researcher's translation from the novel: लेखकका रुपमा मलाई विद्रोही छापामार र आमनागरिकहरू सबैको पीडाले संवेदनशील बनाएको र कुनै पक्षप्रति पूर्वाग्रह नराखी मैले आफूले अनुभव गरेका युद्धका पीडाहरूलाई कथामा संश्लेषण गर्ने प्रयास गरेको छु ।

 dreams, thoughts or behaviours. The physiological corpus, however, is purposively left out as I have confined the study to examine written discourse. To delimit further, the paper assumes that any individual's access to media is a function of social power.

Wagle's access to the publisher and publication house provides an appropriate instance of co-relation between the two elements mentioned in the equation. When the novel was in its making, Wagle was not only an editor but also a popular columnist of a powerful daily newspaper, Kantipur. The most accessible channel in such a context would be newspaper. But he opted for another medium as he was aware that journalistic reporting fails to include perspectives. Dixit echoes Wagle's sense in the following admission:

As journalists in Nepal, we feel that every story of a landmine killing children, abduction of students, young women disappeared by security forces is a heart-rending family tragedy. Unfortunately, by the time the deaths are reported the manner of their reporting turns them into statistics. We rarely see, hear or share the pain and personal loss of someone's loved one. (2005, P.10)

Because Wagle was aware of journalism's inadequacy and could choose alternative media, he selected "the medium of a novel to get the real story across" (2003:10). The publisher of Wagle's novel, Nepa~laya, is originally an event management commercial company established in 2001. Initially, the company organized stage shows of Nepali musicians not only to raise funds for social/educational institute but also to raise social awareness. After two years of the company's operation as musical event organizer, it ventured into publication with the slogan, "artists create ... rest we care".

Thapa's access to channel is also the function of her reputation as already established author. She had authored widely

acclaimed books *The Tutor of History* and *Tilled Earth* from the publisher of *Forget Kathmandu*. Founded in 1985, Penguin Publication House, India accepts the authors whose work meet the requirement like appropriate language, literary merits, readability, style, competition, marketability and sales potential. Of the prescribed requirements, four of them -- readability, sales potential, competition and marketability -- lead to the same denominator, business¹². The domination of the lexicons from business demonstrates what that the publisher's prime concerns are.

An observation of Shah's factor for channel access resembles Thapa's. Shah as an established writer among the Nepali readers had no problem in getting offers from reputed Nepali publication houses. The publisher for his collection of stories is Sajha Prakashan, Nepalese government owned publication entity. Established in 1964, the publication house has been operating under the government's guidance and supervision and carries out activities such as publication, production and distribution of books. The criterion for selecting the texts for publication reads "mutual interest of the author and the reader".

The above discussion on trauma rendition is meant for two aims: to suggest that social power of the individuals affects selection, and to shed light on the importance of studying the issue of discourse control in trauma studies also.

Discourse control

Scholars in media studies argue that political economy of media, *i.e.*, media ownership and its impact on content control, plays a crucial role in media content. The process, which is termed as discourse control, contrives at higher level if the intensity of author's control is low. Theoretically too, the bigger the author's control over the media, the higher the possibility of unmediated representation.

¹² Information available in the website of Penguin publication, India

One of the pioneering studies on political economy of media is carried by Herman and Chomsky. They have shown how money and power filter out the news to make it serve the owner's interest: "[...], the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of the powerful societal interests that control and finance them" (1988, p. xi). Herman and Chomsky's insight, the paper has proposed, is useful in studying insurgency literature. Tools such as in-depth interview with the concerned authors, comparative content analysis of the manuscript and the published version prove useful to analyze political economy. Triangulation can be done by setting the information obtained from the interview against (a) the author's perspective as it is revealed in the text, and (b) the corporate principle of the publication house.

The paper despite a call to investigate political economy and some musings over the methodology, purposively does not discuss the three author's control over media and its effect on trauma rendition based on the grounded statement that they exercised higher authorial agency in the content. With this assumption, the paper now analyzes the nature of trauma in the three authors' writing.

Trauma in *Palpasa Café*

The novel caters vicarious trauma inflicted over Wagle due to Drishya's bearing witness to the events. Drishya, a painter in a metropolitan location with Bohemian life style, encounters his childhood friend Siddhartha who has "turned to violence." He thinks that offering shelter would "invite [...] trouble from the security forces"; but finds denying the same impossible: "If I denied him shelter, I'd be inviting trouble from his people" (2008, p.77). While in such a limbo, Drishya swerves his mind and decides to visit the countryside without thinking that the journey would inflict trauma on him. On the way, two terrible events bear significant scar on him: one, Siddhartha's predicament -- "He was lying in a pool of blood but was still breathing"; and the other, Palpasa's tragic fate -- "Everything seemed to be on fire. I heard people groaning [...]. Through the

blaze, I could hear the horrible shrieking of the passengers trapped inside the bus [...]. In no time, all that was left was a charred skeleton” (p. 186).

Theoretically, exposures to such traumatic happenings impart speechlessness. And, when any bystander narrates the events, the account resurfaces with scenes of incredible vividness, broken sentences, gestures and overwhelming behaviours. To examine whether Drishya narrates in the same way, the paper concentrates on his bearing witness to major traumatic events – the Maoist’s attack in the district headquarters, the news of mitini’s death, Siddhartha’s treacherous murder, and Palpasa’s tragic fate.

The terrible attack in the district headquarters sweats Drishya as in summer day though it is a cool night. The next morning, he witnesses the lodge owner “trembling violently” and her son with his pants wet (p. 133). Another narration, *i.e.*, the section which vicariously traumatizes him after he witnesses death of a small girl’s mitini, illustrates the symptoms of trauma:

This hill shouldn’t have been so hard to climb. It wasn’t that steep but my legs felt weak. I didn’t know why I felt so drained of energy. I felt as if I was walking in a funeral procession. Though I was wearing shoes, I felt as if I was stepping on hot rocks. My rucksack wasn’t really heavy but it felt like a bag of stones a drill instructor might make a recruit carry for punishment. (p. 151)

The narration that presents Drishya’s condition after Siddhartha’s murder transcribes similar situation: “I couldn’t understand what he was trying to say. I looked into his eyes. They tore my heart out. [...] I sobbed. I screamed. I wept like a child. [...] I began to feel feverish. I felt as if I were drowning in a sea of sand” (pp. 166-67). And, the condition after Palpasa’s terrible fate speaks his predicament:

My whole body was shaking like a leaf. All my dreams and desires were suddenly gone, as if they’d been a bird

flying off the branch of a tree. [...] Why had I gotten on the same bus as Palpasa. [...] As the sun came up, I wished I could wake up from the nightmare. (pp. 186-87)

The cumulative traumatic experience, due to overwhelming and recurring registration, re-traumatizes him when he reads a letter handed by Palpasa's grandmother. It is from this point Wagle makes Drishya narrate his experience through the lens of peace politics. Drishya, instead of acting out trauma which is reliving traumatic condition, recalls the experience using working through which according to LaCapra resorts to "conscious control, critical distance, and perspective" (1995). Accounting Drishya's experience in working through mode, the narration reads, "Every movement was devoted to images. Even when I didn't have a brush in my hand, lines and colours danced in my mind. I needed to keep working on the series to remind myself I was alive" (2008, p. 216). Later, the narrator says: "I wanted to put hope into the figure of Palpasa. At first, I'd painted her in vermilion but it looked like blood. I couldn't even distinguish between vermilion and blood" (p. 211). Drishya's state of confusion as a trope for working through when qualified further by Wagle's confession that he still did not know some of the basic facts about Drishya, and "constructed [the other characters] purely from snippets of information Drishya had given me" reiterates the author's motive to further work through (pp. 231-32). Similarly, the episodic nature of Wagle's participation in Drishya's bearing witness – "I'd interviewed Drishya many times" – rectifies that working through as a mode of rending trauma is authorial intention.

Drishya's working through of trauma, the paper argues, grounds on Wagle's perspective of "the politics of peace". As a peace lover, Wagle should necessarily sanitize the scenes of atrocities. For it, in addition to the strategies discussed above, he resorts to "metonymic substitution"¹³ and conjure up meta-ironic¹⁴ effect

¹³ A technique originally used in trauma rendition to show verisimilitude of traumatic experience and its narration.

(Bernard-Denals 2001, p. 1308). Pragmatically, the deployment of “metonymic substitution” with meta-ironic effect reduces the intensity of traumatic happening. As readers, we feel reduction in the force of trauma when Drishya narrates Maoist attack in the district headquarters by juxtaposing it with the description of popular film figures like Manisha Koirala. In another instance, *i.e.*, while describing the people’s response after a devastating attack, Wagle blends humorous situation with a pathetic event. Similarly, the frame of romantic love affair between Palpasa and Drishya serves to reduce the force of trauma and orient the readers towards working through.

The contribution of context in trauma rendition appears when Wagle describes the atrocities of security forces. As it was a time when the army had been in operation to quell the Maoist, any of the narrations concerned with army demanded sanitized. And, Wagle writing under such condition finds no escape from the entrapment. For instance, when Wagle needs to state who is involved in Drishya’s abduction, he makes Fulan allege that the Maoist have their hand.

In brief, Wagle’s novel demonstrates that the whole writing is dictated by the factors mentioned above under the heading of selection, context and availability – vicarious trauma, the time of army deployment as a context and the author’s perspective configured by politics of peace.

Trauma in *Forget Kathmandu*

The last two sections of the text bear witness to the traumatic experience of distinctly four sets of people in the Western part of Nepal during armistice. The first set of narratives come from the Maoist or their sympathizers such as a driver in Chhupra,

¹⁴ The concept develops out of Paul de Man’s analysis of irony, which is the condition of poet-philosopher’s ability to laugh at himself because of the distinction between the ironist’s empirical self and his separated, observing self. Taking insight from de Man, the term has been defined as the contradiction, the paradox, the logical or conceptual violence in writing.

Maoist girls waiting to hitchhike, local area secretary of Maoist, and an area committee member (2007, p. 173, 192-93, 197, 201). Their stories detail the sufferings to elucidate that the state really abused her authority. By contrast, the second set of narratives brings forth a different picture. Spoken through the non-Maoists like former MP of UML and a contractor, the narratives retrospectively highlight atrocities of both the government and the Maoist (p. 218). The third set of account comes from the security forces such as the CDO of Kalikot and a DSP (pp. 222-24). Their narration demonstrates the characteristics of trauma perpetrator's falling back upon secrecy and silence¹⁵. Human rights activists are the fourth set of narrators who rejuvenate the sense of suffering inflicted upon the civilians primarily by the security forces.

The wide spectrum of the narrators and the diverse stories prove that Thapa's accessibility bears significant impact in the novel. Had she have no easy access to the site, she would have failed to represent diverse cases traumatic experience.

Thapa's point of view further structures the trauma available during her visit. The author has confessed that two major perspectives – the outlook of human rights activist and her location as an inspiring bourgeois intellectual – work in her narration. The second outlook dominates the first four chapters after the introduction wherein she re-enacts the history of Nepal by castigating the entire archive. It typically reveals the author's reactionary characteristics¹⁶. Thapa's confession, which says she finds no difference between her perspective and that of a person who “passes the days in a lost-in-the-trenches daze about the present moment”, echoes the same tone (p. 50). Further, it makes her find history to be a corpus imbued with “celebration of the Shahs”, a body of writing defined by

¹⁵ For further information on how perpetrators function, refer to Judith Lewis Herman.

¹⁶ As Karl Marx has argued in *The Communist Manifesto*, debunking of immediate history is an archetypal response of bourgeois at the end of any historical epoch.

“jingoism of [the] Panchayat era” that failed to recognize Shah Kings as “a convoluted lot”, a corpus teeming with “alleged intelligence agents” whose responsibility was to inform on the dissidents, and an account rampant with “mismanagement, abuse and corruption scandal” (p. 52, 61, 109, 117).

The perspective of a human rights activist sublimates in the last two chapters. It can be discerned in her a) attempt to incorporate the voice of people from diverse groups, and b) adherence to what Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith call contemporary human rights campaigners’ story telling method (2004). As Schaffer and Smith have stated, human rights campaigns facilitate narration “to bring rights violation to a global audience, to bring rights violations to a global audience, to put a human face on suffering, to mobilize and fund activism” (p.2). In other words, human rights activists’ stand carries intention of politicizing suffering. Apparently, such motive becomes dominant when she drops out first person retrospective mode used in her critique of history, and resorts to conversational form to account traumatic experience.

In addition to the narrative strategy, she maintains human rights activist’s perspective in her content as well. In many spaces, she remarks that the officials in authoritarian states exercise power to inflict injustice upon their subjects. Thapa spiels the standpoint in the following lines: “There was not a trace of government here, not a single sign of what the Nepali state had done in all its centuries of existence” (p. 203). Another remark also voices the same: “If it was a crime for the state to violate its citizens’ political liberties, I thought, it should be equally a crime to violate their economic rights” (p. 219). The criticism becomes blatant when she counters the army captain’s statement regarding health camps, “If that was the army’s job, what then was the job of the civilian government” (p. 225)? The statement expressed at the end of the text is noteworthy as she castigates the government in typical human rights activist:

I for one was sick of the Maoists. Given that – over the decades – the state had done so little for them, they

were justified in demanding their rights. But what did their violent methods achieve? The powers that be – including donor countries funding the government – would not tolerate a Maoist victory. So, unless the present peace talks succeeded, the security forces would continue their brutal campaigns, and all civil liberties would be lost. (p. 227)

To sum up, Thapa's easy access to the site of trauma during the truce facilitate her to render trauma of diverse people. But due to the constraint of human rights activist's perspective, *Forget Kathmandu* fails to render indepth and unbiased account of traumatic experience.

Trauma in *Chhapamar ko Chhoro*

Shah's anthology *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* renders trauma experienced by a primary witness: many of the stories in the collection provide vivid picture of the insurgency. Atrocities appear ostensibly in the author's depiction of detention, abduction, torture, tension, and gruesome deaths. Similarly, the stories portray desolated villages, ransacked houses and terror-prone environment.

The story, "Kidi Jiya Plunged into the Karnali River", depicts the scenario of villages during insurgency. The readers feel that they are witnessing a typical village where property seizure, threat, forced migration, and enforced labour have been customary. Similarly, "Songs do not Resound in Village" narrates desolate village which once was very peaceful. The narrator finds his childhood friends missing from the village, and sees the school buildings metamorphosed into ashes. These descriptions reveal Shah coming to terms with real life experience. Had he not have firsthand availability of the happenings as a police officer set in conflict torn zone, Shah could not have portrayed the village with such vividness.

The anthology, however, does not render verisimilitude of the happenings; the stories reveal heavy texture of the author's perspective, which the paper has argued, is shaped by an

ambiguous morality. Firstly, as a police officer set to curb the Maoist, he needs to denounce Maoist atrocities seriously, and refrain from representing police as perpetrator. Secondly, as a witness of the existing government's decadence and the perpetual increment in Maoist power, he should not commend the government. The appropriation of Maoist can be discerned in Shah's treatment of a man in slaughterhouse. "Buddha in a Slaughter House" narrates the story of an assassinator turned to a prisoner after he tried to run away from his regular responsibility to behede the opponents. Back in the house, Mahanayak orders that the man be slaughtered when he denies continuing assassination. Ready for being slaughtered, the man ironically chants Buddhist hymn. Another story that castigates the Maoist is "Gandhi in the Street". It represents a Maoist cadre who regrets for the past, sees the present meaningless and fears the future. The story reiterates what trauma theorists call the nature of relation between a victim and a perpetrator. The Maoists, who had proved incapability of police by defeating in many attacks and compelling them to leave their stations, best become perpetrators for any person in security force.

The working of selection also manifests in Shah's retreat to frame as storytelling device. The frame, unlike the context, allows choosing a few images out of the historical panorama. The first frame – Maoist as culprit – helps to sustain anti-Maoist stance in many stories. "Closed Door and Time" dramatizes the fear experienced by a family which is surrounded by the people in combat. The second frame is apathy to the government; it surfaces when Shah views the conflict as a consequence of politicians' insensibility. Three of the stories – "Animal Incarnation", "Chair Carnival" and "Human Farming" – demonstrate the extremes of debased human values in the socio-political sphere. The stories present politics as dehumanization factor in all the spheres. In "Long Live Ceasefire", Shah shows sheer lack of vision in the government. A constable, Birbahadur who is set in Maoist hit areas, fights till the enemy's bullet hits his chest. But, when the combat ends, he hears the declaration of ceasefire by the government and the guerrilla. Another frame is the sanitization

of security forces' activities. A case of sanitization is corroborated by a police officer's humanitarian treatment. In "Son of a Guerrilla," an officer upon seeing the son of a guerrilla in his courtyard feels his blood boil. The memory of the guerrilla fires the fierceness of his anger and instigates hatred towards his son. Nevertheless, he controls himself and dillydallies before he allows the boy to play with his son.

To reinforce the effect of frame, the author intentionally excludes epic narration¹⁷ even in a case which demands first person point of view. For instance, "Another Pit", which presents a Maoist cadre digging a pit to bury the dead guerrilla, purposively discards monologue mode and resorts to third person narrative to devoid him of his perspective.

Conclusion

The paper draws following conclusion from the analysis of three texts that render trauma of Maoist insurgency. An underlying assumption in this endeavour is that the conclusion will have methodological and applicational significance.

From the methodological point of view, the paper invites scholars to opt for alternative approaches because a) resort to interdisciplinary borrowing opens potential to form alternatives when questions of importing any of the canonical theories have been problematized, and b) narrative account of Maoist insurgency in Nepal is a rich field of inquiry waiting for methodological innovations.

I propose that reading insurgency literature by intersecting Gerbner's communication model and categorical variables derivable from canonical trauma theories such as of van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995), Kaplan (2005), Herman (1992), Kansteiner (2004), and Alexander (2004) would be an alternative beginning. My reference to these theories bases on

¹⁷ It is a technique which grants autonomy to the characters to tell their stories from the first person perspective.

the fact that each theory spotlights on the most recurring elements in trauma discourse. Cumulatively, they pertain to structural (availability, context and selection) as well as content level (the rendition) of trauma experience.

Reading Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*, Manjushree Thapa's *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* and Mahesh Bikram Shah's *Chhapamar ko Chhoro* through the method mentioned above shows that trauma rendition is neither an unmediated transcription nor a tool to facilitate community construction; it is rather a consequence of multiple elements functioning dynamically during trauma process.

Paplasa Café presents vicarious trauma filtered through the politics of peace when the country was in the hands of army. Consequently, the content elides the atrocities of the army, approximates traumatic experience of the victims and presents Drishya's trauma in the frame of working through. *Forget Kathmandu*, on the other hand, explicates the perspective of human rights activist who could bear witness to people's experience during armistice. As a result, it not only shows the security forces in negative light but also resorts to the sufferings of the civilians through identitarian inscription. Contrarily, Shah's rendition of the time between intermittent truce and violence from 2002-2006 through the perspective of ambiguous morality delineates vulnerability of security personnel, political delinquency, atrocities of the Maoist, and the suffering of common people.

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