



*Research Article/ Literature*

## **Traumatic Testimony of a Child in Vikal’s “A Pair of Innocent Eyes”: The Conflict Perspective on the Insurgency**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper has analyzed Ramesh Vikal’s “A Pair of Innocent Eyes,” a story written on the background of ten-year-long Maoist insurgency by applying trauma theory. The paper attempts to find out how the narrator while presenting his or her traumatic testimony about a horrible event narrates it: either objectively elucidating all the incidents neutrally or demonizing some particular aspect, which is supposed to have created all the consequences of the nation-state that remained in chaos for more than a decade. If the testimony of historical events is narrated idealizing one and demonizing another group, it, later on, cannot be accepted as an authentic testimony and the condition of the victims of the events would be more aggravated as it cannot appease their tension. The ten-year-long insurgency has not only brought some great change in the nation-state, but it also has helped people narrativize the incidents from one angle which subsequently worsen the situation and the nation-state can delve into internal conflict once again after the most awaited comprehensive peace treaty between the rebel and the government.

**KEYWORDS:** Traumatic testimony, internal conflict, Maoist insurgency in Nepal, Comprehensive Peace Treaty

### **INTRODUCTION**

Ramesh Vikal’s story “A pair of innocent eyes” is the testimony of an innocent child who happened to see his mother being gang-raped by some insurgents and his father being brutally butchered in front of his innocent eyes. It is extracted from *The stories of war and conflict* edited by Govind Raj Bhattarai, which consists of stories written by various Nepali writers on the ten-year-long Maoist Insurgency (1996-2006).

The insurgency brought to the fore the cases of extreme horror and crime from both the Maoists and the security forces. Each of the stories deals with terror and its extension to all the civilians in several parts of the nation and reveals "such condition[s] – grief and pain, fear and terror, and scenes of deaths. The psychological horror and trauma that millions of people underwent is the greatest of all shocks, unforgettable in their memory" (Bhattarai, 2007, p. 8). Most of the people could not remain unaffected by this terror. During the time, people no longer felt safety, justice, order and peace in their lives. If anything was there during this decade, it was only terror and trauma which some Nepali writers have narrativized in the form of stories.

Vikal's story on the trauma of the victims of the insurgency depicts how the whole of the society became a dark place where any kind of ferocity and terror would be unleashed on the people either in the name of securing a revolutionary change or in the name of maintaining law and order. Bhattarai (2007), however, observes that "the creation of terror was the main objective" (p. 9). By showing the seamy sides of this insurgency, the story seeks to "dissuade us from such frightening sport and attempt to turn the world into beautiful place – mostly free from all sorts of fear, coercion and compulsion, so that everyone can live peacefully" (p. 21). The society would subsequently lead to a better place.

This insurgency helped many people write their experiences; most of which is autobiographical in intention. The experience of violence can have different aspects. Das and Nandi (1985) point out that violence at the height of the crisis becomes the subject, object, and instrument and purpose of the action (p. 187). But many such stories written about such experiences give voice to the breakdown of signification. Whereas other stories, they say, "remained inauthentic, because they tried to reduce the violence to the language of feud in which violence from one side was equally balanced with violence from the other" (p. 189). They suggest that a portrayal of the full scale of violence could not be a matter of symbolically balancing the scales of violence.

### **TRAUMA, TESTIMONY AND THE PAST**

Although the word "trauma" has been understood as wound, its meaning varies as per the contexts and disciplines. It invariably gives a manifestation of repeated, uncontrollable, and incalculable effect that comes long after its ostensible cause. Trauma, as it perpetuates, brings forth the dimensions of social, political, historical as well as ethical ethos which subsequently make the victims penetrate the events time and again. Caruth (1995c) a pioneer figure, has elucidated the tenets of trauma in narratives. Showing the importance of writing history either of great people's heroic deeds and other ordinary people's painful experience, she says, "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (p. 5). Caruth turns to literary forms of interpretation of traumatic events and belated experience. Literature, she argues, enables one to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens one's ears to experiences that might have, otherwise, remained unspoken and unheard. There should be a balance in bringing out the actual facts of those people who were actually victimized in history and their traumatic experience should be understood. In the same way, Alexander (2004), highlighting sociological trauma related to the significance of cultural trauma, argues, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves in indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories for ever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable

ways" (p. 1). It incorporates the domain of both social responsibility and political actions. Besides, social groups, national societies and the whole civilizations would witness human suffering. In bringing out some prominent facts of witness and testimony, Laub (1992), a prominent philosopher in trauma theory and survivor of Holocaust, pleads for how the survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory of a forcibly imposed external evil, which "causes an endless struggle with and over a delusion" (p. 64). In a sense, the "not telling" of such story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. He has talked about witnessing to truth in relation to past events; it would be "the quest of testifying and of witnessing . . . the process of the testimony" (p. 61) to begin again the plausibility of the past and to "build anew its linkage to, and assimilation into, present-day life" (p. 62). In past events, the survivors should not only survive because they would tell their past memory, but they would have to share their stories, for their survival, too.

Unlike the critics discussed above, Felman (1992) has laid her emphasis on the relationship between literature and testimony. She claims that testimony can have a common ground between literature and ethics, which is a meeting point between violence and culture and witnessing and events. It can unfold many facts with different literary genres (p. 5). She is of the opinion that contemporary works of arts can use the testimony both as the subjects and as the medium of the literal transmission. She further states, "Testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge" (p. 5). Many traumatic facts hidden in history can be outspoken in the form of testimony.

According to Pandey (2009), it is during mid-1990s that trauma has been converged with other disciplines such as sociology, political science, philosophy, literature, etc. which eventually help it emerge as trauma theory. He further explains, "Trauma theory concerns itself primarily with the temporary delay as the discourse of history which raises the question of the crisis of truth" (p. 125). In seeking out the ethical facts of trauma, historical facts help one grasp the details. In trying to make a distinction between hegemonic historical facts and forgiveness, he further opines, "Trauma forces a remembering which not only knocks down the wall of hegemonic historical consciousness but also conduces to forgiveness" (p. 128). In this sense, history can mislead one because it can have some ethical mishaps; it should be taken as moral issues. Thus, trauma perpetuates a mental condition which may interpret the injury entailed outer sides, too. According to him, the politics of language of violence should not be chauvinistic; and the writers of trauma should employ the language which should neither reduce the specificity of the experience nor should nullify the possibilities of co-existence. It should rather develop a humanistic, critical consciousness in pacifying immemorial feuds, hatred; not the notion of separation and partition (Pandey, 2009, p. 136). Trauma caused racially or nationally should be cured or healed; not retrieved of the past.

While bringing the aesthetics of trauma and post-traumatic testimonies, Lacrapa (2014) is of the opinion that in elucidating trauma and its aftereffects in culture and people, the psychoanalytic concept is perpetuated with historical analysis and sociocultural as well as political critique. He further opines that "evidence constitutes necessary and sufficient conditions of historiography" (p. 1). In the same way, while talking about his concept of bringing traumatic experience in the narrative, he has introduced middle voice of which he says, it is to take writing as "intransitive or to see it as self – referential, thereby bracketing the question of reference and focusing

exclusively on the relation of speaker and discourse (or signified and signifier)" (Lacrapa, 2014, p. 19). Middle voice, as a proper way of representing realistically modern experience, is an affirmation, which would prescribe an "insufficiently modulated rhetoric" (p. 26) or any other forms of discourse. For many people, memory of the past horrible traumatic events can be seen as a thread thrown between the dead and survived; in other words, to hold the dead in our arms is quite impossible effort of solidarity and compassion in the face of 'the wit of eternity'. Memorizing someone and some events is to reconstruct the interconnectedness which seems to have gone away. In his study of the past horrible events of the twentieth and twenty-first century, Edkins (2006) has brought some facts of the destructive memory of the past like this:

At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty first century, the memory of the organized violence of genocide, slaveries, wars, famines, and latterly terrorism has become an important site of political investment. Writers in cultural studies, comparative literature, anthropology, history and sociology are involved in analyzing not only the commemoration of such events, but also the practices of retribution, recovery and reconciliation that follow in their wake. (p. 100)

Thus, memories of such events either collective or cultural or national identity always remain a source of revitalizing the bygone days for the survivors in the long run of their lives. But the narrative in the form of memory may serve the readers of those reminiscences explaining everything about the past events.

#### **NARRATIVIZING TRAUMA AS AN EXPRESSION OF ANGER**

The story was written when the Maoist's movement was at its peak and the whole Nepali citizenry was in panic for a decade. People neither in town nor in village could feel safe let alone at night time. Looting, kidnapping, murder and extortion were common for the news during this decade that witnessed "the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (Caruth, 1995c, p. 4). Vikal is able to bring such situation along with "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (p. 11), narrativizing the trauma of an innocent child who is the only witness of his family's catastrophe while negating "others' traumas" (p. 18) with full assertions. Narrativizing the traumatic situation aligning with the one while othering another group would not make the situation better rather it would aggravate the tension.

Having migrated from a hilly village named Garve, a poor family, including Birkha Bahadur, his wife Dilmaya and their only son, four years old Bhunte, "settled on the fringe of a town" (Vikal, 2007, p. 28). Birkhe works as a laborer of construction works and as a porter with some contractors who do not pay him in time; hence, his family runs out of food frequently. The story has brought out the fact of the people who live in hinterlands and migrate to Terai in search of works. One day, Dilmaya does not have anything to cook for Bhunte who is crying for food. She is waiting for her husband who is coming late because he is looking for his contractor for payment so that he could buy something for his family. He could get only one thousand rupees from him. Spending five hundred rupees for edible items, he arrives home with remaining five hundred rupees which he gives to his wife to spend in emergency. As she starts cooking curry and rice, two gunmen, the Maoists, come in and murder her husband for the charge of espionage and "quenched their beastly passion one after another" (p. 30) with her. Then, they eat what she has cooked to pacify the hunger of her son. Before they leave the hut, they shoot her. After this, two policemen come in search of the gunmen and find two dead bodies and a crying child, but they do not respond to them. As they are hungry, they

eat what is left there. Seeing golden ornaments and five hundred rupee note with her, they take them and go away leaving the innocent Bhunte crying there. Next morning, FM radios broadcast the news about how "some gunmen (Maoists) from the jungle entered the hut of an old couple forcibly at midnight and murdered them in cold blood, and escaped with their property and gold ornaments" (p. 33). Bhunte, taken to orphanage at the end, remains only witness of this ferocity and people are notified that this devilish work is ferociously committed by the rebels.

This story, an account of the terrific event that might have happened within a few hours of an evening, has brought out a dark side of war and conflict in which parents have been murdered and looted in front of an innocent terrified child, whose "two innocent eyes numbed with terror" (p. 32), and who has been crying for food with his mother. This situation is very painstakingly terrifying trauma for the child who would hardly forget this event that would remain to him as "nightmares and repetitive actions" (Caruth, 1995c, p. 4). Vikal is successful in bringing out this fact as an integral part in the form of a literary work. Writing about trauma in the literary form can help people know the historical facts even after many years. But Vikal does not seem to be neutral in bringing out such facts in literary forms because the way a writer should write about the war and conflict, he seems to have missed it by bringing a fore only one side of the extremism villainizing a particular group. Literature, Caruth (1995) argues, can enable one to bear witness to events that cannot be completely known and opens one's ears to experiences that might have, otherwise, remained unspoken and unheard. It can become a platform to express the hidden fact to readers (p. 4). This story has also brought traumatic facts of the insurgency like this: "This ominous sound struck the terror in the hearts of people" (Vikal, 2007, p. 33). Therefore, literature can be taken as a response to very unexpected or overwhelming violent events of what she argues, "repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors" (Caruth, 1995c, p. 4), which cannot be grasped totally but they recur in different forms i.e. repeated flashbacks, amnesia, latency, nightmares and other conditions in the context of the story, Bhunte would be traumatized like this for a long time. Additionally, the readers would also have same condition for some time.

The Maoist insurgency, once the Maoists came in the mainstream politics, has become a part of history. The catastrophe befallen on this lower class family has been narrated in this story by othering the Maoists. Here, they are shown as villains who kill innocent people without any serious reasons. Any stories written from one side by othering the opposite group would not be considered a good narrative to bring out the actual facts of what had happened in the past as it should help both groups to reconcile their previous enmity. It should "speak through the individual or through community, which may not be the site of its disruption" (Caruth, 1995a, p. 156). The story which brings out historical facts from the past must be a mixture of both rise and fall, and victory and defeat. This story is unable to bring out the facts happened in past as an "attempt to bring the experience to light" (Caruth, 1995c, p. 22). According to Caruth (1995c), while bringing out such events, both victims and perpetrators should take them positively as a necessary point of departure (p. 24) to the point of peace and reconciliation as there should not be more or less. The story has tried to misguide the readers from the historical facts by supporting a particular group while villainizing another. As she explains this idea, "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (p. 18). The story would not help both fighting groups reconcile together

forgetting their previous enmity, rather it would aggravate the tension prevailing for a long time in the society.

The converting trauma into narrative can help the story to be verbalized and communicated, "to be integrated into one's own and others' knowledge of the past" (Caruth, 1995b, p. 153). It should accept the pain that has affected the victims. Then, he or she can feel a relief. But Vikal's story seems to be unsuccessful in this attempt. Here, the rebels are presented as villains by giving troubles to working class people as they are known to have raised weapons for the rights and privileges of the lower class and under-privileged groups.

Vikal is unable to locate the language of presentation of traumatic events, which should be outshining through the use of metairony. The language of narration should underwrite violence and capture "specificity of the partition violence from the perspective of morality, interrogates the ideological underpinning of the state-centred national histories" (Pandey, 2009, p. 131). Such morality, which Vikal has not given a proper attention while bringing out the facts of civil war, should emphasize human relations with the attribute of being human. As the author should not use the prose of otherness on the other, it should better measure the depth of human emotion to each other. But, undermining the possible feud in the war-ridden society, if the language of revenge and sacrifice is used regularly, writing literary works about war and conflict would turn into redemptive, fetishistic narrative, which, sooner or later, embarks hostility and enmity; it would never help reconcile in the society.

Due to the massive scale of the violence and a complete inability to find within it a single motivating source, the author's attempts to represent the insurgency break down, as Das and Nandy (1985) have already observed, into either an essentialization of violence as natural and inevitable, or as a complete collapse of signification altogether. They further point out, "Overdetermined scene and undefined silence seem to be the only ways to approach the tragedy so as not to assign blame unjustly or minimize suffering" (p. 189). Literary works written about war and conflict, which once happened in the society; however, they should not necessarily offer "a means of overcoming instability, contaminated as it is with the ideological contours of the dominant culture to which the trauma belongs" (Pandey, 2009, p. 137). The author of this story is not able to concentrate on this; rather it exacerbates the tension. To bring both warring groups in reconciliation, a piece of literature written about war and conflict should also be implemented to pacify the warring groups with their feuds. On the one hand, it forces one section of the society to remember the past, on the other hand, it conduces to forgiveness; which sooner or later leads the conflicting parties to the way of peaceful co-existence.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Vikal's "A Pair of Innocent Eyes," though written about the the Maoist insurgency to show how terroristic feud between the Maoists and security forces actually was, is not written neutrally, rather it seems to aggravate the tension between the warring groups. It should have helpful to understand the civil war as it was in reality while narrativizing the events that once happened in Nepal. But the author has narrated the story from one side and villainizing another, which would not help both fighting groups reconcile their enmity and pacify the tension, but would create more problems alienating both. As a witness to unfolding of the insurgency, one should bring the facts of the civil war objectively by presenting a neutral observer or character who could be a victim of the conflict and who would neither align nor oppose any fighting groups that

might have ruined the peaceful atmosphere of his village and still hopes for the best. Such narratives along with showing a traumatic condition of a family, which was written to describe how people in the hinterlands of Nepal were badly crippled by the conflict, would be successful in bringing out the actual facts of the insurgency neither aligning nor villainizing to any fighting groups, rather neutrally with a message of peace and reconciliation. On the other hand, though written about the consequences of the insurgency and very atrocity of the forces, the story is unable to present them in keeping the author's personal indulgence at a bay. It has tried its best in othering or villainizing a particular section of the society, which does not seem to be appealing for peace, it would rather aggravate the tension even more. By showing the trauma of the victims, it would be responsible for aggravating the tension between the fighting groups, but it would not try to pacify the aggravated tension of both victims and perpetrators.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

*I hereby wish to declare that I do not have any conflict of interests to disclose. However, I declare that the manuscript has not been published before and is not being considered for publication elsewhere.*

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

*I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.*

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Traumatic Testimony of an Innocent Child in Vikal's "A Pair of Innocent Eyes"

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