

## Narrativizing Trauma of the People's War in Shrestha's "Monologues"

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Received 25 Oct. 2023; Reviewed 30 Nov. 2023; Revised 25 Dec. 2023; Accepted 10 Jan. 2024.

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### Abstract

In this study, I scrutinize and analyze Nepali jan yuddha and its impacts on common denizens living under the threat of both the rebels and the security forces narrativized in Abhinash Shrestha's "Monologue" from the perspective of trauma studies. In the process of the research, the paper intends to show the violence, futility of war, enormous pain, fear, estrangement, unhappiness and shadow of war hanging in the mind of survivors basically those people living in the hinterlands of Nepal and expecting peace as soon as possible. Watching news on television and reading newspapers, they are seen longing for harmonious relationship in all. The specter of violence has been imprinted in all people's mind and murder, manhandling, abusing and kidnapping in front of the family members have been common to all. Following this and using some critical insights of Caruth's trauma theories and others' as theoretical parameter, I have analyzed the primary text. This paper also intends to bring out the prospects of peace and solidarity among the people living under the threat from both sides, besides the enhanced conflict which has terrorized everyone. Discussing the expected findings, this article focuses on common individual's anticipation for peace in the war-ridden societies.

**Keywords:** narrativize, peace, People's War, trauma, villainize

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### Introduction

This article, with its suggestive analysis, undertakes the position of Shrestha's love of peace through his story "Monologue" while the conflict was on climax and the life of common people was in trauma. As war is no good to humanity, writing about the war is all but an act against the humanity, which would never allude for peace and harmony in the conflict-hit society. However, this paper takes the methodological stance on trauma and discusses that the presence of a particular theme – peace in conflict. In doing so, I have used the critical insight of Caruth as well as other trauma theories as theoretical parameter to analyze the primary text. I have tried to look into the story in relation to trauma theory which can best exemplify the traumatic experiences mentioned in the story mentioned above that would subsequently help one to understand the causes and consequences of the conflict and get relief from such painful experiences.

Abhinash Shrestha is an established Nepali storyteller who has best been known to have written stories highlighting realities of Nepali individuals who have witnessed some terroristic and horrific events during the ten-year long Maoist insurgency along with socioeconomic and political outfits. “Monologue”, a story which has shown the common pictures of Nepali people who are undergoing with painful experiences during the ten-year long insurgency that took the life of more than seventeen thousand people. And literary writing, a complete artistic creation for healing trauma, has been taken as an outcome of recreation. Narrativizing the traumatic experiences of the war victims has taken apace in the process of healing pain in human society. And this is the point that strikes me: despite a cultural aspect of trauma, would narrativizing traumatic experience help one get relief from trauma, and lead one to face problems happening in society? And I find the narrator in the story, who is trying to narrativize his grief with the help of a character and the catastrophe befallen upon his family, in very painful condition.

## **Traumatic Analysis**

Trauma and its aftermath are not equally distributed even within the populations of developed countries, and the inequities are far more dramatic across the globe (Kirmayer et al., 2004, p.11). The future of their understanding and effective response to trauma is inextricably tied to our response to these inequalities and injustices, which are prevalent both globally and at home. Clearly, trauma refers to very different kinds of events and each reader might question the usefulness of such a broad extension of the term and the justification for bringing these different events together under one rubric. It has threefold. First, this liberal use of the term “trauma” reflects the way in which it is has been deployed by mental health professionals to define their domain.

Trauma is viewed as a coherent category or constructed by health planners, practitioners, and researchers and used to orient mental health services offered in wealthy countries as well as by international organizations in developing countries, and an arable domain for creative minds too. Given the potential social and literary impact of such services and programs, trauma is worth studying for this reason alone. Second, as will be seen from the contributions to the society, there are certainly common elements at play across the disparate situations called traumatic such as the role of fear learning and extinction or the processes of collective remembering and forgetting. They further point out, “This has spurred the growth of the whole field of trauma studies, which extends the metaphor far beyond psychology to encompass the social and cultural ruptures and cataclysms that define our time” (p.12). Finally, comparing the very different uses of the term “trauma” can throw into relief our hidden assumptions and unwarranted generalizations about health and illness which ultimately leads to PTSD. This comparative analysis has much to offer researchers and clinicians as well as all who are concerned with the conceptual metaphors that are used to reflect on the human prospect and predicament.

Traumatic experience can produce an indelible effect on the human psyche. It can change the nature of an individual’s memory, self-recognition and relational life – social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event would come to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. In this regard, Geoffrey Hartman (2001) argues, “This tyranny of the past interferes with the ability to pay attention to both new and familiar situations” (p.1). Cathy Caruth, (1995) in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, has also reiterated that post-catastrophic events seem to repeat again and again for those who have undergone with them. In a sense, these repetitions

would be striking because “they seem not to be initiated by individual’s own act, but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected and which would be entirely out of their wish or control” (p.2). Past remains dominant on human psyche and it ultimately leads each one to the path of creativity. Therefore, psychoanalysis would be the best treatment for trauma – privileged mode of presentation. Writing discourses of trauma would in a sense, be ‘narrative medicine’ or ‘narrative therapy’.

Geoffrey Hartman (2001) has illuminated his point why trauma has become important in today’s context. According to him, the social environment has not only formed the circumstances out which traumatic trauma is created, it has also provided an opportunity for healing as he claims, “The social support of groups or movements that encourage bearing witness is essential for individual and group survival of trauma, because repression, dissociation and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness (p.19). Scholarship and literature on trauma is an important part of a group support process, attesting to diverse voices articulating

They clarify for readers the significant personal and social costs of ignoring the problems trauma poses, indicating that lack of public sympathy exacerbates these problems and prevents healing.

Their approaches often demonstrate in narrative and characterizations what trauma researchers have emphasized – that for healing to take place, survivors must find ways to tell their stories and to receive some social acknowledgement if not acceptance. Examining the human consequences of traumatic events such as the enslavement of Africans in the United States or the attempted extermination of the Jewish people in Europe is a productive endeavour from the perspective of trauma. Traumatic experiences further highlight attitudes commonly found in narratives of survival (Finck, 2006, p. v). Events such as senseless extermination of an entire people and the brutal exploitation of an entire race were not only not avoided, but systematically promoted by the communities in question.

Trauma victims have endured and survived a broad range of traumatic stressors such as war, dislocation, torture, detention, rapes, interrogations, political persecution etc. Through these experiences they also “suffer different types of losses which include their property, houses, jobs, homeland, social status and roles, and income cases, a loss of self and identity” (Wilson, 2007, p. x). The trauma story of the victims unfolds over time and the assessor rarely obtains a complete and full reporting of the traumatic experience precisely because the event overwhelmed the normal coping resource of the person and requires sufficient time and assistance to process and integrate the extraordinary experiences into the self and personality.

### **Narrativizing Trauma in “Monologue”**

Abhinash Shrestha’s “Monologues” is a testimony of trauma of an inhabitant of a village which abuts onto the district headquarter. The inhabitant is a villager who can be from any villages of any districts of the country because during the People’s War or emergency period, whole of the country was under the threat from both the rebels and security forces. The inhabitant is a representative of all victims of extreme cruelty. Both sides which involved in creating psychological horror in the villagers were supposed to protect the lives and liberty and to bring changes in the lives of ordinary people turned to be equally cruel, inhuman and perform barbarous deeds as they are heartless individuals. Shrestha’s narrative has done a justice that presenting the event with the help of the middle voice; as a neutral observer he has

neither aligned with the security force nor has he villainized the rebel. The story is written objectively, which would help all affected people to accept the narrative from heart.

In the story, the narrator has presented the very pathetic condition of the country when it was undergoing with the civil war exacerbated by the People's War and the whole of the Nepali society was split into two: rebels and security forces; hence, the individuality was on the verge of collapsing and awaiting its own termination. Here, Shrestha (2007) narrates the situation in this way, "The society has nearly come to an end. In addition, social conscience – tormented by fear, terror and death-fear is defaced beyond recognition" (p.135). It would not be surprising to see the time being anarchic. People were panicked with the situation prevailing around. Everyone seems to be awaiting his or her own doom when it would befall upon them as she or he could not expect good. The storyteller further narrates the situation;

Time has become a rogue. Time has become an atrocious oppressor. Time is patrolling in the human settlement in the guise of a heinous murderer. Time has turned bestial and wearing a political mask, it is validating the courage . . . what we can say is that under the shelter of the aberrant time someone is harbouring heinous, devious and malicious wishes. He wishes all to go crazy, to be scared and terrified by his presence. He wishes to put all discerning people to rout. He wishes not to see any sagacious and intelligent person standing abreast of him. He has been a slave to his own barbarous wishes to be seen as the only discerning person in the world. He has been a slave to his own inhuman obsession that he is the only one who deserves to live and all deserve death. (p.135)

The narrator himself is not in the condition whether he would be safe or not pursuing his life along with his family.

Even the stars and moon are seen to be mocking at the miserable condition of the war affected denizen. The main character, the narrator himself, delineates his condition like this, "It seems to me that today's night is descending a bit awkwardly. The moon is shining above the village as if it is mocking at us. The stars are twinkling in the sky as if they are laughing at the entire earth. The surrounding atmosphere is heavy with the nauseating stretch from the decomposed carcass and the odor of the gunpowder" (p.136). One is assessed to the effectiveness of intervention in situation of extreme stress, disaster and trauma, and they suffer "mental health maladies i.e. depression, alcoholism, suicide, PTSD, domestic violence, etc." (Wilson, 2007, p. xv) as Shrestha (2007) is found being suffered almost in the same condition;

We apparently hear the banging on the door mounting and bawling is filled with wrath. Yet we have failed to pluck courage to go downstairs and open the door. In the meantime, white with fear and doubts, the daughters, the sister-in-law and the wife are standing close to us. Fear is written all over their faces. (p.137)

Even the ordinary sound would be troubling to them as if someone is pointing a gun towards them and asking them to be ready to die. The narrator living with his family in the district headquarter does not seem to be safe from any kind of prevailing menace. Every moment is passed with panic and torment.

The gun firing, bomb explosion, extortion, abduction and threats have become daily chores for every one living in the district headquarters. Let alone people living in the rural areas which always remain in the grip of the rebels. The dependence of security force for safety remains a paradox because they

themselves were not safe and looking for their own safety let alone the people. The storyteller further narrates,

Everything is in shambles. Everything lies in ruins. Everything is in a state of disarray. The justice is in deep slumber. The law is defunct. The administration is eroding away every day. The defense is busy in its own security. That is to say, the security is desperate to secure itself. The system is busy banging its own drum and dancing itself. (p.135)

The story revolves around the abduction of the narrator from his own home in the eyes of his own family members who remain helpless and apathetic to themselves except moaning for the event.

His whereabouts would be unknown for many days in the concentration camp of the rebel where he is subjected to the tortures and brutal treatments until he accepts what they want him to accept. But one fact that he was innocent and mistakenly brought for tortures and punishment *bhate karwahi* (punishment by bombo stick) made them not to repent what they did rather to enhance their act as a sovereign task to cleanse the feudal from the egalitarian society. For him everything seems obscure and ambiguous, for instance, it is narrated here,

Which one gives security and which one cleanses the humanity? Every one of them has the selfsame nature and character. Their faces and savagery reflected in their faces are alike.

Prose and poetry are alike.

The drama and the essay are alike.

The story and the poem are alike.

A man and a demon are alike.

They have started interrogating me.

‘Who are you?’ Tell us whatever the truth is, or’

(Are you not the spy working for the Army? Speak...)

(Are you not the accomplice of the terrorist? Admit or you will not be left alive. (p.139)

His life has been exterminated mentally and awaiting for the end killing any kind of hope of reuniting with the family.

The deadly events like kidnapping, extortation, killing and physical tortures from either side were common for the people who were habituated hearing such things from media. He has been destined to be a newspaper headline of the media as it is described in the following lines,

The dead body of a Nepali citizen named so and so in his late fifties (whose passport mentions ‘agriculture’ as his occupation), the son and grandson of so and so from the ward number eight of that village abutting onto the headquarters of that district has been found in that rivulet. Along with this, the death toll has risen to fourteen thousand and sixty-four so far.

We will be present tomorrow again with the details of the death toll. Jai Nepal. (p.143)

In this way, an innocent Nepali having lived a disturbed 'traumatic' life for a long time observing others' disastrous lives has become a news for others in the name of revolution and cleansing the dominators from the feudalistic society.

"Monologues" written to bring out the traumatic situation experiences during the People's War when it was in climax or when the emergency period was going on and all provisions of human right were on stake, clearly shows how much traumatized ordinary people like the soldier and the villager have been while bearing their responsibility whether to the nation or to the family. They suffer physically and mentally without any serious crimes or mistakes they have committed. However, the former has been written to intensify the tension of the Maoists because it has othered them by villainizing as terrorists, whereas, the latter has been written bringing both sides sentiments in a balance and both sides can accept it as a testimony of their struggle to bring change in the country; which would subsequently help establish peace and stability in society.

## **Conclusion**

In short, "Monologue" a story written about the Maoist conflict when it was in climax and there was harsh conflict between Maoist rebels and security force, has portrayed a fearful and penetrating picture of a remote village and a struggle of a family man to remain alive in spite of unfavorable circumstances until he is savagely murdered by the rebels. Shrestha is able to show the painful trauma of a person in the story because he has gone through several traumatic situations. History, being written in any way whether one does anything or not, is an important mnemonic past in which many people have donned their dresses up, but what matters here is whether it is recorded or not. Ten years civil war has become a part of history and people like the main character of the story are those people whom the history has engulfed and gobbled down, but the survivors like his family members are in the process to rejuvenate the forgotten facts out of their memory and try their best to fill up the gap with the help of memory sharing the narrative to the listeners. With the span of time, people and their wounds have been changed along with the change in readers or viewers' concepts and mentality. The ten years war that took the life of more than fifteen thousand people and millions of others badly remain affected for a long time has been fertile source to weave the plots of various forms of narratives. The trauma of these affected people has been a topic of writing and speaking; and narrativizing their experience would be a significant work. But the writer is unable to bring this issue being neutrally rather villainizing one group and exacerbating the feud that would remain between the fighting groups for a long time. The writer does not seem to have concentrated on reconciliation and pacification of the aggravated enmity between the victims and the perpetrators, which can be a good source of doing research work for any aspiring people to go ahead.

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# Interdisciplinary Journal of Management and Social Sciences (IJMSS)

Vol. 5, No. 1, January 2024. Pages: 1-7

ISSN: 2738-9758 (Print), ISSN: 2738-9766 (Online)

DOI: 10.3126/ijmss.v5i1.62657

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