

Traumatic Aspects of Maoists' Insurgency in Abhi Subedi's *Dreams of Mayadevi*

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Abstract

This paper explores experience and perception of the traumatized people who have lost their near and dear ones in the Maoists' insurgency. These people either depicted in the literary works or in newspapers have their testimony to share with others. Dreams of Mayadevi, a play written by Abhi Subedi has been taken as a testimony of the war victims who were badly crippled during the war. Mayadevi, the protagonist of this play who has lost her husband in Indian war and son, Siddhartha in the insurgency, and Salleri Sahinla who has lost all his family members are the victims and liable to share their painful testimony. To analyze this play, trauma theory has been analyzed. Theoretical parameter of some well-known theorists like Caruth, Lacrapa, Kirmayer etc. have been discussed to bring out the traumatic facts of the insurgency with the help of traumatized characters who represent all the victims of the war.

Keywords: *insurgency, People's War, testimony, trauma, witness*

Introduction: Remembering and Mesmerizing

The tension and stress caused by the organized and prolonged armed conflict and its aftermath brings enormous psychological and social burdens on the individuals who experience them. As such, for the last three decades, Nepal witnessed the suffering and life threatening experience that caused individuals go through traumatic reaction, which is termed as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and 'collective trauma'. These unhealed traumatic experiences may contribute to lingering the ongoing cycles of violence and further thwarting peace building efforts. The ten years of civil war, no doubt, has confiscated many innocent people's lives without any significant participation, besides, has been a fertile area to put pen to paper as a testimony to share their traumatic experience. Abhi Subedi, a prolific Nepali writer who has penned many literary works on the periphery of socio-political issues, has taken the consequences of the ten years of civil war as an issue for his writing. He has written *Dreams of Mayadevi* about a badly dissipated village due to the Maoists' insurgency, as a consequence, he has brought back

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the memories of the ten years of Maoist insurgency that took the life of more than seventeen thousand innocent people. Mayadevi and Salleri Sahinla are two main characters who have manifested the traumatic testimony of the horrific war as they have lost their near and dear ones in this insurgency. To illuminate their painful traumatic testimony in this article, some fundamental aspects of trauma theory propagated by Cathy Caruth, Dominick Lacrapa etc. have been applied to analyze the play which has been drawn to show how barbaric and cruelty the civil had been to innocent villagers who have been sandwiched between two fighting forces, but are still hoping for peace and stability in the country.

Theoretical Discussion: Trauma and Its Various Aspects

The initial impetus of trauma as a study commenced in the late nineteenth century owing a large number of surviving casualties of wars. Initially, it was medical trauma; bodily trauma was viewed as essentially a wound or injury affecting body tissues or structures. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, psychological trauma has been developed as “an emotional shock, producing a disturbance, more or less enduring of mental functions” (Marder, 2005, p.298). Here, shock is “sudden depression of the nervous system or nervous exhaustion produced by violent emotion, accident, surgical operation etc.” (Wastell, 2006, p. xvi). Emotionally, one feels lost and nostalgic. In bringing out trauma theory while analyzing literary works, Caruth (1995) has been a pioneer figure who 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). For her, it is literature as testimony which is one of the ways to tell one another about aspects of traumatic experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding. Sharing and unfolding the knots about the past traumatic experiences can have some soothing features in reconciling with the warring sides and coming in meeting points, so that both sides can live together. In the same way, Pandey (2009), bringing the importance of cultural trauma, points out that its presence in narrative would function as a memory to illuminate the traumatic past and also a possibility to settle the hostility (p.132), which had led to the violence triggering the trauma.

Later, Freud (1978) formulated the idea of trauma working on women suffering from hysteria, which led him to postulate that it was actual seduction that was traumatizing these women (p.187). Clinicians such as Herman began to confront society with the reality of the existence of incest and domestic violence. Besides, the Vietnam War was another instance of traumatizing event. Cognitive behavioral model as a most influential approach to trauma was developed to address the residual effects of trauma using techniques (Wastell, 2006, p. xxi) that essentially subsume emotion beneath rational thinking focusing on getting the survivors’ thoughts back into perspective through a combination of talking and activity.

Emergence of trauma in literature and literary theory was about two decades old as most influential and far reaching in understanding pathos of the victims of different events. Marder (2005) further argues, “Over the last fifteen years or so, the emergence of groundbreaking new work on trauma in literature and critical theory has made a profound impacts both within and beyond the field of literature” (1). Scholars like Cathy Caruth, and Shoshana Felman in the early nineties along with their significant works have been contributing largely creatively on the borders of trauma, literature and psychoanalysis.

With this, psychological impact of trauma has been focused on the diagnostic construct of post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD), a situation in which people as subjects of horrific terror and cruelty and a history of exposure to a traumatic event and symptoms from each of three groups: “intrusive recollection of trauma event, avoidance of reminders of the event and emotional numbing, and hyperarousal to determine accountability for suffering and to seek restitution and redress.” (Kirmayer et al. 2004, p. 2). On the other hand, while bringing out the traumatic memory as an important asset of trauma, Allan Young (1995) has observed that memory is the linchpin which holds together trauma and disorder in the construct of PTSD. Justifying this, she further opines, “The Dynamics of memory and of attributional processes are crucial for the diagnosis of PTSD because the criteria require that the person remembers and attributes his or her symptoms to the traumatic event” (47). In addition to fear and anxiety, the psychological consequences of trauma may lead to disturbances of memory, identity, and perception which is termed as dissociation. That individuals can forget, repress, or dissociate experiences of trauma only to have them cause distress later in time or re-emerge in the form of symptoms, fantasies or recovered memories can cause a terrible impact on the victims.

In the recent years, recognition has increased for the ways in which trauma can exert effects across the generation from parents to child to grandchild. In the name of collective trauma, it occurs both within families and in whole communities. Kirmayer et al. (2004) have even argued about how PTSD can be transmitted across generations through secondary traumatization, “Transgenerational transmission of the effects of trauma may include many processes at the level of parent–child interaction within the family” (p. 10). People may simply learn to attribute their own symptoms of anxiety, depression, interpersonal difficulties, and other non–trauma-related psychiatric disorders to their parents’ history of traumatic experiences.

Trauma theorists like Herman have even classified PTSD into two: simple PTSD relates to single events, and complex PTSD refers to the response to complex events such as war or chronic abuse (p. 11). Both PTSDs compile short terms painful phenomena i.e. isolated events such as rape or armed robbery, man-made disasters such as sinking of ferries, natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods, and longer term i.e. chronic conditions such as war and child abuse.

Unlike psychological trauma, sociological trauma is related to the significance of cultural trauma of which C. Alexander (2004) says, “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, the whole civilizations would witness human suffering. They would identify “the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidarity relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others” (p.2). It would not be good to underestimate the existence of others’ trauma and refuse to accept their responsibility for their suffering, which only propagates the tension. It normally pleads for other forms of trauma which subsequently touch the feeling of commoners.

While highlighting on the importance of traumatic events which would bring some good sides to writers, Edkins (2003) in her “Remembering Relationality Trauma Time and Politics” states that the memory of the organized violence of genocide, slaveries, wars, famines, and terrorism has been an important site for political and literary investment. According to her, writers would have the traumatic memory a good source of creating their own world for analyzing not only commemoration of such events, but also the practices of redistribution, recovery and reconciliation for their reawakening (p.100). Each one would bring forth important tenets of writing trauma.

In the same way, Pandey (2009), once again, bringing the importance of cultural trauma, points out that its presence in narrative would function as a memory to illuminate the traumatic past and also a possibility to settle the hostility which had led to the violence triggering the trauma. While explaining the condition of cultural traumatic experience, he says, “When someone is hurt, he or she lives through the injury not only physically but also psychologically. Additionally, the society interprets it in a specific cultural context” (p.125). 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 (p.136). Trauma caused racially or nationally should be cured or healed; not retrieved of the past.

In the modern time, the ravages of the First and the Second World War, Korea and Vietnam, US Iraq War, and the like have been potential to create traumatic experiences, which are fertile for the creative minds to write about trauma. Pioneer works of the researchers, victims and other prolific writers have enabled the development of the most

widespread model of trauma to reflect the actual experience of survivors by enhancing the emotional elements from cognitive distortions. Although trauma is always framed as the exceptional, even where violence is endemic, it has a curious relationship with modernity. Though violence has been a constant feature of human life, the industrial revolution and the accelerated pace of urban life have brought new forms of presenting human emotions and experiences in literary writings. The trauma and its various aspects as seen in *Dreams of Mayadevi* would be contextualized as per the situation that happened in Nepal where common people were badly impacted time and again.

Discussion and Results: Trauma in *Dreams of Mayadevi*

Mayadevika Sapana (*Dreams of Mayadevi*), a play written by one of the renowned Nepali writers in the field of writing dramas, poetry, criticism, etc., talks of traumatic experiences of two principal characters: Mayadevi and Salleri Sahinla, both crippled by the Maoists' insurgency. Both "represent turbulence and calm in the same capacity and condition" (Rijal 2). Along with them, the play shows the scene of a remote village ravaged by the battle between two forces – the Maoist rebels and government forces where almost all boys have either left the village or joined the rebellion or disappeared by either forces. The playwright mentions about the condition of the village, "No young lads are in the village. Here are only women. Few old men are only here" (Subedi, 2009, p. 20). They are also traumatized with the pretext of the insurgency. They do not seem to be sure when, where and what happens to them as both forces have made this village a battlefield, and the village folks have been panicked.

Mayadevi, the mother of Siddhartha who has been lost for six months, whom she calls with a loving name Kale is a suspected Maoist rebel. Her husband had died in a war in India when Siddhartha was born. Due to such traumatic experiences whenever anything happens to her she feels that she is having the same pain as she felt when he was born. She narrates her story about how he was born.

When Kale was born to me I was very feeble. I was nearly old and had been in pain for two days. Kale's father did not have the luck to see his own son. He died in the war. I too had almost died. Any news either too sad or too joyful makes me feel as if I am going to give birth to child again. It is very difficult to be a mother. All women have the same fate. (p. 30)

The village is not peaceful, and the villagers are used to unexpected things that would be happening to them all the time. Subedi (2009) describes the terrible condition of the village like this, "Night vision helicopter has been speaking terrible and mysterious language. The familiar jungle looks strange. Dusks arrive with eerie silence. Mayadevi feels as if she is going through the same labor pain again" (p. 25). The very traumatic situation can be noticed when Mayadevi dreams of giving birth to Gautama Buddha under a Peepal tree indirectly desiring "for peace that common people expected collectively. What common

people needed or still need are not the warriors but saviors” (p. 23). She still hopes peace for all the war-affected people so that no mother would have to live life like her.

Unlike Mayadevi, Salleri Sahinla, a retired army from Indian force, who does not seem mentally well, is seen wearing worn out combating dress and performing a march-pass anytime he likes. He is totally disturbed and traumatized. One of his arms is amputated. He has also lost his son and is still looking for him. He is seen telling others about his war experience:

There is none whom I knew in the jungle where I was dead. I did not know whether there was *chanp* tree or not. I even did not know the river there. I did not know the cowshed. Somebody pushed me in the battlefield. The sound of gun firing was so harsh that our ears would be deaf. A friend next was shot. As I saw, he died. At moonlit nights there would be war as well as talks of love. At such nights I did not do anything except war. It's ok, what else should be said. You go. Maybe something will happen at night. No good thing will happen. Whatsoever should be done, do fast. (p. 11)

He is only one male in the village and supposes himself a watchman guarding women and children.

Even when the rebels come to inquire about Salleri Sahinla and try to abdiccate him from there, he tells them how terrible war is and how it makes life terrible to all,

. . . if you dare to know the consequence of war you are making, look at my body and me! I, a weak old man with so called medals of bravery stored into the trunk, and with an amputated hand, linger like a shadow in the street thinking about two proper meals a day. This is what you all are going to be. That war I fought took place somewhere far in the unknown land. Your war is far terrible. You all have to drink water from the same sprout. With amputated hands, you will live through the same *dukha*. Muted and with dried eyes, you will look at each other. Not a word would come out of your mouth. Cursed will be your predicament. (23)

Still, Salleri Sahinla hints one important human value that suffering of one person like him can or should save other people. He is seen praying and performing the act of ritualistic order for the purification of all those who have lost lives in the battlefield. While doing so he states “a view that spaces also become fluid and liminal during traumatic moments. Similar to its denizens who remain schizophrenic and traumatized, spaces too give themselves to multiple spheres on such occasions. Spaces too have mysterious and unconscious state of existence.” (Rijal, 2014, p. 5) The pain he is having for a long time should be receded, and he hopes well to all.

Mayadevi's visit to the battlefield to look for her missing son is very traumatic. Finding dead and wounded youth writhing in pain even not aspiring for peace rather craving for more weapons to instigate terrific war against their own brothers and sisters makes her feel sorry for the pathetic condition of all denizens. Then, she dreams of herself as Mayadevi of ancient Kapilvastu and giving birth to Siddhartha. The realization of her near him, but still not seeing him, she becomes restless and calls him:

Kale, my son, how can you go without meeting me? Don't know, what might have stopped him. Don't know, where he is entangled. But I have seen a very auspicious dream. No harm shall happen to you. I am happy that you are alive. Do remember me. Kale, I wish flowers bloomed in every step you take, my darling. (Subedi, 2009, p.42)

Here, both characters are able to show how painful it is to live in the war-ridden place. Thus, these characters are "not surviving the crisis, they are also preserving the spatial values, which are human and perennial. Brave warriors and crafty politicians are not the only history makers. They are not the only forces, which create and control spaces. There are other forces, which are dear to common people" (Rijal, 2014, p.6). Along with them, the people are seen terrified and traumatic with the Maoists. Besides, the frequent visit of the government forces' surveillance penetrates them deeply. They support and betray each other. Their fear focuses on who is an insider or an outsider. However, the concealment of their fear and Mayadevi's dream can have some relationship with fear and trauma prevailing in the village. These people are seen living their life on the edge of a sword.

Conclusion: Remembering for Exposure

In short, the trauma caused by the organized and prolonged armed conflict and its aftermath has brought afore undeletable psychological and social scars on the individuals who have gone through the experience. As such, for the last three decades, Nepal witnessed the suffering and the life threatening experience that caused individuals go through traumatic reaction, which is termed as 'post-traumatic stress disorder' and 'collective trauma'. In such long span of time, many changes have taken place, but the scars the victims have been carrying on are still afresh. Mayadevi and Salleri Sahinla are the representative characters who have witnessed this conflict and bearing the traumatic pain and are displaying it time and again. War either in the country or outside always creates a havoc to the people who have lost their kin and kith. Those who fight in the war either kill others or get killed, but their relatives or dependents have to go through very painful situation which has been depicted in this play. Subedi, being a creative writer of performance art has been successful to weave the plot of an old mother who sees her son in every young boy.

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