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People for Peace and Republic: A Fantasy Theme Reading of the Representation of ‘Nepalis’ in Movement-Time Editorials

Hem Raj Kafle

Kathmandu University

Author Note

Dr. Hem Raj Kafle ( [0000-0001-8616-9576](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8616-9576)) is an Associate Professor of English and Communication at the School of Education, Kathmandu University. He specializes in rhetoric and communication and keenly works across rhetorical studies, leadership communication, and creative writing. Dr. Kafle has to his credit a co-authored anthology of poems, two translated books, a collection (book) of reflective essays, a collection of Nepali poems, several research publications on literary and communication discourses, and dozens of newspaper columns on socio-political issues.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. Hem Raj Kafle, Kathmandu University. Email: hrk@ku.edu.np; hemraj@kusoed.edu.np

Abstract

Newspapers' editorializing exigencies as a mere publication of spot news would not be enough. Editorials clarify, explain, interpret, or integrate the news based on events, incidents, situations, or trends. Events of and during political movements are the main subjects of newspaper editorials. Editorial coverage of everyday exigencies builds up and helps represent narratives of various actors directly or indirectly involved in the events. In the public texts in Nepal, including newspapers, 'Nepali people' feature as principal actors and participants in socio-political transformations. Through Fantasy Theme Analysis of editorials on political subjects, this article explores how *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times* covered 'Nepali people' as the participants, actors, and agents of political transformation during the people's movement in 2005-2006. The article inductively concludes that with a principal rhetorical vision for establishing peace and republic, 'Nepali people' performed the agency of transformation in the country.

Keywords: movement, fantasy theme, rhetorical vision, transformation, peace, republic

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In most public textual representations in Nepal, Nepali people or *Nepali Janata* feature as metaphors. Broadly, they signify a force for validating political actions and establishing political philosophies. The expressions like 'people are watching,' 'people would like to know,' 'working for the people,' 'people's own party,' 'straight conversation to the people,' are perennial catchphrases among the media and political actors. Former governments, even the autocratic monarchs, accorded 'people' with some agency as determiners and followers of every socio-political transformation in the country, apart from being their compliant subjects.

This paper seeks to explore the representation of 'Nepali people' in editorials of the mainstream broadsheet dailies in drawing the context of the political movement. The article is a Fantasy Theme Analysis of newspaper editorials covering the events of the people's movement, popularly referred to as *Jana Andolan II* in Nepal, which was concluded in April 2006,. The article explicates how *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times*, the two broadsheet English-language newspapers, from Kathmandu portrayed 'Nepali people' in their editorials. The editorials between 22 November 2005 (following the signing of the Twelve-Point Agreement) and 30 May 2006 have been reviewed to examine the portrayal of the Nepali people. This period involved the crucial days of the 'People's Movement' organized against the monarch-led government by the then Seven-Party Alliance. In particular, the article addresses this research question: How did the leading newspapers represent Nepali people in their editorials? And, in line with the key concepts of Fantasy Theme Analysis, it concentrates on answering what attributes of Nepalis as movement actors are presented in relation with their actions and settings of movement. Moreover, it is inquisitive towards the knowing visions for change that are highlighted in the narratives related with the Nepali people as the main agents of change.

Fantasy Theme Analysis

Fantasy Theme Analysis (FTA) is a method of rhetorical criticism considered appropriate in the study of movement-related artifacts. Cragan (1981) calls it “a method for sorting out and evaluating public discourse which may provide parameters and a rhetorical structure for the phrase, ‘the rhetoric of’” (p. 69). In this respect, this paper aims to explore ‘the rhetoric of Nepalis as significant change agents’ in the context of political movements. The word “fantasy,” in FTA is used with its etymological root in Greek, *phantastikos*, as a referent to a symbol “which is able to present or show to the mind, to make visible” (Ball, 2001, p. 218). In an even broader application of the term, fantasy theme involves “the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfils a group’s psychological or rhetorical needs” (Griffin, 2011, p. 250). In relation with the study of public texts such as newspaper editorials for their coverage of real events, a fantasy theme refers to “a shared story that is believed and internalized by many people” and is expressed frequently as “a particular interpretation of some significant aspect of our world” (Nelson, 2017, p. 548). FTA follows two basic steps. The primary interpretive phase involves a close reading of an artefact or a number of artifacts for signifiers representing personae, plotlines, and scenarios embedded in interpretative expressions that tell of events in the past or aspirations for the future. This phase, in other words, focuses on finding character, action, and setting themes accompanied by making sense of symbolic cues, which speak of a presence and recurrence of metaphors and allusions identified by a context-specific discourse community. The second stage of FTA includes inferring rhetorical visions from the character, and action, setting themes and allusions from the symbolic cues, and analyzing the rhetorical visions in connection with sanctioning agents and rhetorical communities.

Table 1 presents an operational definition of each of the key concepts used in Fantasy Theme Analysis in this paper.

Table 1*Operational Definitions of Concepts in Fantasy Theme Analysis*

Key Concepts	Definitions
Fantasy theme	Any signifier representing a persona, action, or setting; an interpretative expression telling of events in the past or aspirations for the future.
Character (Dramatis persona)	Actors in a narrative representing certain emotion or traits of character, either positively portrayed as a hero/protagonist or negatively as a villain/antagonist, or neutral.
Action (Plotline)	Act or deed of a character. Action reflects the nature of happening, intensity of change, traits of characters, and the extent of decisiveness.
Setting (Scenario)	Place or space where actions take place; seen both as a physical location or a political, cultural space.
Symbolic cue	A cryptic signifier, metaphoric/allusive/connotative expression typical for a cultural/political context and group of people; reminds of one or more stories and personae.
Rhetorical vision	A composite of shared goals, which the members of a (discourse) community own as a guiding principle; a reason to come together; a cluster of semantically proximate themes involving identical and mutually convergent dramatis persona
Rhetorical community	A group of people; characters that share rhetorical visions. Members in a rhetorical community show identical traits, and present similar emotional responses

	on external triggers.
Sanctioning agent	An idea or a person, stated or implied, understood to authorize and endorse certain actions; bases to establish that certain rhetorical visions are valid and sustainable

(Source: Compiled by the author from the references included in this article)

Discussion

Broad Representation of the Nepali People

In the backdrop of the transition through the Twelve Point Agreement (TPA) between the CPN (Maoist) and the Seven-Party Alliance of November 2005, the movement of April 2006, and the aftermath till May 2006, the newspaper editorials broadly portray Nepali people in at least three facets. First, the post-TPA editorials show the people of Nepal as suppressed, victimized, and too weak to raise their voices against autocracy. Then, some time close to the municipal elections held by the royal government in February 2006, Nepalis assume the persona of a demanding, uncompromising citizenry. Third, during the protests in April 2006, Nepalis take the face of the mass of protestors – defiant and victorious against the autocratic regime. In the aftermath of the protests, the defiant and victorious Nepalis appear to subside into neutral, anticipating, and forgiving people.

Wolfsfeld (2011, p.3) discusses the political environment and states that it refers to everything people are doing, thinking, and saying about an issue at a particular place and time. Nepalis in 2005-6 were represented in the then context of the political environment in the editorials of the broadsheet dailies. Thus, the principal narrative on the Nepalis can be summed up in a simple plot involving a generic collectivity slowly woken up to courage and defiance to topple an autocratic system and later gone into the back seat to wait and see how the fruits of their labor would be managed by the political representatives.

The Dramatis Personae

Character (dramatis persona) fantasy themes embody the personal attributes of actors involved in a narrative. The themes describe the agents or actors in a communicative context and “ascribe characters and motives to them” (Foss, 2018, p. 108). In other words, character themes portray individuals “doing certain things or manifesting certain behaviours” and also “place them in a given setting or scene” (Shields, 1981, p. 6).

Nepalis as actors of the political movement during 2005-2006 are presented by *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times* in a number of character attributes. The first of these involves generic categories such as the people, the general public, and the mass. The second persona takes such denominators as Nepali citizens, the Nepalis, the people of Nepal, and the Nepali people, thereby fixing their status of the citizenry within the Nepali nation. Yet, another persona presents Nepalis in terms of temporality as the “twenty-first century citizens” (*TKP*, “Ordinary Mind,” 2005, p. 4) and “today’s Nepalis” (*THT*, “The Razor’s Edge,” 2006, p. 6). The fact of being in 21st century or today juxtaposes the citizenry with the historical anachronism of active monarchy ruling the country then. Such persona also confirms their image as the protestors during the movement.

The Nepalis become metaphors at times. They are the “sea of humanities that swarmed the streets” (*THT*, “New Dawn,” 2006, p. 6), “the mass encircling the Ring Road” (*TKP*, “People’s Power,” 2006, p.4), “rising tide of protestors” (*THT*, “Love Me Tender,” 2006, p. 6), and “those defying curfews and braving bullets” (*THT*, “New Dawn,” 2006, p. 6). They become anybody without fixed political identity but Nepalis, such as “most Nepalis including those in the political parties” (*THT*, “Missing Magic,” 2006, p. 6) and “youths chiefly belonging to the middle- and lower-class families” (*TKP*, “On the Threshold,” 2006, p. 4). Above all, they take the respectable persona of the “worthy sons and

daughters of Nepal” (*THT*, “New Dawn,” 2006, p. 6). And they are the subjective ‘we’ representing the sentimentality of Nepalinness, sometimes attached with the fate of being losers, and other times with gallantry of victors.

The dramatis persona of Nepalis, which is essentially that of a protagonist, appeared fairly unheroic at the outset. As stated above, their transition was from victims to victors to a peaceful public. As victims, Nepalis suffered a feudal system backed by a monarch, which denied them basic needs as simple as a cover against the cold wave in the Terai. In general, Nepalis lived through a long-drawn social structure marked with “inequality, poverty, and illiteracy,” as a consequence of unfettered corruption by a handful of feudal fiats (*TKP*, “Corrupt System,” 2006, p. 4). Also, they were unlucky, “reeling under absolute poverty,” being “devoid of a statesman” who would prioritize their well-being (*TKP*, “Poor Show,” 2006, p. 4) during the “deteriorating security and political situation in the country” (*THT*, “No Ordinary Time,” 2006, p. 6). A broader reality was that Nepalis carried a painful memory of their history, that of the denial of democratic aspirations by generations of Shah Rulers, including the then king Gyanendra (*TKP*, “Eluding Democracy,” 2006, p. 4; “Int’l Community,” 2006, p.4).

The Nepali people are shown to have been critical towards other popular actors of the time. They were not fully happy with the political parties for their failure to ensure good governance in the past. Only the parties’ promise to restore democracy and peace with tacit support from the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) had evoked some hope that the political parties had redeemed into competence from inaction and stagnation. The people were skeptic about the Maoists as well. The reason was that the Maoists could not be expected to adapt to the multiparty system overnight after a decade’s war against the government. The king knew well that people were “not fully convinced of the Maoist commitment to multiparty democracy.” Thus, ironically, this awareness had given him enough ground to disbelieve the parties’ potential for bringing change

through a mass movement (*TKP*, “King’s Open Door,” 2006, p. 4) and thus to tighten his hold in the power against the clamor for democracy. People were critical against the regime much earlier than the mass protests of April. They had shunned the February municipal elections showing that they were “aware of the royal regime’s tactics to earn legitimacy through forceful elections” (*TKP*, “Poor Show,” 2006, p. 4). Because people had lost faith in the royal regime for its failure to carve a way towards peace and economic prosperity, the parties on their part could cash this loss of faith towards a mass uprising.

The movement-time persona of the Nepali people reveals an image emboldened to tussle with the regime’s forces. The people were apparently uncompromising, defiant, resultant and sovereign. They were not in a mood to compromise with a system of constitutional monarchy such as that of 1990 (*THT*, “The Age of Change,” 2006, p. 6). Consequently, they shunned “any advocacy on royal supremacy” (*THT*, “Ordinary Mind,” 2005, p. 6). They would not accept if the movement culminated in “anything less than Loktantra” (*TKP*, “King’s Open Door,” 2006, p. 4), or any adjustment that ignored “popular sovereignty and representative democracy” (*THT*, “Sunset Boulevard,” 2005, p. 6). The new terminology *Lokatantra* was used instead of the earlier terminology *Prajatantra* for the English word Democracy. Transition from *Praja* to *Lok* itself indicated the transition of personae of the Nepali people. The people by now were aware that an autocratic system would not seek a logical end to the Maoist insurgency and be willing to establish peace and good governance. As a result, they turned defiant to such an extent as to withstand the unconstitutional and autocratic regime, which was virtually under the tutelage of the Royal Nepali Army. Towards the end of the movement, the situation developed to such intensity of rebellion that “no military, political party and foreign power [could] make the people loyal towards the royal regime” (*TKP*, “On the Threshold,” 2006, p. 4). The regime’s fall was imminent since Nepali people were fully prepared to topple it.

The defiance made Nepali people resultant and sovereign. They overwhelmed the government by exerting “unconquerable power ... defying curfews and braving bullets” (*THT*, “New Dawn,” 2006, p. 6), and forced the king to reinstate the House of Representatives. The change was the result of the “courage, strength and endurance” of the Nepali citizens, of their “unparalleled love for their freedom, nationality and identity” (*TKP*, “Crucial Support,” 2006, p. 4). People’s defiance was, therefore, the cause of the king’s political disaster. With defiance and resultant struggle against the autocratic regime, Nepali people became sovereign and free. With the restoration of the parliament, they achieved the right to decide their own fate and that of the monarchy.

Another very important character of Nepalis in general is that they were equally the forgiving people. They forgave the political parties for their past mistakes and came to the streets on their call for a movement. They were prepared to ignore the intra- and inter-party hassles on power sharing during the post-movement time. They could only wait and punish the party leaders another time if the latter did not act sensibly. The people were also ready to forgive the Maoists now that the latter were willing to join the political mainstream. They were ready to forget the Maoists’ violence-filled past, and to welcome them as a political party prepared to abide by the multiparty and pluralist culture.

Actions

Actions, also called plotlines, refer to the deeds performed by characters. These are about personae (heroes and villains) on whom the message is crafted, and which clarify where the characters are engaged. The main actions/plotlines associated with Nepali people take a number of frontline acts in a rough chronological sequence. These include people’s rejection of the regime, defiance and rebellion against the regime and victory over it. Rejection meant not only the dislike for autocracy, but the monarch himself (*TKP*, “Curfew State,” 2006, p. 6). With an urge to do away with the rejected autocratic government, people defied

the municipal elections held in February 2006, and later the curfews and security crackdowns in April. The act of rebellion then involved the demand for a change in the government system, a forward-looking agenda for republic through the election of Constituent Assembly (*THT*, “Ameliorative Approach,” 2006, p. 6; *TKP*, “Int’l Community,” 2006, p. 4). Finally, the actions related to victory meant “braving the bullets and baton charges,” forcing the king to return power to people (*TKP*, “People’s Power,” 2006, p. 4), and winning back “freedoms and sovereign powers” (*THT*, “New Dawn,” 2006, p. 6). In a nutshell, victory entailed doing away with the monarchy itself.

Settings

Settings or scenes show “where the action takes place, the place where the characters act out their roles” (Shields, 1981, p. 6; Foss, 2018, p. 108). In some narratives, the scene becomes crucial as it “appears to influence both the qualities attributed to the actors or characters and the plotlines” (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 107). The representative settings for the narratives about Nepali people included Nepal, the country as a whole, apart from a number of other locations. In the setting of the country, Nepalis were portrayed in a state of submission, exploitation, and poverty. In a later phase, the setting of Nepal took the image of a grand location where an unprecedented mass of protestors toppled a monarch-led regime through a bloodless movement. Then the setting of Kathmandu, especially its streets and the 27 km Ring Road, formed the most important point of convergence. From there the people could make the royal palace realize being under siege and to make timely decision to return power to the people’s representatives. There were also a number of specific locations like Janakpur, Biratnagar, Pokhara, Chitwan, and Nepalgunj marked for huge turnout of people during the movement. Then the House of Representatives functioned as a setting where people’s aspirations were respected, and from where the paths for a peaceful Nepal could be carved out by people’s elected representatives.

Symbolic cues

A symbolic cue is a verbal allusion. It is a “cryptic” reference to certain stories that have chained out or that a community have shared common experiences and discursive traits (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2011, p. 283). In other words, a symbolic cue functions as a “shorthand indicant or code” embedded in an intimate sign or an inside joke or anecdote identified only by a specific group (Bormann, Cragan & Shields, 2011, p. 283). In case of public texts like newspaper editorials, a symbolic cue refers to such widely-circulated signifiers that the readers conveniently recognize as implying certain shared narratives or beliefs.

TKP and *THT* use a number of symbolic cues defining the Nepali people in both low and grand identities. The cues that project Nepalis in a low image relate to “the century old feudal system,” (*TKP*, “Cold Wave,” 2006, p. 4), “few feudal fiats” (*TKP*, “Corrupt System,” 2006, p. 4) and “the trap of civil war” (*TKP*, “Desist Blockade,” 2006, p. 4). The feudal system was blamed for driving Nepalis into the state of poverty and deprivation. The feudal fiats, mainly identified as the royals and royalists of Nepal, are signified as those controlling majority of resources and ruled over the majority population. The trap of civil war explains the state of fear and uncertainty amid Maoist insurgency, which also deterred the growth and prosperity of the Nepalis.

The cues suggesting grandeur include ‘worthy sons and daughters’ and martyrs. The first refer to both the people who had made the 1990 anti-Panchayat movement resultant, and those who forced king Gyanendra to give up power in April 2006. Apparently, those who were killed in the nineteen-day movement were referred to as the martyrs to accord honor as done to those who sacrificed their lives during the anti-Rana and anti-Panchayat struggles in the past.

Rhetorical Vision: Nepalis for Peace and Republic

The rhetorical vision is a shared ideal comprising a number of identifiable narratives embedded in characters, actions, settings and symbolic cues. The rhetorical vision of a large group of people is represented in public discourses, and frequently transferred to people through the mass media and other forms of public artefacts (Bormann, 1972, p. 398; Ball, 2001, p. 217). Widely shared visions constitute the main guiding beliefs for people, which encourage them to keep alive their “sense of community” in the form of strong actions enacted through “heroes, villains, emotions, attitudes” (Bormann, 1972, p. 398).

Rhetorical visions constituted by *TKP* and *THT* in the portrayal of Nepali people idealize peace and republic as the essential savior for and promoter of Nepal and Nepalis. The people’s participation in the protests implies a hope for a peaceful future, not necessarily their sympathy for the political parties, neither their readiness to adjust entirely with the insurgent Maoists. The Twelve-Point Agreement between seven political parties and the Maoists epitomized this hope. Nepali people risked their lives by joining the seven-party alliance’s protest. They knew that protests would be bloody in the government’s shoot-at-sight response to the Maoist bogey and subsequent imposition of curfews. Subsequently, the vision for peace, delineated in Point 3 of the Agreement, to which the Maoists had lent commitment, earned people’s forgiveness to them. The vision of republic in this sense surpassed the alliance’s primary goal of restoring the parliament, which did not necessarily visualize a position for monarchy but presupposed the abdication of power by the monarch.

Outscoring the target for parliament and voicing the demand for republic, the people were least concerned about how the political parties regarded the value of monarchy as a national institution. By adherence to republic, Nepali people were not giving the Maoists a benefit of prominence. In fact, the vision of republic was the ideal of a larger rhetorical community apart from the Maoists.

The rhetorical community primarily comprised the ‘sea of humanities,’ which was largely unidentified but could be said to include people from sectors as diverse as civil society, professional groups, independent media, marginalized communities and, above all, population of young Nepalis.

The main sanctioning agent of the rhetorical vision, the factor that justified the adoption and dissemination of the vision (Shields 1981, p. 7; Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 108), were the Nepali people themselves. A movement of such scale as that of April 2006 could hardly take place without the endorsement and participation of the mass. But one can discern both contextual and universal factors guiding the people’s participation. Among the contextual factors were the norms that Nepali people’s verdicts were final, and that the Constitution of Nepal protected the rights of Nepalis. Nepalis’ rebellion against autocracy respected the norms of constitutional assurance for the right to live without fear and pressure. The universal warrants involved such factors as freedom, territorial integrity, identity, sovereignty, and representative democracy. These also provided the rationale for convergence between the Nepali people and the political parties and their sympathy to the Maoists.

Concluding Remarks

The fantasy themes and rhetorical vision about Nepali people constitute their identity as an invincible force in the light of being resultant in political transformation of April 2006. The image assumes conspicuity for its evolution from subjection to poverty and voicelessness to assertion of agency and force. The vision of peace and republic features as both righteous and pragmatic in the sense of being very contextual and congruent with the agenda of political parties of the time.

Besides, more than echoing the common parlance that Nepalis are determining agents, the editorials accord justifiable and resultant attributes to the Nepalis. This is to say, *TKP* and *THT* succeed in asserting the role of the only

independent print outlets of the time by advocating the primacy of people in country's sovereignty and good governance.

Finally, because this paper is delimited to studying the portrayal of Nepali people in movement-time editorials, the editorial representation of several other movement actors has apparently been shadowed. This rather implies the prospect of a number of in-depth studies focusing on the same exigencies. Also, with Fantasy Theme Analysis as the main critical lens, this study is expected to present a model of analysis for any media coverage of the exigencies of national significance, such as the Madhesh movement, the process of constitution drafting and state restructuring, in which the rhetorical representation of one or more actor/agent can be analyzed in samples of diverse rhetorical artifacts.

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