

# Narrativizing Trauma: A Way of Anticipating Peace and Solidarity in Dhurba Chandra Gautam's "The Conclusion"

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes Dhurba Chandra Gautam's story "The Conclusion" by applying Cathy Caruth's psychological trauma and Dominick LaCapra's middle voice. "The Conclusion" is written on the periphery of Nepal's ten year long Maoist insurgency in which more than seventeen thousand people lost their lives and millions of others were badly affected and displaced from their own home towns or villages. Those who witnessed the horrible past have written the narratives as their testimonies with the help of imaginative characters who better present their trauma and anticipate for long lasting peace and solidarity. The narrator in this story has narrativized the horrible consequences of the war, and he/she has depicted the incidents objectively not aligning to any warring groups. Narrating the testimony of the war neutrally would enable both warring groups to accept it as their own testimony which would ultimately make them feel relief.*

**Keywords:** Insurgency, middle voice, peace and solidarity, people's war, trauma

## Introduction

In *Stories of Conflict and War*, an anthology of twenty five stories written by different Nepali writers and translated and edited by Govind Raj Bhattarai, there are some stories which reveal other facets of the Maoist insurgency and violence: detaining innocent people, abducting and forcing them to pay a huge amount of money as donation and meeting with various arbitrary punishments. Likewise, arresting innocent people while having meal or lying in bed after the whole day's hard labor or returning home tended to resort to extreme tactics to spread fear in those days. They were beaten to death on the charge of being spied or informers. The victims had nowhere to go and question and appeal for justice. Mostly male were the target, however, their wives, mothers and small children, being desperately helpless, were all exploited and harassed mentally and physically. These innocent people undergoing with traumatic experiences and being terror stricken became insane, lost memory or went mad. But these grief-stricken people still anticipated for better life in future in spite of several troubles they were facing in their life which some Nepali writers have tried to narrativize in the form of stories.

Many political, cultural and social upheavals that have left a lot of victims in trauma can be good resources for writing narratives. Their painful traumatic experience of violence would be an instrument and purpose of the narration which can be represented as new genre

of Nepali literature. Literary depictions of trauma tend to bear witness and testify to traumatic experience, since they break the silence and also redefine discourse, challenging memory and identity. It is in the engagement with writing that the unspeakable emerges from the aporia in consciousness and releases its repressive energy. The narratives written about such atrocities, in contrast, might become very meaningless because they try to reduce the violence to the language of conflict, which would rather create a problem in establishing a peaceful society and help escalate the full scale of violence.

In this context, the story – Gautam’s “The Conclusion” though written about unspeakable pain, arbitrary abduction, murder, rape, molestation, and trauma of innocent people due to the Maoist insurgency inflicted by the then Nepal Communist Party, Maoist for about ten years mostly in the hinterlands of Nepal, show the bitter pictures of Nepali society. The writer has narrativized the unspeakable trauma of the victims very distinctly by bringing the horrific pictures of the insurgency. He is able to depict the stories very objectively neither aligning nor opposing any conflicting forces. Being neutral witness of horrific past events that once engulfed the whole Nepali citizenry, he seems to succeed in making an authentic balance in the narrativization which makes the undertone of peace and harmony sound genuine.

### **Trauma Theory as Theoretical Framework**

The word “trauma” comes from the ancient Greek meaning “wound” referring to what Caruth states, “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, 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. It has been taken as a response to very unexpected or overwhelming violent events of what she says, “repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors” (4), which cannot be grasped totally but they recur in different forms i.e. repeated flashbacks, amnesia, latency, nightmares and other conditions.

Hence, trauma as an interruption of consciousness by something comes too soon to be expected. In such condition one can approach to death, but as human nature he or she cannot exterminate the possibility of death, and lives with the stroke of painful trauma of what Caruth argues, “the silence of its mute repetition of suffering” (9). A traumatic event not only affects an individual personality, but the whole society – “deeply tied to our own historical realities” (12), which leads him or her to disturbed state. It is always good to counsel with the psychiatrists about whom she says they “have begun to reshape their thinking about physical and mental experience, including most recently the responses to a wide variety of other experiences such as rape, child abuse, auto and industrial accidents” (11). Sometimes, recurring and counseling the previous traumatic events one can get relief.

In exploring theoretical and literary critical attempts in the context of trauma as well as post-traumatic testimonies, LaCapra is in opinion that in elucidating trauma and its aftereffects in culture and people, psychoanalytic concept is perpetuated with historical analysis and sociocultural as well as political critique. In talking about truth claims of which he opines of

gathering evidence and making referential statement based on “that evidence which constitutes necessary and sufficient conditions of historiography” (1). While showing relationship between historiography and fiction, narratives in fiction may involve truth claims on structural or general level by providing “insight into phenomena ... by offering a reading of a process or period, or giving at least a plausible feel” (13). He, subsequently, states truth claims are relevant to works of arts on the levels of general structure or procedures of emplotment.

In the context of elucidating middle voice, 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)” (19). Ronald Barthes takes it as a “new status of writing for the agent of writing” (19) and its goal to “substitute the instance of discourse for the instance of reality” (19). It is taken as undecidable with respect to the opposition between “transitive and intransitive, so it is the in-between voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut position” (20). Here, the system of history or narrative can be adapted to the recounting of past events without any intervention by the speaker and it is deprived of present and future.

### **Textual Analysis: Anticipating Peace and Solidarity from Traumatic Testimony**

Gautam’s “The Conclusion”, written about a war (the Maoist insurgency) that continues for a long time without any significant sign of ending, shows uselessness of war and its impact on the ordinary people. It also shows how people lose their relatives in such wars and conflicts and try a lot to find them in spite of several difficulties. They simply want the war to end and everything to go back to normal. But the terrific consequences of the war would never let them live peacefully. The traumatic memory keeps them alive with many seen or unseen wounds. Still, they hope for better days ahead and don’t want to fight anymore by anticipating peace and reconciliation among the warring groups.

The story begins with the description of the purpose of waging war for human being. One of the warriors is quoted saying, “We are fighting against a pillar created by ourselves” (Gautam 53). The pillar is invisible, but deeply rooted to “long back ancestry” (53), which has provided mysterious power to its patron. Therefore, a fierce but “faceless war continues for a long time” (54). Then, a young brother is seen looking for his sister who has been missing “in the carnival of the battle” (54). Being unarmed he visits both sides of the battlefield and enquires every warrior about his sister, but does not get any positive answer. He remains looking for her for a long time until “somebody hammered him over his head with a club” (56) and he gets fainted. As soon as his blood drops on the ground, “the so called invisible pillar happened to collapse by itself” (57). But as expected the war does not end, rather it continues to collapse many other pillars which “are within man” (58). This time in the battlefield, the young boy, who is “near his death,” is not seen, but a young girl is seen looking for her lost brother. It is not clear whether he is the same young boy she is looking for. The war is going on, both are looking for their kin, but they don’t meet physically, and “their search is still going on” (58). The story ends with a hope that the war would end and people would be able to meet their lost ones.

The story does not identify which war the narrator is narrating and where both brother and sister are looking for their lost one. But one thing which the story has shown is that every war is destructive and many people are lost and die. The war would not have any name and identity except its destructiveness. Either it is “the Mahabharata, or the First World War or the Second World War, or even the war of Water Loo” (53), every war is faceless. The warriors can use different kinds of weapons e.g. A.K. 47, clubs, swords and *khukuris*, and smash each other by themselves. People are engaged in fighting continuously without considering the value of time and space. People would be traumatized. Nobody would be sure “how long this situation lasted. Even time itself vanished. Timeless space? Timeless time? Both time and space were in the premise of definitionlessness” (56). The story has elaborated the futility of the war and its worthlessness to humanity and indirectly pleading for peace and stability for all human being to live together without any hostility.

The story, from the beginning, talks about the war and its impact on common people – here the young boy who has lost his sister and looking for her. He is traumatized and expecting “overwhelming violent event” (Caruth 4) which might have happened to her. The narrator of the story describes the young boy’s trauma like this:

Sometimes it occurred to him – did she fall prey to rape? Nowadays there is no age bar in rape. The world has become so evil that people have even forgotten to say something is immoral. He consoled himself. Let my sister be found without being raped. Let she be recovered sound and safe. It is said that what happens in rape is thousand times more terrible than what happens in war. In such situation, they say, the war outside thrusts inside and simmers, shaking the very foundation of one’s being. (Gautam 55)

It is literary writing which brings such event that might happen to any individuals, otherwise, it would have remained unspoken and unheard for a long time. The young boy is “repeatedly in the nightmares and repetitive actions i.e. repeated flashbacks, amnesia, latency, nightmares” (Caruth 6). His mentality to get his sister in solitary places which would be far from the battlefield and rape is seen like this, “Weeping . . . does not matter. Getting fever... does not matter. May she be found in a lonely place? Nowadays, lonely place is safer than the crowd for a man” (Gautam 55). His longing for meeting his sister safe and sound would rather be a way to peace and solidarity for all war affected people.

His meeting with both sides of warriors inquiring his lost sister would not hurt him. Both sides of warriors are engaged in harming to their enemies, and he visits and asks them if they have seen her. Being an observer of the war, the young boy remains safe and unwounded. The narrator says, “He was unarmed. He thought simply, I might not be hurt. Or even if he might be hurt or whatever the consequence, he should trace his missing sister” (55). Somebody’s attack from his backside and bleeding from his boy would be symbolic because as his blood falls on the ground, the pillars also get collapsed. But the war continues about which the narrator says, “The war is waged for war’s sake, or even for peace we need to declare the war” (58). The war is presented here to bring peace in the disturbed society, so people would get their loved lost one.

Gautam, as a writer and neutral observer of the war and conflict, has presented the context and consequences which are prevalent in every part of the human society, very objectively neither aligning nor opposing any warring groups. The young boy, while wandering both sides looking for his sister, does not get wounded and even the warriors don't give any consideration to his presence. He is not seen commenting their actions, rather only "worried about his sister and sometimes grew angry with her for her going out" (55). Presenting the consequences of war and its impacts upon the commoners, on the one hand, would appeal neutrality of what LaCapra states truth claims by "providing phenomena, by offering a reading of a process or period or by giving at least a plausible feel for experience and emotion" (13), and narrating the sequence of events with the help of middle voice, "the appropriate way to write trauma" (19), on the other hand, would rather appeal both victimized and perpetrators to accept the truth claims of which LaCapra highlights "the most important consideration in art and its analysis" (13). Gautam has applied this method in bringing out the facts of the war and conflicts and as a post-conflict narrative, this story is successful in eliminating feud between the victims and perpetrators and establishing peace and reconciliation in the war-ridden society. The narrator has presented the conclusion of war:

No sooner had the young boy dripped blood onto the ground than the so called invincible pillar happened to collapse by itself. We cannot say what relation was there between the pillar and the boy's blood. They said the pillar rocked as the first drop of blood fell on the earth. Nobody could count how many drops of blood had fallen in on the ground before the pillar was uprooted. Some said that though the pole was of stone, it had far reaching roots and they were not all uprooted. The pillar crumbled down, that much is true. (Gautam 57).

The war has never given any constructive way for lives grow up, how this war would make the life meaningful for the people living in the war-affected society in which everyone is badly impacted by it. The narrator further delineates:

Despite this, the war was not over. The warriors said, 'There are other pillars as well, this war is to break them down.'

Someone else asked – 'Where are these pillars then?'

'These pillars are within man,' laughed the warrior. The questioner didn't get it. Wherever they are, why do we need that sort of war for them?

The warrior said – 'What can we do? We have no choice at all. Had it been a symbolic war, we would have done so.' In other words, no matter however much ferocious it is, the war of the picture never changes into the real war. The war should be waged for war's sake, or even for peace we need to declare the war. (57-8)

The abovementioned lines clearly show how the narrator has presented the context of war and embedded peace even in the narration. Being a neutral observer, the narrator has shown how doing one after another war, the significance of war is dwindling one after another and expectation of peace is overheard.

### **Conclusion: Finding Truth through Narrative**

In short, "The Conclusion," illustrating the consequences of destructiveness of war and conflict in human society, has clearly shown the futility of such events and appeals for peace

and solidarity. The use of middle voice in bringing the truth claims propagated by LaCapra would help one read and understand the theme of the story though it has brought the traumatic facts of a young brother and sister looking for each other's brother and sister. War has never given anyone's lives back, rather has taken many people's lives, which should be stopped sooner or later.

The story seems to be a documentary of the conflict-hit Nepali society of around 20 years ago, highlighting the bitter picture of youths' compulsion whether to join the force or flee away to foreign land and looking for their lost ones. It is able to bring out the fact objectively without aligning to any groups, but presenting the situation with the help of middle voice propagated by LaCapra, the story teller is successful to establish a balance to keep both sides' principle of fighting. The story ends not mentioning who won or who lost, but simply illustrating the possible consequences. Though written about the trauma of the conflict victims, "The Conclusion" shows the ultimate outcome of the Nepali politics – restoration of democracy for peace and stability. It, needless to say, written about the war, conflict and victims and their painful traumatic life: fleeing away from home, hiding from being kidnapped or shot, escaping from opposite groups and wandering here and there looking for their lost relatives and better life, has brought out the facts neutrally neither aligning one nor othering another group, which would definitely help both groups come together and live in peace and reconciliation forever. The text would always help each one related to the insurgency feel better and forget their trauma. Ultimately, it would help establish peace and harmony in the society.

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