

Reflection of Public Anguish in Bhattarai's *Socrates' Footsteps*: A Trauma Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze how Govinda Raj Bhattarai has recapitulated the public angst, the deteriorated socio-economic condition, and the cultural downfall of Nepal during the period of ten years of Maoist civil war. The characters of the novel, Ananta, Purnima, Bhaktaman, Chitrakar, and others confront various problems in their lives due to the political instability and domestic war or the Maoist civil war. Through the close reading of the text from the perspectives of trauma theory, with special references of the trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and the like, the paper focuses on why and how the Maoist waged war against the imposition of the social, political, spiritual ideologies by the ruling parties, that is by the monarchical systems. The research finding is that the domestic war leads to nothing but trauma, demolition, anarchy, fights, in the life of the public, signified through the experiences of the emotionally wounded characters.

Keywords: Civil war; Memorization; Reality; *Socrates' Footsteps*; Trauma.

Introduction

During the armed conflict between the then Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Stare Party from 1996 to 2006, that is, the Nepalese Civil War, a grave violation of human rights was committed by both parties (*Truth and reconciliation commission Nepal*, 2020). There were executions, kidnappings, massacres, crimes against humanity during the conflict (Lawoti & Pahadi, 2010). Over 17,000 people, including the army and policemen, insurgents, civilians were killed and thousands of people were displaced in the insurgency. Bhattarai's novel, *Socrates' Footsteps*, originally published in 2007 in Nepali version as *Sukarat Ka Paila*, and republished in the English translated version in 2010, captures the delusion, anxiety, and trauma of the Nepali youth in particular and Nepali people in general living during the Nepalese civil war. Govinda Raj Bhattarai is a prominent "novelist, essayist, literary critic, linguist and translation consultant" ("Govinda Raj Bhattarai", n. d., para. 1) of Nepali literature. The leading characters of the novel, Ananta, Purnima, Bhaktaman, Chitrakar are affected by the massive blows of the Maoist war (Koirala, 2008; Sharma, 2008). Trauma is a frightening response to a horrible event like war, accident, natural disaster, or rape ("What is trauma?", n. d.). The characters of the novel experience

trauma as a response to the ten-years long war between the State and Maoist. The emotional wound or shock of the Nepali people is presented in the fiction through the traumatic narratives.

The book, *Socrates' Footsteps* "represents the forward-looking dimension of the Nepali people's aspiration through the technique of shadowy reference" (Subedi, 2007, p. 4). The novel is "set against the time when Nepal was undergoing the most devastating war led by Maoists" ("*Socrates' footsteps* by Govinda Raj Bhattarai", n. d., para. 1). It begins with a brief sketch of Naphok, the birthplace of the central character, Ananta. Socrates, a historical character, is represented here as a university professor and Ananta, the central character, is represented as the Nepalese youth who becomes the victim of war (Koirala, 2008). He has recently been graduated from his village majoring English. But troubled by the political instability in the country, he moves to Kathmandu where he meets a professor of Tribhuvan University, Sukarat. The philosophical lessons of the professor abate Ananta's anguish. But he fails in the Master's Degree, remains jobless, and can't return home. The news of the untimely demise of his beloved, Purnima in the crossfire near Naphok troubles him. He, therefore, plans to go abroad, but he can't because the manpower companies were fired after the murder of twelve Nepali

people in Iraq. Ananta thinks of committing suicide but remains in utter vague throughout his life. The novel is a product of the postmodern scenario where people are troubled by the confused life created by the conflict and war (Subedi, 2007). The postmodernist theorists mainly focus on the disconfirming homogeneity of society, instability of knowledge, and instability of perceiving reality (Baudrillard, 1994). Postmodernist literature exposes a lack of absolute truth and traditional authority. In confusion Ananta, Purnima, and other characters of the novel can't determine whether traumatic war is right or wrong. The rationale of the paper lies in making an inquiry on the trauma and emotional wound caused by the ten-year long civil war in Nepal. The research work, therefore, deals with the memorization, hallucinations, and trauma of the Nepali people living during and after the domestic war.

Review of Literature

The novel, *Socrates' Footsteps* received some critical responses after its publication in 2010. Subedi (2007) surveys the subject matter of the novel and marks it representing many dimensions of Nepali people's aspirations through the technique of shadowy references. Socrates had used the shadowy technique to persuade the students in pursuing the philosophies of life. In the same way, Bhattarai has used this technique to reflect Nepali people's delusion. The novel, *Socrates' Footsteps* is highly philosophical and seeks to raise some metaphysical questions on life, death, and truth ("Socrates' footsteps by Govinda Raj Bhattarai", n. d.). Another critic, Koirala (2008) marks the novel portraying the corrupted environment of the academic institution of Nepal. The unstable political scenario, the ongoing violence in the country has brought anarchy and disrespect in the academic sector. The novel mainly "focuses on terrorism of Maoist unstable situation of Nepal which created hindrances in the development of the nation" (Koirala, 2008, p. 136).

There are some critics who mark *Socrates' Footsteps* as a documentary novel because it is written in a circular setting. Sharma (2008) critiques, "The events and narratives seem objective and real as they move in spontaneous

way. It is like a collection of the news that covers the firing activity of the army and the Maoist, curfew, kidnap, government suppression" (p. 47). Like a documentary, the novel makes us visualize the events of the domestic war. Dhital (2009) evaluated that *Sukarat Ka Paila* will stand above the Royalists and Maoists in the history of Nepali literature. The novel, *Socrates' Footsteps* provides the true picture of life and generalizes the specific event (Dhital, 2009). The novel uses history as fiction and "appears to revolve around the theme of war, terror, suicide, romance and academia at surface level, however, at a deeper level, Bhattarai takes the readers even higher, to contemplate on the question of life and death and consciousness" ("*Socrates' footsteps* by Govinda Raj Bhattarai", n. d., para. 2)

In this way, some critics have marked the issue of war and trauma but predominantly from the perspective of existentialism in the novel *Socrates' Footstep*. This justifies that the issue of trauma needs further exploration in the novel. The research gap lies in addressing and exploring the victim's psyche from the traumatic experiences. The paper, therefore, is an attempt to accomplish this research gap.

Methodology

For the justification of the proposed hypothesis, the study makes the close reading of the primary resource, that is, the text, *Socrates' Footsteps* from the perspectives of trauma theorized by Cathy Caruth, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and other chief advocates of the trauma literature. It applies a qualitative approach to research. Besides this, secondary sources such as the reviews on the text written on journals, websites, and other resources commentaries are studied to find the research gap. The systematic sampling method is used to test the data collected from the textual analysis.

This research is developed through a theoretical framework based on trauma literature. Trauma, according to Caruth (1996), is an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (p. 181). The response to the catastrophic events occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive

phenomena (Freud, 1839; Caruth, 1996). Trauma “is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (“Trauma”, n. d., para. 1). Freud (1889) believes that the human psyche is “obliged to repeat repressed material” (p. 19), and the contents of its lost experiences are full of trauma. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past but only identified in the way it is precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on” (p.17). Alexander (2004) views that cultural trauma is treated as a link in the ongoing chain of social changes depending on the number of concrete circumstances. Trauma affects psychic perceptions due to the occurrence of a disastrous event (Young, 2009). A terrible event causing the disruption of the human psyche is psychological trauma. Caruth (1996) admits

Though the notion of trauma will argue, we can understand that a rethinking of reference aimed at eliminating history, but as resituating it in an understanding, that is, of precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not. (p. 182)

The traumatic approaches mentioned above are useful research tools used to examine how Bhattarai uses memory politics in the narrativization of the public angst in the fiction, *Socrates’ Footsteps*.

Analysis and Discussion

Govinda raj Bhattarai’s novel, *Socrates’ Footsteps* recapitulates the traumatic experiences of Nepali people living in different parts of the country during the ten-year long civil war between the State and Maoist insurgents. Caruth (1996) contends that we come to understand history through the principles of trauma. The novel reveals the bitter truth that war not only results in the physical destruction and division of human beings but also in psychological and spiritual trauma. The novel reflects all the major and terrifying events and the impacts of the Nepalese Civil war through the memorization

and actions of the characters like Ananta, Purnima. The long-rooted Nepalese socio-political and cultural systems were permeated with oppression and imposition of the ideology of the rulers. This was the principal motive for the evolution of the civil war. The Maoists initiated the civil war to fight against the monarchical ideological foundation in 1996. But this war turned into violence and generated trauma. Defining the tenet of trauma, Caruth (1996) argues, “The experience of the soldier faced with sudden and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is central and requiring image of trauma in our century” (p. 181). The novel also reflects the emotional trauma of the narrator which, in turn, is the emotional wound of the writer, Govinda Raj Bhattarai himself. The writer projects Ananta as the disciple of Socrates and both Guru Socrates and Ananta talk on the ground reality of the nation and future of the youth in Nepal. The writer narrates the upcoming tragedy in these words: “For thousands of years neither those who were born and nor breathed their last bore witness to this” (p. 1). The reality and the history of the country’s turmoil are reported in the fictional world.

Literature does not record the traumatic experience of the survivors straight-forwardly, but indirectly through memorization (Caruth, 1996). Govinda Raj Bhattarai also reflects the traumatic experience of the survivors indirectly. Narphok, a fictional village that was the hometown of Purnima, and Ananta, is destroyed by the Maoists insurgents during the civil war. Alexander (2004) contends that the knowledge of trauma is composed of contradictory elements and registered through memorization and experiences. The narrator describes the horrible situation of his village in these words: “They had to reach as far as Phisling Bazaar where Andheri Multiple College was situated. If one set off at the crack of dawn, it was a two hour walk from Narphok” (p. 3). It was not safe for the villagers to go to the schools and colleges, bazaars for study, for daily work in the war period. Some people “suffer negative long-term effects from trauma exposure, often

resulting in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (Frieze, 2015, p. 27). The village people were so much horrified by the civil war that no one openly dared to speak about what was going on in the village. There was no easy route to reach the village because of the terror evoked by the war. There was no safety, no guarantee whether one would reach home because of the firing from both the government and Maoist sides. Ananta becomes nostalgic about his childhood. The writer narrates Ananta’s nostalgia in these words:

At the moment, he harked back to his childhood days. In those days, the sky was full of dark masses of clouds. Alone Ananta was struggling to reach home. The west grew darker, a raging whirlwind of dust and sand-swept along the banks of Andheri. (p. 4)

The reminiscence of the past intensifies trauma (Freud, 1839). The writer is referring to the explosion of bombs by the mist soldiers during the war. If people of Narphok village saw anything, it was the whirlwind of dust and sand. The traumatic situation of the village was nightmarish.

Goirgi (1999) regards that traumatic life as nightmarish and troublesome, resembling the mini apocalyptic films. The fictional description of the ten years long incidents depicts the picture of the Nepalese society and thereby impels us to experience the trauma. It was difficult for the village youth to survive because neither they had employment nor security. Both the State and Maoist tortured the youth. Therefore, they had to flee from their homeland and go abroad for jobs and earnings. Lacan (1977) conceptualized that the quest for the real generates anxiety.

The Nepali people take the foreign country as ‘the real’, in Lacanian terms, and live in anxiety. Ananta accounts, “All of them were somewhere in foreign lands, some scattered across the world, India, Singapore, Malaysia, America, Germany, Japan, the Gulf states. Some of them deserted the village nearby towns; some entered faraway the capital” (p. 9). Purnima and Ananta loved each other in the village. Purnima could not pass her Bachelor’s

Degree in Education just because she failed in the compulsory English subject. Exposure to trauma can “impact learning, behavior, and social, emotional, and psychological functioning” (Kuban & Steele, 2011, p. 41). Purnima’s life becomes even harder than the people who were killed in the civil war. She can’t think of how to overcome the situation. She questions herself, “Why on earth have these students failed?” (p. 16). If she had passed, she had also migrated from her village to Kathmandu for higher education. Therefore, her unemployment forces her to get involved in the war. Purnima is horrified by the war and depressed by her unemployment. Her situation exposes her traumatic situation.

The experiences of living in extreme poverty, displacement from homes, and having a society working in a war zone make people traumatic (Sitler, 2009). After passing Bachelor’s Degree in Education majoring English, Ananta moves from the village to Kathmandu for his Master’s Degree education. But he notices that Kathmandu city is also badly affected by the civil war. Ananta describes the turbulent circumstances of the city during the war in this way:

I dreamt of struggling here and starting a new life from here itself. But the other day, I got to read an article about Kathmandu, written by a person well acquainted with the city. It seems to me that this article was not written out of mere whim and emotion. Having read this, I now feel that I have stepped into the wrong place. I dreamt of choosing my boat to cross the ocean of my life. But I am shocked to read this article. Now I feel somewhat hopeless. (p. 28).

Trauma is “a sudden, life-threatening event, in which an individual feels horrified, terrified, or helpless” (Jaycox et al., 2009, p. 49). What is shocking to Ananta is that he can’t get admission to the Master’s program unless he gets an indirect recommendation from a leader of the Students’ Union. He often muses about

the political situation of the nation and feels disturbed. One of his friends assures Ananta saying

Who says there is a quota? We too know how to break the jaws. I'll telephone our Union boys today. Go see the student leader Rana Sangram tomorrow and get your admission all at once. Let me know about it later. (p. 21)

The genuine students like Ananta are tensed by the dirty politics exercised in the university from the time of admission to the examination process. Ananta is admitted to the university but he can't pass the Master's Degree examination because his mind is disturbed by the bloodthirsty war. Traumatic experiences may hamper the learning and behavior of students and impel them to live in fear and pain (Frieze, 2015). As a conscious youth, Ananta can't detach himself from the ongoing situation. The city people are also perplexed by the domestic war. Ananta cannot recapitulate the pristine peace and harmony at Kathmandu. The disturbed city life intensifies his trauma and depression. The novel displays the cruelty of the English teacher. The leading characters and students, Purnima and Ananta opine that English teachers are criminals like the Maoist and the State authority because the English teachers have been traumatizing the students. After getting failed in the exam, Ananta "was trying to adjust himself in a small room at Naya Bazaar, the new town. It is not Naya bazaar. In fact, it is students' bazaar situated by the university" (p.18). Ananta can't communicate with others but just ponders.

The traumatic events are based on social reality and narrated through fragmented memorization (Alexander, 2004). The writer, Bhattarai also memorizes the history of Nepal through fragmented memorization and narrates it in the novel, *Socrates' Footsteps*. During the civil war the Maoist activists urged the local youth to involve themselves in the war, claiming that if the war succeeded, no people living in the country would have to suffer from the

problems of poverty and unemployment. Ananta expects to revive his life because he has heard after the end of the Maoist revolution, Nepal will be one of the developed nations of the world. The attempt to recapitulate a person's lost glory is tinged with trauma (Freud, 1839; Caruth, 1996). Ananta confronts traumatic incidents one after another. Students' demonstration at Tribhuvan University heightens his traumatic situation. Most youths of the campuses from all over the country are also involved in the demonstrations because innocent people were killed, kidnapped inflicted every day. The agitation of the people is described in this way:

The university environment became rather tense because of clamor and agitation throughout the day. The students came out of their classrooms, so did the teachers. The agitation abated only late in the afternoon, by then Ananta had reached his room at Naya Bazaar. (p. 40)

Ananta observes the situation and becomes traumatized because the violence is going to break people's tolerance. The experience of the holocaust in a war waged scenario is embedded with trauma (Freud, 1839). The agitators do not hesitate in getting indulged in violent activities. Ananta mumbles, "All year you were destroying metropolis railings. You destroyed the recently erected bars. You burnt the public offices" (p. 42). The agitators blamed the monarchy of Nepal for all these demolitions because their leader had guided their mind that the monarchy is the root cause of their backwardness. The agitators regularly gather at the city centers and make demonstrations against monarchy. Seeing the tires burnt in front of Tri Chandra Campus, the Exhibition Road, Ananta ponders "But you couldn't ward off the blow that has caused you so much distress. You couldn't burn it down" (p. 43). Though the motive for waging war and conflict was not crystal clear, people were involved in the destructive acts. Bhattarai, the writer, reflecting on this issue, narrates, "How can we overturn the age-old systems of the world? After all these systems are expressed

through the coupling words of life and death, truth and untruth, pass and fail, day and night” (p. 43).

All the people of the country were badly traumatized because the situation was being worse. Duplechain et al. (2008) report that traumatic events include “hearing gunshots, witnessing muggings, stabbings, or shootings; or seeing a dead body” (p. 118). The village of Ananta had become a shelter for the Maoists. The schools, colleges, and universities seemed as if they were bunkers where youths were sheltered for fighting. The writer, Bhattarai analyzes the traumatic condition of Nepal that occurred during the civil war by reflecting on the consequences:

About 600 lives were lost overnight, not counting the loss of the live stocks, property, and the city’s age old cultural heritage. How terrible! How cruel! How barbarous! Once the country is at war, there remains nothing but barbarity. The electricity supply was cut off, so was the telephone service. (p. 62)

The Nepalese people were obsessed with fear, anxiety, and insecurity. Traumatic literature records the social, historical reality through traumatic narration (Alexander, 2004). The social reality is recorded through the traumatic narration by Bhattarai. Sometimes Ananta wears the persona of a philosopher observing the traumatic scenario of the nation. He gropes for the answer of the cause of the destruction: “Why do people involve in the destruction?” (p. 44) His philosophical questions embody the social reality of the people. The university students were compelled to do destructive acts because the laborious students failed in the exam: “The next day all university departments were in turmoil. Students grew rather agitated...They padlocked the departments one after another. Some students chanted provocative slogans too” (p. 47). The university results traumatized the students who came to the capital from remote villages for higher studies. Memorizing the violence in the English department, Ananta narrates “The chairs were set ablaze; many effigies were

burnt. Some professors were forced into public hearings; some were insulted and abused publicly. Violence flared up; conflict flared up. Mistrust, contempt, abuse filled the university air” (p. 48). There is no system for revising the result. This intensifies the trauma of the students. The failure of the sincere students was provocative and traumatic.

Except for Socrates, the Professor of the English Department, all other lectures of the department seem to be cruel for the students. The foundation of the trauma narrative is memorization. Through memorization, the unclaimed experiences of history can be seized (Caruth, 1996). Ananta’s memorization impels us to notice the social events of Nepal during the time of civil war. Ananta’s memorization hints the readers perceive the utter destruction, anxiety, and fear of the Nepalese people. Neither Ananta can go back to his village nor find employment for survival in the city. The confusing situation of Ananta is narrativized in this way:

I’m caught in a real dilemma now. I’m an M. A. failure. I have nothing except the certificate given by the university. I have no skill. No practical knowledge. I have a leaden heart and a mind that always ruminates over this and that... I don’t want to take the animal husbandry. (p. 68)

Traumatic symptoms are caused by “witnessing and/or being involved in one or more of a broad range of traumatic experiences” (Frieze, 2015, p. 27). After Ananta’s failure, Socrates attempts to help Ananta to go abroad and find a job. Ananta intends to go abroad but manpower companies were closed at that time because twelve Nepali workers were killed in Iraq in 2004. The failure of the manpower in the country intensifies Ananta’s trauma. The Nepalese people blasted the manpower companies in Nepal. Thus, Bhattarai demonstrates how the Nepalese were trapped in the conflict between the Maoists and the State. Bhaktaman, a general citizen of Ananta’s village was missing for so many days. The narrator of the fiction describes this tragic situation in these words:

Bhaktaman had not been to the jungle. Nor had they been met by the commander anywhere in the jungle. They always hid themselves somewhere in the thicket whenever they saw the army. They ran for their lives whenever they sighted the Maoists even at a distance. (p. 81)

Duplechain et al. (2008) consider that trauma is the result of gunshots, kidnapping, killing activities in the war. Bhattarai is successful in exposing the trauma of Nepali people caused by the gunshots, kidnapping, and killing of their relatives in the war.

Traumatic events also include bullying the innocent, firing the public's houses, government buildings (Kuban & Steele, 2011). The writer uses the trauma narratives to describe how innocent people were bullied by the agitators in the civil war. This can be felt in this narration:

Khanju Bari lost his right eye. The doctor in the district said that the bullets had lodged in his body and advised him to go to Kathmandu for the operation. The poor fellow cannot even manage a square meal a day. How can he afford to go to Kathmandu? Some days ago we saw him walking around our village pleading for help. (p. 76)

The innocent people like Khanju were tortured during the civil war and well recapitulated by the novelist. Nepali people were expiring anarchy in the country. Miller et al. (2019) regard that in the anarchic situation, the crimes pass unpunished, properties are attacked, the morality of the people get corrupted and the safety of the individual is violated. Anarchy creates problems in the life of people and appears in the form of violence. The novelist describes the situation in this way:

The country seemed to be shrouded in death and darkness, 'Injured', 'banished from one's own village', 'fighting', 'clashes',

'ambushes', 'destruction', 'mutilation', 'night vision', 'army', 'police', 'commanders', 'fighters', 'regiment', 'militia', and 'death'- such words were occupied. (p. 123)

When the response to the unexpected violence is bewildering, trauma is heightened in the people. Later on, such traumatic situations are recapitulated through repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. The delusion of the public remains suspended throughout the novel. In the end, Ananta reads the news of the death of his girlfriend because she was trapped in the cross-firing between the agitators and the Government. But he can't do anything.

Bhattarai also narrates the unclaimed experiences of the general public of Nepal traumatized in the civil war in the novel, *Socrates' Footsteps*.

Conclusion

Govinda Raj Bhattarai's novel *Socrates' Footsteps* belongs to the war literature, and trauma literature. The novel depicts the traumatic events and social reality artistically. The novel captures the serious issues related to war, violence and shocks, which are identified as trauma. The plot revolves around the ten-year long civil war. The novelist records how the innocent Nepali people were wounded mentally, physically, disturbed, and killed in the domestic war. From Ananta's narration, memorization, we can visualize the horrible situations of Nepali people. Innocent people of Nepal were kidnapped, victimized, tortured, and killed by both the State and Maoist during the civil war. The situation of the fictional village, Narphok shows the traumatic experiences of the people living in the homeland. People could not come out of their houses. Schools and colleges were used as a bunker. The everyday newspapers covered the news of killing and kidnapping, Youth of the village migrated and went abroad for jobs and safety. Middle-class people left the village and went to the town areas nearby their locality. Both the city and village lives were characterized by demolition and anarchy. Ananta was traumatized in the city because he

could not escape from the trap. Socrates attempts to reduce Ananta's trauma by consoling him to be strong and by advising him to go abroad for a job. But this is also failed because all the manpower companies were closed due to the massacre of twelve Nepali workers in Iraq. The mass destroyed all the passports and visa and burnt the manpower companies. Ananta, Chitrakar, Bhaktaman were affected by the demolition of manpower companies. The novel portrays how the civil war influences the mentality of the people living in the village. The village girl, Purnima hates war initially. Her failure in the exam disturbs her psyche and forces her to be associated in the agitators' group unwillingly. Ananta read the news that she was killed in crossfire of an army in a hillside. The anarchy, lawlessness, violence had pushed people backward both economically and socially. Thus, this is a moving story because it captures the trauma of the Nepalese people during the civil war through traumatic narration, memorization.

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