



UPPSALA
UNIVERSITET

Department of Theology
Spring Term 2023

Master's Thesis in Religion in Peace and Conflict
15 ECTS

Woven from Hundreds of Flowers

Religion, Conflict, and Collective Memory in Nepal as Seen Through
Deepak Rauniyar's Film *White Sun*

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Dedicated to the first of my mothers

Abstract

This thesis examines how religious traditions, collective memory, and conflict are represented in the Nepali film *White Sun* (2016), which was co-written and directed by Deepak Rauniyar. The film focuses on an anti-regime partisan who returns home to the rural areas of Nepal to bury his father. During his stay, he is forced to face social and political obstacles, which reflects on the history of Nepal, in particular the Civil War (1996-2008). In this study, I am using feminist theories such as the North American feminist theorist Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge* mixed with theories drawn from the psychology of religion and sociology of religion, e.g., Nancy Ammerman's *lived religion* and the concept of *chosen trauma* to analyze the representation of religion and society in the film. As a methodology, I use Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal's *cultural analysis*, which focuses on interpreting film in the context of culture. Thus, I am looking at various themes in the film centered around both social and political oppression, but also the importance of this film, which is still quite unknown to an international audience. In that sense, the film represents a new wave of filmmaking that reflects the history and culture of Nepal. Additionally, I am also reshaping my own relationship to Nepali culture as a Nepali adoptee in exploring the deeper meaning of the film as a collective memory.

Keywords: *Nepal, Nepali Civil War, Religion, Gender, Film, Film Theory*

Acknowledgment

First and foremost, I want to thank my wonderful supervisor Dr. Brian Palmer for his patience and guidance throughout this process. I also want to express my gratitude to Vanessa Noack, Sashit Bajracharya, and Katak Malla, for sharing your knowledge and supporting me in writing this thesis.

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I. Introduction

This thesis seeks to examine how religious traditions, trauma, and conflict are represented in a film situated in the rural areas of Nepal, namely, Deekap Rauniyar's *White Sun* (original: *Seto Suraya* सेतो सूर्य, 2016), which is about the life after the Civil War in the rural areas in Nepal. Central to the film is the quiet, yet fractured lives of the inhabitant after the war, focusing on an anti-regime partisan, who travels to his home village in the mountains after having been away for almost a decade. Back in the village, conflicts between him and his brother occur whilst they bury their father, whereby the brother storms off and the partisan is forced to seek help from the outside. The film raises important questions regarding the value of tradition, relationships, and the change in political and social identities, but also unification. The theme of unification in the film is sought to emphasize by using the title 'Woven from Hundreds of Flowers', which is the first line in the Nepali anthem that was established in 2006 with the same title.

I.1. Aim and research questions

This study aims to explore how religious traditions and conflict are represented in the film, and thus become a collective memory, centered around, in this case, the Nepali Civil War. I am using feminist theories, such as Donna Haraway's concept of *situated knowledge*, mixed with theories drawn from the psychology of religion and sociology of religion, e.g., Nancy Ammerman's *lived religion* and the concept of *chosen trauma*. As a methodology, I use Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal's *cultural analysis*, which focuses on interpreting film in the context of culture. The questions I aim to answer are:

- *How does the filmmaker portray religious traditions and religious actors in the film?*
- *How is the intersectional oppression of gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and rural-urban hierarchies represented in the film?*
- *How does the filmmaker explore the trauma of the historical experience and the ways that religious actors participate and respond to such trauma?*

1.2. Methodology and theoretical framework

This section will provide the material and methodology that I am going to use in the analysis, whereby first I am going to present the Dutch cultural theorist Mieke Bal's (1999) *cultural analysis* and the American feminist Donna Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledge*, which will be relevant to how I will look at and study the films.

To interpret the film, I will use *cultural analysis* as a methodology, drawing from Mieke Bal (1999). Bal presents the 'cultural memory in the present', in which she argues that cultural analysis is a critical practice based on the awareness of the researcher's situatedness, the cultural and social situation, whereby looking at objects in the past defines the present situation. The term, in that sense, stimulates an indecisive relation to history and therefore questions the hegemonic narrative of the past (Hjelm, 2021; Bal, 1999). I am going to use this methodology to understand the films as the past as a part of the present, that is, a reflection of a societal event, but not the event itself. According to Bal, e.g., an image or text, or in this case film, becomes exhibited, which defines cultural behavior rather than culture. The depiction embodies the concept of culture, and thus, when it is exposed to the public it becomes a performance that involves the subjects' beliefs and values (Bal, 1999).

Furthermore, I will make use of the concept of *situated knowledge*, which was coined by Donna Haraway (1988), whereby she essentially questions traditional knowledge production and the notion of objectivity in academia. She argues that the traditional way of producing knowledge is 'a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to the desired form of very objective power' (Haraway, 1988, p. 577). Her approach to situated knowledge is rather to subjectify the researcher and hold them accountable for their own research (Haraway, 1998, p. 81). The reason that I will use this approach, is both because I come from the field of gender studies and want to have a strong basis of feminist theory in this thesis and because it is crucial for me that the interpretations are mine in the text. Mixing situated knowledge with cultural analysis will be the foundational approach for this study, which will add to the theories of lived religion and chosen trauma that also will be used.

Looking at religion from the social science field, Linda Woodhead (2011) emphasizes that religion encapsulated culture; identity; relationship; practice; and power. Using *lived religion* while studying film is relevant in looking at how the characters on-screen practice religion.

According to Nancy Ammerman (2016), the concept draws attention to the laity, '[...] not clergy or elites; to practices rather than beliefs; to practices outside religious institutions rather than inside; and individual agency and autonomy rather than collectives or traditions' (p. 83). In that sense, it centers around the practical traditions of religion, and how it shapes and affects people, rather than studying the validity of beliefs in themselves. Ammermann (2021) questions how we think about doing and living, analyzing 'practices', and drawing from different sociologists. Accordingly, she argues that practice is not always formalized into a ritual, but an array of activities; a 'cluster of actions that are socially recognizable in ways that allow others to know how to respond' (Ammerman, 2021, p. 15). In thinking about the structures and patterns of practices, Ammerman means that some people are more privileged, whereby she is drawing from the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who especially was interested in practices that reinforced structures of difference and inequality. *Lived religion* uses Bourdieu's philosophy that practices always involve habitual dispositions and cultural resources, and that it is situated in a social field that structures the existing expectation for how people will act. However, Ammerman argues that religious practices are not confined to a single social space, hence, that action can both be religious and political simultaneously (p. 17).

The field of psychology of religion aims to study the meaning religion has to a group or individuals, where religion becomes a part of dealing with everyday life in an emotional and intellectual and can in that way give meaning to the lives of people. Studies (Park, Edmondson & Hale-Smith in Pargament et al., 2013) have pointed out that there is a consistent relationship between beliefs and the willingness 'to achieve higher levels of life satisfaction and functioning' (ibid, p. 161), which I find to be an interesting factor to study in combination with the portrayal of *lived religion*. A concept from the psychology of religion that this thesis will use is the concept of *chosen trauma*¹, which refers to a form of collective memory that people also could be inherited from its forbearers. It could describe how a group organizes around injustice done to their ancestors, which generates and creates a transmission of trauma (Jones in Pargament et al., 2013, p. 355). *Chosen trauma*, in that sense, may become a part of a group's identity, whereby trauma is sought to be passed on to the next generation. Thus, this study will put a wide focus on both the individual representation and

¹ I want to point out that I do not read the term chosen trauma as being something that you get to choose, rather enforced, in that sense, although it is the term, I will use to describe the transmission of trauma drawing from the field of psychology of religion.

group representation presented on screen, which will allow me to understand the situation in Nepal even further. The concept of *chosen trauma* combines psychoanalysis and history, whereby one might observe the process at a group level that parallels the individual experiences (Volkan, 2001, p. 88).

To create a deeper understanding of *lived religion* and *chosen trauma*, I find the concept of *intersectionality* to be important. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article ‘Mapping the Margins’ (1991), where she described it as a tool to expose how social and political identities can be combined in different modes of oppression. Ammerman (2016) emphasizes the importance of materialism and the embodied stored social interaction of lived religion, which I find to share parallel to intersectional analysis. Similarly, the tool can be useful in looking at *chosen trauma* too, for example, regarding how women in a certain caste are oppressed in relation to another.

1.3. Previous research

I have not come across any academic papers that study this particular film, but I have found papers and other publications that discuss film and gender in Nepal and articles on the topic of lived religion and/or trauma analyzed in films, which is relevant to previous research in regard to this thesis. Initially, I am going to review two theses on the representation of women in Nepali films, which will be followed by two studies, one that uses lived religion and film analysis, and one that discusses trauma and creating an identity through the medium of film.

In her master’s thesis, *Portrayal of Women in Nepali Movies* (2018), Nirmala Adhikari examines the representation of women in Nepali romantic commercial films over the last 30 years using three films: *Kusume Rumal* (1985), *Darpan Chhaya* (2001), and *Bir Bikram* (2016). Adhikari uses a feminist theoretical framework containing Laura Mulvey’s concept of the *male gaze*, Simone de Beauvoir’s *the second sex*, and Daphne Spain’s notion of *gender spaces*, starting with the premise that women in Nepali movies often are depicted as caretakers of men, housewives, or objects of desire. According to the author, men in Nepali films have been portrayed as the head of the family, dominant in workplaces and other public spaces, hence, making women the *second sex*. Throughout the study, the author examines the films with the representation of women in Nordic films and studies Nepali films in relation to

the Nordic media model. Here, the author uses representation in the Icelandic films produced between 1992-2012 (p. 98). All in all, the thesis claims that women in the films are portrayed as sexual objects for men to look at, and in that way are secondary to men and placed in private spaces, therefore, Adhikari concludes that not much has happened in representing women in the last 30 years (p. 103).

Bhim Bhattarai examines in their master's thesis, *Stereotypical Representation of Women in Deepa Shree Niraula's Chhakka Panja* (2011), female characters in the film *Chhakka Panja*, through stereotypes, constructed images, and camera movements. According to Bhattarai, even after the feminist movement and the emergence of female filmmakers in Nepal, women have continued to be subordinated in films. As a methodology, the thesis uses Anneke Smelik's theory drawn from their book *And the Mirror Cracked*, whereby Smelik claims that women are subordinated in cinema through different stereotypes and constructed images (p. 1). Using this methodology, together with, e.g., Mulvey's *male gaze*, Bhattarai manages to put the film in context, looking at how it mirrors the Nepali society and the positions women have. For example, the author discusses the feminist movement in Nepal after 1990, where women started to take up more space in mainstream politics. However, according to the author, women in power could not serve as an agency for marginalized women by rather became an agent of the patriarchal system (p. 19). Throughout the thesis, Bhattarai points out how the film is problematic in its representation of women from different angles, fighting for a better and more varied representation of women in film.

Júlio César Adam's article 'God and the Devil in the Land of the Sun: Lived Religion, Conflict, and Intolerance in Brazilian Films' (2017) discusses conflict and religion in Brazil in relation to the concept of *lived religion* to analyze movies that mirrored society. In the analysis, the author identifies three forms of conflict and intolerance regarding religion, (1) socio-political conflict unfolding in the religious field; (2) conflict and intolerance within the religious fields; and (3) the conflict because of the lack of hope and view of life (p. 78). The study focuses on five films: *Black God, White Devil* (1964), *Baptism of Blood* (2006), *Keeper of Promises* (1962), *A Dog's Will* (2000), and *Linha de passe* (2008). Adam notes that *lived religion* is not only about implicit forms of religion, but also about explicit forms, i.e., evaluating the theological meaning of what people do, and the way people interpret their spirituality and experience. The hermeneutics of *lived religion* is used as a way of perceiving and reading religious elements in the sphere of pop culture and everyday life, that is, outside

of religious institutions and sacred spheres. Accordingly, *lived religion* is only used as it is experienced, disseminated, and believed within the plot of the film in relation to conflict and intolerance. A question that Adam means to raise is to what extent *lived religion*, as presented in the film, is the result of the conflictive, violent, and ambiguous context of Brazil (p. 98). The article is relevant in ways to use the concept of *lived religion* in film analysis, which will inspire this thesis.

On the topic of trauma, Hayley Dawn Segall analyzes the Sikh identity to expand the discourse on trauma and identity formation in the thesis *1984 and Film: Trauma and the Evolution of the Punjabi Sikh* (2020). Segall starts from 1984 – when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi launched Operation Bluestar, which killed a hundred civilians and was followed by Gandhi being killed by her Sikh bodyguards – to the present collective identity. The violence against Sikhs in the operation, and later, the Delhi Riots, mirrored the continued marginalization of the Punjabi Sikh community. Through this trauma, Segall claims that the Punjabi Sikhs have begun to reclaim their autonomy and define their identity by confronting their collective trauma in the public sphere, e.g., in the film *Punjab 1984* (2014), which the author analyzes. The piece starts by addressing the writer's positionality, which is a great addition to considering the ethical issues that may occur in the study. The researcher positions themselves as a non-Sikh, a white voice from outside of the region of South Asia, and in order to migrate the obstacles and unintended biases formed from being an outsider looking in, they will draw from many primary- and secondary sources from authors who self-identify with the Indian sub-continent. Thus, the author aims to challenge the Western assumption about trauma and identity, whilst raising awareness regarding the need for diversity within the current academic discourse (p. 6). According to the study, the film gives the viewer insight into the Punjabi Sikh identity, as well as teaching, perpetuating, and participating in a collective identity rooted in the chosen trauma of 1984. The Punjabi Sikh identity actively confronts and accepts its position in a hostile public sphere, in which the private sphere is to 'rebuild internally before re-entering the public sphere through the film' (p. 50).

1.4. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study seeks to examine the lives of the characters on screen in relation to religion and conflict, therefore the method of *cultural analysis* will be important to help me contextualize the films, and *situated knowledge* will emphasize my own comprehension and interpretation

of the subject. Thus, it is important to situate myself, being a Western-based feminist researcher, adopted from Nepal, but based and raised in Sweden. It is therefore important that I understand my position and dynamics of power that might be in play, and rather humbly emphasize that there are many things that I can never fully grasp. I, therefore, will, to a certain degree, be in discussion listening to people with greater knowledge on the topic. However, the factors shaping my own situation and biases will affect how I interpret the history and the films, and to its essence that will be the foundation of the thesis.

Another point I want to make is that the religion that will be examined is mostly Hinduism, in relation to secularization, because it is most common in Nepal. The country was also the very last Hindu Kingdom, which is important to have in mind in the analysis. However, there are many worshippers of monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and other polytheistic religions like Buddhism and Sikhism and so on. The many religions of Nepal will be explored in Chapter 2 in order to provide a clear perspective on how the ‘new’ met ‘the old’, hence, how secularization is and has affected the population. Although, the main characters in the film, who will be at the center of the study, follow Hindu traditions, and therefore Hinduism will be much in focus.

1.5. Summary of chapters

The first chapter after the introduction will be divided into two sections; one about the history centered around conflict, politics, and religion in Nepal and one regarding the history of Nepali filmmaking. Particularly, the first section will focus on the Civil War and the circumstances before and after the war because of its relevance to the film, whereby the second section will contextualize the film and the director of the film. In chapter three, I will analyze the film thoroughly using the concept of *lived religion* and *chosen trauma* centered around the research questions focusing on representation, political identity, heritage, and religious traditions. In the last chapter, I will summarize my findings and make some concluding remarks.

2. A Brief History of...

This chapter is divided into two parts, whereas, firstly, I present a brief history of modern Nepal to create a valuable base to analyze the film starting with the unification of the kingdoms in Nepal, continuing to the Rana dynasty, and making a huge jump to the year 1950 and forward, putting emphasis on the Civil War and the royal massacre. Throughout this part of the chapter, I will put a lot of focus on political and social structures, closely tied to the religious tradition of the nation. The reason that I am structuring it that way is to keep it brief and highlight what is relevant in regard to the post-war situation today. Needless to say, there is much more to the country's history that can fit within the scope of this thesis, as well as different perspectives on the matters, e.g., regarding the histories of various ethnic groups, etc. I am aware that I will only be able to scratch the surface, knowing that there is much yet to learn. In the second part of this chapter, I am discussing the history of Nepali filmmaking, stretching from the 1950s to today. In the last section of this chapter, I will present the director of the film I am analyzing, Deepak Rauniyar, to put him and *White Sun* in the context of Nepali filmmaking.

2.1. Modern Nepal

Before the mid-1700s, Nepal was over 50 small principalities on the territory of what the King Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha forcefully brought together to become one. Some of the states had already socially and politically organized themselves on the basis of Hindu law, but there were still a number of other states with customary laws with influence by local ethnic traditions and cultures that needed to heavily adjust to the unification (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 44). One of the king's main policies was the granting of internal autonomy, drawing from the concept of autonomy and federalism since ancient times in Nepal (Bhattachan in Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 44). At the age of 52, the king died and was succeeded by his son Pratap Singh Shah. The unification of Nepal, or expansion of the Gorkha kingdom, was put to an end by the Anglo-Gorkha War between 1814-1816, which lead to a temporary downfall (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 44). At this time, the central elite, mainly consisting of Chhetri and Bahun (Brahmans of the Pahad region) families from Gorkha, tried to standardize the judicial and social order on the basis of Hindu law. The process was finalized in January 1854 and published in the *muluki ain* (the first Nepali law codex). This new law created a stratified social order, directly mirrored by the value system of the so-called high caste male elite of the state, whereby on top of this order was the Tagadhari; the wearers of the holy thread, i.e., Bahun, Chhetri, and some of the upper caste of

the Newar. All the other ethnic groups were organized below the Tagadhari, and below the castes declared ethnic groups of 'Muslims and Europeans' followed by the Dalits. The system affected how the people from the various groups were treated in terms of rights, duties, and punishment. The participants in the task of the state had to be a man belonging to the Tagadharis and had an economic effect by contributing to an enormous shift in owning land since the land had not been owned by individuals in many so-called ethnic areas. Due to their conquest, the Shah monarch declared all land his own, whereby he partly distributed it to some from the Tagadhari circles who had helped him invade (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, pp. 44-45).

Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana took absolute power 1846 and the Rana family came to rule Nepal for the next 104 years. The Rana rulers and the British colonial powers in India ensured that Nepal became hermetically secluded from the rest of the world up until the year 1950 (also called the year of revolution) – when the Rana dynasty ended – Nepal opened up (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 45). Under the Rana rulers, Kathmandu (or the Nepal valley, as it was called until the 1950s) was not connected by any motorable road most of the inhabitants lived the subsistence agriculture, and political participation was not allowed. The education system was not good and there were barely any schools outside of the capital because education was forbidden to the broader public. Furthermore, publications were strictly prohibited, and only a few state-funded or scrutinized literary journals and newspapers were allowed, then as 'intellectual food for the Nepal valley elites' (Pathak, 2017, p. 1-2). All in all, the isolation kept foreigners out of the country, however, many inhabitants left, most famously to India, where some of the people's rebellion began (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 21).

According to Deepak Pathak (2017), there were three political events in the 1950/1's revolution; starting with the political formation of the people's front, such as the Praja Parishad² and Nepali Congress³, aiming to establish democracy and the king's position to be a constitutional king. Nepali Congress created an army called 'Mukti Sena' in India that attacked some of the border towns. Secondly, King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah Dev took political asylum at the Indian embassy, and later on, Delhi, which had huge political havoc in

² Praja Parishad was the first political party that was secretly formed in Nepal Valley (Pathak, 2017, p. 3)

³ Nepali Congress was a merge of Nepali National Congress, set up in Banaras 1948, and Nepali Democratic Congress, founded in Calcutta 1948 (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 21).

the capital. The third event was the unprecedented public demonstration in the capital against the Rana regime between the 26-28 of November 1950, demanding the restoration of King Tribhuvan (Pathak, 2017, p. 3). King Tribhuvan Shah, the Nepali Congress, and Rana rulers came to a compromise in Delhi, i.e., the famous ‘Delhi Agreement’, in which the participants agreed to hold an election for a Constituent Assembly (Jha, 2014). Accordingly, the number of ministers in the interim council was brought down, and half would be Congress nominees and the other one Ranas. King Tribhuvan returned to Kathmandu three days later, and a few months after, a new government was installed (Pathak, 2017, p. 2).

During his last years of reign, Tribhuvan was ill and died in 1955 and his eldest son Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev became king through the process of democratic experiments for three decades. In early 1959, King Mahendra issued a new constitution, and the country had its first election. The Nepali Congress won with a two-thirds majority, however, in December 1960, Mahendra dismissed the election, and two years later, he established the Panchayat system; a constitution that institutionalizes a party-less framework and centralized power to the monarch. In other words, he reinstalled absolute monarchy by a coup d’état⁴, and thus, set the development of democracy back for decades (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 47). Mahendra died at 52, and his son, Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev became the new king (Jha, 2014; Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 57). In 1979, Birendra announced a national referendum on the future system of government, in which the democratic forces got a second chance, but the leaders were not willing to cooperate. The king did however carry out some reforms, in which he, e.g., appointed the prime minister by the nation's legislature (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 22).

In 1990, a people’s movement (*jana andolan*) brought down the Panchayat regime and caused the restoration of multiparty democracy, whereby a new constitution limited the role of the monarch and made way for a parliamentary system. In other words, Birendra was forced to give up his absolutist power and accept his role as a constitutional monarch. The ban against political parties was lifted and the political prisoners were released (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 23; Krämer in Bhattarai, Keshav, et al, 2010). An interim government was created consisting of members of the Nepali Congress Party, the communist parties, royal appointees, and independents, with Krishna Prasad Bhattarai as prime minister. At the end of the year, the

⁴ Translation: ‘stroke of state’. To remove the government and remove their power.

government drafted a new constitution to protect fundamental human rights and establish a parliamentary democracy. In the election of 1991, Nepali Congress won 110 of 205 seats, whereby the opposition, the communist party, won 69 seats. Girija Prasad Koirala became prime minister and formed the government (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 23). However, Krämer (Bhattarai & Keshav, et al., 2010) argued that the party elites were dominated by male Tagadharis, who were deeply rooted in their systems and beliefs, and therefore wanted to preserve Nepal as a Hindu state, thus, also the foundations of the state that was still linked to the culture and thinking of the ruling elite. Hence, all parties failed to adopt an internal democratic structure, in which the upper caste male elite continued to run the show, and women, ethnic groups, Dalits, Madhesis, and non-Hindus were excluded (Jha, 2014; Krämer in Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 48, 57).

2.1.1. The Nepali Civil War (1996-2006)

In February 1996, the Maoists declare the People's War by attacking police posts in remote parts of the country. The government, then led by the social democratic party Nepali Congress, mobilized the police to achieve a political comeback. The rebellion kept spreading during the next few years, which led the government to declare a state of emergency and arrange the national army. When the king stepped forward in 2002, India, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom backed Nepal, with the alone US providing about 20 million dollars in military aid, to fight against the Maoists. The Maoists had no external support, used quite undeveloped weapons, and most of the soldiers came from poor, rural backgrounds, many were women and people from marginalized castes. Thus, they did not have the advantage, yet by 2005, they had gained control over most of the rural areas (Adhikari 2014, pp. 10-11).

The conditions for the People's War⁵ had to do with the current situation in Nepal, whereby a large portion of the population lived in poverty and had been kept poor due to the hierarchal system of political, social, cultural, and economic domination of the 'Caste Hill Hindu Elie Males' (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010, p. 7). Accordingly, it was going in the wrong direction; between 1977-1996, the number of people living below the poverty line had nearly doubled. Poverty and economic stagnation had a detrimental impact on people from the rural areas

⁵ By the supporters it was known as the People's War. However, the usage in this thesis does not mean that I accept the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist's construction of the military campaign but seek not to take sides and remain openminded in the issue.

because they were dependent on stagnating agriculture, which had been caused by the government's investment in industrialization in the urban areas (Lawoti & Pahari, 2010, p. 5).

With the Maoists' expansion, especially around their post-2002 movement against the King, the parties began to support ethnic issues, e.g., in 2005, marginalized groups were promised reservations, and the constitution to distribute citizenship certificates to Madhesi and others was amended (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 18). After a decade, the Maoist signed a peace agreement with the mainstream parties⁶ that opposed the king's violation of power, and together they led an uprising to bring the monarchy down in 2006. The Maoists joined the government, whereby they won about 40% of the seats and later came to dominate the public debate, even if, at the beginning of the rebellion, they had aimed at state control. However, their growth was unique, and they were the only rebel group in the post-Cold War era that gained state power (Adhikari 2014, p. 12).

The war was very violent and resulted in the death of more than 13 000 people, killed in the most brutal ways, whereby those who suffered the most were the civil society both fearing the Maoist attacks and the army (Pettigrew, 2013, p. 23). According to Krämer (2010), who drew statistics from the 'Evaluations by Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC) in Kathmandu in 2005, he claims that until the end of the peace dialogue 1700 were killed, which 976 of the security force and 724 by the Maoists. Between 2001-2005, another 11 165 persons were killed, 7307 by the army and 3858 by the Maoists. Thus, the army killed most people, many only because of the suspicion that they might be Maoists (p. 55).

Looking back at 2001, I was about eight years old, and I remember being told about the royal massacre as if it were a play by Shakespeare; a story about forbidden love because of a conflict between the lovers' families, ending in a bloodbath whereby the lovers realize that they cannot live without each other. However, the story has been very romanticized due to becoming known across the world, and there have been many conspiracy theories around the event. In truth, nobody knows what happened that evening on the 1st of June 2001, but one thing is sure, it shook the whole nation, and it was the beginning of the end of the monarchy. According to the official story, Crown Prince Dipendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev killed his

⁶ It was the Maoists, together with the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), a Madhesi party, the Nepal Goodwill Party (NGP), and the second People's Movement of the parliamentary parties and civil society organizations, that together forced the King to give up (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 18).

parents, King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya, his brothers, and sister, plus wounding other family members. The tragedy ended with him shooting himself, causing him to remain in a coma and, he actually, became king for a few days before passing. The country was grieving the loss of the royal family, especially the king, who was seen as a father of the nation. In Hindu beliefs, the Kings are symbols of God Vishnu, the caretaker God. Shortly after the death of the King, the government ordered civil servants to shave their heads in the grief of someone loved and respected, as the nation collectively started the thirteen-day mourning period.

After Dipendra's death, his uncle and Birendra's younger brother, Gyanendra Shah, became the last king of Nepal. In contrast to Birendra, Gyanendra was quite unpopular and wanted to preserve the monarchy by mimicking his father Mahendra's rule, whereby, like his father, he staged a coup d'état. King Gyanendra wanted to be an active monarch, and after the previous government of Sher Bahadur Deuba dissolved, he finalized a constitution in October 2002 that gave him power. A week later, he installed a new government, which was not able to solve the Maoist conflict either, causing the conflict now to be between the Maoists, the monarchy/security, and other political parties (Bhattarai & Keshav et al., 2010, p. 60). After Gyanendra seized power, which escalated in 2005, the nation split.

2.1.2. Aftermath

The People's Movement reinstated the parliament and declared the country a secular state in 2006, which was followed by the Constituent Assembly declared it a federal democratic republic in 2008, thus, putting an end to a 239 old tradition of an institutional monarch (Dahal, 2016). In 2008, it also became legal to have parties based on caste, ethnicity, language, and/or region, before, monarchy and Hindu state were seen as foundational to national integration (Bhattachan in Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 52). According to Bhattachan (2013), both of these pillars of 'national integration' are no more, but Nepal has not disintegrated, which he argues proved that it was myths created by the religious groups and caste in power (p. 53). Bhattachan (2013) also states that Nepal stands out because (1) it was never colonized by another country; (2) the overarching Hindu caste system makes it unique, and (3) no caste or ethnic group is in the majority. However, he continues, it is important to acknowledge these social structures of caste and ethnicity because denying them will do more harm than good (Hangen & Lawoti, 2013, p. 49).

After Gyanendra's rule, prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala from the Nepali Congress became the acting head of state until 2008, when the country's first president was introduced, Ram Baran Yadav. Since then, the nation has had thirteen prime ministers. In 2015, Nepal got its second, but first female, president, Bidya Devi Bhandari, leader of the Communist Party of Nepal Unified Marxist-Leninist. The same year, Nepal also got a permanent constitution and became a federal country. After years and years of fighting for political stability, the country actually got more political instability, however, according to Jha, it is slowly moving toward becoming more open, democratic, inclusive, and egalitarian for its citizens (p. 306).

2.2. Nepali Filmmaking

The history of filmmaking in Nepal began in 1964, with the film *Aama*, which was funded by the then king of Nepal, King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev to promote *Panchayatism*, the idea of a homogenously unified country; one country, one people, one dress, one language. In the beginning, the concept, method, and presentation of Nepali filmmaking were copied from India's Hindi films. The film was a success, and the prominent Bollywood director, Hira Singh Khatri, therefore got to direct two other movies for the Nepali government, *Hijo Aja Bholi* (1968) and *Parivartan* (1971; Aryal, 2022; Khadgi, 2021). However, the first Nepali film, or at least a Nepali language film, is considered to be *Satya Harischandra*, which was produced in Kolkata, India in 1951. Released by Sumonanjali Films Pvt. Ltd. and directed by B.S. Thapa, *Maitighar* (1966) was the first film to be produced under a private banner (Pandey, 2019; Banerjee & Logan, 2008). Even if it were a Nepali film, many Indians contributed to the production of it, in which, e.g., the Indian actress Mala Sinha had the leading role. It had established Indian singers doing the playback singing together with household names in Nepali music, such as Narayan Gopal, Prem Dhojan Pradhan, and C P Lohani ('History of Nepal Film Industry', bossnepal.com).

In 1971, the Nepali government formed a task force to draft the Communication Service Plan that led to the Communication Act, whereby under the act the government created the establishment of the Royal Nepal Film Corporation. Through the corporation, five films were produced up until the year 1983, including the first color film, Prem Bahadur Basnet's *Kumari*, in 1978, (Banerjee & Logan, 2008). The first film The Royal Nepal Film Corporation produced was *Man ko bandh* (1974), which was directed by Prakesh Thapa. In summary, there had only been one film in the 1950s, three in the 1960s, and four more in the

1970s ('1950s to 1970s release Nepali films', filmsofnepal.com, 2015). The success of these films created an opportunity for private parties to enter the filmmaking industry. In 1980, the Royal Nepal Film Corporation produced two films, *Sindoor* and *Jeevan Rekha*. Throughout the 1980s, the number of films produced was still not high, but it was more than ever before. Thus, filmmakers like Tulsi Ghimire, Shambhu Pradhan, and Uddhab Paudyal started the Kollywood trend (Pratik, 2003). Amongst the films released in the 1980s, was the first Newari-language film in Nepali cinematic history. The film, *Silu*, was directed by Pradeep Rimal and was an adaption of a Newari story about a couple's journey to Silu, a sacred lake in the Himalayas (*Kathmandu Post*, 2017). Around the end of the decade, the first Tharu-language film, *Karam*, was also released, produced by Sansari Film Production. Since then, the Tharu cinema scene, and indigenous cinema in general, has grown, whereby, for example, several films in various dialects of the Tharu language have been made (Chaudhary, 2017).

The Nepali film industry grew rapidly in 1990, whereby a total of almost 200 films were released and over 300 cinema halls were built throughout the decade. This period is usually referred to as the golden age for Nepali film, largely affected by the re-establishment of democracy, which secured people's right to freedom of creating and broadcasting whilst also creating a huge market. Cinema was now both a breadwinner and a platform that generated fame, and Nepali filmmakers no longer had to go to India to record, edit, etc., but better studios were provided in Nepal. The Royal Nepal Film Corporation was privatized and changed its name to Nepal Film Development Corporation, and in 2000, 32 movies were produced, whereby in 2001, the number had increased to 52 films in a year (Pratik, 2003).

Bollywood influences in many films throughout the cinematic history of Nepal are undeniable, and in general, both the younger and the older generations of Nepali inhabitants are familiar with Hindi movies and TV shows. According to Shresthova (2010), Hindi movies came to Nepal in the 1950s with the establishment of film theaters, and continue to dominate the halls even today, causing the Nepali commercial cinema to struggle to find its own identity and still live in the shadow of Bollywood (p. 314). However, in Hindi films, Nepali characters are often stereotyped and frequently depicted as comical or scheming tricksters. In their article, Shresthova also interviewed Nepali professionals within the Hindi film industry in Bombay, and many of them claimed that anti-Nepali slanders were common. Bollywood has increasingly become a representative of the fear of 'Indianization' and victimization connected to Nepal's socio-economic and political dependence on India. In

1996, Bollywood films were even mentioned in the 40-point demand that the United People's Front (Maoist) published, arguing that: 'The invasion of colonial and imperial culture should be banned. Vulgar Hindi films, videos, and magazines should be immediately outlawed' (Hutt 'Appendices', 285 in Shresthova, 2010, p. 314).

According to Gaenzle (2017, in Hutt & Onta), the national film industry in Nepal has been dominated by high-caste producers and artists, but the increasing contributions from people with backgrounds from various ethnic groups have changed the cinematic public sphere (p. 77). The developments in the 1990s, also created space to represent the ethnically diverse country that Nepal really is, being the home of about 125 groups and 123 identified languages (Chaudhary, 2017, p. 8). For example, the movie *Numafung* (2003) directed by the Limbu director Nabin Subba belongs to a genre of indigenous cinema (*janajati chalchitra*), which I discussed earlier in the thesis. *Numafung* is considered to be the first hit in indigenous cinema, bringing Kiranti culture and Limbu culture into the cinema halls (Gaenzle in Hutt & Onta, 2017, p. 94).

The film industry has always been male-dominated, and women are still underrepresented; thus, women's stories are rarely told through a female perspective and women are still often presented as stereotypes or objects of desire in Nepali films (Adhikari, 2018; Bhattarai, 2013). In 2005, Suchitra Shrestha became the first female director with her film *Prem Yuddha*. Furthermore, the famous actress Rekha Thapa directed her film *Himmatwali* (2014), which focused on women's empowerment, and thus, became the second woman to be recognized as a director (Subedi, 2021). In terms of representation, in 2012, Subarna Thapa's film *Soongava: Dance of the Orchids* became the first LGBT-themed film in Nepal centered around the love story between two women. However, the film gained a lot of criticism for portraying queer love through a cis male gaze (Dixit, 2021).

Nepali society is evolving every day and everything is a reflection of the war. As a filmmaker, it's my responsibility to bring the story into film, to also spotlight the silver lining of the war, and get people talking about the trauma of those years (Rauniyar in Jhunjunwala, 2016).

One of the pioneering films in the new wave of Nepali cinema, set post-war, is considered to be Rauniyar's *Highway* (2012), which will be discussed in the next section regarding the director Deepak Rauniyar. As the quote above suggests, he wants to change the Nepali film

scene which means that the new wave is characterized to reflect on reality and no longer following Bollywood, which, according to Rauniyar was caused by the arrival of the DSLR cameras, crowdfunding, and co-production that gave filmmakers the opportunity (Jhunjhunwala, 2016). With the digital period came also films that changed the scene completely, with blockbusters such as Bhusan Dahal's *Kagbeni* (2008), Alok Nembang's *Sano Sansar* (2008), and Nischal Basnet's *Loot* (2012), which presented unique storylines and the action scenes that looked more realistic than earlier films (Thapa, 2019). In that sense, the journey has resulted in Nepali filmmaking having its own voice and uniqueness in portraying stories of Nepal.

2.2.1. Deepak Rauniyar

Deepak Rauniyar is a Nepali director, writer, and producer, who was born in Saptari on the 29th of August 1978. For the last eleven years, he has been based in New York and Kathmandu and was 2017 named in *The New York Times* 2017 as one of 'The 9 New Directors You Need to Watch' (Ramachandran, 2022; Dargis & Scott, 2017). Rauniyar started his career writing film reviews for a daily paper in Kathmandu but decided to change course due to a riot that happened because of one of his film reviews. Because there was no film school in Nepal at that time, he sought to seek knowledge elsewhere, and later on shot the famous Nepali filmmaker Tsering Rhitar Sherpa's second feature, *Karma* (2006), and was then hired as Sherpa's assistant director (Budhathoki, 2017).

In 2012, his debut *Highway* premiered at the Berlinale and was later shown at the Locarno Film Festival. The film centers around the passengers of a bus from the east to the capital of Kathmandu, who are not only challenged by the mountain terrain and being stopped by the bandhs (a civil disobedience blockades, which has been a frequent phenomenon since the end of civil war) but also are going through their own personal matters (deerauniyar.com, 'Highway'). In an interview with the newspaper *The Diplomat*, he reveals that he happened to have gotten the idea to produce *Highway* on a trip from eastern Nepal to Kathmandu, as the journey was obstructed by three different groups of bandhs in three different parts of the country. He told the journalist that he had experienced several bandhs and he even saw two people being killed. Due to this traumatic experience, he wanted to channel his emotion through film. The film was the first Nepali movie to screen at a major festival (Budhathoki, 2017).

Rauniyar's second film, *White Sun*, premiered at Venice Film Festival 2016, whereby it later was screened in various places, such as Toronto, Busan, Locarno, and Rotterdam. *White Sun* received several awards worldwide and was Nepal's official selection for the 90th Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (deerauniyar.com). The aim of making *White Sun* was to encourage the difficult conversations that had been avoided regarding the Civil War, and the still-ongoing political process because of the war which affect the citizens of Nepal. According to Rauniyar's feature in *The Diplomat*, the film tells a tale of 'the past in Nepali present, of tradition vs. modernity, of young vs. old, a story of men vs. women, where three generations of Nepalis with very different beliefs, thoughts, and roots are forced to be together and interact due to the death of the former village chief' (Bodhathoki, 2017). The film takes place around the announcement of the constitution, i.e., late 2015, and the title, *White Sun*, refers to the white sun on the Nepali flag.

In 2022, he released his short film *Four Nights*, about a Nepali couple – the filmmaker Ram, and the actress Maya – who moves to New York City to fulfill their dreams. In contrast to his other films, this short directs to camera toward the filmmakers and seems to have been somewhat autobiographical (Ramachandran, 2022). The director is currently developing his third feature, *The Sky is Mine*, which seeks to examine the caste system endemic to South Asia, emphasizing the intersection of caste, gender, and color discrimination. According to a feature in *Variety* (2022), the film centers around a light-skinned police officer, who has become the first female detective in the country and is at a border town in Nepal.

3. Film analysis of *White Sun*

The drama war biographical movie, *White Sun*, is the Nepali director Deepak Rauniyar's second feature film, which he wrote together with David Baker. It was produced by Danny Glover, Tsering Rhitar Sherpa, and Joslyn Barnes under Aadi Productions, Louverture Films, and Doha Film Institute, amongst others. The film follows the anti-regime partisan, Chandra/Agni (Dayahang Rai), who, when his father dies, travels to his home village among the mountains of Nepal after almost a decade away. In the village, a young girl, Pooja (Sumi Malla) is anxiously waiting for the man who she thinks is her father, but as he arrives with a street orphan, Badri (Amrit Pariyar), she is confused because Badri is rumored to be his son. As Chandra arrives, he must also face his brother Suraj (Rabindra Singh Baniya), who was on the opposite side during the Maoist uprising. The political dispute between the brother causes tension between them, as they carry their father's dead body down the river for cremation, resulting in Suraj to storms off in a rage. With no other men to help him, and under pressure from the elder in the village, Chandra/Agni is forced to seek assistance outside of the village and obey the inflexible caste- and gender norms that still linger in the remote areas.⁷

3.1. 'We cannot just forget everything'

At the beginning of the film, the viewer is confronted with beautiful palish images in earthy tones of the village up in the mountain hills. A distant sound of a radio is playing, opening with the line 'If you knew that you would be compromising, why did you Maoists make all these promises to ethnic minorities?' in which another voice answers 'We thought we would win the war outright!' As the spectator gets to see the villagers calmly doing their daily tasks, the interview segment from the radio exposes the political situation in the country and the failed promises of politicians. The opening scene lets us know where and when we are and sets the tone of a quiet storm in the mountains of Nepal after the war – a wound bound to be ripped open again. The viewer follows the sound of the radio into a dark room, where we see nothing but a foot. A woman, Durga (Asha Magarati), shouts 'father' and walks up the stairs. The camera follows the image of the foot lying on the ground as the woman enters the room, only to find her ex-husband's father's lifeless body.

A short segment of Chandra stepping on a fully packed bus towards Pokhara from Kathmandu is displayed, indicating his arrival. Back in the village, the family and elder

⁷ The following subtitles are quotes from *White Sun*.

villagers have gathered around the dead body, debating on how they will move him out of the house to proceed with the burial ritual. A young girl, Pooja, stares at her grandfather's remains whilst someone opens the window down to a patio with blossoming marigolds. A man complains that if he had been alive, then they could have moved him through the front door, whereby ironically answers 'Yes if I were clairvoyant'. Suraj and the elder men try to lift the heavy body out of the window but drop him down to the floor. In a way, the scene becomes absurd in a yet dark moment, which reminds me of a segment from Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), when the depressed Justine (Kristen Dunst) and her spouse Michael (Alexander Skarsgård) are riding in a limousine on a narrow gravel road to their wedding, figuratively, but metaphorically. Similarly, in the scene in *White Sun*, the emotions weigh heavy, as well as the physical body. However, it does not only tell a story of grieving the death of a loved one but also, as revealed at the beginning of the film, of the political situation of Nepal, going from a monarchy to a federal democratic republic. Thus, the father's dead body becomes a metaphor for the end of the king's rule, and the difficulty of establishing a new system, which the elderly insist should be carried out of the window instead of the main door, indicating some unwillingness to let go. Further in the scene, one of the elderlies wants to purify the corpse, even the house since it has been touched by, a woman, Durga, who, because of this, storms off. It seems to be a depiction of how women are discriminated against, but also as a metaphor for the exclusion of women in the political shift, lingering within the ancient ways of doing things and a way of holding on to traditions in a moment of change.

Back in the city, a little boy, Badri, starts to follow Chandra on his way up to the village, asking him to carry his bags for money. Chandra asks him to go back home, but he reveals that he has no home, nor any parents. The scenery jumps to imagery depicting Pooja being groomed by her mother, who tells her that it will be better if she went to school in Pokhara, especially of how the villagers' teats them, she says. Pooja anxiously asks if her father, Chandra, is in Pokhara, to which the mother replies that 'What father?' and that she does not need a father having her to help her become something big. Pooja replies that she does not want to become something big, agonizing over the trauma of missing her father.

The next day follows, and so does the issue with the body, and villagers are gathered outside the house. As Pooja stands there patiently, a group of kids starts to tease her about her grandfather, saying that he will rot and that his ghost will haunt the house. Chandra and Badri

enter the village, which seems to stir up emotions for everybody. Approaching the elderly around the body, the jokingly says they were watching the skies, thinking that Maoist leaders like him would travel by helicopter. Holding on tight to religious traditions, Chandra is not allowed to greet them with a death in the family, yet so, they were unsure if Maoist still believed in cremation. It is here revealed that Suraj and Chandra fought on different sides during the war, which builds up the tension between them. As Chandra approaches the body on the second floor, the elderlies ask him what to do, because they cannot carry him out the window, and Suraj is the only able man left in the village. Chandra asks why they have not tried to get any help and points out that if any of them dies trying to get his father cremated would not help anyone either, to which one of the elders replies that 'Customs exists for a reason' and continues 'it is not like you Maoists think, we cannot just forget everything'. Here, Chandra becomes the personification of the new order of secularism, entering the village, whilst the elderly grieves the shift, and thus, clings to the inflexible holy rituals of the former, and last, Hindu kingdom. At last, the corpse is dragged out of the window like a ragdoll. The purifying ritual begins, whereby the priest hymns and spreads essential oils on the body, which is then covered by a white sheet.

A quite significant passage is portrayed between the scenes regarding the corpse, following Badri looking at a group of kids playing and running around in the tall grass. As they see smoke in the grass, they all stop and scream 'a mine!', whereby Badri walks up to it and discovers that it is not a mine, but a wooden stick. I would say it is a symbol, both figuratively and literary, of the yet lingering collective trauma of the war amongst the children, perhaps not even being sure that it is over. An article from 2007 reports that in 2006 there were 86 explosions, and 146 casualties caused by landmines laid by both government forces and IEDs planted by the Maoists. According to the Nepali Army, 57% of the victims are children, because the devices were mostly placed near households and in the fields, where they play, as demonstrated here ('Unexploded ordnance threatens new freedom', *IRIN*, 2007).

3.2. 'We fought a war over it, but the elder will never change'

The camera follows the men into the night, discussing the political climate, and wonders if there will even be a constitution, or if there ever could be because of the protests, showing a strong opposition against the rebels. Lurking in the shadows is Pooja, who ambushes Badri and questions him about why he has come to the village. In her eyes is sadness and anger,

since she thought that Chandra was her father, not Badri. The viewer gets a clearer image of Chandra and Pooja's mother, Durga's, relationship as they meet that same night. He shows sympathy over how they treat her in the village, saying that we [the Maoists] fought a war over, e.g., the issue of gender discrimination, but the elder will have a harder time changing.

There was an overwhelming number of women at the frontline of the Civil War, advocating for militancy and militarism as the only possible pathway to subjecthood and liberation. To claim equality in society, Lohani-Chase argues that women were urged to leave their 'follower mentality' and make sacrifices for the country and the proletariat (2008, p. 279). In that sense, there were acts of empowerment shown, however, women's participation in the war was complex, and many women were suffering under the rebellion and militarization (Lohani-Chase, 2008, p. 272). It is important to note that gender oppression differs in regard to location, culture, and ethnicity. For example, women from Mustang might have the cultural right to, e.g., have more than one husband and a child outside of marriage, which might not be the case in Kathmandu, where that might cause a sense of cultural alienation (ibid, p. 274). Thus, gender oppression in Nepal is politically, socially, culturally, and economically layered, which is a really important aspect when looking at the issue.

Further in the film, it is revealed that it was Durga who urged the others to tell Chandra and to make him come back, and therefore he expresses gratitude towards her. However, she also wanted him to come to sign Pooja's birth certificate, stating that he is the father of her daughter, so she and her can move with her daughter. Without the signature, Pooja cannot go to school. Durga argues that she has done much for him over the years, especially since she still is considered his wife, and thus, has been obligated to take care of Chandra and Suraj's father alone after they left for the war. Chandra means that she has done nothing but give him another man's baby because he had to give up everything to fight for what he believes in. He walks out in the rain without signing, only to be faced by Pooja's innocent gaze. Later that evening, Pooja confronts her mother, and she tells her that Chandra is not her father. The following morning, Chandra looks at old photos formerly belonging to his father, whilst the radio reports the current situation of the post-war conflict in the country. He walks out, past the white linen covering his father's body, to Durga's house, which is packing to go to Pokhara. The rumor has got to him that she is to be wed to his brother, whereby Chandra asks if she cannot find someone else to marry and if Suraj is Pooja's father. There is anger in his voice as he reminisces on how he had to fight to marry her because she is of a lower caste than

him, making it sound like she owes him. The line reveals his own biases in regard to gender and the caste system, being an upper caste man, as well as exposing the intersectional discrimination Durga has had to face being a lower caste woman. She answers that she does not want to marry again but can take care of herself and that Suraj is not the father either. However, she needs Suraj to sign the papers because she wants to give her daughter an education; to not have to depend on anyone. Durga comes off as a strong, resourceful, highly capable, and independent woman fighting for the next generation of women.

I note the name chosen for the character, Durga, which may be a conscious choice to connect to the goddess Durga (the ‘Invincible One’), the mother goddess and wife of Shiva. In early *Svasthānīvratakathā* Manuscripts, the idealized image of the devoted wife, the *pativratā*, and thus, the counterbalance to images of the woman as fierce, and uncontrollable, e.g., Durga or Kali. The *pativratā* have been shifting shape in various texts but are mostly known in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, which are foundational texts in Hindu culture, and characters from the epics are still used in literature and films made today (Birkenholtz, 2018, p 9). The use of the names and character traits from these epics shows how important Hinduism still is, and in a way, gives the epics new meaning to be interpreted by future generations.

3.3. ‘Death is the last truth’

In the following scene, Chandra is called to initiate the procession by carrying his father down to the river. The villagers are gathered around the body as the family members and the priest prepares the ceremony. Chandra is asked to take off his shoes and wash his hands with holy water whilst the priest chants, to purify himself before the ritual. The brothers, who barely have spoken to each other since Chandra’s arrival, start to fight after Suraj covers the corpse with Rastriya Prajatantra Party’s flag⁸, arguing that it was their father’s last wish. Chandra removes the flag and tosses it to the ground, admitting that he and their father disagreed on politics, but that he had sacrificed everything for the struggle and that he did not come here to be treated like this. At this moment, he, at last, reacts to the micro-aggressive comments that he has been faced with since his arrival. However, one of the elderly hands the flag to Suraj with no protests, which emphasizes their stand, and that Chandra is not welcome. The rite continues, and in anger, the brothers climb down the mountain hill with

⁸ A constitutional monarchist and Hindu nationalistic party in Nepal.

heavy luggage and bare feet whilst the villagers and family members chant and carry the rest of the equipment.

After death, the preparation of the body for disposal in Hindu tradition is left to the immediate family to prepare it for cremation. The experience of preparing the final *Samskara, Antyesti*, is very intimate and intense for the family members. Cremation often happens the same day as the person decreases, unless they have to wait for a significant family member to arrive – which is depicted in the film – or if they live somewhere else (Chaitanya, 2005, p. 33). The ceremonies are based on the Vedas, whereby the disposal of the body and the following period of mourning is described in the hymns *Grhyasutras* and *Dharmasutras*. The first stage, when the body is anointed, is called *abhisincanam*. The body is bathed and sprinkled with water to be religiously purified, and mantras are recited to invoke the sacred rivers in the water to further be able to offer it to Lord Agni. In Hinduism, the body is seen as inert; created by elements and a part of the physical world, whereby the journey of the *jiva* (i.e., ‘the individual soul’) continues after the death of the physical body. Accordingly, the body is offered back to the elements by prayers, sanctification, and invocation during the cremation ritual, whereby the presiding deity of fire, *Agni devata*, is called upon (Chaitanya, 2005, pp. 28-31). He is the carrier of oblations of the gods, and therefore, in the film, in a way represented in the shape of Chandra/Agni, and a metaphor for fire.

Suraj, who carries the back of the equipage, whispers to his brother to slow down so that maybe Chandra can appreciate the beauty of the country his party tried to destroy. Chandra counter-argues with a question ‘For two centuries, one caste has ruled the country, is it so wrong for people to fight for justice?’. The dispute continues, but as they bring up Durga, they drop the weight. One of them screams ‘It’s a sin!’, emphasizing the already failed attempt to uphold the old traditions. Chandra punches Suraj, but as Suraj is about to punch back, he accidentally hit their uncle, causing him to storm off. The elderly presses Chandra to bring Suraj back, which he reluctantly says he will, but seems to go towards to police station. The rest of the party sets up camp on a cliff on the hill to wait for the brother, discussing how their father, who used to be chairman, could be laying in the ditch and be abandoned by his sons. The man expresses fear that they will probably end up the same way, because their children do not care anymore either, which, I interpret, gives a deeper meaning to why they tend to hold on to religious traditions. The priest expresses he could have an even worst death

than Chitra (the brother's father), in which one of the men says, 'Death is the last truth'. The elder seems to carry the *chosen trauma* on the nation's history, causing them to emphasize religious traditions to stay relevant, and essentially, to cope with the current instability depicted in the film.

The viewer is faced with a scene where Pooja is going through some old photos, which her mom tells her not to. She runs outside, where she meets Badri, who is sneaking around, following Chandra. The two children accompany Chandra on his journey, but as Chandra and Pooja travel across the bridge, Pooja hinders Badri from coming. She catches up with him, shows him the photo she found, and asks him if he is her father. The man in the picture, he claims, is his cousin, and thus, he is her uncle, he explains. After receiving that answer, Pooja drops it and starts developing a fascination with Chandra because he is fighting for the benefit of the lower castes. Badri catches with them, and the trio walks together to the police station. At the station, he tells them that he is the son of the district leader of the National Democratic Party. The officer smokes a cigarette and comments that he has not seen him around, whereby Chandra reveals that he was in the People's Liberation Army, causing the officer to answer that he cannot do anything since he does not belong to their district. The officer dismisses him and asks why they will not bury him. Chandra counter-argues that both sides used to bury their soldiers, but not since the earthquake. The officer takes Chandra outside and points at the smoke on top of a hill, saying that this is what your people did, and extinguishes his cigarette in front of his feet.

The trio continues their journey and comes across a wedding ceremony, looking for assistance from comrade Bhim, who then arrives in a helicopter. The scenery throughout the journey reminds me of cinematography from the American director Terrence Mallick's films, whereby the camera speaks in movement with bleak imagery and a subdued tonality. Bhim introduces Chandra, or Agni, to his family; he asks him not to judge him, because it was his son who wanted a traditional wedding, ensuring Chandra that he is still one of them. In that sense, the split of holding on to traditions seems to have been associated with right-wing politics and opposing them with the left wing. Disappointed the trio leaves the wedding, without any help from Bhim, even though, as Chandra mumbles, he saved his life from the Nepalese Army during the war. At this moment, Badri realizes that Chandra is a Maoist, and thus, blames him for his parents' death. Badri starts to hit Chandra, enraged by what has happened. Chandra tries to hug him and asks for his forgiveness, explaining that there was a

lot of death during the war. The scene, I would say, is one of the most significant in the film, because of how it highlights how the war affected the most innocent, the children, which many lost not only their lives but also their parents, as well as their childhood.

A lower-cast villager passes by the elder men and asks to pass and why he is lying there, the men answer that they are so old to carry him. The villager replied, 'I carry these pots, and I am old', indicating that it is just by principle the men refuse to carry the body. The men deny him to pass and tell him to go another route, and mumbles 'The war really change these people', possibly meaning that the villager lacked the respect that was there before the war. I find this scene to be interesting since it sheds light on the position of the elder men in relation to their caste and status, but also their stubbornness.

Back at the village, the trio approaches the medical clinic, where Suraj seems to have locked himself up to drink. As he refuses to open up, they start to look for Durga, but she is not in her house. Chandra takes the opportunity to sign the papers, claiming that he is Pooja's father, to get her education. The scene is quiet, but there is a feeling that the journey has changed him, seeing the affects of the war from a new perspective, especially the kids. As Durga has gone to get help from guerilla soldiers, the sound of the radio starts again, this time announcing that a constitution has been signed by the president, declaring Nepal as a federal republic, which will be followed by the final peace process. The good news reaches the elder men blocking the road, and with it seemed to come some form of flexibility. Instead of saving the wood sticks for the funeral, they consider making a fire, since it has started to become dark and cold, even if the priest hesitates. However, at the same time, the Durga and the soldiers reach them, and the men reason that it is better to receive their help than let the body rot. The shift in the men's mindset is almost comical. Chandra and Pooja reach the group carrying food for everyone and are warmly greeted by the guerillas, with whom he once fought alongside. The priest, however, storms off, arguing that it is too much, and later argues that if they continue to give in like this, there will be nothing left, and *they* will be nothing.

Setting up camp in the dark, Chandra reminisces with comrade Kumar on how it used to be before the split between the guerillas eight years ago, arguing that 'we all need to stop killing each other'. Kumar counters that 'what rights have we minorities received by politely asking?' The scene escalates when another group of soldiers comes to help Chandra, but it is all a misunderstanding since the soldiers, who supposedly are the enemies, are there to help,

and thus start to shoot at each other. As her role as a woman and a mother, Durga is asked to protect the children, and thus, do so. In the morning after, a helicopter comes to take care of the wounded, but as they leave, the groups do not seem to find the body, thinking that the army has taken it with them to Kathmandu. The groups find the body, without the flag, by the river, where the children have begun to make a fire to start the burial ritual. The film ends with a strong message, which I interpret to put faith in the generation after to carry on the religious traditions and collective memory of the nation, even if it is not as carried out as it used to be. The characters each represent different perspectives and narratives from the rural area of the war seem from the perspective of Chandra, coming back from the outside, looking in. Under the *White Sun*, hence, the same flag, I interpret that the filmmaker seeks unification – which I would argue is carried out by Durga who solves the final conflict – and that no matter caste, gender, religious- and ideological belief, etc., all is one, sharing the same history and cultural heritage. The choice to make Durga the maker of peace is an interesting choice considering that the goddess she is named after is the goddess of war in Hinduism, and a symbol of protection, strength, motherhood, and destruction. In a way, she is the representation of the women's uprising in Nepal, both before and after the Civil War, fighting against injustice. In that sense, the film portrays a paradigm shift, which emphasizes the importance of religious traditions and beliefs, as a way of helping a person during the process, rather than obey to it. After cremation, follows a thirteen-day mourning period, which is how the viewer is left after the credit's role, grieving, but yet to hope.

4. Summary and conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored how religious traditions and conflicts are represented in *White Sun* using a mix of theories from psychology of religion and sociology of religion, namely, Ammerman's concept of *lived religion* and the concept of *chosen trauma*, in addition to a feminist approach. In the first chapter after the introduction of the thesis, I discuss the historical events in Nepal that led up to the Civil War and post-war, which were relevant to analyze the film, hence, explore how religious traditions and conflict are represented. In the same chapter, I briefly presented the history of filmmaking in Nepal to put *White Sun* and the director of the film into context. The analysis discussed how the filmmaker dabbles with questions of religion and trauma, not only born out of the civil war but also generational trauma created out of patriarchal and socioeconomic structures.

In the analysis of the film, I have argued that religion, or rather Hinduism, was embodied in all the characters on screen, whereby the elderly represented the traditional way of believing and the younger a newer, more secularized way. The main character, Agni/Chandra, brought new perspectives on religion to the village, which created conflict, not the least with his brother. The part of him that was called Agni was a former rebel, whose name I argued referred to Lord Agni, the God of fire and guardian of the Southeast, and his other name, Chandra, translates to the moon. His brother's name, Suraj, translates to the sun, and together they symbolize the sun and moon on the Nepali flag, which represents the two dynasties in the Hindu Vedic tradition of Kshetryia Kings (also known as 'Suryavanshi' and Chandravanshi'). The metaphors to the national flag are of importance to the film as a symbol of the national identity of Nepal, whereby in that identity, religion has played an enormous part in history and to diminish its importance is argued in the film as forgetting everything. It is a history not only shaped by the hardships of the war but also by a long period of political instability and the trauma following the royal massacre.

By using the concept of *lived religion*, I explored how religious traditions and beliefs permeated the film, not the least as represented by the characters themselves. For example, on the one hand, we had Chandra, who came with a secularist perspective, and on the other, we had Suraj with his traditionalist view. Together, they are forced to bury their father, whereby the burial Hindu burial rituals play a central role. In how to do it, the elderly in the village plays a large part in holding on tight to tradition. There is also Durga, who has an important

role as a mother and a woman, unifying the secularist and traditionalist perspectives, while also being left out of the political shift. The children, including Badri who comes from the city, represent the innocence of the future of the nation and the collective trauma carried through generations.

At the beginning of the film, the body of the dead father is carried out of the window, which I argued was a metaphor for the difficult establishment of the new political system caused by the trauma of political instability. The father's body represents the monarchy, but relationships with the *father* are central to the story, not only Chandra and Surja's decided father but also Pooja lacking a father, Badri's parents being killed by the Maoists and Chandra being falsely accused of being Badri's father. The father's role, in that sense, could be a representation of a patriarchal system while it also circles back to Hindu mythology, whereas the fathers often (but not always) are absent or even tyrannical. For example... In that sense, uses metaphors for the political situation and historical events interchangeable with Hindu mythology.

The orphaned Badri follows Chandra to the village where he gets to meet the other kids, whereby in one significant scene that I discussed on page 26, he played with them in the grass, and they saw smoke. I see this as a direct reference to the collective trauma from the war when mines were placed outside of rural Nepal, thus, killing many children. Badri does not make the connection right away, which is important to note since the war was not exposed to the war in the same way as people in the rural area were. Further in the film, Chandra pointed out another difference, namely, that the elderly has a harder time adjusting to changes such as women's role in society. On page 27, I explored women's participation in the war, whereby a large number of women were at the frontline and advocated for militarism as a way of liberation. I also briefly pointed out the intersections of oppression, hence, that ethnicity and socioeconomic status in relation to rural-urban hierarchies were significant in analyzing gender oppression. In the film, gender oppression was seen through Durga, for example, she had to ask Chandra (who was her ex-husband, although not Pooja's father) to state that he was her daughter's father for her to be able to go to school outside the village. I argued that Durga did not face discrimination only because she was a woman, but also because of her caste, especially in relation to Chandra. Furthermore, on page 28, I argued that Durga was portrayed as independent and powerful, whereby I also noted that her name was connected to the goddess Durga, also known as the 'Invincible One'. I also connected the

character to the *pativrata* that has been used in epics such as *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*, which are foundational texts in Hindu culture. They explore the oppression women face, yet still empower Durga poses a feminist undertone to the film, which becomes even more clear in the end.

The film constantly highlighted Hindu rituals, such as the purification Chandra goes through before he carries his father's dead body down to the river. From pages 28-29, I described the ritual and tied it to the Hindu belief in purifying the body in the fire and returning the body to the physical world, whereby the soul, the *jiva*, continues its journey. The body is offered back to nature by prayers, sanctification, and invocations to the deity of fire. Furthermore, when the brothers carried their father down to the river, they got into a fight, which caused Suraj to storm off and Chandra to get help. In the company of Badri and Pooja, Chandra explored the outskirts of the village, which offers an interesting view of how Chandra, a Maoist, is treated both by the police and other Maoists. I especially mentioned the scene when Badri when finds out and blames Chandra for killing his parents. While the police treated him with disrespect, the other Maoist asked not to be judged for having a traditional wedding, which rather challenge the identity of the inhabitants. It raises questions such as who are we without our religious traditions, but also for those who oppose the traditions, do we have to obtain them completely? I connect this to a form of collective trauma that is shared amongst the people, of what has been lost, but also what has been gained. Additionally, the discrimination that Chandra faced, as well as the justice he claimed to fight for, goes deep into the culture, politics, and religion, and is a collective hazard in itself.

The film implies how the war challenges the societal hierarchy, not only regarding gender, by also regarding caste and socioeconomic class. Besides being an important film in Nepali film history and the Nepali new wave, the film has been acknowledged internationally – for example, by being selected as the Nepali entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 90th Academy Awards and has been acknowledged as the Best Film at several film festivals around the world – which emphasizes its cultural importance. For me, the film has had a large impact in looking into Nepali filmmaking, but also reconnecting to my Nepali roots and understanding of the culture and history of Nepal. However, the journey of studying this film has been quite challenging in terms of situating myself, as an adoptee, that even if you have grown up with fragments of the culture of your birthright you will always be the *other* in both

the culture you were born into and the one you were adopted to, which is something I want study further.

Towards the end of the film, everyone started to come together and eventually bury their differences. After many disagreements, the villagers, comrades, elderly, brothers, and priests started to work together to proceed with the burial ritual. However, in the very end, it is the children who finish the ritual to carry on the legacy of the traditions of the nation. In my interpretation, the film ended with a strong message that put faith in the generation to come in order to carry on the religious traditions and collective memory, even if it is not as it has always been, regardless of political views or social status. Thus, the filmmaker seeks peace and unification of the people by creating a film that widely brings up the challenges faced after the war, seeking unification of the inhabitants – woven from hundreds of flowers – that shares the same history and cultural heritage; the importance of remembering the past, but also not letting it stand in the way of the future.

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