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# UNIVERSITY OF PLYMOUTH

***BIRDS WITH WOLF HEARTS*, A COLLECTION OF POETRY, WITH  
AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY NEPALESE WOMEN'S  
POETRY**

by

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## Author's Declaration Page

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee.

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# ***Birds with Wolf Hearts, a Collection of Poetry, with an Analysis of Contemporary Nepalese Women's Poetry***

By **Eleanor Walsh**

## **Abstract**

This thesis is comprised of a collation of women's poetry from Nepal and its contextualising material, and a creative element which is poetry of my own responding to that work. The critical introduction argues that contemporary women's poetry expresses female experiences and exposes a movement in women's rights in Nepal that has previously gone unrecognised. The analysis demonstrates how women's poetry has been used to form new communities, both literary and political, and is a summons to social action, as it recognises the marginalisation of women in literature that has historically been overwhelmingly ignored. In a country where female characters have been either omitted from literature or presented as uneducated, domestic and passive, contemporary work by women offers a literary counterpoise, in which balance is redressed. As a contribution to feminist rhetoric as well as poetry, the creative element of the thesis contains a collection of poems set in Nepal which respond to the traditions and tropes utilised in the poetry by Nepali women. Though they are written from my Western perspective, these poems acknowledge and explore the poetic devices used by some of these female Nepali writers, experimenting with characterisation, metaphor, structure and language in a way that is being popularised in Nepali poetry as it deviates from its traditional forms and becomes diversified.

Thesis advisors: Anthony Caleshu, Min Wild and Mandy Bloomfield

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to curate contemporary poetry by Nepali women, to analyse its themes, and to provide a creative response to the poetry. There will be a specific emphasis on diversity previously unseen in Nepalese literature, with a focus on pluralising voices: poems translated from endangered Nepalese languages, poems by women from low-castes and deprived regions, and translated oral poetry – and an effort to ensure that the poetry used here does not represent only the literate and educated minority.

There has been a clear absence of scholarly interest in contemporary poetry in English (or translated to English) by women in Nepal: female writers are included only in a tokenistic way in anthologies, and are rarely considered to have the same credibility as their male peers. Analysis of Nepali poetry tends to focus on a specific type of poet: high-caste, well-educated men from Kathmandu, often from historically significant families. In a country where social status is directly linked to the reception of a writer's work, the poetry of low-caste women from remote parts of Nepal is still fighting – at a disadvantage – to gain recognition, especially as Nepali women's poetry exposes an aspect of Nepali culture that many deny even exists: they write of domestic oppression, the pressure to marry, and a society that devalues them at almost every stage of their lives.

The creative collection, *Birds with Wolf Hearts*, responds to both the poetry by Nepali women and my experience living in Chitwan, Nepal. The poetry brings together the techniques and influences of Nepali poetry along with inspiration from the life and culture in Chitwan to create a collection that privileges characters and narrative speakers seldom seen in Nepali literature. It replaces the subservient, silent characters of mute housewives and obedient daughters with more genuine speakers who reflect the authentic characteristics of Nepali women's poetry and the villages where I lived.

## Literature Review

In order to appropriately contextualise this thesis and to ground its claims in the appropriate academic arenas, it is necessary to draw in research and theories from a number of avenues. There has been little scholarly interest specifically in Nepali protest poetry, and even less academic research into poetry by Nepali women. My Nepali language skills are proficient for certain things, like oral translation, and I have an extensive vocabulary that is similar to much of the content of rural spoken poetry. However, to learn to read in multiple Brahmi scripts and to the standard of comprehension required for academic texts, as would be required to engage with Nepalese academic resources, would take longer than the length of the fieldwork. For this reason, the bibliography is exclusively Anglophone in its content. The methodology draws from a number of different fields – postcolonialism, ethnopoetics, translation, and studies in Nepal’s most recent civil war: the People’s Revolution – and although there are Nepalese academic resources in most of these areas of research, the sources I draw from are limited to English texts, though many are written by Nepali scholars. These topics are also inflected by studies of feminist and caste resistance in South Asia. These theories do not all speak to one centralised line of argument, either supporting or contradicting one another, but instead come together to form a picture of where theory has exposed some of the historical, social and political phenomena that shape the lives of women in Nepal.

### *Postcolonialism*

Postcolonial theory bears especial relevance to Nepal. Despite Nepal never technically having been a part of the British Empire, Nepal still bears the consequences of control and exploitation from the West, and – particularly due to the West’s interest in ‘conquering’ Everest – has been subject to strong colonialist pressures over the years. There are many theorists who examine the



narratives that either support or challenge colonial power relationships, with a particular focus on third-world feminist movements and the way that colonialism has affected non-Western women.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is a leading postcolonial theorist whose work on postcolonial feminism and subaltern studies has heavily impacted academic discourse. In her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?',<sup>1</sup> Spivak focuses largely on the subject of Sati<sup>2</sup> and ultimately claims that the 'othering' of the subaltern constitutes them as muted and anonymous. She goes on to claim that academics can be unwittingly complicit in imperialism by working from a Eurocentric, institutionalised discourse and suggests that they can unintentionally reinforce the colonialism that they attempt to dismantle. Spivak also warns against a postcolonial discourse that oversimplifies the cultural identity of the 'subaltern'; this is a crucial feature of postcolonial theory in regard to the researching of the experience of women in Nepal, as to generalise about that experience instead of accounting for complex sets of variables including class, the caste-system, and geographical location, can lead to inaccurate oversimplifications of the ways women experience oppression.

One seminal set of essays that explore Spivak's ideas, and studies influenced by her theories, is *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*.<sup>3</sup> It contains the work of eight scholars who continue to develop and contextualise Spivak's work on subaltern and postcolonial studies. They further apply her ideas to other historical instances of silencing and othering, exploring different cases of the rights of indigenous women around the world. Although these essays explore the rights of women and the impact of colonialism extensively in India, there is no mention of Nepal. Many theories around the rights and treatment of Indian women can be

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<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak' from *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* by Nelson, Cary, and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 271-313

<sup>2</sup> A now outlawed practice in which a widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, (Columbia University Press, 2010)

extended to women in Nepal, but this should be done with caution, as Nepal's relationship with the West is different to India's.

Edward Said was a significant theorist in the field of postcolonial writings. His significant works criticised the culturally reductive perceptions of the East that are based on imperialism. In *Orientalism*,<sup>4</sup> he condemns the prejudices and stereotypes of people from the East and the fictionalisation of the foreign 'other'. Said also asserts that the grouping together of Eastern people and cultures under one banner is a flawed and ethnocentric concept that peddles the image of the 'unchanging other'. He identifies writers like Gérard de Nerval and Rudyard Kipling as having contributed to the Western romantic and exotic perceptions of Eastern people and culture. His methods with specific regard to literary criticism are largely an applied extension of Michel Foucault's thoughts on cultural imperialism, and his ideas have shaped the research of this thesis in a way similar to Spivak's: they have created a framework through which to analyse poetry by Nepali women whilst avoiding pitfalls of exoticism and generalisations.

Though *Orientalism* has proved to be a controversial text, and there is no shortage of critical literary responses to Said's work, ultimately the claims made by Said bear significant weight when assessing the dominant claims in the West about Nepal, a perspective which is often given more weight than Nepal's claims about itself, as Western discourse dominates the ways Nepal and its people are represented. In an essay titled 'Climbing Mount Everest: Postcolonialism in the Culture of Ascent' from *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture*,<sup>5</sup> postcolonial theorist and explorer Stephen Slemon explores this phenomenon of postcolonialism specifically in relation to Nepal and argues that the language that the West has historically used when writing about Nepal has allowed them to exercise power over Nepali people and to erase their history and culture in the name of British expeditions. This relates to

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<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978)

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Climbing Mount Everest: Postcolonialism in the Culture of Ascent' in *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture*, (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000) 51 – 70

Edward Said's arguments that people in positions of power in the West speak for, and over the top of, people in the East – it is an example of 'silencing the Orient'. Slemon's writing explains why language used around issues of politics and land ownership in Nepal ultimately comes to reinforce structures of colonial power. Though he writes primarily on the discourse around Everest, his ideas can be applied to the ways in which the West views Nepal as a country and engages with an image of Nepal that makes it easy for the West to subscribe to an idea of Nepal that is perpetually conquered by Western explorers, a phenomenon that is still present in the way that Westerners read Nepali literature. As part of the purpose of the creative collection is to challenge the ways in which texts about Nepal are consumed in the West, this is a highly relevant area of theory as it outlines the pitfalls that poetry might fall into when seeking to dismantle colonial notions.

Although they shaped the current discourse in ethical ethnographic and global studies, theorists like Said did not necessarily write with South Asia in mind. Said's work focuses on imperialism, primarily in the Middle East, and the oppression of Nepal from the West in practical terms is linked more to power imbalances in trading rights. It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of generalised studies when considering Nepal's relationship to the West and use studies critically and selectively: Nepal was not part of the British Empire in the way that India was, so imperialist influence has not had the same impact as Nepal as many of the countries on which Said focuses. So, while Said's studies and those like them are relevant and important to research about Nepal, we must still recognize the absence of theories *specific* to the West's effect on Nepal.

One theorist who does focus specifically on the representations of people and culture in Nepal is English scholar Ram Chandra Paudel. His essay 'Ethnic and Racial Stereotypes: A Critical Appraisal of Identity Politics in Nepal'<sup>6</sup> examines how high-caste elites in Nepal, often

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<sup>6</sup> Ram Chandra Paudel, 'Ethnic and Racial Stereotypes: A Critical Appraisal of Identity Politics in Nepal', (*Crossing the Border: International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Vol.1, 2013) 79-84

influenced by Western agencies, attempt to stabilise the caste system and reinforce stereotypes about low-caste and indigenous Nepali people through propaganda. The paper concludes that these damaging representations provoke ethnic tension and increase suspicion and stigma towards low-caste communities. Though the paper does not specifically explore the Tharu (the ethnic population indigenous to the southern Terai strip of Nepal), it still explores an important aspect of oppression that is beginning to enter the Tharu communities in Chitwan, as high-caste tour guides begin to offer ‘village walks’ to Western tourists. These walks involve guides leading visitors through Tharu villages, as they describe the ‘primitive’ houses and lifestyles of the Tharu. In the process, they align themselves with their perceived superiority of the tourists and distance themselves from the low-caste Nepalis whose homes they profit from and put on display.

### ***Ethnopoetics and Translation***

There are several poets and theorists who discuss the critical analysis of poetry translated from languages that are as radically different to English as Nepali. The process of translating poetry, particularly poetry that is performed rather than written, can be a complex and layered task, and one that requires several theoretical considerations.

*Constructing Cultures*<sup>7</sup> is a collection of essays that covers a broad range of translation theories, including the practical applications and limits of translation. Among the topics discussed are strategies for translating image and metaphor, allowing for cultural boundaries and differences, and how to deconstruct and rebuild form and meter. They have been useful to consult when faced with issues of translating Nepali words and phrases for which there is no equivalent in English, as well as negotiating a need to retain the authenticity of Nepali poetry whilst making the writing comprehensible to a Western audience. These essays, however,

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<sup>7</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Constructing Cultures: Essay on Literary Translation: Essays on Literary Translation*, (Multilingual Matters, 1998)

predominantly focus on Western theories of translation and do not move beyond a focus of written, published literature. Therefore, there is no exploration into the translation of lyrics and folklore, nor much of an exploration of theories that explore poetry that does not conform to the uses of Eurocentric literary devices.

There are some texts that focus more specifically on an ethical approach to translating literature from cultures traditionally described as ‘primitive’ by Western societies, which aim to avoid summarising these types of literature as ‘simple’ in comparison to Western texts (which results in the translation and presentation of them as overly simplistic). They also move beyond the idea of translation as the process of translating only written texts and explore the translation of performed and oral literature.

Jerome Rothenberg is a seminal and profoundly influential poet and theorist who has dedicated much of his career to the translation of non-written literature. He has written many texts that explore the recording and collating of non-traditional or experimental forms of poetry across the world. Rothenberg also coined the term ‘ethnopoetics’: he had identified that traditional methods recording oral literature on the page failed to capture the power of performance, and so formulated a method of analysing the linguistic structures of performance traditions from non-Western cultures. His text *Symposium of the Whole*<sup>8</sup> restates the complexity of poetry by populations often labelled by the West as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’, and corrects this reductive assumption as he explores and analyses poetry across a full range of human cultures. Rothenberg mainly focuses on West African and American Indian poetry, where he finds literary richness in divination poetry and narrative poetry as instruments of change. His theories have provided a framework for translating songs from women’s festivals in Nepal, where the context of the songs is a crucial inclusion, and the cadence and repetition of the performance must be portrayed on the page as far as possible.

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<sup>8</sup> Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, (University of California Press, 2016)

In *Technicians of the Sacred*,<sup>9</sup> a definitive text in the movement of ethnopoetics, Rothenberg collates avant-garde and experimental poetry in this collection, and with a clear move away from poetry that prescribes to a euro-centric code of ‘success’, he juxtaposes texts from indigenous cultures around the world: a written application of many of the ideas Rothenberg discusses in *Symposium of the Whole*. The text revises what the Western reader thinks of as poetry, exploring space and format on the page to emphasise the cadence of how work is relayed orally. It has influenced the way in which I began to record in writing the songs from festivals in Nepal, moving away from writing with a usual line-length as one might in poetry, and instead using space on the page to show how certain words or phrases were emphasised or drawn out.

Dell Hymes was a sociolinguist and anthropologist who is considered a seminal theorist in ethnopoetics alongside Rothenberg. His text *Now I Only Know So Far*<sup>10</sup> is similar to anthologies like Rothenberg’s in that it focuses on the practical applications and methodologies involved in ethnopoetics. Though he also focuses primarily on Native American literature, the set of essays explores the role of interpreting literary performance and writing and editing translations of these performances, as well as the different ways of representing a story on the page through form, shape and space.

Language and poetry scholar Jahan Ramazani’s book *A Transnational Poetics*<sup>11</sup> also examines work from a wide range of backgrounds, although unlike Rothenberg, Ramazani tends to re-visit well-known poets who are already accepted as successful and prominent in their field. His work is less relevant to my efforts in analysing oral poetry as he does not engage with ethnopoetics or translation. However, he challenges existing assumptions on borders and identity and explores fluidity in globalisation and modernity to re-define the boundaries of how the poetry is identified, and ways in which modern and contemporary poetry in English overflows

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<sup>9</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, *Preface of Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (University of California Press, 1992)

<sup>10</sup> Dell Hymes, *Now I Know Only So Far: Essays in Ethnopoetics*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2003)

<sup>11</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics*, (University of Chicago Press, 2009)

national borders and exceeds the scope of national literary paradigms. Ramazani focuses on renowned mainstream poets including Eliot, Yeats, and Langston Hughes, but, like Rothenberg, he explores the migration and decolonization of literature. In addition, he focuses on the poetic connections being made across the world as diasporas grow and the boundaries of borders become less concrete.

There are few texts that explore the translation of literature from Nepalese languages. However, Manjushree Thapa, one of Nepal's most influential poets and feminists, wrote 'With Love and Aesthetics'<sup>12</sup> as an ethical guide to those wishing to translate Nepalese literature. The text covers the difficulties in translation specific to bridging the gap between Nepali language and English. Thapa covers complexities to be considered in politics, culture, metaphor and image and the importance of being aware of cultural preservation in translating a text for a Western audience. She also explores the power dynamics between English and Nepali languages, concluding that English is a language that functions hegemonically in Nepal, but also that a version of English has formed in the urban parts of Nepal that does not follow the structure of British English. Thapa emphasises the importance of being aware of these power dynamics when translating for a Western audience. Her writing has provided a valuable set of guidelines for how to retain the integrity of Nepali poetry where possible and to not compromise the essence of poetic tradition in an effort to make it palatable to the Western reader.

### ***Women: Civil War, Ecofeminism, Identity and Resistance***

Nepal's civil conflict from 1996 to 2006 – often referred to as 'The People's Movement', has significant relevance in my research as the war has greatly impacted the generation who are now young adults, as many missed out on an education due to the disruption caused by the conflict. It

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<sup>12</sup> Manjushree Thapa, 'With Love and Aesthetics: Notes for an Ethical Translation of Nepali Literature', (*Studies in Nepali History and Society* Vol.4, 1999)

also influenced the way many women write about the country's politics in their poetry today, as they feel disenfranchised both by the Maoist party and the government, as promises to improve women's rights were not kept – in spite of female involvement in the war.

The conflict was a Maoist uprising against the state, which had significant involvement from women, both as soldiers and supporters of the movement. However, scholarly opinion on what the implications of the war really meant for women differ significantly. There is no central line of argument that is agreed upon: even with the conflict ending a mere decade ago, reliable sources are scarce and much of the news reporting is biased and contradictory. It should also be noted that fieldwork that involves interviewing women about their involvement in the war carries strong ethical implications and should be considered high-risk: several of the women who were interviewed in Michael Hutt's research into the participation of female rebels in Maoist combat and the post-war consequences, for example, were killed by authorities after they agreed to be interviewed. This is one risk that deters many scholars from delving too deeply into the details of the war.

Hindi and Nepali language expert Michael Hutt is a leading authority on the civil war, and his book *The Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*<sup>13</sup> includes a chapter called 'Gender Dimensions of the People's War', in which he asserts that, although a large proportion of platoons were made up of women – somewhere between 30 and 40 percent – the relationship between the Maoists and Nepali women was not necessarily a good one and a large number of women left the party after gender strategies outlined in manifestos were not carried out in practice. Many women also supported the party in a way that did not stray far from their prescribed roles as domestic women: they housed rebels and cooked for them. Although Hutt includes detailed accounts of the oppression and violence against women that led them to show

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<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Hutt, *Himalayan 'People's War': Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2004)



interest in the Maoist party at the outset, his study does not cover the dangers that women faced at the hands of both the Maoists and the government forces if they joined the rebellion.

Few texts thoroughly explore the relationship between women and the war in Nepal, presumably because of the risks involved in research, along with the scarcity of material to begin with. However, there are some that do examine the involvement with, and subsequent impact of, the movement on women.

*The Journal of Conflict Resolution* published an article by Nidhiya Menon and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers called 'War and Women's Work: Evidence from the Conflict in Nepal'.<sup>14</sup> Here, the two scholars claim that one positive effect of the war has been that women have been able to enter employment in increased numbers. As this new trend has reduced women's dependence on men, and decreased the number of women who work for no income, employment opportunity is one aspect of women's lives that has generally been improved as a result of the war. However, their study only measures one indicator of an improved standard of living and fails to account for the fact that for many women, a level of financial independence does not emancipate them from the families into which they married.

Political scientist Mahendra Lawoti's book *Contentious Politics and Democratization in Nepal* disagrees with the premise that the Maoists have helped women's emancipation in any way. Lawoti's work is controversial overall: he argues that contentious politics can hinder democracy just as easily as help it, and that many 'voluntary' Maoist rebels were coerced. He asserts that Nepal is a 'fledgling democracy' and can be tipped into volatility with ease in a way that can quickly increase poverty for citizens and cause large-scale suffering. With specific regard to women, Lawoti claims that women were pressured by the Maoists, often abducted from their villages and forced into prostitution in India. The rebel forces employed strategies of intimidation and extortion against women, targeting the poorest and most remote villages.

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<sup>14</sup> Nidhiya Menon and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers, 'War and Women's Work: Evidence from the Conflict in Nepal', (*Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, 2013) 51-73

Whether women joined voluntarily or were coerced, the tragedy and suffering the war caused for women in the long-run far out-weighed any political benefits they might have reaped, according to Lawoti.

In her essay 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalizing Gendered Narratives',<sup>15</sup> human rights activist Rita Manchanda does not accuse the Maoists of crimes against women in the way that Lawoti does, but she does argue that the male leaders of the Maoist party were ambivalent about redefining gender relations. The emancipation of women was not a concern that was mentioned in the early manifestos, and although leaders felt a pressure to incorporate the interests of women after they found that their body of support was largely female, that the Maoists did little to actually attempt to improve gender equality in the country. On the whole, women were not repaid for their loyalty to the Maoist party, and were misled about the support they would be provided.

Certainly, when reading about the harassment of women who identified as rebels and who assisted with the Maoist side of the movement, the women killed in large numbers either in battle or in custody, and the ways in which women were not prioritised by the Maoists' political strategies, it seems reasonable to conclude that the People's Movement did not lead to significant improvement in most aspects of women's lives in present day Nepal. These theories about the war come together to help explain, in my analysis, why so many poems by women explore themes of mistrust in the government, of corruption and of political stagnation. There is a tone of suspicion, even bitterness, in a significant amount of literature written by women, and much of it stems back to ill-feeling about the war. It is an aspect of women's existences I have worked to incorporate into my creative work too: a feeling of women having been deceived and exploited by men in positions of political power.

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<sup>15</sup> Rita Manchanda, 'Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Radicalizing Gendered Narratives', (*Cultural Dynamics*, Vol. 16, 2004) 237-258

To move on to ecofeminism – the poetry written by women from rural regions of Nepal has strongly recurrent themes that link women to nature and the land. Female poets frequently use images of plants and crops as metaphors for human experience. Theories that link women and the land they work on have been explored by many scholars, and some of their ideas illustrate the links that these poets draw. *Ecofeminism*<sup>16</sup> is a set of essays and can be regarded as a seminal entry into ecofeminist theory, as it covers a wide range of bases in approach and subject matter. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva are leading feminists who explore prevailing theories of ecology combined with conventional theories of women's emancipation, and the impacts (both positive and negative) of Western aid, development and technology. Their writing covers a range of approaches and explorations in ecofeminism, including the ways in which environmental crisis affects women disproportionately, and the links between the oppression of women and the destruction of nature.

Ecofeminist scholar Karen J. Warren's writing focuses more specifically on the lives of women in rural regions of developing countries, particularly women who live off the land and rely on the crops that they grow for survival. This is a key idea in my analysis of the poetry, as many of the poems set in rural Nepal maintain a focus on themes of crops and the land as metaphors. In *Ecofeminist Philosophy*,<sup>17</sup> Warren uses ecofeminist theory to explore and understand issues of environmental and social justice through a Western perspective. Her writing exposes oppressive frameworks and compares the domination of women to domination of animals and nature. Warren pays particular attention to the lives of women in rural areas of developing countries who cultivate farmland but do not control the means of production or own the land. These women are often subject to dominant patriarchal norms that take ownership over the land and the crops they produce.

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<sup>16</sup> Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism*, (Zed Books 2014)

<sup>17</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on what it is and why it Matters* (Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000)

Warren was also the editor of the book *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*<sup>18</sup> which explores the ecofeminist movement in the developing world. Rather than only covering the Western perspective, this collection explores disciplines from the East, and addresses ecofeminist ideas through a wide variety of lenses, including biological, philosophical and anthropological approaches. A concept that has important applications for the Terai region is the ‘environmental racism’ that some texts explore, for it is often the low and indigenous castes who grow crops and suffer the associated physical tolls and hardship: from back and joint problems to being forced to live on land close to rice paddies where they frequently lose their homes to flooding. Just as in *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, these essays find comparisons between the systems that overwork the land and create more work for women, and the systems that keep women in roles of work without agency over the crops they produce.

There are also several texts that explore the social and political phenomena that have led to the current collective identity held by many women across Nepal. However, as urban and rural parts of Nepal are developing at rapidly different rates and experiencing different social trends and fluxes, it is important not to make generalisations about national identity and instead allow for complex social variations that lead to a wide range of experiences for women in Nepal. Certainly, in the poems, the Nepal represented in writing set in Kathmandu seems unrecognisable to those writing rural settings, so an appreciation of how to recognise and analyse these variations and nuances is vital.

The collection of essays in *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*<sup>19</sup> by anthropologists Dorothy Holland, William Lachicotte Jr, Debra Skinner and Carol Cain. focuses particularly on structures of identity as they relate to gender narratives and respond to power dynamics across cultures around the world. The text uses narratives from traditional festivals and social

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<sup>18</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Indiana University Press, 1997)

<sup>19</sup> Dorothy Holland and William S. Lachicotte, *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, (Harvard University Press, 2001)

gatherings, including Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, as vehicles for challenging socially prescribed identities as well as instigating change. There is a chapter on female identity in Nepal, ‘Authoring Oneself as Woman from Nepal’, which involves case studies into codes of morality in Nepal amongst women, the ramifications of a society where ‘good’ becomes synonymous with ‘obedient’, and examples of *dukkha* (hardship) stories and anecdotes that illustrate the consequences of girls who risk their reputations in pursuit of education or love-marriages. They offer a wider context to the poetry by women and help to identify common concerns and experiences among women across the country, as well as offering explanations for why women, on the surface at least, may appear complicit with oppressive practices.

Some of the patterns identified by Holland and the other writers from *Identity and Agency* can be applied to some of the experiences identified in *Hindu Women: Normative Models*.<sup>20</sup> This book explores the position of women in religious and secular Hindu texts. As with *Identity and Agency*, the book traces the transition of literary representations of women from bold, knowledgeable individuals to pliant, submissive beings, but draws links specifically between these patterns and the representations of Hindu goddesses. It discusses how sustained and systematic idealisation of meek domesticity ultimately led to women’s gradual loss of social position and economic rights. It goes on to explore the social fallout for women and how women in Hindu countries suffer as a result when they deviate from the prescribed behavioural standards expressed in Hindu texts. Like *Identity and Agency*, the text argues that Hindu structures of power have consciously and purposefully moved women into a submissive role, casting them as secondary citizens in the name of religion. As many of the narrative speakers in the poems express a feeling of tension between liberty and a pressure to conform to traditional religious expectations, this background on religious discourse helps in examining the way the identity of women can be shaped and challenged.

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<sup>20</sup> Prabhati Mukherjee, *Hindu Women: Normative Models*, (Orient Longman Limited, 1978)

*Real and Imagined Women*<sup>21</sup> is a set of essays that challenge the stereotyped and sensationalised image of the third-world woman as victim, due in part to the representations of sati (the practice of women self-immolating on their husband's funeral pyre) and the issues around rape and wife-murder in Indian media. These essays challenge these reductive and inaccurate images of women through cultural representations from a wide and varied range of texts that explore women who organise resistance and women who are leaders. Like Mukherjee's text on Hindu women, the texts delve into the real-life ramifications of these media representations, though they do focus on women's experiences in India, and so their application to women in rural Nepal, while relevant, is limited, as representations of Hinduism in news and film are not consumed in the same way.

Turning now to texts that address resistance against these structures of inequality, there are several books that explore notions of non-oppositional acts of resistance. These texts propose that there are non-confrontational forms of resistance that challenge academia's usual assumptions about the overt nature of resistance to dominant powerholders. They are particularly important as context for poetry that frequently returns to themes of non-political, quiet, domestic acts of resistance by women. Poems such as Ujjwala Maharjan's 'Durbarmarg' that refers to the woman who 'just sit[s] there / looking expensive', and Manju Kanchuli's poem 'The Hunger for Justice' where the narrator is accustomed 'to fasting herself to sleep' while 'fire rages on the riverbank' require a specific type of thematic framing in their analysis that is based in non-politicised or low-risk acts of resistance.

*Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*<sup>22</sup> is a set of essays that proposes a much wider range of socio-cultural practices in order to understand how oppressed groups push back against systems of power. Using mainly case studies of peasants and labourers,

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<sup>21</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (Routledge, 1993)

<sup>22</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (University of California Press, 1992)

these essays conclude that our notions of resistance should be extended to more subtle and nuanced areas of resistance. Though it covers theories about the history of the impact and effect of this type of resistance, it focuses little on challenges to patriarchal social structures, so the ways in which it can be used to analyse resistance against gender expectations, such as in this thesis, are limited.

*Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* is a collection of sources that builds on these theories further with specific regard to gender structures in South Asia. Indian history expert Anindita Ghosh collates unconventional sources including photographs, diary entries, lyrics, court records and family photographs, in order to draw out patterns of resistance in the daily lives of women who have been socially and politically silenced.<sup>23</sup> Ghosh explores the embedded acts of resistance that women commit in lives that otherwise seem passive and obedient. Her writing explores the side of resistance that lies outside the actions of powerful and political figures and outside of overt, organised rebellion. Ghosh's arguments are similar to those in *Contesting Power*, as she focuses specifically on women who contest the power of men. Her work is highly applicable when it comes to analysing unconventional sources: finding consistencies and drawing links between resistance and cultural material. In songs such as 'Chaubandi Ma Patuki', where Astha Raut redefines the boundaries of female identity and affirms her status as a 'Nepali ko chori' on her own terms, writing that explores patterns of resistance and low-key acts of independence provide the necessary theoretical backdrop for analysing such material.

Similarly, in the *Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies* journal's 'Speaking of Dissent, Speaking of Consent: Ritual and Resistance Among High-Caste Hindu Women in Kathmandu',<sup>24</sup> feminist scholar Julia J. Thompson collates the anecdotes of women in Kathmandu who subvert religious

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<sup>23</sup> Anindita Ghosh, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, (AIAA Ltd, 2008)

<sup>24</sup> Julia J. Thompson, 'Speaking of Dissent, Speaking of Consent: Ritual and Resistance Among High-Caste Hindu Women in Kathmandu', (*CNAS Contributions to Nepalese Studies Journal* Vol.20, 1993)

traditions in order to draw attention to modes of oppression and systems of inequality. She details how these acts are interpreted (and often misinterpreted) and describes the way women are shunned or punished for these acts. The stories that she has collated illustrate the theories outlined in work by Ghosh and Haynes et al, as they draw attention to the risks of such acts, the potential for humiliation, and also explain why women from high-castes do not always lead a more privileged life than low-caste women. They provide a backdrop for the poems by women that so often involve a speaker who is outwardly compliant, or who resists gender-based values in small, inconspicuous ways. These stories also provide a context for how wider communities might respond to (and sometimes punish) behaviour by women that they perceive as a threat to hierarchical social structures: a necessity in my fieldwork as there was a requirement to sociologically provide explanations for behaviour that might appear compliant.

There has been no research as yet into the disparity of experiences between high-caste and low-caste women as they engage in these acts of opposition. We can see from studies like the one by Thompson that high-caste women risk their family honour by getting a reputation as a difficult or rebellious girl. It is important to remember, though, that for low-caste women in rural areas where honour is often less of a concern, that the potential dangers involved are different – those women risk losing their homes or increasing suspicion against them to a level of violence. There is, as yet, no academic work that delves into the variations of women's experiences across Nepal as a result of the growing feminist movement and women increasingly involving themselves in the challenging of patriarchal structures.

### ***Dalit and Indigenous Castes***

A handful of scholars have researched the history, culture and struggles of low and native castes in Nepal. However, particularly as the Tharu caste are a culturally and linguistically diverse



population, who, as little as a hundred years ago, would not have acknowledged each other as belonging to the same ethnic group, research on Tharu identity is sparse.

Arjun Guneratne is a leading anthropologist in the study of the Tharu. His study *Many Tongues, One People*<sup>25</sup> covers many aspects of the Tharu communities across Nepal, including language, history, culture, political tension and inequality. His study provides a detailed background to contextualise the Tharu caste in Nepali society and in Nepal's political environment. Guneratne claims that the dispossession and exploitation of Tharu communities have been instrumental in helping them to transcend their cultural differences and in causing disparate communities to form a more unified identity. Though his is an anthropological study, it provides a thorough contextual base for reading and analysing Tharu literature and for providing a historical understanding of the community with whom I lived during fieldwork. Several of the translated songs are from cultural events specific to the Tharu caste: 'Mela Song' makes reference to many adornments worn by women during Jitiya festival and requires an adequate historical contextual explanation of the significance of these items in order for the song to be understood in its translated form. The context of Tharu songs is also different to cultural songs from other Nepalese communities – they are performed in nature as opposed to in temples – so a detailed contextual explanation for the culture of these songs is also required.

Like Guneratne, Mary Cameron, a scholar who focuses on gender and caste relations, researches the complexity of caste identity in Nepal, and the ways in which people from low-castes negotiate their own caste identities. Cameron's work does not focus on the Tharu, but instead looks at trends between *Dalit*<sup>26</sup> castes in Nepal. In her essay 'Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal',<sup>27</sup> Cameron illuminates formations of self and group

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<sup>25</sup> Arjun Guneratne, *Many Tongues, One People: The Making of Tharu Identity in Nepal*, (Cornell University Press, 2002)

<sup>26</sup> (From the Nepali word *dalnu* meaning to crush or oppress, the word *dalit* refers to those most discriminated against in the caste system)

<sup>27</sup> Mary Cameron, 'Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal', (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.27, 2007) 22

identity that emerge from social margins. Cameron claims that caste distinctions are evoked through communication and acts of agency that resist domination and affirm difference in status. The essay concludes that the structures of identity that develop through activism are not quite the same as the identities long-held by poor, landless Dalit people in rural areas, and that the two should not necessarily be conflated in research. Her work is crucial when forming an understanding of the cultural songs from the Tharu community – their subjectivity and the way they have evolved over time and will continue to develop as Dalit identity evolves. Some of the songs that are translated here are not only cultural performances, they are also acts of cultural preservation, and events of community pride in the face of discrimination. They bring communities together, combat cultural erasure and affirm Tharu identity. This political context is essential reading when analysing the translated versions of these songs in order to gain a full understanding of their position in Tharu culture.

Himalayan researcher Gisèle Krauskopff's essay 'From Caste Association'<sup>28</sup> relays stories of people from rural regions who are often forgotten in both political and scholarly accounts of the fallout of the massacre of the royal family and the civil war from 1996 to 2006. Krauskopff tells the stories of poor families in rural regions, who have suffered as a result of failed development projects, political corruption and years of insurgency. This is an important text for providing insight into intersectionality in Nepal: a place where women who are low-caste suffer from multiple systems of oppression and are forced to walk the line between resistance and compliance for the sake of their own safety. It adds depth and insight into the theories outlined by scholars like Guneratne and Cameron, and sheds light on the attitudes that people from low-caste communities might have about challenging their own status. Parizat's poem 'Mother', set in the rural farmlands of Nepal, refers to a woman who is a 'twelve-ribbed skeleton', who suffers the effects of poverty, loss of land, sexual violence and reproductive coercion. A full contextual

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<sup>28</sup> Gisèle Krauskopff, 'From Caste Association to Cultural Ethnic Association' from *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences* (Berghahn Books, 2007) 203

understanding of how different systems of oppression are related to one another is necessary in order to draw out the significance of the character's identity and position in society.

With a similar focus to Mary Cameron's work, Sapkota's 'Contested Identity Politics in Nepal',<sup>29</sup> analyses the formation of identity politics in Nepal from a view point of the Tharu movement, one of the largest ethnic movements in the country. The essay argues that one of the driving forces behind Tharu communities coming together under one recognised identity was to contest and address poverty, inequality and marginalisation. Like Cameron and Guneratne, Sapkota recognises the relatively recent nature of the Tharu as a unified caste and explores the modern suspicion and discrimination that Tharu people still face from systems of power and high-caste Nepalis. Sapkota's work helps to position and contextualise Tharu poetry and the types of marginalisation often alluded to by writers. In poems such as 'My mind is not at peace' by Tharu writer Urmila Kumari Chaudhary, lines that claim that the 'behaviour of our society is fetid' and that society 'idealises falsehood' are not elaborated on, either in the Tharu version or the English translation, so a theoretical background in Tharu power struggle and discrimination helps to appropriately contextualise poems like Chaudhary's so that the poet's anger and despair with society have a contextual explanation that assists with thorough analysis.

In a similar style, cultural anthropologist Stephen Folmar outlines the strategies employed by Dalits to negotiate the politics of their local environments in 'Identity Politics Among Dalits in Nepal'.<sup>30</sup> He explores how identities become complex within frameworks of inclusion and exclusion as Dalit people hide their castes or adopt anonymity. He identifies inter-caste boundaries and organised movements that have challenged caste structures or incited rebellion against imposed positions of dependence and subservience. As other scholars have, he acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of caste identity, but he focuses more on the ways in

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<sup>29</sup> Mahendra Sapkota, 'Contested Identity Politics in Nepal: Implications from Tharu Movement', (*IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.19, 2014) 23

<sup>30</sup> Steven Folmar, 'Identity Politics Among Dalits in Nepal', (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.27, 2007)

which people may challenge or elude their subservient positions in the caste system. In a comparable way to the claims that Sapkota makes, Folmar acknowledges that many Dalit people may seem accepting and subservient on the surface, as the risks involved in upsetting high-caste people on whom they depend can be too great.

There is only one academic study that has specifically researched the barriers to education for Tharu girls. In *Daughters of the Tharu*,<sup>31</sup> education academic Mary Ann Maslak examines the cultural conditions and circumstances that influence the process of educational decision making for girls in Nepal, recognizing and studying the significant, yet often forgotten, voices of women. Maslak explores the cultural and socio-political conditions that shape, mould and dictate individual agency, conditions that determine the educational choices women make for their daughters. The study seeks to go beyond the existing educational participation literature by exploring how ethnic identity, ethnic interaction, religious beliefs, and religious rituals function as interweaving sociocultural forces in the community and how familial relations in the home are influenced by the power structures that subsume gender roles. A common theme in poetry by Nepali women is the frustration they feel at a lack of education – this study illustrates many of the causes that prevent girls going to school and the disadvantages this leads to later in life. It also shows the potential risks that a girl might face in expressing dissatisfaction over her social status and goes some way to explaining why some Nepali women write with a nervous style, as they negotiate the risks of expressing discontent in their work.

When bringing the conclusions of these texts together, they paint a clear picture of the history and the trajectory of the Tharu caste, with insight into discrimination that the Tharu face and how they structure their lives in spite of this oppression. It would be easy to point to the dearth of research on the effects of the unification of the Tharu castes, their subsequent organised political efforts, and the effects that these have had on the standard of living for the

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Ann Maslak, *Daughters of the Tharu: Gender, ethnicity, religion, and the education of Nepali girls*, (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003)

Tharu; however, it may well be argued that activism designed to involve the Tharu in national debate and centralised political efforts is a comparatively recent phenomenon, and that research into its effects is likely to attract scholarly interest in the future, as the Tharu gain recognition beyond the boundaries of their own communities.

It is important to articulate, finally, that irrespective of the depth of fieldwork and engagement with sources, the position of this thesis is a Euro-centric one: it is written from a European viewpoint, so any efforts to debunk Orientalist myths about Nepal are still made from a Western viewpoint. Although much of the drive of this thesis is to correct problematic literary representations of South Asian women, that does not mean that there is not the potential for harmful myths to be written, either about Nepali female poets or in Nepali characters in the poetry. An attempt to make rural Nepalese society more accessible to the West and Western scholars requires vigilance in each argument: there is a power dynamic at play between Western academia and Eastern subjects that requires a sustained sense of awareness and responsibility throughout. One of the main concerns in the formulation of this thesis remains with the potential impact of the writing among Western audiences: therefore, although no ethical approval was mandated for this type of thesis, I did follow guidelines of integrity suggested for researching in a developing country. Full ethical procedures are detailed on p.242.

## Hinduism and Women in Nepal

Nepal has been built upon Hindu *dharma*<sup>32</sup> since the beginning of recorded history and Hinduism remains the dominant religion to this day, with around 80% of the population identifying as Hindu in the 2011 census.<sup>33</sup> Up until 2008, (following the removal of King Gyanendra,) the country was officially recognised as a Hindu kingdom. Nepal is now a democratic, secular state, and (according to its own constitution) allows religious freedom, but the social structures of Hinduism continue to shape societal structure and values both in the home and in the country's superstructure. An understanding of Hindu values is required in order to fully comprehend how the religious ideology, and the enforced caste system, both position women in society as second-class citizens from birth.

Hinduism has dominated all aspects of social life in Nepal for so long that social and political issues cannot be analysed without accounting for their religious context. With regards to Hindu ideas about how society should be ordered, theology scholar Kim Knott describes 'social and religious questions' as 'inextricably linked' to one another, and a distinction between the two as 'artificial and unworkable'. She claims that 'caste and gender issues are not simply social matters requiring a secular response; they are underpinned by religious ideas and maintained by customary practices.'<sup>34</sup>

Writer and activist Sita Agarwal lost her sister to a dowry-related homicide. In her book 'Genocide of Hindu Women', dedicated to her sister and written from what Agarwal describes as a 'humanitarian perspective', Agarwal describes Hinduism as inherently 'anti-woman'. She lists social phenomena inflicted on women in the name of Hinduism, including female infanticide, child marriage, bride burning and widow burning, rules preventing women from divorcing or re-

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<sup>32</sup> This is a term that refers correct way of living according the Hinduism. It includes, behaviours, laws, and societal conduct, but also covers cosmic law and the power that upholds the universe.

<sup>33</sup> Government of Nepal, *National Population and Housing Census 2011*, (Kathmandu, National Planning Commission Secretariat, Central Bureau of Statistics) 2012

<sup>34</sup> Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000) 74

marrying, enforced illiteracy, rigorous chaperonage, and the effects of stripping women of property and enforcing the dowry system. Agarwal paints a picture of women rigorously and systematically devalued by Hindu dharma throughout history.<sup>35</sup>

Though the origins of these social norms pre-date the modern male population by centuries, they are still upheld by the male household heads in today's Nepal, even in families who do not practice Hinduism. Sociology scholar Steve Darné identifies that 'these macro gender structures are constituted through microinteraction rituals. Hindu men recognize their self-interest in these interaction rituals - they know that they benefit from women's subordination.'<sup>36</sup> Women are socialised from an early age to submit to these 'anti-women' behaviours, and through the stripping of their rights that Agarwal identifies, their lives are determined entirely at the hands of their male counterparts, who are socialised into superior identities from a young age.

Other sources agree with Agarwal's overview of women's status according to Hinduism: to return to Kim Knott's authoritative overview of Hinduism, she describes how, according to Hindu dharma, 'high-caste women [ . . . ] should be under the protection of fathers, husbands and then sons. They should never be independent, owing to their weak, fickle nature and the social consequences of allowing women to act outside male authority. [ . . . ] a good wife should serve even a bad husband as God.'<sup>37</sup> Women's Studies academic Sikata Banerjee supports this argument in her writing where she claims that the structure of the family unit is perceived to rely on the obedience of the females in the family: 'the harmonious Hindu family [is] tied to the construct of women as chaste and virtuous', and that to educate women is to encourage them to deviate from these prescribed roles.<sup>38</sup> Women are expected to visually signal their submission to

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<sup>35</sup> Sita Agarwal, *Genocide of Women in Hinduism*, (Jaipur, Wayback Machine, 1999)

<sup>36</sup> Steve Darné, *Hindu Men Talk about Controlling Women: Cultural Ideas as a Tool of the Powerful*, (Sociological Perspectives Vol. 37, Issue 2, 1994) 203-27

<sup>37</sup> Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 75

<sup>38</sup> Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India*, (New York, State University of New York Press, 2005) 147

these virtues through behaviours: ‘not laughing freely, walking with lowered eyes, stifling creative fashion to preserve modesty, remaining ever vigilant that one’s physical demeanour is not provocative’.<sup>39</sup>

Women from Dalit communities, like the Tharu in Chitwan, face multiple forms of discrimination: they are disempowered in their homes as well as in the wider community as a result of Hindu dogma and a caste system that classify them as second-class citizens. A report for the ‘National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights’ commented that: ‘As women, both [high caste and low caste] are subjected to gender discrimination and violence. In the case of Dalit woman, however, the devaluation of her personality takes on a double dimension: she is devalued not only as woman, but also as Dalit.’<sup>40</sup> Nepalese society systematically devalues Dalit women through allowing schools to ban low-caste children, and through failing to defend their employment rights. One ethnicity study into low-caste activist groups that advocate for the rights of their own communities found that ‘women’s concerns and perspectives are crucially distorted or ignored by the self-appointed spokesmen’, so community projects run by Dalit groups failed to liberate women in the communities.<sup>41</sup>

Dalit women are considered to have body impurity but also occupational impurity: they are not only lowly because of their caste status but also because they engage in labour that is considered physically dirty.<sup>42</sup> Women are assigned to the outskirts of society and expected to perform the most difficult, dangerous and demeaning tasks, often working in servant or slave roles for dominant-caste families.<sup>43</sup> This enforced physical distance between Dalit women and the rest of the community not only devalues them, but also puts them at risk of physical violence

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<sup>39</sup> Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a Man!* 147

<sup>40</sup> Aloysius Irudayam, Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee, *Dalit Women Speak Out*, (New Delhi, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2006) 35

<sup>41</sup> David N. Gellner, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka, John Whelpton, *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, (Oxford, Routledge, 2005) 19

<sup>42</sup> Mary Cameron, *On the Edge of Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal*, (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1998) 7

<sup>43</sup> Kim Knott, *Hinduism: A Very Short Introduction*, 75



from male members of society who are emboldened by the fact that the police are rarely interested in pursuing complaints brought by low-caste women against dominant-caste men.

Religious fundamentalism plays a major part in the continued violations of the rights of Dalit women: human rights lawyer Kalpana Kannabiran writes that ‘in a context of increasing religious nationalism, fundamentalism and dominant caste chauvinism, of globalisation and its disastrous consequences for the poor [almost exclusively Dalit], [ . . . ] the situation of Dalit women is particularly troubling.’<sup>44</sup> Kannabiran recognises that it is not just political failings that allow the continuation of poor treatment of Dalit women, but also a religious ideology that fails to recognise them as equal citizens.

Dalit women are systematically punished when they are seen to transgress caste norms or assert rights over public spaces: dominant castes will often utilize violence to reinforce caste norms and prevent Dalit women from gaining autonomy or independence. A campaign on Dalit human rights identifies that ‘the process of Dalit women’s empowerment in itself is perceived as a challenge to caste and patriarchal structures.’<sup>45</sup> Given their untouchability status and classification as women of ‘loose morals’, they are perceived as obtainable for male exploitation with almost no social or legal ramifications.<sup>46</sup> Violence against Dalit women is not only common, it is also used strategically by dominant castes: it is ‘utilized to deny them opportunities, choices, and freedoms at multiple levels, undermining not only Dalit women’s dignity but and self-respect, but also their right to development.’<sup>47</sup> For Dalit women, patterns of sexual aggression can be difficult to address: the rhetoric of shame around female sexuality prevents women from reporting or resisting assaults, and women can find themselves blamed for violence perpetuated against them through accusations of inappropriate behaviour or a lack of modesty. Sikata Banerjee writes that ‘[women’s] lives are framed in terms of femininity and sexual

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<sup>44</sup> Kalpana Kannabiran, *Caste, the Academy and Dalit Women*, (Chennai, The Times of India, The Hindu Group, 2001) 4

<sup>45</sup> Aloysius Irudayam et al, *Dalit Women Speak Out*, 21

<sup>46</sup> Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a Man!* 146

<sup>47</sup> Aloysius Irudayam et al, *Dalit Women Speak Out*, 21

responsibilities, and their bodies, genders and sexualities are social effects of a system that requires self-surveillance and internalization of responsibility.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, sexual violence that is motivated by a desire to subjugate Dalit women and prevent them from challenging caste and patriarchal structures is still seen, socially speaking, as a problem that the recipients of violence are responsible for solving.

Though there have been efforts to launch community projects designed to improve the safety and rights of Dalit women, it has proved difficult to bring the voices of those affected to the forefront of the discussion. Lynn Bennett's report on the social and economic status of women in Nepal found that 'even when [Dalit women] are able to join various types of women's groups, their voices are often muted by the more confident and highly educated BCN [Barun-Chhetri] women unless special efforts are made to ensure that they participate in the governance of the group.'<sup>49</sup> A study into the politics behind Dalit women's engagement (or lack of engagement) with NGO projects concluded that Dalit women were unlikely to persevere with long-term projects with NGOs because the organisations were ill-equipped to work with illiterate women who spoke marginalised languages and were committed to long work hours with their current occupations.<sup>50</sup> In order for literacy projects to be effective, rural women require a literacy kit that is different to ones written for urban women.<sup>51</sup> A policy formulation in 2007 also identified that projects by both Nepal and foreign agencies failed to take an intersectional approach, allowing Dalit women to fall through the cracks. Like Govinda's study, the writers of this report identify a failure to account for illiteracy and remote geographical location of Dalit women. As a consequence: 'policy measures developed for women are very general (not

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<sup>48</sup> Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a Man!* 146

<sup>49</sup> Lynn Bennett, *Gender, Caste and ethnic Exclusion in Nepal: Following the Policy Process from Analysis to Action*, (World Bank, Arusha Conference 'New Frontiers of Social Policy'- December 12-15, 2005) 20

<sup>50</sup> Radhika Govinda, *In the Name of 'Poor and Marginalised'? Politics of NGO Activism with Dalit Women in Rural North India*, (Cambridge, *Journal of South Asian Development*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, 2009) 45-64

<sup>51</sup> Sujata Khandekar, 'Literacy brought us to the forefront' from *Women, Literacy and Development*, (New York, Routledge, 2004) 210

specifically addressing Dalit women's issues such as education, health, and governance) and, therefore they neither recognize nor address the core problems that Dalit women face.<sup>52</sup>

Bennett summarises the cause of this issue as follows:

The welfare approach characterises women as uniformly 'backward, illiterate and tradition-bound'. The assumption underlying this view is that a uniform 'Hindu patriarchy' constrains all women in the same way and therefore, a single policy towards women is appropriate regardless of their class, caste, ethnicity, religion and age. In other words, the understanding of gender has ignored the important specificities of class, caste, ethnic, age and other cross-cutting divides.<sup>53</sup>

When considering these patterns of how Hindu dharma and its model of the caste system have shaped Nepal's social history, a cultural landscape emerges that exposes the ways in which Nepali women are pressured into subservient roles from birth. The presence of the caste system results in Dalit women facing an additional structure of discrimination, and face oppression not only from the gendered structure of their own household but also from the dominant castes in their surrounding community, who use violence to continue to enforce both caste and patriarchal structures. Gender equality projects have so-far struggled to bring about long-term, meaningful change for Dalit women due to aid models that fail to account for the added challenges that low-caste women face.

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<sup>52</sup> Ramu Bishwakarma, Valerie Hunt, Anna Zajicek, *Educating Dalit Women: Beyond a One-Dimensional Policy Formulation*, (Kathmandu, Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Vol. 27, 2007) 35

<sup>53</sup> Lynn Bennett, *Gender, Caste and ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*, 24

## History & Style of Nepali Poetry

Nepali poetry is still today rooted in its history of control by elites and Western condescension. When examining the early poets and styles that set the trajectory for the coming decades of poetry, we can begin to see why.

Michael Hutt is the world's preeminent scholar of Nepali literature, media, and politics, and occupies the post of Professor of Himalayan studies and Nepali literature at the School of Oriental and African studies within the University of London. His work makes up a significant portion of existing academic study of Nepali literature and culture. It is Hutt who has identified Bhanubhakta Acharya's poetry, published around the mid-1800s, as the first authentically Nepali work from Nepal.<sup>54</sup>

Acharya's translation of *The Ramayan*, the well-known Nepali epic poem (and by far the most translated), requires thorough contextual knowledge of the era of King Dasharatha in the Ikshvaku dynasty and contains many references to ancient puranic literature (Hindu texts),<sup>55</sup> specific details which would have been far beyond the socially (orally) shared teachings of Hinduism that circulated among non-elite class of the population. However, these were the first poems that were not merely translated from Hindi into Nepali,<sup>56</sup> as was traditionally the case: Hutt claims Acharya's collections as among 'the most important and best loved works of Nepal' as well as 'a model for subsequent writers'.<sup>57</sup> *The Ramayana* is still studied today and is still considered the seminal *maha-kavya* (epic poem).

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<sup>54</sup> Michael James Hutt, *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature* (University of California Press: 1991) 6

<sup>55</sup> Usha Shukla, *Issues in the Rama story: genesis, impact and resolution*, (International Journal for Indian Studies, Vol.21, 2009) 69

<sup>56</sup> Pratyoush Onta, *The Career of Bhanubakta as a History of Nepali National Culture, 1940-1999*, (Studies in Nepali History and Society, 1999) 101

<sup>57</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 6

In the early 1900s, emerging Nepali poetry was predominantly created by writers like Lekhnath Paudyal, Gopal Prasad Rimal, and Mohan Koirala who were male, Barun-Chhetri caste, with a high social status and a private education, and whose poetry was written and published in the conventional way.<sup>58</sup> This poetry would thus have been out of the reach of the vast majority of Nepali citizens, especially those from rural areas and lower classes or castes, as few outside Kathmandu would have been able to purchase it or see themselves authentically represented in it – if were they even literate. National literacy was only first measured in Nepal in 1980, when it was found that only 20.6 percent of the population could read and write, a percentage that is almost certainly higher than it would have been in the beginning of the century.<sup>59</sup> Even today, the UN ranks Nepal's literacy population at around 52 percent,<sup>60</sup> so in the early 1900s it might have been as low as, or lower than, 10 percent nationally. Through dissemination of poetry as written text alone, poetry was kept resolutely out of reach of the masses – and certainly beyond the reach of women.

Institutionally enforced censorship also played a significant role in shaping the earliest Nepali poetry. The 'Gorkha Language Publication Committee' was founded in 1913, and although the committee worked to publish poetry as well as stories and articles in Nepali in the *Gorkhapatra*, it also had a strong code of censorship, which was enforced completely, as it was the only publishing house in the country.<sup>61</sup> Nepal, at this time, was under the rule of the Rana regime: a dynasty of autocratic leaders who feared that dissemination of information would lead to their downfall. Political historian Gopi Nath Sharma writes that this was part of the Ranas' deliberate failure to universalise education, and that measures to disseminate knowledge were against the dictate of Jung Bahadur Rana (the founder of the dynasty) who had stated, 'Impart

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<sup>58</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 15

<sup>59</sup> UNESCO Kathmandu, *Literacy Status in Nepal*, (Literacy Mapping Study Team, 2013) 1

<sup>60</sup> S. Thapa, abstract, 'The human development index: a portrait of the 75 districts in Nepal', (*Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, 1995) 3

<sup>61</sup> Lok Raj Baral, *The Press in Nepal, 1952-74*, (*Contributions to Nepalese Studies Journal*, 1975) 176

English education to your sons and keep mum for others',<sup>62</sup> 'others' in this case meaning women or girls. One of the main criteria was that politically controversial statements would not be tolerated, and that end, any comments about the administration were required to be sufficiently oblique. To give an example of the rigour with which this censorship was enforced, Chandra D. Bhatta notes that

in 1920, Krishnalal Adhikari was jailed for nine years for writing in his book introduction that "Foreign dogs were being pampered in Nepal, although native dogs were the only useful ones so far as protection against thieves were concerned ..." which was taken to be a criticism against the administration.<sup>63</sup>

Anyone who attempted to print a book without the committee's approval would have all copies seized and the writer would be fined fifty rupees – not an insignificant amount at the time. Hutt describes this period of censorship as being enforced with 'extreme severity', and this drastic level of control as having an impact on the nature of Nepal's seminal poetry.<sup>64</sup> Poets had no platform with which to publish works that levelled criticism at the government or the royal Rana regime.

There was simply no method by which a writer could freely share work that articulated criticisms of those in powerful positions within Nepal. Himalayan Studies scholar Slok Gyawali notes: '[w]hile the constitution provides every citizen with the freedom of opinion and expression, the list of 'reasonable restrictions' is so long and flexible that freedom becomes meritless.' Even through to 1990, there were strict laws about 'public security, national unity,

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<sup>62</sup> Gopi Nath Sharma, *The Impact of Education During the Rana Period in Nepal*, (Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, 1990) 4

<sup>63</sup> Chandra D. Bhatta, *The Interface between the State and Civil Society in Nepal*, (Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, 2016) 65

<sup>64</sup> Michael J. Hutt, 'Reflections of Political Change in Modern Nepali Literature', (*Kailash – Journal of Himalayan Studies*, Vol. 15, 1989) 138

party political activity and defamation of the royal family'.<sup>65</sup> The risk of writing truthfully about experiences of oppression and poverty were simply too much for most writers, who risked leaving behind families with no means of survival if they were punished with imprisonment.

Prof. Govinda Raj Bhattarai makes a key argument on the subject of Nepali language itself as a framework for poetic form and on how early Nepali poetry developed, that 'Old Nepali [poets] managed to do with limited resources—limited words, experiences, structural patterns and thematic varieties. Naturally a young language could offer them very little.'<sup>66</sup> Because of the history of colonial, cultural encroachment (the voluminous influences of Hindi language and culture, itself encroached upon by the English) and the fractured, dialectical regionalism of Nepali language itself, many feel that a nationally unified Nepali language is still 'young,' i.e. historically recent and still developing.<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting that, unlike much of Western poetry, early Nepali poets were setting literary trends at a time when literary devices could not be established in the way the modern English reader is used to, because the structure of Nepali language simply was not robust enough to support it – a result of the move towards homogenization of Nepali languages resulted, understandably enough, in the lack of universally agreed upon structural rules,<sup>68</sup> even today, if one were to ask a five different Nepali people for a translation of a straightforward English sentence, then you would likely receive five different answers, each confidently translated according to their own ideas of language structures. Innovative, experimental uses of language risked being counterproductive, as inventive ways of writing in a language that was still establishing its rules did not produce poetry that felt fresh and ground-breaking, but rather that confused and muddled its contents and made it inaccessible.

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<sup>65</sup> Slok Gyawali, *Censorship in Nepal: Forms and Evolution*, (2014)

[https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central\\_south\\_asia/censorship-in-nepal-forms-evolution-73208/](https://www.fairobserver.com/region/central_south_asia/censorship-in-nepal-forms-evolution-73208/)

<sup>66</sup> Govindra Raj Bhattarai, *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest: Collected Modern Nepali Poems* (Nepali Kalasahitya Pratishthan: 2010) 11

<sup>67</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 173

<sup>68</sup> Govinda Raj Bhattarai, Preface 'Trends in Modern Nepali Poetry Preface' from *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest*, (Nepali Kalasahitya Pratishthan, 2011) iv

It wasn't until 1934 that *Sharada* – Kathmandu's first literary journal – was launched with the help of a government subsidy and was not restricted by the enforcements of *Gorkhapatra*. With poetry and politics being so tightly interwoven in Nepal, it followed that a progression from a single literary publication led to more room for poets to begin to express criticism of the Ranas, and to influence public opinion. Political parties in Nepal had begun to form as a method of resistance against the Rana autocracy – the political rise that would continue to grow and eventually overthrow the Ranas in 1950-1951, so writers felt more confident in making political statements that might be considered controversial.<sup>69</sup> Although this was by no means the end of government enforced censorship, nor the persecution of political writers, it was the first era of compromise between the authorities and the rising population of political poets, and the birth of a more diverse and sophisticated Nepali poetry. Among these poets was Lakshmi-Prasad Devkota, who wrote in a complex, philosophically dense style, and who is still considered one of the most influential and innovative poets in Nepali history. His romantic, florid writing with winding, complex sentence structure was stylistically influential, and many subsequent poets sought to replicate this intricate style, later attempting to apply that poetic frame to the lived experience of the everyday, lower class Nepal.<sup>71</sup>

As a result of the temporarily relaxed attitude towards censorship, Nepali poetry began to diversify stylistically, and this led to a gradual shift away from strictly formulaic poetry in later decades. Influences became more plural, and poets drew inspiration from Bengali and Urdu as well as the more traditional Hindi. Devkota used meter and rhyme taken from Nepali folk songs to influence the structure of his poetry. *Jhyaure* (musical metre) became increasingly popular, and was a significant shift in accepted poetic form, as folk songs were distinctly more accessible for those without access to a comprehensive education. Influences like this are still clearly apparent

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<sup>69</sup> Krishna Hatchhetu, 'Nepali Politics: People-Parties Interface' from *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences*, (Berghahn Books, 2007) 133

<sup>71</sup> Abhi Subedi, *Modern Nepalese Poems and Paintings: Canons and Contexts*, (Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol 19, 1992) 4



in contemporary works; poets such as Momila Joshi write with jhyaure influences, as she uses the meter and repetition from rural folk songs to shape her long poems.<sup>72</sup> The accepted plurality of styles truly emerged in the post-civil-war (post-2006) era as more diverse sections of the population became able to write poetry: it was during this age that, for the first time, more of the country's adult population were literate than not. It wasn't until poetry ceased to be reserved for the middle-class Barun-Chhetri men of Kathmandu that diversification of style was truly embraced.

But back in the 1940s, however, Nepali poets experienced another vicious crackdown on censorship: there was a new Rana leader in power, Shri Tin Juddha Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana. He had witnessed more progressive leaders be exiled to India and felt pressure to take extreme measures in preventing uprising. During his reign in the 1940s, several poets were jailed for sedition. Siddhicharan Shrestha was jailed from 1940 to 1945 for the single line in his poem that translates roughly to 'Without revolution there can be no real peace.'<sup>73</sup> Yet again, poets found themselves risking exile and imprisonment for speaking out against governmental authorities in the written word. Despite their efforts to silence any attempts at organised resistance, 'along the Indian border, Nepalese-language newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets were being published and slipped into Nepal.'<sup>74</sup> Poets had begun to find that by settling in places like Darjeeling, they were able to evade the censorship of the autocracy and smuggle literature across the border back to Nepal.

In 1951, 'The *Jana Kranti* (People's Revolution) against the autocratic Ranas sought to establish parliamentary democracy, and successfully replaced the Rana autocracy with a new

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<sup>72</sup> (Examples of this comparison cannot be shown here as Devkota writes in Nepali: to include the Sanskrit version would not be enlightening to the Western reader, and to translate to English would be to lose the very meter and rhyme that exists in the Nepali version.)

<sup>73</sup> The poem 'We All Nepali' (1940) in *Nepal Bhasa*

<sup>74</sup> Rajendra Dev Acharya, *Political censorship and its impact in Nepal*, (Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers, 2006) 24

political system under King Mahendra'.<sup>75</sup> Following the collapse of the Rana regime and the subsequent release of political prisoners who had been accused of inciting insurgency, poetry took a sudden political turn, as the censorship the Ranas had enforced so severely was lifted. The political changes in the 1950s in Nepal are regarded as the beginning of the modern era of poetry.<sup>76</sup> The revolution (the political movement against the direct rule of the Rana regime) brought a greater sense of literary freedom and a large number of withheld works were finally published. However, pre-revolutionary poets continued to dominate the literary field; it was still difficult for many poets to break into the field and find people willing to publish work that reflected on their experiences.

Poetry from the 1960s introduced tropes still popular in Nepal's modern poetry. Hutt refers to much of the work of the 1960s as the beginning a trend of cynicism and social alienation that women poets commonly adopt today, as they explore themes of disillusionment and a lack of faith in their country's leadership.<sup>77</sup> For example, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa and Toya Gurung, both published poets in Nepal who are featured in the attached analysis, make references to the failings and corruption of the Nepalese government. In her poem 'Exile: An Invitation to a Struggle', Dhompa writes

In fifty years, dogs from rival villages  
 have lost and won their wars. Their heirs walk  
 with tails between their legs.  
 We pray for a better life.

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<sup>75</sup> Mandip Rai, *Enduring inequalities: Practices of caste and development in new Nepal*, (PhD thesis submitted to The Australian National University) 34

<sup>76</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 5

<sup>77</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 30

While, in ‘History Can’t Last in this Country’, Gurung says ‘One is obliged to call them peace-seekers / though one may not wish to’. Both reflect this tone of pessimism and lack of faith in the country’s ability to progress.

The 1960s was the decade when poet Mohan Koirala reached the height of popularity: he had not only expressed overt condemnation of the Rana regime in the preceding decades, but also utilised mythological references. He references a ‘moonbird’ in ‘An Introduction to the Land’ as well as mythological aspects of Hindu-Buddhist beliefs, such as the manifestation of Shiva in the form of Pachali Bhairava, and in ‘The Martyrs’, the Bishnumati River takes on a godlike quality. This method of subverting mythological symbolism and utilising it to express discontent was a new trend that proved influential over the following decades. Poets featured in the thesis analysis like Momila Joshi and Manju Kanchuli went on to utilise the symbolism of the gods in a way that did not reflect religious reverence, but instead subverted those styles of poetry that involved dogmatic instruction. In ‘A Strange Temple’, Manju Kanchuli wrote ‘Behind the locked temple door there is no god at all’, and Momila Joshi wrote ‘by not repeating the crime / man becomes the God of humans’.<sup>79</sup>

Significantly, the 1960s was also the decade that saw the emergence of female poets – Banira Giri and Parizat, although they were largely dismissed and undervalued by a country that was not wholly appreciative of women who engaged in independent expression: as Nepali writer Pushpa Sharma writes: ‘Before being regarded as a woman writer, a woman is considered first as a housewife, then a partner of her husband, and thirdly as a working woman’.<sup>80</sup> However, poetry by Giri and Parizat was popular among certain groups as, like Koirala, they wrote pessimistically about their country’s lack of opportunity. We saw how ‘Exile: an invitation to a struggle’ described the toll of drawn-out conflict on civilians: ‘In fifty years, dogs from rival villages / have lost and won their wars. Their heirs walk / with tails between their legs’. Koirala echoes similar

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<sup>79</sup> Poems in attached appendix p.296 and

<sup>80</sup> Pushpa Sharma, *A Woman-writer in Nepali*, (Indian Literature, Vol.35, 1992) 142

sentiments in 'The Martyrs', where he describes how war has 'trampled the playground of many a child, / washed the vermillion from their hair' (removed their blessings); it 'fills the land with corpses' and 'the stench of dead memories'.<sup>81</sup> Both poets share a sense of pessimism as they evoke the stagnation they induced by the country's corruption and violence.

It was around the time of the 1950s and 1960s that Raj Bhattarai identifies English literature as among the significant influences on Nepali literature: "The poets borrowed from the past and they learned from other literatures, especially Hindi and English, and they drew much from world events."<sup>82</sup> There had, by this time, been a significant trend of poets living, writing, and publishing in Darjeeling. As Hindi and English were literary influences in India, it followed that these trends also began to influence Nepali literature. These influences from Darjeeling, coupled with the trend for teaching English in schools, led to this increase in English style and trends.<sup>83</sup> Bhattarai identifies early Romantic poets Wordsworth and Blake, as well as second generation Romantic poets Shelley and Keats as being among the writers most popularly read by leading Nepali writers. It is possible that the concerns over the elitism of poetry and the rejection of subject matter that was irrelevant to the lower classes was influenced in part by writers like Wordsworth, who shared these anxieties about the accessibility of poetry. Blake wrote of the plight of soldiers and chimney sweeps in a way similar to poets like Giri and Parizat, who draw the focus of poetry away from figures of entitlement and towards those living on the margins and in abject poverty. It is possible that these correlations in changes of trends are incidental, as the effects on literary trajectory are complex and multifaceted, but it is certainly true that it was during the 1960s that there was a rise in overall literacy, specifically in reading and writing in

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<sup>81</sup> Mohan Koirala, 'The Martyrs,' from *Four Poems by Mohan Koirala; Translated by Michael Hutt*, (Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Vol.8, 1988,) (First published in Sharada vol. 20, 1955. Original title *Shahid*) 4

<sup>82</sup> Momila, *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest*, 13

<sup>83</sup> Pratyoush Onta, *Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India: The Rhetoric of Jati Improvement, Rediscovery of Bhanubhakta and the Writing of Bir History*, (Studies in Nepali History and Society, Vol.1) 48

English – it was a time when many schools taught their curriculum in English, rather than Nepali.

Bhupi Sherchan's 1969 collection *Ghumne Mech Mathi Andho Manche* (*Blind Man in a Revolving Chair*) received the 'Sajha Puraskar' prize and is still revered amongst much of today's generation of young poets. Sherchan not only popularised the accessible free verse form, but also dramatically diversified emotional tonality with his work, as he wrote with fury and humour. His prevailing mood is ironic, and his dispassionate anger still resonates deeply with many young Nepali poets who feel frustration and distrust at their government. There are distinct similarities between Sherchan's lines such as 'The sun always rises from the kettle, / and sets in an empty glass'<sup>84</sup> and some of Susmita Nepal's poems featured (in translation) in the analysed poems, which use the same tool of circular time frames and monotony as a way to express hopelessness. Nepal's line 'Each morning spills onto her face / Each evening squeezes her expression' from 'Rice Grains of Words' describe the same repetitious life. In 'Mother', the lines '[m]other cuts each morning / with the edge of a sickle' and '[s]he wants to hide the rising moon / in the folds of her clothes'<sup>85</sup> also suggest an urge to control time, to prevent it from passing, to pause it or re-direct its path. Like Sherchan, her tone is dispassionate as she writes about the lack of control many feel over their livelihoods in a country that fails to prioritise the liberation of women.

Though it began in the 1950s and 1960s, it took a long time for Nepali poetry to fully embrace the realities of the society that produced it. It wasn't until Bhupi Sherchan's work that poetry really became a medium for populist criticism. Significantly, in 1979, there were some major alterations in protest politics. A peaceful student rally that was protesting against the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan, was prevented from reaching the Pakistani embassy as police were concerned that the protesters would block the

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<sup>84</sup> Michael J Hutt, *The life of Bhupi Sherchan – Poetry and Politics in Post-Rana Nepal*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010) 21

<sup>85</sup> Susmita Nepal, *The Essence of Nepali Womanhood*, (Nepali Times, Issue 73, 2001) archive.nepalitimes.com

road while King Birendra's car was nearby. Clashes broke out between the protestors and police that were so violent they resulted in multiple fatalities, and as the unrest grew over the following three days, King Birendra was forced to investigate the students' demands.<sup>86</sup> In the same year, the Newar<sup>87</sup> community began to organise, and the Association of Newar Speakers launched a rally that demanded that the government grant equal rights for all languages in Nepal to be officially recognised.<sup>88</sup>

These political uprisings led to fundamental developments in Nepali poetry, which had 'descended from its ivory tower to become a medium for the expression of popular sentiment'.<sup>89</sup> In the capital, along with this new era of political freedom and a sense of safety in numbers, young people gathered on New Road (in central Kathmandu) in what became known as the *Sadak Kavita Kranti* (Street Poetry Revolution). Each evening students gathered to share poetry that was almost exclusively written to influence voters in the upcoming referendum: the population were due to vote between a new multi-party democratic system or a continuation of the Panchayat system of self-governance under the power of the king. Poets wrote unanimously in favour of introducing a multi-party system. As poetry now took on an entirely new form, shared in a politically charged setting and often at stirring readings and rallies, this brief but pivotal poetic era was the launch of the most accessible poetry – written to be comprehended and appreciated by all, referencing political sentiment that brought a generation of young people together. This public-spirited poetry reached beyond the boundaries of the elite and even the literate, to be shared by anyone in Kathmandu who cared to stop and listen to the readings. Although 'chapbooks' of these poems were produced and sold, the main interest was in the performance element of the poetry and the new notions of community that it generated as it brought listeners together in shared political interest. Though there is no evidence of a

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<sup>86</sup> Amanda Snellinger, *Crisis in Nepali Student Politics? Analyzing the Gap between Politically Active and Non-Active Students*, (Peace and Democracy in South Asia, Vol. 1, 2005) 24

<sup>87</sup> (Historical inhabitants of Kathmandu valley)

<sup>88</sup> Mahendra Lawoti, *Contentious Politics and Democratization in Nepal*, (SAGE Publications, 2007) 210

<sup>89</sup> Hutt, *Himalayan Voices*, 142

correlation between this sudden popularity of spoken word and an increase in the status of printed poetry, it was a movement that emboldened poets in writing political, public-spirited poetry that was accessible to those outside of the circle of literary elites: this new era of politically-motivated spoken word, contained the kind of rousing energy that we see in some female poets' written work less than a decade later – the protest poetry of Itisha Giri and Manju Kanchuli, as they wrote poems that echoed the anger and urgency of Bhupi Sherchan and the subsequent street poetry era. Poems like Giri's 'When I Have a Daughter'<sup>90</sup> are direct calls to action that are designed to empower and rally other young people.

Raj Bhattarai identifies the post-1990s as an era of plurality and freedom of expression, the point at which styles have diversified and the plethora of poets that are commonly read feels less monochromatic. Importantly, it was a time when female poets began to enter the scene in greater numbers, although they are still in the minority by a significant margin. Translator Manjushree Thapa identifies this as a time when women went from battling 'tokenism' to 'having their voices heard more loudly than ever before'.<sup>91</sup> Western literature plays a greater influence than ever, as women have access to education in greater numbers, and schools more recently have chosen to teach all subjects in English and to teach literary works that come largely from the Western English language canon. American-born avant-garde poets from the Modern era, such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, have become common selections higher education institutions in Nepal, just as they are popular choices for many Western curricula. Students of literature absorb their poetic techniques alongside the influences of traditional Nepali poets.

In addition, cyber culture has caused drastic changes in the way that poetry is consumed, as well as recorded. Poets need not wait to secure a formal publishing agreement, so they can challenge existing notions of who poets are and what a poem can be, as well as re-form notions

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<sup>90</sup> Included in the attached appendix

<sup>91</sup> Manjushree Thapa, 'The Future of Nepali Literature' accessed 10/04/18, *Online Sahitya Digital Library* <http://www.onlinesahitya.com/Future-of-Nepali-Literature>

of poetic community through online forums. Poets can write in their own mother tongues, including marginalised languages, without the concern of whether there is a substantial enough audience to warrant printed publication. They can write poetry that is provocative or expresses unpopular opinions: poetry is no longer restricted by the approval of a publisher. To give an example, Ujjwala Maharjan and Yukta Bajracharya performed a poem called 'Privilege' at a Kathmandu-based spoken word event called March of the Poets in April 2017, and within twelve months the video recording of their performance had 9000 views on YouTube.<sup>92</sup> Maharjan tells the story of her grandmother: how 'the only thing she learned to read as a child was poverty and hunger'. The poem's anecdote about the school girl who had to kneel on the floor to work, who had outgrown her school skirt and couldn't afford underwear, and who is harassed by male peers who sit behind her, would almost certainly be considered too controversial for printed publication by Nepalese publishers. The era of YouTube and social media means that female poets like Maharjan and Bajracharya, who challenge preconceived ideas about acceptable content, can disseminate their poetry without the need to wait for traditional forms of publishing to deem their feminist rhetoric acceptable.

It is vital to note that this is a time when voices from outside the urban centre are finally emerging – poets with a way of life radically different from those raised and educated in Kathmandu. Raj Bhattarai commends this quality of work from these new voices: '[w]hat a great power emerging from outside—they can compete with any center, thought and style, refinement and perfection—these qualities are no longer limited to Kathmandu.'<sup>93</sup>

The experiences of women and members of low-caste communities have only been recorded in poetry very recently, in the context of Nepal's literary history. In their feminist writing from 1979, Gilbert and Gubar claim that the emerging woman writer must struggle to separate herself from her most immediate, direct influences, and to develop her own voice,

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<sup>92</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAuXiEAX93M&t=26s>

<sup>93</sup> Momila, *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest*, 30



rather than to work within the literary framework set out by male predecessors. They go on to assert the near-impossibility of doing this in patriarchal cultures, and write that the emerging voices in women's writing like Austen, Shelley and Brontë often 'seemed odd in relation to the predominantly male literary history defined by the standards of what we have called patriarchal poets'.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, how could Nepali women begin to write themselves into a literary field where women had been consistently omitted or side-lined? As the few female characters who had appeared in literature had been stripped of any indicators of agency or independence, it was difficult for female poets to join a literary canon that had positioned them on the margins.

When writing an updated exploration of Gilbert and Gubar's ideas from 'Anxiety of authorship', Carol J. Singley writes:

If women do read or write despite centuries of male utterances to the contrary, then what is the price of their mastery of language but a loss of identity *as woman*? How can woman read or write herself out of this empty set which defines her?<sup>95</sup>

This reiterates the dilemma for women writers, and certainly one faced by Nepali women, as in any given piece of writing women have been landed with the task of undoing and re-writing themselves in a way that breaks away from the traditional representations of women in literature.

In this manner, we begin to see instances where old traditions have been inverted or rejected entirely. In contrast to pre-modern times, many poets now think of devotional or religious poetry as old-fashioned and restrictive, as many poets reach for greater freedom in thought and expression. There is a clear trend, too, of contemporary female poets taking a step away from verse bound in Hindu rhetoric and using tradition to create tension in their work as

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<sup>94</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 72

<sup>95</sup> Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, (State University of New York Press, 1993) 4

they query and critique it, rather than observing to it unquestioningly. When analysing poems like ‘The Daughter of Your Father’ by Bartika Eam Rai or ‘Tradition’ by Benju Sharma in this analysis, it is clear to see the popular poetic tropes of the 1900s satirised or made ironic, as these poets articulate the disparity between their own world view and a society that clings to tradition and superstition: in Rai’s ‘The Daughter of Your Father’, the line ‘you do not deserve ... your mother’s God anymore’ and ‘truth be told, / you have stopped praying’ articulate the rejection of religious faith, and the loneliness in it.<sup>96</sup> The religious discourse that shaped early poetry, often about family ties, is inverted. In Benju Sharma’s ‘Tradition’, the lines ‘Now I want / this picture smeared with red, effaced’ describe the narrator’s need to blot religious symbolism from her home as she experiences doubt and discomfort at the ‘demands’ of ‘worship’ from her family members.

Literature does not simply remain separate or indifferent from feminist values until women begin to write. It becomes complicit in repressive social consciousness, and even validates discriminatory policy. Just as with many countries, Nepal’s poetry in the past has reflected the omission of women from public consciousness. Along with under-representation, it has exposed judgements on women that force them into a narrow framework of subservient, domestic roles. Some of this poetry remains unchallenged and popular today. Even Devkota’s most well-known poetry allows only the occasional appearance of women, who are described either as ‘beautiful’ or as ‘whores’.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, one of Gopal Prasad Rimal’s most famous poems, one that is still recited in schools today, ‘Aama ko Sapna’ (‘A Mother’s Dream’) is written from the point of view of a woman who, desperately seeking change in Nepal, dreams that she might give birth to a son capable of fighting against the evil forces in the country. Though it is a woman who is granted the narrative voice in his poem, it is her son who is perceived as the

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<sup>96</sup> Poem in attached appendix p.287

<sup>97</sup> Laxmi Prasad Devkota, *‘Crazy’, ‘Muna Madan’, Nepali Visions, Nepal Dreams*, translated by David Rubin, (Columbia University Press: 1980)

change agent; it must have been inconceivable that the woman herself might have herself combatted the corruption she had identified in Nepal. She was so incapable of it, in fact, that her only hope was a child she had not even conceived, but merely dreamed up.

Even in recent years, representations of women in poetry by men have often been reductive, writing women into domestic, passive stereotypes or as love objects for male characters. Tirtha Shrestha's popular poem 'The Women at the Water Tap' describes the domestic work of women as they fetch water to bring home:

The women at the water tap  
are more frolicsome than water,  
their lips move more rapidly  
than the liquid lips  
of water.

The women at the water tap  
fill their jugs,  
singing  
songs of dissatisfaction.  
Sometimes they become  
more licentious than  
the crests and ripples of water,

There is some unresolved tension in the male perspective here: clearly, the narrator feels like an outsider next to the women. He is interested, even attracted, and yet he is excluded by women once they form a group. There is a voyeuristic element to the writing, as he speculates on their sexuality: conversations and songs with which he has no inclusion or involvement. It is a projection of a male fantasy, not a realistic portrayal of the task of fetching water. Not only is

water collection time-consuming and exhausting, it is also the cause of social tension, rather than an opportunity to socialise. Sambriddhi Kharel points out in a study on one communal water source:

[low-caste] women [experience] discrimination coming from high caste women that pertain to water issues, as the community has no taps and has to get water from a common well. Since men are exempt from this tedious task, they enjoy a distance from this everyday inter-caste interaction and do not have to deal with the resulting frustrations.<sup>98</sup>

From Shrestha's elevated position of judgement, he fails to recognise that the experience of collecting water is contentious, stressful, and dangerous for some of society's more vulnerable women. His portrayal of fetching water makes the work sound like a time for socialising, for singing 'songs of dissatisfaction', without accounting for the fact that the task is a source of risk and anxiety for many women.

There is a similar dynamic at play in another of Shrestha's poems, 'Time and the Hill', (also translated by Manjushree Thapa), in which the narrator watches women cut grass:

The girls who cut grass  
 were cutting grass  
 and cutting down others in their talk  
 They didn't realise  
 as they cut grass  
 as they cut down others

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<sup>98</sup> Sambriddhi Kharel, *The dialectics of identity and resistance among Dalits in Nepal*, (University of Pittsburgh Dissertations Publishing, 2010) 146

they were cutting through their youth

During fieldwork, I learnt grass cutting to be one of the most physically tough forms of daily labour: grass is cut to feed domestic goats or cattle, so must be fresh, as fermenting grass causes dangerous colic. Therefore, like water collection, it has to be cut multiple times a day, in all weather conditions and all circumstances: when women are tired or sick, the livestock still have to be fed, and women often have to walk far from their homes to find grass to cut bring.

Shrestha is indeed referring to girls and not women, (the word in the Nepali original poem is *kaiti*), and as with ‘The Women at the Water Tap’ the narrator is preoccupied with his perception of how the girls socialise: ‘their talk’. He claims to know something that the girls don’t – that ‘they were cutting through their youth’ as ‘they cut down others’. Cutting grass is not a task in which the narrator has ever participated: as a man, this type of manual labour would not be expected of him. Yet, the narrator positions himself as the one with the knowledge – he knows something the girls do not – despite the fact that he does not know how to cut grass, nor does he face the risks or physical toll, he knows that the girls are ‘cutting through their youth’: something to which they are apparently oblivious. The narrator exhibits confidence that he is the one who knows better, and that the girls, despite cutting grass every day, have not yet realised their errors. Ultimately, he feels emboldened to criticise the girls for imagined malicious gossip from his passive position as an outsider.

In both poems, as much can be inferred from what the poet omits as what he includes. Shrestha is willing to make women the subject of his poems, but barely beyond objects of male fantasy. There is a gender dynamic that goes entirely unmentioned and unexamined. He writes about forms of labour that are some of the most visible forms of inequality, but projects his own ideas as to what the women talk about, conversations which exclude him, but with no mention of toll, hardship, or risk to the women.

Such narratives are in stark contrast to the female characters portrayed in modern Nepali poetry, where women define their own identities with courage and determination. Pratisara Sayami's poem 'In the Shadow of the Paddy Stalks', like Shrestha's poems, uses rural labour to comment on the experiences of women, yet her poem not only captures the burden of physical labour but also uses the metaphor of farming to draw in so many other female experiences: marriage, reproduction. The contrast between the poetry of Shrestha and Sayami is clear: it is hard to imagine a woman who has carried out years of physical rural labour using such experiences to present women in literature as benign and playful.

The status of poetry in Nepal still remains heavily politicised. Its historical entanglement with political conflict continues in the charged contemporary work of women across Nepal today, who use it as a political tool to narrate political adversity and influence change. The poems and songs by the women in the appendix record stories and experiences that speak to the experiences of women across the country, not just to the elite, but to the masses, to the illiterate and oppressed, creating a growing sense of poetic community in a country that, until recently, silenced those who threatened to speak up.

## Introduction to the Analysed Poems

In 2012, I started an early-bird class at the boarding school in Chitwan where I worked, for students who wanted to study poetry. The sign-up sheet quickly filled up – an encouraging sign. When I walked into the classroom on the morning of our first session, students were squeezed tightly onto their benches, so everyone could fit in. Out of about forty students, there was not a single girl in attendance. Admittedly, there were fewer female students than males in my daytime classes, but the female students had showed diligence and a keenness for learning and for literature. So why had not one signed up for poetry? It was a class for ninth and tenth graders, 14-16-year-olds, and I wondered if the female students were under pressure to complete domestic chores at home before they came to school (only forty students at the school were boarders, the rest lived at home) and were not permitted to come to early classes. This, I'm sure, was part of the problem. But I was also aware that female students had endured entire school careers of feeling like interlopers in literature classes: it was a subject where they were used to learning about male (and often white) writers, who wrote stories with male characters, for male readers. They learnt from male teachers in a classroom made up largely of male students. As a teacher, I had done nothing to challenge the system that put female students on the peripheries. Girls had no reason to think that poetry would be for or by people like them. They had no experience of poetry that came from the same world as them or represented their Nepal.

Due to women having only appeared in a tokenistic way in Nepalese publishing until this point, I aimed to collate work from female Nepali poets, with a broad representative sample in mind and with a strong intention to elevate the voices of low-caste women from remote regions whose work has not previously entered the literary sphere. More than this, I also aimed to act as a counterbalance to some of the tendencies that are still strong in the poetic collections of much of South Asia: inclinations that objectify the people and cultures in the colonial-era mode of

hierarchical writing. Nepalese poetry, historically, has offered little space for women writers to define themselves in their own literary terms.

Michael J Hutt's *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature*, arguably the most comprehensive anthology and critical introduction on the market, features just two women out of a total thirty-seven writers and offers little more than a cursory nod to the deficit of female poets and the challenges that they face. He writes, simply: 'It is still rather more usual for a poet to be male, but the number of highly regarded women poets is growing',<sup>101</sup> which accepts the absence of women but does nothing to examine the root of this gender dynamic, nor anything to correct it. This anthology was published in 1991, so it would be ungenerous to ignore the literary progress it made for its time: compiling Nepalese poetry in English in such a thorough way had not been done before. However, veiling this omission of women by including a couple of 'token' female poet did little to bring women into mainstream literary arenas, because such a gesture does not change the structural politics of such a narrative, no matter how undefined that narrative may still seem.

The portrayal of women through much of the twentieth century followed a code of representation that was restricted to a composite, two-dimensional woman who was uneducated, family-oriented and obedient. These women were habitually, almost axiomatically stripped of almost all signifiers of individual agency. These portrayals were not only reductive but also wildly inaccurate. Cultural anthropologist Judith Pettigrew writes that 'up to 40% of all combatant and civilian political supporters [were] allegedly women' during the ten-year civil war in Nepal.<sup>102</sup> Considering that so many women fought as guerrilla fighters and were killed in large numbers by state security, either in battle or in custody, it seems extraordinary that cultural narratives that portray women as weak and submissive continue to remain the dominant mode of

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<sup>101</sup> Michael James Hutt, *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature* (University of California Press: 1991) 15

<sup>102</sup> Judith Pettigrew and Sarah Schneiderman, *Women and the Maoist: ideology and agency in Nepal's Maoist movement*, (Himalayan South Asian, 2004,) 19-29



representation.<sup>103</sup> In contrast, this analysis aims to focus on the new emerging work by young feminist poets in the twenty-first century. Just as postcolonial theorists like Bill Ashcroft emphasise the need to correct the systems that ‘relegate women to the position of “other”’, this collations of poetry begins to offer what could be termed a ‘correction’ to previous literary reductionism, as its contributors write poetry that reclaims female autonomy and takes charge of the representation of women.<sup>104</sup>

One purpose of compiling the cultural songs was to move away from an approach of singularity; the Barun-Chhetri, English-speaking, urban-dominated poetry scene that has prevailed since the beginning of Nepal’s written literary history. It was important to include voices from a diversity of castes, as women are more likely to be adversely affected by the stigmas that often affect members of low-caste communities and experience prejudice more keenly.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, their experiences are less likely to be represented in Nepal’s media and literature, as some may lead ghettoised lives, separate from other larger and more powerful communities. They suffer social and religious exclusion, yet we hear nothing of their alternative experiences, segregated from Nepal’s national culture and community. They are used for cheap and hazardous labour – often working as street sweepers and stone quarry workers. There have been reports of low-caste women being killed under suspicion of witch-craft. Nearly a quarter of Nepal’s women are treated as ‘untouchable’; yet poets from these *Dalit* communities are almost unheard of in Nepal’s literary landscape.<sup>106</sup> On the topic of the challenge of collating and sharing a diversity of poetry, anthologist and founding father of the discipline of ethnopoetics Jerome Rothenberg writes:

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<sup>103</sup> Michael James Hutt, ‘Gender Dimensions of the People’s War’ from *Himalayan ‘People’s War’: Nepal’s Maoist Rebellion*, (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2004) 152

<sup>104</sup> Bill Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (Routledge, 2002) 172

<sup>105</sup> Samira Luitel, *The Position of Dalit Women in Caste System*, (Occasional Papers JOL, 1999) 77

<sup>106</sup> Punita Rimal, ‘New Computer Learning Brings Girls Power and Education’ (Womens News Network Global: 2009)

The mere fact that Westerners are now becoming aware of the potency of other traditions of thought and expressive culture is in itself an act of ‘making visible’ and at the same time an entering into reflexive relations with peoples, gender, classes, ethnicities, the sick, the marginal and the troubled, all of whom from beyond the pale or beneath our bureaucratic rationality insists that we are them.<sup>107</sup>

One of the tasks of the anthologist is to cross this cultural void – to take the literature of people who have few chances to be heard or read outside of their immediate locality and to have their work acknowledged – to make it ‘visible’ and knowable.

The collection of cultural songs is devised specifically to offer insight into work that is not created by educated individuals. In fact, these songs were created by whole communities as opposed to one single writer and include women from all backgrounds. Concepts of ‘author’ and ‘original’ do not apply here. Moreover, the very themes they deal with are the issues of the underclass. They demand education, a safe home life, the right to choose a husband and own property, and are not sung by one sub-group about another, but by those for whom these deprivations are real.

The songs are referred to as *git/geet* in Malpur – the word for song – although sometimes narratives or sections of the songs are referred to as *sanskritik pradarsban* (cultural display) or *pauranika katha* (mythical story). I use the word ‘song’ to refer to the performances, as opposed to terms linked strongly to religion like ‘devotion’ or ‘prayer’, because these festivals, particularly in recent years, occupy a new, secular space that is relegated to remain free of the control of men and male-derived religion. Much of the ethos of these female-led events is centred around the rejection of Hindu dogma that historically shames women at such events. These have also become multi-faith events: increasing numbers of Dalit people are converting to Christianity in

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<sup>107</sup> Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, (University of California Press, 2016) 340

order to escape the caste system, but still treat festivals as integral parts of their culture and history, and partake in them with the rest of the community.

I wanted to avoid evoking ideas of primitivity when analysing poetry from unindustrialised cultures, so I have avoided language that focuses on an absence of development in comparison to the West, such as a lack of literacy or lack of technology. To focus on what culture and language lack in comparison to the West seemed a sure path to placing these cultures in the role of emergent. Instead, I aimed to explore the history and richness of the culture and of languages like Tharu that have remained staunchly independent from influences of surrounding languages like Nepali and Nepal Bhasa. I cite Rothenberg, once again: ‘There are no half-formed languages, no under-developed or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity.’<sup>108</sup>

In a statement on privilege in relation to poetry, poet and editor Itisha Giri stated:

The next time a high-caste individual speaks of not having any privilege I would ask her to reflect on some very simple questions – Has she ever been prohibited from entering someone’s house? Has she ever been prohibited from drawing water from a well? Has she ever been coerced into changing her surname to conceal her caste?<sup>109</sup>

Giri makes an active call for readers to consider poetry by Dalit writers; she claims that marginalised poets are less concerned with visions of literary status and prosperity, than with contributions to development that are inclusive, humble, and with equality at the forefront of progress.

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<sup>108</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, Preface of *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (University of California Press, 1992) 10

<sup>109</sup> Itisha Giri, Introduction to *These Fine Lines*, (Safu Ekantakuna: 2016)

The methodology behind my selection of representative poetry is as follows: a traditional call for papers would not have accessed a diverse range of poetry: it would almost certainly be limited to poets with access to the internet or enrolled in education, and would have been unlikely to draw submissions outside of Kathmandu. It would also be less likely to attract poetry written in marginalised languages: all submissions would have been written in English, and those writing in minority languages would be unlikely to be recognised by universities or publishers. Therefore, lengthy immersion in poetic communities both in Kathmandu but also in Chitwan were required in order to source a rich plethora of poetry across languages and cultures, as well as to access poetry that was not shared in written form. To reach poets not previously published, fieldwork was required in order to form new notions of poetic community, to make contact with poets who may not even consider themselves to be poets, and to engage with oral literature, particularly with songs that are only shared at annual events.

It is important to stress that, for the most part, the work presented here has been collated without editorial intervention: format, grammar and syntactical structure were not edited but were instead kept as submitted in their originals by the authors. Writer and translator Manjushree Thapa points out that Nepali writers are working with a flexible language system:

Attempts to standardize [Nepali] grammar began as late as 1820, and the process is still continuing. In addition, all but a few Nepali dictionaries are marred by irregularities.

Writers and poets of the twentieth century have had to invent the Nepali language as they went along, and today's written Nepali is still evolving towards greater flexibility.<sup>110</sup>

For this reason, though the format and language choices of some of the poems may seem irregular at times, they have been kept as submitted, in order to retain as much of the voice of the author as possible.

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<sup>110</sup> Manjushree Thapa, *Reaching One's Own People, Reaching the World from Manoa Vol.13* (University of Hawaii Press, 2001) 68

For this reason, though the format and language choices of some of the poems may seem irregular at times, they have been kept as submitted, as it was not in the spirit of the anthology to impose a prescribed grammar system onto the poems. As Bill Ashcroft writes in his section on hegemony in *The Empire Writes Back*: ‘The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities.’ It was in the spirit of the project to reject this power dynamic: the politics of the English language and the ways in which it ‘sets itself apart from other ‘lesser’ variants’ is a mark of imperialist thought and to subscribe to this privileging of British English as the most correct version would involve devaluing the mode through which many of these poets seek to communicate.<sup>111</sup>

One of the presiding limitations of collating and filtering the poetry was that the poems must be comprehensible to a Western audience, and again, by this I do not mean ‘perfect English’; some of the poems in this anthology can sound awkward or nervous at times, not because they are poorly written in English but because they diverge from the cultural habits of Westerners. Indeed, some of the poems *are* nervous in their style; for some of these poets are using a written platform to speak up for themselves in a way that is primarily inconsistent with the way they have been conditioned to behave as women. For reasons like this, it is appropriate to include some of the poetry which seems or is self-conscious, un-confident; poetry by women who write in the language of the very educational system that treats them as submissive second-class citizens.

I would have liked to include more poetry that was translated from marginalised Nepalese languages. Diverse representation was an integral cornerstone of this thesis: in ‘The Politics of Translation’, Marina Warner claims that translation of literature is an act of ‘political husbandry’, and even has the potential to ‘reverse colonial damage by making the larger language

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<sup>111</sup>Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (Routledge, 1989) 8, 9

and culture of a former power [. . .] sustain and invigorate the life of smaller ones' – in this context – the translation of languages that are rarely shared outside of their rural locality in Nepal might allow the culture and literature of women in marginalised communities to share their poetry with an audience larger than just those who share their language<sup>112</sup>.

One of the frustrations of compiling an anthology like this one is the unfortunate scarcity of translation from languages that progressively fewer people are speaking as years go by. While it is easy to find multiple translators who translate work from Nepali to English, it is not at all easy to find people who will translate from, say, Tharu, Sudhi, Halwai, or Marwadi, perhaps because the task is so challenging and the potential readership so small. Another factor is the correlation between marginalised languages and access to education; those who attend schools where they learn English are almost always forbidden from speaking in their mother tongue at school, and many quickly lose their ability to speak it fluently, as well as never having access to literature written in their ancestral language.

There is a tension in the dynamic of identity when Nepali writers write in English. It is, of course, a conflict that is different for everyone, but it is impossible to ignore the political power structure at play when Nepali poets are encouraged, even forced, to write in English by an education system that legitimises linguistic and cultural hierarchy and an imperial past by enforcing a syllabus entirely in English.

It might seem, on the surface, that one question needs to be answered: in which language Nepali poets can express themselves most comfortably and confidently? Yet for poets who speak their mother tongue at home but never at school, there is no straightforward answer to this, as poetic vocabulary might be fuller in English, but cultural and idiomatic expression most comfortable in the native language.

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<sup>112</sup> Marina Warner, 'The Politics of Translation', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 40, 2018: 21

In Nepal, English language is anchored in social and economic mobility. An ability to communicate fluently and effectively in English is often considered a shortcut to assessing someone's level of education. Parents, and even students themselves, are often keen to learn English because it enhances competitiveness in the job market: for many, it is a way out of Nepal and the limited earning capacity the country has to offer. Because English is a clear asset in any Nepali writer's future career, it would be over-simplistic and inaccurate to suggest that Nepali poets are victims of imperialism and linguistic hegemony, because many are acting in their own interests, as they seek literary recognition outside of Nepal. However, these literary vested interests can come at the expense of the development and natural use of poetry in languages indigenous to Nepal. This inevitably leads to a loss of Nepalese literary tradition, and it can be difficult to authentically share culture in a language that functions hegemonically in Nepal.

Mark Turin writes that 'most of Nepal's indigenous mother tongues are believed to be endangered', and that 'language death is a complicated issue'. He also writes that minority languages continue to be endangered 'with diminishing fluency and compromised linguistic ability among younger speakers'.<sup>114</sup> In a conversation I had with a Newari poet on the loss of native language, he commented that he considered himself 'bye-lingual' – meaning that he wrote poetry in two languages and was losing vocabulary in both, because neither were entirely familiar to him, as neither were his native tongue.<sup>115</sup> He, like many poets who write in the language they were taught in school but did not speak at home, feels that he does not have full command over any one language and therefore struggles with translation, as he does not feel entirely confident either in the original or translated language he is working with. This illustrates why so few Nepali poets feel equipped to translate poetry from mother tongues: as the languages are diminishing, writers are finding it increasingly difficult to possess the vocabulary to translate poetry.

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<sup>114</sup> Mark Turin, *Minority Language Politics in Nepal and the Himalayas*, (University of Cambridge & Cornell University, 2004) 5, 4

<sup>115</sup> Sanket Shrestha (poet) in discussion in the author, November 2017

### *Translations*

If the collated poems were to be restricted to poems written only in English, then it would have remained limited in its representation of female Nepali poets. There would have been little diversity in perspective and experience, and limited scope for including women from less privileged backgrounds and more remote regions. Poets who write in English are almost always well-educated, but specifically have almost always been educated in literature written in English rather than Nepali, which means that much of the literary influences present in the poetry are predominantly Western, with traditions of Nepali poetry tending to be secondary. Poems written in English are often stylistically similar to Western poetry and based on the techniques used by Anglo-American contemporary poets read in the Eurocentric curriculums of private schools who aim to train students to be able to find work abroad.

As yet, there is no way for Nepali writers to establish a literary dialogue with the international world in the absence of translated texts – so for the featured poetry to be relevant for Western readers as well as a Nepali audience, acquiring translations remained a key objective during collation. Translations are standard in Nepalese anthologies but also in Nepal's everyday life: Nepal is, after all, a multilingual nation. Manjushree Thapa, one of Nepal's most well-known and thorough translators, describes 'translation as a vital everyday act in Nepal's national discourse'.<sup>118</sup> Several of the translations provided are by Thapa: a well-respected feminist and writer who is renowned for her thorough translations of poems from marginalised languages and cultures. (Any poems not credited with a translator were written as originals in English.)

Translation of poetry from Nepali to English not only requires sufficient linguistic and cultural understanding in both languages, it also requires acknowledgement of the position of the

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<sup>118</sup> Manjushree Thapa, *With Love and Aesthetics: Notes for an Ethical Translation of Nepali Literature*, (Studies in Nepali History and Society Vol.4, 1999) 296



poet in the original culture and country. In her essay on cultural translation in poetry, Susan Bassnett writes that, depending on the culture, ‘the poet is a shaman, a creator of magic, a healer. In others the poet is a singer of tales, an entertainer, and a focal point in the community’.<sup>119</sup> The function of poetry is different depending on the cultural context, and part of the value of the translations selected for this thesis is that the translator recognises the female poet in Nepal as in a position of risk, of discomfort, as an outsider. A Nepali female poet who is a critical commentator is also a rebel, and though a poem might be open to a great range of interpretative readings, the translated poem should convey the sense of risk present within the Nepalese context and relive the act of resistance. The effect, then, on the audience of the translation, is one of transformation. In the introduction to his book ‘Translation Changes Everything’, Laurence Venuti writes:

Translation changes the receiving cultural situation by bringing into existence something new and different, a text that is neither the source text nor an original composition in the translating language, and in the process it changes the values, beliefs, and representations that are housed in institutions.<sup>120</sup>

The translations of these poems transform the meaning of the texts and their significance. It is not just the linguistic translation of the poem that communicates it in English, it is also the translation of its drive, its call to action, and its political positioning.

The process of translating a poem almost never preserves all of the initial qualities of the original poem. Poems are reliant on series of patterns and yet linguistic patterns are governed by rules of syntax, and those rules in Nepali and English are completely different. One could argue

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<sup>119</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Transplanting the Seed: Poetry and Translation*, (Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation, Multilingual Matters, 1998) 58

<sup>120</sup> Laurence Venuti, Introduction to *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice*, (Routledge, 2013) 10

that the insufficiencies of a translation are attributable to too much emphasis on one or more of the elements of a poem, to the detriment of the poem in its entirety. All the elements of the poem function as part of a system, and any translator must often sacrifice one element for the preservation of another: metre, rhyme, and the form of the stanza are often lost in translations from Nepali to English, largely because the structure of the two languages is so different: a sentence in Nepali often requires more than double the number of words to express the same sentence in English.

The translations chosen for analysis in for this thesis were selected on the basis that one of the key interests was the politicised content of the poems, so preservation of tone and energy were the some of the most important elements. Translations needed to be as charged with social consciousness as the originals. Tones of anger or lament had to be articulated as strongly in English. If poets employed imagery that connected women with nature or the land, then this technique had to be preserved – not just in the literal sense – but also in its cultural implications. Poets such as Manjushree Thapa and Wayne Amtzis, two of the translators I return to most frequently for their translations, do not translate from a strictly linguistic point of view. Though they might be forced to forfeit phonetic and metrical patterns, or the internal rhyming structures that are often favoured in Nepali poems (but near impossible to replicate in English) they decode turns of phrase, cultural metaphors and politicised tone in ways where the core and essence of the original is carried into the energy of the translated version. Translation theorist Ovidiu Matiú outlines three main elements that can be retained (or lost) in any poetry translation: sound, sense and suggestion.<sup>121</sup> Though translations of poems included in this thesis often forfeit what Matiú summarises as sound – the phonetic patterns and rhyme schemes on originals – it is the sense and suggestion that are translated.

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<sup>121</sup> Ovidiu Matiú, *Translating Poetry: Contemporary Theories and Hypotheses*, (Professional Communication and Translation Studies, Lucian Blaga University, 2008) 130

If poets can speak to each other across borders, over space and cultural difference, it is translation that allows this. Nepali and English, certainly, often seem incompatible. Manjushree Thapa describes many translation problems including ‘unfamiliar social, cultural and historical references, local idioms and expressions, complex intertextual narratives ... difficulties that are not mere challenges to be overcome: in fact, they stump the very enterprise of translation.’<sup>122</sup> As Thapa concludes, all translations ultimately fail, but just as something is always lost, something else is usually gained. Translations that retain the essence of the original are hard to come by. Thapa states that given the poor standard of English taught in Nepal, and given the remoteness of Nepali languages to English-language writers, the conjunction of these skills is rare in any one individual. As a result, she argues that ‘few current translations of Nepali literature seem committed to the aesthetic skill and sophistication that the original work deserves’ and claims that instead ‘many translations can seem cavalier in their use of language, forcing the original’s logic and rhetoric to submit to the translator’s whims or limitations.’<sup>123</sup>

However, in instances of translations that truly retain the core of the original, the magic of this rebirth in a new language teaches us about not only the writing of the original poet but also what is possible in English, as it bends each single one of its own rules to accommodate various new forms. We learn something new about the English language each time we confront another syntax, another way of organising words, ideas, images.

One aim of the translations was to provide the originals with a longevity and geographical range of survival that the original text might otherwise lack. By translating poems from localised languages into English, localised experiences could be communicated, shared, not only beyond the boundaries of marginalised communities but also beyond the borders of Nepal. Not only does the sharing of experiences break down help to preserve the cultures they’re from, it can also act as a catalyst to political change when it draws national attention. Itisha Giri’s poem

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<sup>122</sup> Thapa, *With Love and Aesthetics*, 300

<sup>123</sup> Thapa, *With Love and Aesthetics*, 319

“When I Have a Daughter” was published in the newspaper *La.Lit* and performed by Giri at an event in Kathmandu organised by the Forum of Women, Law and Development in 2015, the poem functioned as part of a city-wide campaign to bring the perpetrators of an acid attack against two school girls to justice. This was a significant moment for poetry and also for women’s rights – and it seems clear that if poems by women from rural Nepal were able to reach a national audience then the impact would not be limited to cultural distribution, but could also be political.

Similarly, the surgeon who treated the royal family following the palace massacre in 2001 published an account of his experiences in UK publisher Head of Zeus anthology *House of Snow* – finally shedding light on one of Nepal’s most pivotal historical events that, until that point, had been shrouded in mystery and conspiracy. The author exposed, unequivocally, the guilt of the prince and the innocence of the governmental factions who were implicated in the massacre. If we accept that the Nepalese population has a right to know the truth about the actions of their government, their army and their monarchy, then this was arguably one of the most important pieces of writing published this century.

One then has to speculate on the impact that might be made in translating and publishing poems from rural communities that expose injustice to which the rest of the country are not fully informed, or where there has been no alternative narrative to newspaper reporting that favours the government and police force over indigenous populations. When fourteen Tharu protesters were gunned down by police in 2015, the Tharu population – unrepresented in media and in the police force – were unable to voice this injustice or seek reparations. If poetry about such events were published in English, the eyes of the world might be on the police force. If the Black Lives Matter movement in America can gain global attention, then it should follow that such terrible infractions committed by Nepal’s police might be noticed by this movement, that the Tharu campaign might be bolstered by joining forces with similar movements elsewhere in the world, and could gain traction by joining this global community.

In any instance of translation, certainly the translation of poetry, there is the risk that the original text will be diminished and rendered inadequately – a risk that must be taken particularly seriously when one is actively avoiding the potential of reinforcing stereotypes of primitive languages and cultures. One of the causes of this perpetual risk of reducing individual authors' styles and creative flair to a plain prose uniformity, is that Nepali and English are so different structurally. The grammatical rules of Nepali language mean that poets can dispense of pronouns and use similar suffixes to form strong syntactical patterns that have a vigorous phonetic cadence with a strong resonance when read aloud. When poets use these techniques, it becomes impossible to translate lines in isolation because vital grammatical information is missing. Usually, the entire stanza has to be written prosaically and then shaped into a new stanza in English to reflect the original poetic form. Nepali is capable of extreme brevity in poetic form, and often to translate a Nepali stanza into English requires the English version to be double the number of words, and the translator must decide whether to use longer lines, or double the number of lines.

Often there is no commonly known English name for elements of the natural environment that are described in Nepalese poems, and to use an exact translation reads as so pedantic it distracts the reader from the wider tone of the poem. For example, there is an imperative in Chitwan, "*Tyo bagh ko pachi pachi jau,*" which asks someone to gauge the likely danger of a tiger's near presence by measuring the prints of a tiger by stripping the flesh from a large leaf until just the stem remains, then using the stem to measure the outline of a single pawprint, then holding this measurement vertically from the floor to make an estimate to the height of the tiger's withers and thus the relative potential danger of walking close to its fresh tracks, should it still be in the vicinity: if the tiger is taller than the hip of an adult, it is big enough to be lethal, so the belief goes. Clearly, to explain this entire process would be to abandon all textual richness in a poem, and yet there is no way to explain this process in English with brevity. This is one

example of where cultural and linguistic equivalent feel impossible: with the corresponding risk of marginalizing the richness and complexity of Nepalese literature.

The answer to the questions of which Nepal I seek to represent was not complex: it was crucial to include a range of poems written in other languages: not only Nepali but also Nepalese languages that are fighting for revival after decades of oppression from royal and governmental regimes. In order to avoid obscuring the needs of less powerful languages and to prioritise work by those who are likely to face cultural or economic disadvantages, I included poems written originally in the Nepal Bhasa, Rai and Tharu languages. This allowed women who still speak their mother tongue – and were taught to communicate in a mode of language that was not recognised by government or media – to be given the same access to a platform as someone able to write in English. Ideas and experiences that were once restricted to the confines of the regions that spoke these dialects can now be shared with a wider audience; these are poems that can be used as a teaching tool in the rest of the country, to establish open borders of poetic community, mutual understanding, not to mention the attention of a readership beyond the boundaries of Nepal.

Increasingly, in the years since the relative relaxation of political and cultural dominance by ruling elites, voices in poetry have seen a rise in plurality and inclusion. Poets have begun to write in a wider range of Nepalese languages, in deviation from the traditional trend of writing only in the dominant *bhasa* (language). A pluralistic spirit has been gradually established over the years. As a result, the foundation for the criticism and analysis of any given ‘ethnic’ mode of writing has become less straightforward; approaches to analysing work by Dalit writers, and poetry written in other languages becomes multifaceted and require a more pluralistic approach, demanding divergent angles of interpretation.

Some languages have been revived more than others. The Tharu language, which has been deliberately suppressed and excluded by settlers from the hill regions for centuries, has struggled to make its mark in modern literature in the way that languages such as Rai, Newar and

Gurung have. It could be argued that this fact is linked to resources and education; the Newari community, situated in the central region and largely in Kathmandu Valley, have experienced more opportunity to recover and record their language through good schooling and advanced organisations. Similarly, the Gurung community has developed literary publication ‘at least in part owing to the fact that a number of Gurungs have achieved literary and some degree of economic well-being as a result of their service in the Gurkha regiments’.<sup>124</sup> This development in literacy has been slow for the Tharu communities in the Terai, who still struggle to access more basic educational rights, and suffer high levels of illiteracy.

### *Oral Tradition / Ethnopoetics*

The field of Ethnopoetics seeks out art forms that challenge commonly held values of the Western literary tradition and involves exploring forms outside the boundaries of euro-centric literary forms and traditions. Jerome Rothenberg coined the term and remains the most significant contributor to the field: his work focuses on oral performance, and he works to utilise format and space on the page to best bring out the qualities of oral literature and express their essence. He particularly emphasises a need to break away ‘from official language, from authorized language,’<sup>125</sup> involving a process of translation and analysis that requires ‘a complex redefinition of cultural and intellectual values’.<sup>126</sup> In his introduction to Rothenberg’s anthology *Translations and Variation*, Charles Bernstein summarised the key to Rothenberg’s poetics as an

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<sup>124</sup> Anju Saxena and Lars Borin, *Lesser-known Languages of South Asia: Status and Policies, Case Studies and Applications of Information Technology*, (Mouton de Gruyter, 2006) 167

<sup>125</sup> John Wrighton, ‘The Welcome of the Other’ from *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry*, (Routledge, 2009) 112

<sup>126</sup> Jerome Rothenberg and Diane Rothenberg, *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, (University of California Press, 2016) 7

ethically charged imagination of collage as both a social and aesthetic principle ... [E]xtending this principle of collage to the social space of poetry as translation and translation as poetry, he writes that the value of poetry is 'not the making of single, isolated masterpieces but of a larger work in common'.<sup>127</sup>

There is a history of oral literature in Nepal that reaches far wider than written poetry, and in order to compile a well-rounded and properly representative collation of poetry, it was imperative to access and record literature that was embedded in cultural practice and included women who had never had the opportunity to learn to read and write. Translator John Wrighton summarised Rothenberg's translations of folklore as reaching beyond the confines of the Western canon to the traditions of oral and tribal poetries. He states that 'Rothenberg sought not merely to preserve or respect marginalised ethnic and tribal poetries, but to expand our understanding of language through a renegotiation of the poetic past and poetic other.'<sup>128</sup>

This kind of rich introduction of unfamiliar cultural expression of language was something I aimed to do in translating folk songs that had never before been written down in English. Thus, I translate cultural songs that are created and kept alive by women, that are for or about women and played a role in defining notions of female community. They also challenge the societal roles laid out for women and confront structures of oppression and inequality.

I was able to take on the task of translating songs myself. This was somewhat different to the task of poetry translation, as my familiarity with the folksongs of the Terai was unlike that of written poetry. Particularly in the Terai, folksongs are a central part of daily life – of farmwork and cultural events – and over time I came to know them thoroughly, and my knowledge of their

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<sup>127</sup> Charles Bernstein, Preface from Jerome Rothenberg's *Writing Through: Translations and Variations*, (Wesleyan University Press, 2004) 7

<sup>128</sup> John Wrighton, *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry*, 124



content, structure and cultural significance were detailed enough to be confident of ethical and effective translations.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasises that in translating the work of ‘third-world’ women, translators must be aware of the inevitability of translating their work into a patriarchal language structure. Not only must translators be aware of language as an indicator of the workings of gendered agency, they must also be sure to maintain an awareness of the language of illiterate women, and to not impose overly-Westernised notions of solidarity and feminism.<sup>129</sup> In the spirit of this awareness, I was conscious not to ‘poeticise’ songs on the page, nor to over-assimilate them to Western notions of poetry.

### *Haritalika Teej*

I focused on translating songs from annual cultural festivals, as these tended to reflect the significant social shifts within the female community. Early on in the process, I found that the songs of a national women’s festival, Haritalika Teej, had been politicised in recent decades as some women had transformed the occasion into a feminist event to reflect on the reality of women’s lives beneath the traditions of the festival. Teej is an annual celebration that falls during the month of Bhadrapad (late August) and is traditionally a time for women to come together in groups to fast and pray for the men in their lives – unmarried women pray for a good future partner and wives pray for the prosperity of their husbands. Women make the journey back to their parents’ home to fast with their female family members and perform bathing rituals in rivers to wash away their sins. The myth of Teej tells the story of Hamalay’s daughter, Goddess Parvati, who endured a 108-year fast known as Haritalika Teej, in the hope of winning Lord

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<sup>129</sup> Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, (Routledge, 1996) 133-134

Shiva as her husband. Having witnessed the sacrifice that the goddess made to be with him, Lord Shiva accepted her as his wife.

Despite it being known as the festival of women, many women feel that it is, in fact, ultimately for men, as it focuses on the prosperity of husbands. It was men who wrote the myth of the festival and many women began to claim that the tradition reinforces men's sovereignty over women. It is certainly hard to imagine a festival in which men would be required to wash their wives' feet and then drink the water, as is traditionally required of women to do for their husbands at Teej.

That said, it is important not to understate the feminist aims of the movement. In a conversation with poet and women's activist Pranika Koyu, I asked why so many women took part in Teej in spite of its troubling ethos. Koyu pointed out that for many women, it is the only time they can leave their marital home, where they are often treated poorly, and return to their parents' house:

The songs are often about mistreatment in the marital home. It is a clever trick – even when women are allowed to leave the marital home, they must use their break to focus on praying for men! Women dance to take their minds off their hunger from fasting. You must pray for your husband irrespective of how he treats you. Religion is just the tool for indoctrinating women into thinking that their lives must revolve around their husbands. Even the myth is horrible! Lord Shiva committed marital rape amongst other crimes against women.<sup>130</sup>

This is a logical explanation as to why Teej goes ahead with full force each year. The evolution of Teej is being urged by a younger generation of women who have started to write their own songs

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<sup>130</sup> Pranika Koyu (poet) in discussion with the author, 2018

that subvert the traditions of Teej – songs that call attention to the inequality of women at the hands of the men. Instead of worshipping their husbands, they critique them. They sing about the cultural traditions of marriage that rob women of their safety. The songs that are translated here are political protests: they address men directly. They speak for girls who demand an education, they reprove men for drinking and squandering money, and they beg their families not to force them into miserable marriages. Although the songs address men, the audiences are ultimately women as they are sung in a space reserved for female cultural practice. This suggests that the purpose of the songs is in fact to rally a community of women. It fortifies women and imparts them with the confidence to demand change. For many women who are illiterate, Teej songs might be the first time they are able to feel part of a community that rejects oppression as the standard existence. It might be the first community they have belonged to that is concerned with their existence alongside the livelihoods of their male counterparts. The characterisation of the uneducated girl who begs to go to school becomes a symbol of a movement, a protagonist through whom women can share a desire to receive schooling, fortified by the shared needs of the community of women around them.

The politicisation of a space traditionally reserved for worshipping men is a significant community move. Women cease to be victims and instead become active communicators in their own feminist manifesto. Singers like Komal Oli and Jyoti Magar have begun to use their platform as pop singers to express contempt at the domestic situations in which women find themselves in their Teej songs. Despite the public furore with which their lyrics have been met, they continue to sing about marriages that restrict women and refuse them independence. In ‘Dumsi Kade Junga’, Magar sings the line ‘When I was a child I needed books and pens but now I have a spade’ (translated). In ‘Lastai Choti’, Oli sings ‘I want a man who does not scorn women, but respects them’. This is an inversion of the traditional Teej songs. Despite being described as salacious and improper by the media for her songs that long for a better future for women, singers like Oli have set a tone of defiance for women who come together for

the festival. New Teej songs have the potential to ‘go viral’ as they are disseminated via YouTube and the radio. Radio Kantipur is Nepal’s most listened to radio station, with coverage across 80% of Nepal, and it is also the radio station that is usually played on public transport. Because Radio Kantipur plays new releases around the clock, Teej songs are with the same speed and coverage as pop music. This means that messages of rebellion can sweep through the female population far more rapidly than the written word and have a rallying effect. Over half the population now has access to the internet, so songs on YouTube can be shared between women and across communities in a matter of hours. Access to such channels of communication are key to increase ‘political participation’, though of course it may not be articulated as political among participants<sup>131</sup>. This, in part, has allowed the formation of an online consciousness among women, a new notion of political community formed online where a shift in the ethos of Teej can be shared and fortified nationally, as opposed to ignited at local levels.

In addition, Teej songs are an effective way to reach a wide demographic of women including some of the least privileged in the country. Women who are excluded from poetic communities, due to illiteracy, are able to express ideas in a community that does not rely on their ability to read and write, process political dialogue or to understand English. In fact, many of them voice the frustrations of illiteracy, and articulate feelings of bitterness from an early age as their peers attend school. Rather than rely on more privileged independent poets to relay their oppression through poetry for the masses, they can articulate their ideas in songs that can be shared across communities. They need not rely on the hope that women from urban areas and more progressive families will relate to their struggles and priorities them in their writing, but instead can articulate their own social commentary as well as envisioning an alternative future for themselves.

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<sup>131</sup> David Bell, Brian D. Loader, Nicholas Pleace and Douglas Schuler, *Cyberculture: The Key Concepts*, (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2004) 17

There is evidence to suggest that *rajinī dukēba* (political Teej) songs have an impact on the way women develop a sense of identity and agency overall, and more importantly, how they engage with politics. In 1991 and in conjunction with the politicisation of Teej, a women's procession in Naudanda (in the Kaski district of northern-central Nepal) took to the streets in a procession where they voiced their demands, crying: 'Men, stop drinking! Stop gambling! Don't marry off your daughters so young! Don't beat your wives!'<sup>132</sup> There is a natural progression for groups of women who first empower themselves in a female space, to then become emboldened enough to become more public with the demands for their rights.

There is a global awareness in these songs as the writers compare the lives of Nepali women to those of women from more progressive countries who have more opportunities. Some songs confront men about their behaviour in a way that many women may not be able to as individuals, face to face with men. To criticise a man, a woman would have to speak in a way that would be considered incongruous with her upbringing and her role in the community. Depending on her family's cultural values around honour, she could be punished for insubordination. A song that demands that society and the socialisation of men change for the benefit of everyone removes the burden of mutiny from individual women. It allows women to communicate ideas of change, to challenge the current status quo and even outline a course of action to achieve equality, while reducing the risk of violence against individuals.

To capture the essence of Teej songs in translation is to record an era of political and social shift: it captures the way in which ideas form new notions of community that are prepared to rally, to take action, and to use a tradition created by men and to evolve it into something beneficial to women.

### ***Jitiya Pawain (Or Jitiya Brata)***

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<sup>132</sup> Dorothy Holland, 'Authoring Oneself as a Woman from Nepal' from *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, (Harvard University Press, 2001) 214

Another festival that I took part in and translated songs from was Jitiya Pawain (from 'jit', meaning 'victory') – a festival specifically for Tharu women to come together and pray for nature and collective welfare. Jitiya is a festival celebrated by the Tharu in the regions of Chitwan or Nawolprayasi, though it is possible the tradition has reached further afield. It is a smaller and more private, insular event as the Tharu make up just 6 percent of Nepal's population, but it is a significant event in the Tharu calendar and is considered of great spiritual importance. The festival falls in the month of Ashwin, which is around September/October. The festival involves several stages of worship over three days, including *khar jitia* – a two-day food and water fast, and *jhamata* – several stages of song and dance. Most women partake in *barta* (fasting) which is carried out as a good omen for the family and children, and some also undertake *nirjala* – fasting with no water, which is especially physically taxing as the climate in Chitwan during Ashwin is usually still around 35°C and women still carry out manual labour during the day.

There is the *badabaw* – songs early in the morning that include unmarried girls, as well as different songs that are sung for the worship of gods and family. The end of *paran* – the third day of worship – involves a long night of singing and dancing that also involves ritualised consumption of alcohol and crow or pigeon meat, though these elements vary more from one region to another. Jitiya does not take place in a temple, but is celebrated in the fields and in public space. The festival holds great significance for women, and mothers whose children become sick are sometimes blamed for not performing Jitiya rites thoroughly and causing ailments in their children.

Traditionally, mothers fast for their sons, but certainly in Malpur at least there is little emphasis on this gender divide now, as women pray for the collective welfare of the community as well as their families. They scrub the house with cow dung to make it pure, and burn *guitha* which is fuel made from dried cow dung.

Jitiya has not fully escaped the patriarchal hierarchy within which it was first conceived: the story of Jitbahan, the main deity of Jitiya, is still told by the head of the village, often the landlord and almost always a man. The story often takes five hours to tell, and women sit on the floor to listen to the story of Jitiya. The story is well-known (it is annually told in detail) and there is no real reason it should not be told by a woman. Whenever I enquired as to why it had to be a man, the responses were simply that men are better narrators or hold the attention of their audience more effectively, or simply just that the story must be told by whoever is in charge.

Studies have been made into similar Dalit developments in India, where native groups who face similar discrimination and exclusion as Dalit communities in Nepal, and the development of cultural narratives of identity have been tracked and analysed. Badri Narayan writes about Dalit identities:

When [culture] is expressed through their own cultural symbols, it evokes their collective memory and constructs their identity in a new way ... To counter oppressive historical constructions, the subaltern groups have continuously engaged in communicating their own stories, which they had composed in various forms.<sup>133</sup>

As with the native groups in India, Dalit groups in Nepal use these songs as a source of empowerment as well as an active rejection of the Barun-Chhetri-dominated songs that reflect upper-caste history, culture and values. It is a rejection, too, of their inferior position within this dominant narrative, as these songs value the lives and experiences of women from low castes.

One of the extra hurdles in writing Jitiya songs was that, unlike Teej songs, Jitiya songs have never been written down in the past and therefore never officially recorded. While Teej songs are shared nationally, and on the radio, and even, in the past few years on YouTube, Jitiya

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<sup>133</sup> Badri Narayan, 'New Narratives of Dalit Politics' from *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006) 40

songs are not pre-recorded, or recorded at all. They are not sung on the lead up to the festival in the way that popular Teej songs often are.

For this reason, when I initially began to translate the Jitiya songs, there was much consultation and some disagreement over their content. It required the input of multiple members of the community to begin to get the songs on paper with some accuracy. Very few of the women in the Malpur Tharu community where I lived are literate, and as the songs are only sung once a year and during a festival that involves inebriation as part of its spiritual process, they're not entirely familiar to anyone. Younger members of the community who attend school and have some literacy skills are too unfamiliar with the songs and are not included in many of the aspects of the festival that are just for married women.

It is also important to consider the lens through which we analyse these translations and how we consider them as valued and significant pieces of work with not only cultural, but also literary merit. Many scholars before have faced the task of presenting poetry that does not fit the prescribed models of euro-centric aesthetics, and does not include the poetic devices Westerners usually associate with well-crafted poetry. Of a Pawnee poem from a Native Hako ceremony in Oklahoma, Ethnopoetics scholar Catherine S. Quick wrote:

If the average Western literary scholar were to critique the ... poem, he or she might note the repetitiveness, simplistic (perhaps even trite) images, lack of poetic device, and meaningless words. This would represent a fair critique of the poem, if it were written with typical Western assumptions about what constitutes good poetry. But what if the poet's assumptions were different? What if the very context in which this poem was produced dictated entirely different standards than what the above critique assumes?<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Catherine S. Quick, 'Ethnopoetics' from *Folklore Forum Vol.30* (IUB Folklore & Ethnomusicology Dept, Indiana University Press, 1999) 95



This illustrates why it was so important to carefully consider the representation of these songs on the page, and why it was vital to prioritise the task of capturing the significance of them as performance pieces when deciding how to present them.

The process of attempting to record and translate the orature of the rural regions has proved complex. Folk songs, like many types of oral art, do not lend themselves easily to being portrayed on paper. One of the purposes of these songs is that they are exhaustingly repetitive, and can continue for hours with the same quatrain used over and over again during a ceremony that involves prolonged intoxication, as we can see the ‘Mela Song’ translated here. Part of the value of the songs is their distinct cadence; half sung, half chanted, coupled with the circular movement as a group that is a combination of walking and dancing. The songs are designed to be simple, repetitive, and the purpose is certainly not one of entertainment or even enjoyment. They are part of a cathartic ritual. There is also the important aspect of the *raksi*; the altered state into which participants enter after drinking strong liquor and allowing themselves to become more emotionally connected with one another and (as the belief goes) their ancestors.

The songs are generally led by older women: this seems not to be rigidly enforced or even considered a rule, but with songs only sung once a year and never written down, the longer women have partaken in Jitiya the more thoroughly they tend to know the songs. In this sense, hierarchy is not so much related to age as to wisdom and experience. Nearly every woman in the village attends – only those who are heavily pregnant or sick are excused – and for women who are newly married or have children, attendance is especially important. There is a sense of thoroughness and exhaustiveness in the performance that shows how vital the event is to the livelihood of the community: many women believe that the well-being of their families and of the environment are deeply affected by the reverence with which the elements of the festival are observed. It is a chance for women to take control over aspects of their lives that might otherwise seem somewhat out of their control, like the success of the crops or the health of their children, so performances that last long into the night and seem repetitive and exhaustive are

purposefully so: a chance for women to show their endurance and tenacity for the well-being of their family.

The song performances of Jitiya festival take part in any available space near the centre of the community, and for a couple of nights when I attended, large groups of women, perhaps fifty or sixty, blocked the junction at the centre of the village while sitting in circles to sing and drink raksi for the night. I am cautious not to overstate the disruptive element of the festival, as there are other events that also block roads without particularly being motivated by a desire to disrupt – for example when the local youth group held a dance contest to raise money for earthquake victims in 2015 they also blocked the road for an afternoon – but there is certainly an element of Jitiya that is bold enough to take up space in the community and put women at the centre of events. For these few days a year, women are no longer silenced and on the outskirts of daily life. They sing long into the night with no concern for who they keep awake, and force traffic to take a longer route. There is a palpable sense of community confidence amongst women: a shift from the collective female role as passive and supportive to the men of the community.

This context is important when analysing these songs on paper; they must not be examined through the usual, Euro-centric models we use to break down poetic devices but must instead be considered in their cultural contexts. In discussing the ways in which we should contextualise literature before translating it, Rothenberg wrote:

[When poetry is foreign to the translator] its complexity is often elusive, a question of gestalt or configuration, of the angle from which the work is seen. If you expect a work to be simple or naïve, you will probably end up seeing a simple or naïve work; and this

will be abetted by the fact that translation can, in general, only present as a single work, a part of what is actually there.<sup>135</sup>

The process of translation itself was also complex. Many terms, even individual phrases are loaded with racial connotations and it is difficult to find an appropriate equivalent in the English language. For example, the Tharu word *jat*, a popular word in patriotic folksong, could be glossed in many ways. In its essence it means *species*, or *kind*, but more literally, *tribe*, *caste* or *ethnic group*. This raised the question, what did it mean to be a singular, unitary *jat*? This is something that varied extensively between Tharu groups across the Terai; a definition that is not agreed upon, and almost requires an entire anthropological study in itself. Almost any translation seemed simplistic and misleading; it seemed better simply to keep the word in Tharu and explain the complexity of its meaning.

There is no inclusion of original transcripts of the Tharu songs, due to the difficulty of verifying their accuracy. There are very few literate Tharu women in Malpur, and there is no crossover between those who are able to read and write, and those who are familiar with the festival songs. Some of the school-age girls in the village are able to read in Brahmi scripts but are not practiced in reading Tharu: there was nobody who could assess a Tharu transcript with any confidence, given that Tharu language is so rarely written down, and in no consistently agreed alphabet. It seemed unlikely that an accurate transcript could be achieved – and if done poorly – risked adding to misconceptions of Tharu language as non-sensical and inconsistent. This raised the question of what the value of including original versions would be, given that there was no real audience for them, as the audience for this thesis would be able to neither read nor comprehend them, nor verify their content themselves.

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<sup>135</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, Preface of *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania* (University of California Press, 1992) 12

Responsible ethnographical practice is crucial in translations like these because of the risk of perpetuating misleading ideas about the Tharu community in a wider sense; these people already are the victims of persecution from many of the surrounding Nepalese castes. It is important to contextualise the songs to avoid them looking, once on paper, part of a ritual that becomes over-simplified. English is a language that is fundamentally incongruous, in many ways, to Tharu dialect, so in the translation process there must be a vigilance not to translate in a way that makes the grasp of language seem clumsy or basic, or to translate in a way that empties the verses of their meaning. To make any of these mistakes would not only betray the expectations of the participants, but also potentially feed in to the existing prejudices held by some Nepali people about the Tharu. Just as Rothenberg emphasised the need to capture poetic patterns within speech, I try to use space and line breaks in songs like 'A Life Enslaved' in order to capture the cadence and tempo, as well as emphasis on certain repeated sounds.

The result of several phases of translation has produced a section of poems rich with cultural tradition, from a festival that has, until now, received almost no literary academic interest. In the way that Western studies are so often criticised for speaking for women, rather than facilitating ways in which women might speak for themselves, there is no reason why women cannot share their experiences through the medium of poetry, a vehicle no less capable of accessing an audience outside of Nepal.

Recording and translating the songs from the festivals was a long and complex process. There was no option to observe the festival without partaking: as someone who had lived in the Tharu village for a long time and immersed myself in every aspect of day-to-day life, there was no possibility of opting out of such an important cultural event and simply observing from the sidelines. This meant that recording songs during the festival was not an option, as the performance aspect of the event really required complete absorption with no distractions. The decoding of the songs was a process with several stages and involving groups of women: we often began with the concept of theme of the song, before translating lines from Tharu to

Nepali, which was an easier linguistic feat than translating either language to English, as they share more cultural and structural similarities. Once the English version had taken shape, I would return again to the oral Tharu version to put the English transcript through a broader level of scrutiny – examining whether it reflected the tone, the spirit, and even the cadence of the Tharu song.

Recording the songs on paper for the first time felt like a new and significant event, and it involved a gathering of the community and an ongoing discussion – I was often told ‘Come back at a later time, give me time to think of it’. Sometimes after I had written down a full transcript and read it back again to listeners at a later time, they would say ‘Now that I hear it, that does not sound right.’ It became clear that the content of the songs changes and develops over time, so the lyrics that were finally agreed upon and translated may be a mix of old and new versions of the same song. They almost certainly do not reflect the songs in their entirety, and the same songs will go on to change after they have been written down and translated. They should be considered as impressions, or snapshots, of a type of oral literature that is fluid, ever-developing, and not culturally designed to be finite and consistent. As the political and social challenges that the Tharu community face continue to change, these songs are likely to evolve further. However, it is also possible that the process of writing these songs down for the first time will now have caused them to become more concrete, more finite, and to be remembered and repeated with more consistency than in the past. As the recording of Jitiya songs is unprecedented – it is difficult to predict how writing the songs down might alter how they are used in the future.

Final translations for the thesis were selected based on how well the structure and cultural content of the song translated onto the page in English. Songs that were culturally integral to the ethos of the festival were prioritised, but also songs that were not too reliant on phraseology that was overly verbose when transcribed into English. These songs were finite in their structure, which not all Jitiya songs are. This not only made it more feasible to transcribe

them onto paper, as they had a beginning and ending, but also made the group translation process more straightforward as there was less disagreement as to the content of the songs and order of verses.

The process of translating the songs to English comes with associated moral obstacles and ethical risks. One concern from the outset was the risk of reinforcing the idea of Tharu language and culture as primitive or undeveloped: versions of the songs that focused on line level accuracy in translation risked reading as simplistic and clumsy, with a poor command of language. There was the danger that this written material could even fuel existing misconceptions about the Tharu held by other communities and castes, where the Tharu are sometimes often branded uneducated or primitive. Most significantly perhaps, there was the danger of losing the performance nature of the songs on the page: the exhaustion, ecstasy and spirituality that are integral to the songs can never be truly represented on page. In this sense, writing them down will always rob them of their context. This is why a critical contextual introduction to these translations is vital: to appropriately position the songs and to annotate their context and purpose. It is crucial to emphasise that the songs are ultimately performance pieces – that they serve a spiritual purpose for an entire community, and without fully appreciating the context of the festival they are ultimately meaningless, as the spirit of the song is lost without this context. Their spiritual element is vital too, and the way in which they connect communities and generations: it is a festival during which the social repercussions can last for long after the festival has ended.

It is also important to note that these songs are not representative of all Tharu communities across the country. In fact, it is difficult to assess to what extent these songs are shared across the Terai region. Though people of the Tharu caste are native to the Terai and live almost exclusively on the southern strip of Nepal, unlike many castes, there is not much of a national, unified Tharu culture. Furthermore, Tharu tradition changes from one community to another, with villages that are separated geographically having little in common, even

linguistically. The Tharu villages in Chitwan have more in common with neighbouring Madeshi villages (who face similar types of suspicion and discrimination) than with Tharu communities from other districts. These songs must not, therefore, be read necessarily as representative of the Tharu caste across Nepal. They are circulated and shared in Chitwan and may well be different in the rest of the Terai.

Permission was sought from all poets who have poems printed in full in this thesis, who also understand that their poems may appear online.

## Critical Analysis of Poems

When we look at the trajectory of Nepal's literary history, it is easy to see that poetry by women, particularly women who did not grow up in Kathmandu, is a new phenomenon. Before beginning to analyse it, it is important to appropriately contextualise the socio-economic status of women in Nepal and to acknowledge the many variables that impact the rights and liberty of Nepali women.

Social and economic development in Kathmandu has accelerated at such a higher rate than the rural regions of the country, so gender-based inequality that women might face depends largely on where in Nepal they are born and raised. Additionally, aspects of class, caste and education mean that the cultures in which women grow up are hugely varied. In her study on feminist intersectionality in Nepal, identity politics scholar Andrea J. Nightingale emphasises that 'boundaries between bodies, spaces, ecologies and symbolic meanings of difference are produced and maintained relationally through practices of work and ritual.'<sup>138</sup> For these reasons, generalisations about the oppression of women must be avoided.

For example, *chhaupadi pratha* (the practice of banishing menstruating women from the home under the belief that they are impure and will pollute the household) is almost unheard of in Kathmandu, since in 2007, Article 29 of the Interim Constitution stated that 'nobody shall be exploited in the name of any custom, tradition and usage or in any manner whatsoever,'<sup>139</sup> – a policy that criminalised superstitious practices that penalised or endangered women. Despite this, 21 percent of households in the Terai still follow this practice, due primarily to a lack of education. It is a tradition that, on top of the dehumanising aspects, frequently leads to health

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea J. Nightingale, 'Bounding difference: Intersectionality and the material production of gender, caste, class and environment in Nepal', (*Elsevier: New Feminist Political Ecologies*, Vol.42,) 153-162

<sup>139</sup> K. Jaishankar and Natti Ronel, *Second International Conference of the South Asian Society of Criminology and Victimology*, (South Asian Society of Criminology and Victimology, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, 2013) 153



problems and even death, as women and girls are exposed to, amongst other risks, sub-zero temperatures, violence from neighbours, and snake bites.<sup>140</sup>

Similarly, laws that aim to prevent domestic violence, like dowry-related violence, have failed to be implemented. Though dowry practice was outlawed in 2012 under the Social Customs and Practices Act, not a single arrest has been made in cases where women have been beaten by their in-laws or even killed for failing to pay the full promised dowry.<sup>141</sup> This indicates a societal unwillingness to relinquish values that see women as property and a legal system unprepared to enforce laws written to protect victims. This is an issue that disproportionately affects poor regions, as the educational status of the husband's family is correlative with the likelihood of domestic violence, particularly as women in poor regions tend to marry at a younger age, often as children.<sup>142</sup> The more we account for the social, political and geographical factors that affect the lives of women, the more it is clear for the need to acknowledge the disparity between the lives of rural and urban women.

Therefore, the analysis chapter will be split into two main sections. The first will examine the ideas the poets explore with frequency in poems from rural settings, as they seek to challenge the role of domestic women and expose the poverty and corruption that causes them suffering, their barriers to learning, and the marginalisation of the languages they speak. Particular attention will be paid to the recurrent theme of metaphors involving the land: these poets often compare women to plants and crops in their writing. There is an implied closeness between women and the land – though not one of harmony – as women use the ways in which the land, crops, and animals are treated as a backdrop with which to expose their own ideas, and often their subjugation and poverty.

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<sup>140</sup> Chhabi Ranabhat et al, 'Chhaupadi Culture and Reproductive Health of Women in Nepal', (*Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, Vol.27, 2015) 78

<sup>141</sup> Y.C. Ulrich, Cross-cultural Perspective on Violence Against Women, (*Response to the Victimization of Women and Children*, Vol. 12, 1989) 21

<sup>142</sup> Azusa Oshiro, 'Intimate Partner Violence Among General and Urban Poor Populations in Kathmandu', (*Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol. 26, 2011) 2073

The second part of the chapter compares and contrasts the themes in the rural poems with poems with urban settings. Though the urban poems seek to explore and expose the same phenomenon – to subvert the quiet and domestic roles of women – there are variable features. We see poets using the education that living in a city has afforded them: there are protest poems that speak with a confidence rarely seen before in a country unprepared to let its citizens criticise the government. Though these poems, too, lament a lack of progress in gender equality, they also expose a struggle less seen by rural women: the conflict that arises for urban women on the frontline of independence. Being the first educated females in their family, they face a form of identity crisis. We see a turmoil in these poems as women are torn between their traditions and faith and their newfound education and independence. As the first generation of women making their way into adulthood with a degree of autonomy, they find themselves fighting for safe spaces in a society that, in many ways, is not ready for emancipated women.

Of course, these poems are not all politically motivated: many may not even seem to weigh in on any political issue in an obvious way. However, to be a female poet in Nepal is an inherently politicised position, because women articulating any sort of social commentary falls outside of the current expected female role. All poets exist in a gendered world, so if a woman writes a poem about her hungry children, whilst the poem may be thematically linked to the exhausting nature of motherhood, it is also necessarily a political poem because poverty is a political issue and to expose poverty is a political act. All poems analysed here have multiple elements to them: some engage with mythology, Hindu symbolism, or make references to Nepalese folklore. There are many potential interpretations to be made. However, this thesis essentially seeks to identify overtly political themes in women's poetry, so whilst a wholly unidirectional approach is avoided, the analysis does respond to political aspects above other interpretations, as it is political elements in the poetry that contribute to the argument of the thesis.

*Rural Poems – From Rice Crops to Stray Dogs*

To start with the rural poems and the naturalistic imagery, it is important to appropriately contextualise these literary tropes by acknowledging the history of the ways in which women have been associated with nature.

In a chapter on the feminisation of agriculture in developing countries, Ecofeminist Karen J. Warren identifies that

A failure to realise the extent of women's contributions to agriculture has contributed historically to the invisibility of women in all aspects of agricultural work ... The health of women and children is adversely and disproportionately affected by harmful environmental practices.<sup>143</sup>

This is a phenomenon clearly visible in the rural regions of Nepal, where decisions around farm practices and land-use take place between landowners and the government – two groups both comprised almost entirely of men. Both the skills and the health implications of the women who cultivate the land rarely enter into conversation.

President of the Indian Association for Women's Studies Sumi Krishna expands on this issue by identifying a pressing need to address 'women's resource entitlements', as not only is it the case that 'women's access to resources are human rights to survival and enhanced development choices', but also that 'women's experience of oppressive power is related to their sexual and economic subordination.'<sup>144</sup> Although the majority of farm labour is carried out by

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<sup>143</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on what it is and why it Matters* (Roman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) 10

<sup>144</sup> Sumi Krishna, 'Redefining Sustainable Livelihoods' from *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained*, (AIAA, 2012) 16

women, it is not the women who own either the means of production or the produce itself. This means that their survival still lies in the control of men, as men inherit land but also are more likely to receive an education that allows them to find work that pays more than farm labour. While women cultivate the land, men control the produce and income it generates.

The issue of the delegation of resources and power over land is one of the fundamental issues in women's rights and their relationship with the land. Warren explains further: '[a]s more and more men seek employment in towns and cities, women must carry out men's former jobs,' making men the sole breadwinners and putting them in charge of the family income. Even when men and women share farm work equally, 'gender division of labour typically puts men in charge of cash crops while the women manage food crops.'<sup>145</sup>

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood's depiction of women in rural India is directly applicable to women's status in rural Nepal, as the both the socio-economic status of women and the types of rural labour are similar:

Women in this [Indian] culture have been historically associated with the supposedly 'lower' order of nature, with animality, materiality and physicality, and men with the contrasting 'higher' order of mind, reason and culture ... nature has been feminised and women naturalised, so that understanding these connections is necessary to understanding their respective oppressions.<sup>146</sup>

One of the risks in the way the cultural roles in which Nepali women are cast is the idea that their kinship with the land is part of their female essence. Wendy Harcourt, a professor in Critical Development, describes 'the dangers of essentialism, through women's 'special'

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<sup>145</sup> Karen J. Warren, 'Taking Empirical Data Seriously' from *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Indiana University Press, 1997) 7

<sup>146</sup> Val Plumwood, 'Gender, Ecofeminism and the Environment' from *Controversies in Environmental Sociology* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) 43-44

relationship with nature.’ For her, ‘[t]his not only feeds into dualistic thinking, but also puts women in a subordinate position, having to take on the extra burden of environmental care and regeneration.’<sup>147</sup>

In the poems I am about to discuss, we see women subvert these cultural roles, and challenge the assumption that women live in harmony with the land in a perpetual state of attractive symbiosis; nurturing and growing, as if this was their designated purpose from birth.

Parizat (also written as Parijat – the z/j sounds is interchangeable in Nepali and pronunciation of the letter from the Devanagari alphabet is somewhere in the middle), a prominent Nepali poet of the late twentieth century, wrote poetry in Nepali that drew attention to the plight of women in rural Nepal, an area of Nepalese life that had been largely neglected for decades, as readers tended to popularise stories of glamour and excitement from the city. Parizat calls attention to the hardship suffered by these forgotten populations of women, to their silence, their lack of independence, and the demands made on them by family and by society. In Parizat’s poem ‘Mother’ (p.260), the narrator converses with a malnourished woman nursing an infant – a conversation that challenges the assumption that women live in harmony with the land – for as the poem goes on it becomes clear that the woman suffers immense hardship as she cannot live off the land adequately.

The symbols the woman lists as her own identity are national symbols of Nepal – ‘Himalayas / Rhododendron / Danfey / Musk deer’ – the iconic mountains recognised all over the world, the national flower, the petals from which paper is made, and the shy but enduring mountain deer. There is a sense of patriotism here, of deep personal identity that is inextricably linked with the identity of the protagonist’s country, and the pride of her nation. Despite this, the symbols combine to convey a suggestion of overuse and exploitation as well as strength: there is power in the symbol of the mountains and beauty in the rhododendron, but danfey (daphne

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<sup>147</sup> Wendy Harcourt, The Introduction to *Women Reclaiming Sustainable Livelihoods: Spaces Lost, Spaces Gained*, Wendy Harcourt, (AIAA, 2012) 9

bholua) is used to produce Nepal's paper, cut down and pulped in its prime, and the musk deer, though technically protected by law, has been poached so fiercely for its scent glands that its population has faced dangerous decline. The female protagonist is established from the first stanza, in these four symbols, as a woman whose strength is exploited, who is loved but is overworked, carries the burden of others, and has suffered immensely. The use of these symbols join the woman to the land: like the rural lands of Nepal, the woman is both needed and exploited.

There is significance in the physical account of the woman in the seventh stanza of the poem, 'Yellow woman, are you anything / but a twelve-ribbed skeleton / with two pendulous breasts?' The description itself is vivid, a reader can picture a woman so malnourished that her individual ribs can be counted, the 'pendulous' breasts emblematic of those of a mother who bore and fed many children despite her own hunger, but the description of the woman as 'yellow' is particular, yet less straightforward. It is possible that 'yellow' is metaphorical, but is improbable as the Western implication of yellow to mean cowardly is not recognised in Nepal, and would be ill-fitting in the context of this character, so is more likely to have been intended literally. The obvious medical cause of skin appearing yellow is jaundice, but others include pre-eclampsia and eclampsia, as well as anaemia. Each of these ailments carry connotations of the toll of multiple unmanaged pregnancies and childbirths, the lasting effects of ailments that should be both inexpensive and straightforward to treat. Well over half of pregnant women and mothers suffer from severe anaemia in Nepal,<sup>148</sup> so although the description of the 'yellow' woman might seem jarring to a Western readership, it conjures a more recognisable and relatable image for the Nepali reader.

Even though the description of the character 'Mother' in the poem is brief and sparse, the word 'yellow' depicts the character as someone whose basic health needs are neglected. Another significant feature of the poem is the way description is structured: Parizat uses an

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<sup>148</sup> Gunnar T. Bondavik et al, *The prevalence of anaemia in pregnant Nepali women – a study in Kathmandu*, (Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica Vol, 75, 1996) 341

interrogative – ‘are you anything but ...?’ which calls into question the identity of the character – the woman in the description – asking: is she more than a mother? In a woman whose physical appearance betrays only the toll of pregnancy (a pregnancy that was forced on her, in this instance), the narrator searches for some other defining feature, a hint of some other characteristic, and finds none.

The subsequent lines of the seventh stanza: ‘What is yours of this / fertile and abundant land?’ introduces a new thematic element into the poem, issues of space, autonomy, the ability to make decisions about how land is used and farmed, who reaps the benefits of it and who owns the produce of the land. The poet describes the land as ‘fertile’, drawing a direct comparison between the earth and the character, raising the question, if the land is producing such ‘abundant’ sustenance, what of its yield belongs to ‘Mother’? With these two descriptions alongside each other, the question is raised – if the land is offering an abundance of yield, why is the woman no more than a ‘skeleton’? The character is fertile, because she is producing children, and yet her efforts both to reproduce and to draw produce from the land are at the expense of her health.

‘Where did you find the blood / to form this child?’ is the third interrogative of the stanza, and here there seems to be the implication that everything of this woman’s drained body has gone into the body of her son, who is ‘wrinkled’ and ‘malnourished’ as well. These questions touch on a theme of decision-making over the land. If the narrator cannot find what part of the land is supposed to be the woman’s, then by extension, it can be assumed that the land is someone else’s, that the crops are consumed, sold, and bring profit to others, despite the fact that the woman’s survival relies on the ‘labour’ of farm work along with the ‘labour’ of birthing multiple children in material deprivation. The poem implies that the woman has been cheated out of what should be hers. Her pitiable form is not caused by mere poverty, there is no sense of a poor crop yield or drought (‘entangled by numerous rivers ... abundant natural resources’), but that women are consciously and purposefully denied their share of the land in this environment.

Ecofeminist Carolyn Sachs outlines the ways in which women are structurally subordinated by role allocations in rural farm labour.

Women are prevented from performing key tasks so that they depend on men for resource allocation. Thus, to the extent that women are structurally excluded from key institutions, their power is limited.<sup>149</sup>

This sexual division of labour pushes women further into poverty and robs them of autonomy over the land that they cultivate. Women's needs are not prioritised, even though they carry out the bulk of the physical labour on farm land. Only 15 percent of households in Nepal are female-led, which shows that women are statistically unlikely to live in a house where they have the autonomy to make decisions about how land is managed and how they use the income from the crops to feed themselves.<sup>150</sup>

It is unlikely that Parizat's poems about rural experiences were closely autobiographical. Parizat lost her mother when she was very young, and she also suffered from health complications which led to her paralysis around the age of twenty-six, so remained unmarried and was cared for mostly by her sister.<sup>151</sup> It is possible that she felt a pre-occupation with the concept of motherhood as a woman without children who was living in a society that demands women procreate, but Parizat was also a prominent activist in several humanitarian movements in Nepal that did not directly affect her, including women's reproductive rights. Her poetry seems more likely to be polemical in nature.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Carolyn E. Sachs, *Women Working in The Environment: Resourceful Natures*, (Routledge, 1997) 87

<sup>150</sup> Matsumura, Masaki, Gubhaju, Bina, 'Women's Status, Household Structure and the Utilization of Maternal Health Services in Nepal', (*Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, 16, 2001) 29

<sup>151</sup> Janga B. Chauhan, *Understanding Parijat through the Prism of Her Biography*, (Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Dept of Languages and Mass Communication, Kathmandu University, 2008) 58

<sup>152</sup> Tulasi Acharya, *Gender, disability, and literature in the Global South: Nepali Writers Jhamak Ghimire and Bishnu Kumari Waiwa*, (ProQuest Dissertation Publishing, 2012) 39, 60



Susmita Nepal's poetry similarly explores themes of the relationship of female characters to their environments, the exchanges of energy between women and the world in ways that sometimes seem to suggest their exploitation. In her poem 'Rice Grains of Words' (p.262), which has a similarly rural setting to it, the symbol of the rice becomes a metaphor for the way she communicates with her family and the way she expresses herself. The poem itself becomes inextricable from the routine of preparing a meal – 'stirring word rice with a pen'. Time is marked out by mealtimes, and the kitchen utensils become symbols of emotion, as if the routines of the character's housework restrict her cognitive function. There is a tangible sense of tension surrounding her identity and communication. There is no mention of verbal conversation with the family, no direct dialogue, and yet she does communicate – through the 'rice grains of words'.

Nepal draws attention to the limitations of the female identity within the country. Possibly uneducated and prohibited from making decisions about her life and the way the household is run, the character is limited to speaking through the way she provides to her family. As with Parizat's protagonist, her character is defined, limited and controlled by her work, as she is not granted the autonomy to express herself on an equal footing with the people around her. Even her eyes are described as plates, as if this is how she is viewed by others: a passive provider. Yet her words are provided in the staple diet – rice – served up twice a day, a part of her that her family cannot live without, even if they do not acknowledge it.

The end of the poem offers insight into the narrator's thoughts about her role in the family and her relationship with the role she plays. Is it that her role has become so inextricably linked to that of mother, provider, caretaker, that she can no longer provide food without offering up a part of herself? The end of the poem: 'She continues serving meals of experience / and as she serves, she serves up herself' certainly seems to suggest this, along with the mention of her 'torment' in the same stanza, that her identity is so dominated by the role of feeding her family that it has become impossible to extricate her character from that of the domestic woman.

Like many other poems by Nepal and by other poets that describe life in rural areas, the very essence of the character's identity seems up for debate here, defined by others who place limitations on her voice, and the only way she is permitted to speak is through the way they rely on her, in the way she feeds them.

To return to Parizat's work – her poem 'Me and My Past' (p.298) uses a technique of extended metaphor similar to Susmita Nepal's, the comparing of woman to crop. The poem is brief and almost entirely abstract, except the simile of the narrator described as 'tall like a bamboo tree ... hollow like a bamboo tree'. The bamboo is the defining image in the poem – introduced in the opening line and repeated in the final line – and read in English and in a Western context, may not seem to have many thematic connotations beyond the literal, because bamboo is not especially symbolic in Western culture.

However, the symbol of the bamboo in this poem is likely in reference to a well-known proverb in Nepal that compares girls to bamboo, that claims that they need not be taken care of as they grow up. In Nepal, bamboo is known to spread quickly and is often severely invasive: it grows in abundance without any need for care. Girls also cannot perform the funeral rites, so families only really require sons and there is no need for daughters to ever return to the family home.

The connotations of such a proverb are distinctly pejorative and the phrase is often used as a defence when justifying the prioritisation of the care of sons over daughters. It is a proverb that many live by; in the past twenty years the literacy rates in Nepal have markedly improved, yet the gender discrimination gap had barely decreased, suggesting that boys are still prioritised over girls just as they were pre-civil war.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Shirley Burchfield et al, *A Longitudinal Study of the Effect of Integrated Literacy and Basic Education Programs on Women's Participation in Social and Economic Development in Nepal*, (IDCA Office of Women in Development Washington D.C, 2002)

In Pratisara Sayami's poem 'In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks' (p.263) the five stanzas compare the life cycle of the paddy stalks to the life of a Nepali woman. Just as in Parizat and Susmita Nepal's work, the produce of the land becomes an allegory for the lives of women. It is a telling metaphor: to compare women to rice crops holds multiple connotations about the nature of many women's lives. Rice is the staple crop in Nepal and makes up the bulk of the national diet. It is not considered a luxury; it is a necessity for survival. It is strongly associated with areas of low labour costs as its production is labour intensive, and because it requires flooding, the work is considered arduous and physically taxing. Rice farmers (usually women), spend much of their time planting stalks whilst calf-deep in water, and certainly in the Terai suffer from leeches and conditions similar to trench foot. The process of separating the rice from the straw is also physically exhausting, it involves holding armfuls of crop in two hands and beating it hard against a low wooden table so that the grain falls through the slats of the table to the floor. The stalks are then stacked in mounds the size of houses and covered with tarpaulins; workers tie the bundles together and throw them up to one woman whose job it is to stand atop this 'house' to arrange its construction. This is an incredibly tiring process as the plants must be stacked very quickly as the crops should not be left out overnight. Rice is considered cheap to purchase in comparison to all other crops, and waste of rice crop remains low because it stores well. So, the comparison of women to the paddy stalks in the poem suggests that all women go through some kind of planned, mechanised process with no room for variation. They all meet the same fate, yet they are also necessary for others, they serve others, and are cultivated for the needs of others.

There is a notable development in tone as the poem progresses, the only images of dynamic interaction, joy, or suggestions of freedom are in the first stanza where 'they laughed and tittered in play / pushing and shoving each other', a description that suggests the behaviour of school-age girls, still free from responsibility. Sayami compares the green stalks to the youth of the women: this is a time when the crops are still growing, yet to hold flowers or grain – or be

cut down. As the poem continues and the stalks yellow with age, this energy depletes and is replaced by language that evokes self-consciousness, tiredness and even defeat.

The second stanza begins with a specific time frame: ‘five or seven days’ before stalks become ‘bent in abashment’ like ‘brides arriving at their new home’. This stipulation of the number of days portrays a rigidity about the structure of the timeline of a woman’s life, as if she has a counted number of days to ‘laugh’, and be ‘full of life’, before she is married off. The second stanza is indicative of the nature of most arranged marriages, often deeply emotional experiences for the bride’s family as it is the first time in the bride’s life when she leaves her parent’s house and her own family, to move to her in-laws’ home and become a member of someone else’s family.

It is certainly not the custom for the newly married couple to begin a household of their own. The bride is likely to have met her new husband only once before, as the arrangement will have been made by family members (and often the ‘middle-woman’ of the village who assists in matching husbands and wives), so the move into the new family home, with a husband who is a stranger, is not as much considered a joyous time or a celebration of love, but a rite of passage and a mark of having grown up from girl to woman. Traditionally, a woman cannot then move back to her parents’ home, even if she is mistreated or abused by her new husband and in-laws. For these reasons, the marriage is often an intimidating time for new brides, particularly young ones, and it is far from a rare occurrence even today, as a significant proportion of girls are married by the age of eighteen.<sup>154</sup>

The poem delivers the same sense of urgency in the poem, the stipulated number of days before the wedding, the youthfulness of the bride who feels ‘abashment’ as she moves in with strangers. Despite the flowers, there is not much sense of celebration.

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<sup>154</sup> UNICEF, *Nepal: Child Marriage Threatens Girls’ Futures – Government Breaking Promises for Reform* (Human Rights Watch hrw.org, 2016)

The shape of the woman as she enters the marriage, the mention of her ‘abashment’ in spite of the flowers, brings a critical note to the nature of the marriage with the detail of how she must move into her new home. It is worth contextualising arranged marriage here: there is a fine line between consent and coercion. Even when a marriage is labelled ‘arranged’ and the bride and groom have the option of refusal, they might face intense pressure from their families and society not to do so, or they might be too young and inexperienced to actually understand such a life-altering decision. Women can be pressured to make a decision before they can fully consider their options. They might be bribed, tricked, or threatened (implicitly or explicitly) if they do not agree to a marriage. They might be subjected to actual violence until they agree. Doctor Jyoti Sanghera goes so far as to claim that many of these marriages are simply a form of trafficking, and that it is only a lack of clarity in legislation that separates forced marriage from other types of trafficking.<sup>155</sup> The ‘abashment’ of the new bride is not necessarily a betrayal of benign shyness, but also encompasses the real fear of a new and strange family that she is obliged to fit in with and obey.

The third stanza describes the stalks ‘stooped’ lower still, ‘burdened with fruit’ like a woman who has fallen pregnant. Again, the tone of the language does not suggest a time of happiness or celebration, but more a sense of hardship, of physical toll, the pregnancy itself a ‘burden’ causing the women’s posture to droop. The drooping of the crops is irreversible, just as the youth of the women is over – the burden continues as the responsibility and hardship of caring for many children takes its toll.

In the fourth stanza the stalks are ‘turned into straw / and laid out on the fields: / like a woman just through / with delivery’. It is important that Sayami depicts a woman who has just given birth as though she is beyond a state of revival. Stalks become straw when they die, and the description of the ‘laid out’ woman is an image also evocative of funerary viewings before the

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<sup>155</sup> Jyoti Sanghera, Ratna Kapur, *An Assessment of Laws and Policies for the Prevention and Control of Trafficking in Nepal*, (The Asia Foundation, 2000) 6

funeral fire. There is a strong suggestion of the end of the woman's life here. As in Parizat's poem, we feel the toll of pregnancy and labour on women with no access to medical assistance. With Nepal holding one of the highest maternal mortality rates in South Asia, partly owing to the low utilization of maternal health services, one of the statistically riskiest things that can happen to a woman is to fall pregnant.<sup>156</sup> The image of the woman through with labour is not associated with rebirth or revival of the land, but with a crop at the end of its life.

The 'bloodless' face and the ailment of 'anaemia' in the final stanza of the poem are familiar sights in women following childbirth in Nepal. That drastic decrease in iron levels is easily rectified and inexpensive, but for women in rural regions who may not visit a clinic throughout their entire pregnancy and receive no ante-natal care, nor education, it can be a visibly aggressive ailment with lasting effects on a woman's body. Even with a diagnosis, the costs of iron and folic acid are simply too much to bear for many rural families. The fact that this specific medical feature appears both in Parizat's work and Sayami's shows us something of how much of a concern this is for women in rural areas. This is not portrayed as an unusual image but a standard one: the yellow, anaemic women are the symbol of labour. The visual symptom of the sick new mother seems to embody the portrayal of labour as a whole.

The structure of the poem achieves a powerful effect in depicting the life of a Nepali woman growing up, but it is also a grim depiction of the physical toll of the expectations placed on women, moving into a new family after marriage, the burden of pregnancy and the dangers of labour itself. It may even seem like a morbid summary of the lives of women as they grow with an end as predictable as rice crops, but it draws attention to the reality of life for women least likely to be given a platform to speak for themselves and the reality of a life mapped out for girls, often before they are even born.

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<sup>156</sup> Matsumura, Masaki, Gubhaju, Bina, *Women's Status, Household Structure and the Utilization of Maternal Health Services in Nepal*, (Asia-Pacific Population Journal, 16, 2001) 23

A study in the links between region and autonomy among women showed in a demographic study that '[w]omen's autonomy in decision making is positively associated with their age, employment and number of living children. Women from rural areas and the Terai region have less autonomy in decision making [than the rest of the country]'.<sup>157</sup> This shows that these women tend to have the least autonomy at the time when the biggest decisions are being made about their lives, like education, marriage and childbirth – all of which happen by the age of eighteen, or soon after, for most women.

It should be noted that Sayami originally wrote this poem in Nepal Bhasa, and it was not translated until some years after she wrote it. For women growing up in Kathmandu valley who have no access to education, they were unlikely to be able to read and write in English and may even to struggle to read Nepali language if their parent's language was Nepal Bhasa.<sup>158</sup> So, for a poem that recognised and testified to the silent struggle of women, it is certainly significant that this poem would have been accessible in a language not taught in schools but spoken in many households.

Nasala Chitrakar explores a comparison to crops or plants that is somewhat different, as she tries to shake off the idea that her body is destined for a nurturing role. She challenges the assumption that her future role as a 'good mother' is necessarily something she is interested in. In 'Before I Forget' (p.265), she talks about future motherhood:

I get declared the most likely to be a good mother.  
 But my waist is a bed that mothers more weeds  
 than flowers, and spreads.

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<sup>157</sup> Dev R Acharya, Jacqueline S Bell, Padam Simkhada, Edwin R van Teijlingen and Pramod R Regmi, abstract: 'Conclusion', *Women's autonomy in household decision-making: a demographic study in Nepal*, (BioMed Central, 2010)

<sup>158</sup> (The native language of the Newar people who occupy Kathmandu valley)

There is the sense of the narrator challenging her given identity, evading the purpose that she is told her body serves. The stanza is dense with metaphor; she expresses scepticism that her body is for making ‘flowers’. The imagery involved in growing ‘weeds’ on a body that ‘spreads’ implies that the woman is not prioritising her body for reproduction, and that perhaps, just because everyone declares her likely to be a good mother, that does not mean that she wishes to be one. Her waist spreads, not through pregnancy, but instead through comfort and sustenance. The narrator is confident and contented – unconcerned with the pressures of the idealised female body image as she watches her body grow “more weeds” – a bold feminist counterpoise to the usual depictions of women in Nepalese poetry and the preoccupation with their bodies being small and slender. Unlike the woman in Parizat’s poem “Mother”, withered and bony from the physical toll of pregnancy and poverty, this character’s comfort and health are linked to her bodily autonomy and her rejection of childbearing. Her avoidance of pregnancy allows her own body to grow as she sees fit, instead of for the purposes others try to dictate on her behalf. She offers an alternative narrative to the one of female purpose: that the female body must attract, and reproduce.

The single, staccato sentence at the end of the stanza, ‘[t]hey want me to pluck off the weeds’ highlights the disparity between the narrator and those around her. The narrator does not want to pluck these metaphorical weeds: the suggestion seems to be that she would rather accept her body as what it is, with no interest in preening it for a future husband or preparing it for bearing children she is not yet sure she even wishes to have. There is a palpable sense of the private reclaiming of bodily autonomy here: the narrator is not only aware of the expectations placed on her body – even by her social allies – but she is quietly critical of them, unwilling to be coerced into the role that everyone seems keen for her to play.

One other topic that several poets explore in their poetry is women’s relationship to education: though few of the poems discuss schooling overtly, many include speakers who lament their perceived lack of education and their barriers to attending school. The barriers to



learning for girls in Nepal reach beyond a question of economic status. One Amnesty International report showed that violence both at school and on the journey to and from school were cited as major issues for girls, particularly girls from ethnic minorities.<sup>159</sup> Aside from the fact that girls are expected to do more chores around the house than their male counterparts (and therefore work harder and longer), school can be an intimidating environment. Schools tend to be heavily male-dominated, in the student population as well as amongst the staff. There is often no privacy for girls; bathrooms are secluded but not separated by gender. There are few female teachers, and even in the most recent years as schools are improving, reports of girls being sexually intimidated at school are frequent. For girls from more remote (and almost always poorer regions) their only option is to board at school, posing higher risks still.<sup>160</sup> In my own experiences of working in Nepalese boarding schools (four different secondary schools between the years of 2012 and 2017), no statistic could have prepared me for the atmosphere of aggression in the classrooms. Corporal punishment was routinely inflicted on students, with children as young as five being slapped, pushed and shaken by teachers.

In addition, one only needs to glance at the content of the curriculum to see how it excludes and alienates girls, not to mention perpetuates the exact kinds of domestic stereotypes that girls struggle to escape. In the stories students study in English, boys are characterised as the heroes while girls remain home to care for their husbands and children.

When I analysed the contents of the standard English textbooks for Grades 5 – 9 at a boarding school I lived at in Chitwan, there was a clear disparity between the representations of male and female characters. Of the five stories used in the textbooks, there were ten male characters and two female characters. In every case, the protagonist and/or narrator was male. The male characters included two kings, a star pupil, a heroic traveller and a tiger. Of the two

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<sup>159</sup> Amnesty International Nepal, 'Making Schools Safer – Where are the Dangers?' from *Safe Schools: Every Girls Right* (Alden Pres, Whitney, 2008) 14,33

<sup>160</sup> Sarah Levine, 'Getting in, Dropping out, and Staying on: Determinants of Girls' School Attendance in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal', *Anthropology & Education Quarterly Journal* Vol.37, (American Anthropological Association, 2006) 21

female characters, one was a hunter's wife who cooked a porcupine, and the other was a king's daughter who was to be the prize wife for a rat. The messages in the stories where female characters were not omitted entirely, but were not named, were invariably the same: that their purpose was to remain in the background as support for the male characters.

Sewa Bhattarai's poem 'Cycle of family history' (p.268) explores some of these reasons that girls might fail to ever make it into the classroom. Even in its form, the poem is short and benign, simplistic in a way that delineates progression in the young girls' lives that it describes. Despite the domesticity of the mother's life, there is nothing to propel the girls in the poem towards education, not even their own mothers. In fact, their role seems to lie within the home completely. 'Their mother is the world', and they are 'content to follow her around'. There is a meekness, and an implication of comfort and shelter in words like 'warm' and 'glow' as if there is nothing to reach out for, nothing beyond the limitations that 'mother' experiences. [T]hey decide beforehand / Not to compete' is a significant choice of syntax. The girls' options are limited by their own perceptions of what they can achieve as much as the explicit limitations imposed on them by male figures of power. None of the characters in the poem ever seem to leave the household. The reader feels that the girls in the poem will lead the most traditional form of life, moving from the family home only once they are married off. We can only speculate as to what it is that makes mother 'strong'; perhaps calmness and stoicism in the face of hardship or poverty.

This positions the girl at home in a perpetual state of shyness. It is idealistic to imagine Nepali girls boldly demanding to be sent to school, and then receiving an education that is for them as much as boys. Schools can often still feel like a space that belongs to boys, where girls are interlopers and remain on the peripheries. The last two lines of the poem; 'Since there is no shame / In losing to mother' summarise the expectations of some young girls who have internalised the idea of education as designed for boys.

In her research on gender bias in Nepalese schools, Jennifer Rothchild found that ‘the construction of gender that was created, reinforced and negotiated within the context of the home was also reinforced and maintained within the social structure of the education system.’ Specifically, she found that headteachers viewed this reluctance for girls to go to school as an innate trait of females, rather than one caused by the school environment, as they expected girls to be innate caregivers. The heads ‘assumed that girls, without question, would want to take up household responsibilities and care-giving.’<sup>161</sup> This shows why a young girl may well internalise the idea that she could never succeed at school next to male peers, as even the adults in charge of her education expect her to prefer to remain in the home.

While boys are encouraged to display unbridled ambition, both academically and financially, girls are often valued for simply facilitating male ambition. It is hard to picture a Nepali boy allowed to merely follow his mother around. The briefness and sparseness of the poem evokes the simplicity and domesticity of the young girls’ lives. There is a sense that not much comes of her adulthood, that there is no personal development, nor open door to freedom. It is the antithesis of social progression; even the title ‘Cycle of family history’ exposes oppression that perpetuates itself.

Yukta Bajracharya’s poem ‘Raised by Mom’ (p.269) depicts a similar family dynamic; tight-knit and strong through domestic understanding. It is a testament to the strength of domestic women and bears witness to the hardship of women who do not receive an education. Women who never attend school are significantly more likely to join unskilled work forces with long hours, low pay (or no pay at all), and risk of physical injury. In the lines ‘worked, worked, worked / ‘I may not know much but I need to make this work’, the narrator invokes an idea of a woman whose life has been shaped by work from the beginning with few tools or resources. The repetition of the word ‘worked’ emphasises longevity to the years and hours they have laboured,

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<sup>161</sup> Jennifer Rothchild, *Gender Trouble Makers: Education and Empowerment in Nepal*, (Routledge, 2007) 99, 100-101

perhaps from childhood, and a lack of a break, a change of scene, or chance to pursue anything else. In work sectors such as agriculture, which are physically taxing and rely heavily on the work of women and girls, it is not unusual to see girls as young as eight working long hours in the fields in remote areas of Nepal.

Later in the poem, the secret love of '*pani-puri* and chocolate' is mentioned, and perhaps this indicates the social expectation for a woman to always work and avoid being seen as lazy. As there is no social shame or stigma in having a weakness for chocolate or *pani-puri* (puff balls stuffed with potato and spiced water), the only reason such a love of these foods might need to remain secret is because they are considered luxuries. They are street foods rather than foods that are prepared at home; they are bought ready-made and are basic and inexpensive. The suggestion is, then, that these are women who, despite nurturing the girls in the family ('how to make enough of less / but always give all you've got'), are women who live without luxury, who have a 'love' of foods they cannot frequently enjoy, because they have to provide for others before themselves. Even cheap street food seems like a guilty indulgence because it requires no preparation and is a break from work.

The reference to 'fingers that have been worn to the bone, / those that have only known / how to make things' also further indicates the type of labour to which these women are accustomed. '[O]nly known / how to make things' shows that physical work is all the women have ever known. That they are 'worn to the bone' shows the extent of the toil, and the ailments the characters suffer, but this workload is met with acceptance, not anger. In Nepal, most of the unpaid family labour force is female and the majority of the unskilled workforce is female,<sup>162</sup> in part due to the migration of the male workforce to foreign countries. Bajracharya portrays the effects of these physically taxing roles for women as the standard, rather than an exception in the treatment of women.

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<sup>162</sup> Boris Branisa, Stephan Klasen, Maria Ziegler, Denis Drechsler, *The Institutional Basis of Gender Inequality: The Social Institutions and Gender Index*, (Feminist Economics Vol.20, 2014) 29-30

Importantly, in the penultimate stanza, the narrator describes the women as ‘hope-birthing’ – a phrase that is indicative of how hope might be perceived to be generated among uneducated women with limited opportunities. Hope must be ‘birthed’: improvement must come in the form of offspring (who might see better opportunities as the country develops), and that their optimism lies in their children, rather than an expectation that their own lives might improve: ‘You will make things alright’. However, to birth hope also means that hope comes specifically from a woman, that it is a woman’s own sacrifice and suffering that might allow for a better life for the younger family members.

The ritualised acts that form the structure of day-to-day routine for Nepali women are not repetitions, or lifestyles, that the women themselves have chosen. They are existences pre-governed by a society that has already chosen a role for women and has defined its limits. Identity for women is decided before their birth, and cares little for individual aspirations, desires, skill-sets and needs. Political scientist Vanaja Dhruvurajan succinctly summarises Hindu society as one that

encourages the adoption of a submissive and dependent position by Hindu women.

There is a lack of political will to transcend this ideology because the status quo is beneficial to those in positions of power and privilege.<sup>163</sup>

The practical application of concepts like identity and autonomy can be measured by any number of social factors, including deliberative reflection, desires, emotions, self-identities and feelings of self-worth. Education, marriage, starting a family, and addressing incidents of violence in the

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<sup>163</sup> Vanaja Dhruvurajan, ‘Religious Ideology, Hindu Women, and Development in India’ from *Journal of Social Issues Vol.46*, (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1990) 57

home are all key features to analyse when assessing the state of women's autonomy and are all areas in which Nepali women struggle to gain control over in their own lives.

In her work on human rights and indicators of freedom in Nepal, Social Politics researcher Marjorie Agosin found that for women in Nepal to have even a basic level of choice over who they married, when they had children, and where they lived, they had to have a basic education.<sup>164</sup> With more than half of women outside of Kathmandu illiterate, this suggests that women still face huge obstacles in taking control over their own lives and bodies, as they lack the opportunity to contextualise the way they are treated or access information to do with human rights, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

Education and employment correlate positively with a woman's opportunity to make decisions about major milestones in her life, as well as having a strongly positive effect on self-confidence and self-worth.<sup>165</sup> Again, this has implications for women in rural regions who are less likely to receive an education or work for an income. We will see in the poetry in the analysis that it is often the poems set in rural Nepal that explore problems of a lack of autonomy for women who have few opportunities. Although it is certainly true that women in some regions are engaged in an ongoing contestation of current structures to widen their participation in decision making and become increasingly active agents in cultivation',<sup>166</sup> the current status of most women who labour in remote regions in Nepal remains low.

Some poems analysed here just as frequently articulate the lack of opportunity or agency to invoke change or to be part of a movement, political or otherwise, that aims to improve the living conditions and rights of marginalised groups. Many of these poets describe not only a need to act, but a frustrating inability to do so, severely limited by poverty or a community that is

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<sup>164</sup> Marjorie Agosin, *Women, Gender, and Human Rights: A Global Perspective*, (Rutgers University Press, 2001) 53

<sup>165</sup> Dev R Acharya, Jacqueline S Bell, Padam Simkhada, Edwin R van Teijlingen and Pramod R Regmi, abstract: 'Conclusion', *Women's autonomy in household decision-making: a demographic study in Nepal*, (BioMed Central, 2010)

<sup>166</sup> Kalpana Giri, 'Nepali Women Using Community Forestry as a Platform for Social Change', (*Society and Natural Resources Journal*, Vol.23, 2010) 1216-1218

indifferent to their struggle and unwilling to support them. For every poem discussed in this chapter that articulates acts of resistance and experiences of activism, there are as many poems that describe the lack of progress, the inability to act, and the poverty that prevents many women (particularly in rural areas) from engaging in even basic ventures to seek out their rights.

Mahendra Sapkota explains what he perceives as a lack of activism on the part of Nepali women by claiming that ‘...men in patriarchal cultures often feel entitled to dominance, whereas women feel that they deserve to be treated as second-class citizens, and both genders monitor their behaviour in accordance with social norms,<sup>167</sup> but the suggestion that women can imagine no alternative world in which they are treated with more value seems unlikely, when we consider how recently the People’s Movement occurred (1996-2006), during which thousands of women and schoolgirls joined once they felt the Maoists would fight for their rights, and how the rebellion was strongly characterised by a demand for equal rights for women.

It seems more likely that Åshild Falch’s theory about the disillusionment of Nepali women, and the fear of repercussions for acts of resistance, play a larger role in an absence of organised activism. Falch asserts the following:

... reports indicate that domestic violence, dowry deaths and sexual violence are on the rise, and that most perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence continue to escape prosecution under the Nepali criminal justice system; the provision of 33 percent women’s representation in all government sectors has not been followed up in practice; and a bureaucracy engrained with patriarchal norms and practices continues to prevent children from acquiring citizenship through their mothers. This inevitably raises doubts

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<sup>167</sup> Mahendra Sapkota, ‘Contested Identity Politics in Nepal: Implications from Tharu Movement’, (*IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol.19, 2014) 100

as to whether the legal advances have contributed to any actual improvement in the lives of women.<sup>168</sup>

This explains how throughout recent history, without the support of a political party, the demands of women's organisations fell on deaf ears, and even feminist movements that gained traction did not, in the long run, result in significant improvements in women's rights. However, even non-violent campaigns by women have been met with harassment and torture by government and army officials.<sup>169</sup> When considering the risks involved for a Nepali woman to put her head above the parapet, it is hardly surprising that many may seem, on the surface, accepting of their role of subservience. The alternative can be far more dangerous.

In addition, a low-caste woman will be cautious of upsetting more privileged neighbours as well as the authorities. Mary Cameron identifies the risk that Dalit people face if they enter into conflict with high-caste neighbours on whom they rely for subsistence. She also establishes how these everyday actions tend to force low-caste people to further assume their subservience when they are forced to ask for favours, making it difficult for them to challenge the caste structure:

Dalits who initiate requests for food and non-food items convey their right and/or their need to receive the desired object, while landowners want to at least initially avoid giving to Dalits by either ignoring the request, giving as little as possible, and/or demanding they receive something (or the promise of something) in return. Competing objectives

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<sup>168</sup> Åshild Falch, *Women's Political Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Burundi and Nepal*, (Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2010), 28

<sup>169</sup> CENESTA, *Conservation Principles and Humanitarian Practice*, (Iranian Centre for Sustainable Development and Environment, 2007) 95



therefore engage both parties in a dialogue that co-constructs what it means to be a Dalit who seeks and to be a non-Dalit who gives.<sup>170</sup>

One of the poems that explores this lack of progress is 'New Year' (p.271) by Toya Gurung. The poem inverts the expectation of renewal and hope that are traditionally celebrated during new year's celebrations. In the Nepalese calendar, new year arrives in April and at the beginning of the Spring season – usually a period of growth after the harsh winters – yet Gurung personifies the coming of the new year as a stray dog. The dog is 'disobedient' – Gurung implies that the new year brings nothing of what was promised, none of the progress that people expect from it, but instead it 'loiters around every refuse-heap' and 'goes from door to door'. It has nothing to feed off, nothing out of which to develop progress or create growth, nothing to offer people. This seems to speak, broadly, to the phenomenon outlined by Falch: that at the new year, the time when people expect a new beginning, nothing that was expected is actually delivered.

Gurung depicts a cynical and desperate cycle of poverty for Nepal in this grotesque image of the new year as it attempts to feed off the leftovers of the previous year. It is 'skinny / despite its greedy habit' – a suggestion that it fails to sustain power or wealth, that it fails to save or store, and that its greed is its own downfall. This is not a dog that hunts, that plans, or shows faithfulness to others in the way that dogs often symbolise in global cultures. The dog is not a wild animal – it cannot live without man – it relies on mankind for survival and yet is neglected and rejected by man. It is the symbol of the society in turmoil, unable or unwilling to take care of its animals. It is a product of a society that casts out the unwanted, and this dog is a dog described as the least favourable or trustworthy kind of dog possible.

The fact, though, that it *is* a dog, as opposed to an animal more typically associated with negative imagery, suggests that Nepal is somewhere in a state of flux, characterised by an animal

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<sup>170</sup> Mary Cameron, 'Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal', (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.27, 2007) 22

highly changeable in character. A dog has the potential to be resourceful, it is known for intelligence, and yet this particular dog fails to show these qualities. The reader is called upon, then, to imagine other kinds of dogs by comparison, the nature of any other hypothetical new year that does indeed promise hope and progress.

It is significant too, in this brief and sparse poem, that the last line seems somewhat unexpected – that the dog holds the summons of the court. Gurung is not merely suggesting that the cycle of poverty and lack of progress erodes the country – the dog goes from door to door demanding that people answer to their government. It is noteworthy that the court summons is delivered by a stray dog – not professionally or properly, but desperately ‘hiding its tail’ – it is ‘disobedient’, trying its luck, and the only sense of progress really suggested here is a growth of tension, or disparity, and an increasing void between society and state.

In a similar style, in her poem ‘Exile: Invitation to a Struggle’ (p.272), Tsering Wangmo Dhompa makes some insights into the exhaustive nature of insurgency that seems to have little effect, in the long run, on the standard of living for the country’s citizens. ‘In fifty years, dogs from rival villages / have lost and won their wars. Their heirs walk / with tails between their legs. / We pray for a better life.’ Dhompa suggests a lack of significance or consequence in the long run, when it comes to matters of insurgency. She places no emphasis on those who win wars, or how often. No significance is given to one party or another, however noble their agenda might have been. They have simply ‘lost and won their wars’. The poem bears witness to a nation where, for many people, there is nothing to be gained in rebellion. War simply has a negative effect, whatever the outcome, because it intensifies poverty.<sup>171</sup> Political agendas become meaningless. Governments and rebel groups fail to benefit the population. The subsequent generations live a harder life, ‘with tails between their legs’, bearing the negative effects of the battles they inherited. This is not a poem that supports the idea of progress through battle. The

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<sup>171</sup> S. Mansoob Murshed and Scott Gates, *Spatial–Horizontal Inequality and the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal*, (Review of Development Economics Journal, Vol.9, 2005) 3,4

indignity of the heirs of the dogs at war, praying for a better life, all seem to suggest that war has benefited nobody. It simply robs the country of economic development and stability. Dhompa discourages organised insurgency in the poem: the toll that conflict takes on the population creates hardship for civilians for generations to come.<sup>172</sup>

Despite this, Dhompa hints at optimism for the future. ‘Snow bound ground, snow topped ground, the only / assurance we have / is, it will melt.’ There is the suggestion of hope: the only guarantee is that the snow will melt, that the cold will leave and there will be a chance for growth. Dhompa makes a demand here, not for conflict, for power passed meaninglessly back and forth, but for unity for the sake of progress.

This frustration at a lack of development, a need to draw attention to the cyclical struggle of the population, is explored by several poets, as it is most frequently women who suffer poverty caused by years of conflict and fail to reap any benefit from this perpetual state of political flux.

To move on to the specifics of imagery: many of the rural poems use images of the land to challenge Nepalese society’s prescribed role for women, but this is a theme that pervades most of the poems by Nepali women, as they return time and again to expose the limitations placed on them by cultural values that insist that women fit one specific persona.

The ways in which these roles are challenged is subtle: several of these poems that describe existences shaped by poverty contain characters that maintain a public posture of consent. They seem quietly obedient, as well as hard-working: both traits that can appear, to a bystander, to be indicators of satisfaction. Anthropologist Sarah Homan summarised the ways in which women in Nepal are categorised:

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<sup>172</sup> Kishor Sharma, *The political economy of civil war in Nepal*, (Elsevier World Development Journal, Vol.34, 2006) 1238

Women and men often voiced notions of what it meant to be a 'good' woman, and these notions resonated with how women should be and act as set out in Hindu or Brahmanical texts ... A woman should control her body, mind and speech, keeping them in line with the wishes of the respective male in her household at all times ... A woman is presumed to be linked to male relatives: her father before marriage, her husband during marriage and her son (presuming she has one) after the death of her husband.

This prescribed role for women as secondary and subservient citizens means that resistance in itself is considered to step outside the boundaries of what is acceptable for 'good' women, so is often met with hostility. The discourse surrounding the actions of women who do fight for their rights tends to be negative: acts of resistance are frequently branded lazy, obtuse, aggressive or selfish by wider communities. The poems in this thesis lend the reader a private, inside view of the inner workings of evasion and avoidance in the lives of women who are slowly pushing back against systems of oppression.

In contrast, some of these poems explore progress from an outsider's perspective. Rather than being part of the fight for liberation, they watch the conflict take place among other women and systems of oppression but are not involved in it. Often, progress accelerates in urban areas, and citizens who experience caste-discrimination or acute poverty are excluded from these developments. In Urmila Kumari Chaudhari's poem 'My mind is not at peace' (p.274), the narrator laments the treatment of women from poor, low-caste communities.

It is important to consider the impact of translation when reading Chaudhari's work, as Tharu language (Chaudhari's native dialect) is so rarely translated into English. With poems that drive a political message, the translator of Chaudhari's work, Manjushree Thapa, tends to prioritise delivering the politics of the poem above imagery or cadence. The tone of the poem is clear through the translation – although the process of writing the poem in English has pared it down to the bones – this is clearly a call for change. The poet challenges a society that 'plays with

the lives of women' and 'idealises falsehood'. The language of these phrases, the 'playing' and the 'falsehood', imply that the position that women are expected to keep is not one of authenticity. It is fake: without true meaning or purpose. In many ways, though it is drastically different in style from some of the urban-setting poems, the claims are remarkably similar – the assertion that women are treated like puppets and live at the whim of the men in their lives. Chaudhari pledges to 'speak out' – to show opposition to the structures of society that reduce her to less than human. 'An uproar is taking place within me' shows an edge of mutiny, but one that does not actually manifest in reality.

The context of how the Tharu have been historically categorised is critical here: the ruling Rana regime's legal code defined the Tharu as a caste, not a tribe, and although they were categorised as a 'clean' caste, they were also 'alcohol drinkers' and 'subject to enslavement'.<sup>173</sup> Rebellion amongst the Tharu comes at significant risk, as the Tharu have so few allies outside of their own communities.

In his work on Tharu identity politics, Mahendra Sapkota claims that 'Due to gradual erosion in self-esteem, dignity and freedom of common people of society, a kind of ethnic identity has developed with despair, dissatisfaction and frustration'<sup>174</sup> within the Tharu. He claims that the Tharu identity is characterised by a historically rooted struggle against elitism, as well as distrust and stigma from other castes – a struggle that we feel in the rousing language Chaudhari uses when describing the perpetual fight against oppressive forces. It is important to acknowledge the relevance of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality here: Crenshaw identifies how related systems of power affect those who are most oppressed in society. Intersectionality claims that variations of identity as class, race, sexual orientation, and gender do not exist independently, but are linked, and that women who are also disadvantaged by race and

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<sup>173</sup> Gisèle Krauskopff, 'From Caste Association to Cultural Ethnic Association' from *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences* (Berghahn Books, 2007) 203

<sup>174</sup> Mahendra Sapkota, *Contested Identity Politics in Nepal: Implications from Tharu Movement*, (IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science, Vol.19, 2014) 23

class will experience the effects of prejudice more acutely.<sup>175</sup> This is certainly true for Tharu women: tasks like fetching water, buying food or cultivating land are jobs where women are most likely to face the suspicion and stigma inflicted upon them by neighbours, bosses or landlords. As we can see in Chaudhari's use of descriptions of life as an outcast, the speaker's position as an outcast is unrelenting.

The ending is perhaps the most telling – 'I had wanted to traverse a world filled with flowers / But thorns and needles always bar my way ...'. Even through the fog of translation, the experience of many Tharu women seems strong here. Chaudhari recognises that the world *is* filled with flowers, that there is an abundance of beauty and opportunity that she is barred from accessing. Discrimination permeates every aspect of this narrator's life. She knows it is there and can see it being enjoyed by those more fortunate than her, but she cannot access it for the 'thorns and needles' – obstacles that prevent her from benefiting from all that the world has to offer. But never does she doubt that the flowers are there. Tharu communities frequently live in close proximity, almost on the doorstep, of high-caste communities who enjoy all kinds of privileges rarely afforded to them. In a single day, every interaction a Tharu person has can be framed by the power imbalance of caste discrimination. The stark contrast between their oppression and the privilege of their Barun-Chhetri<sup>176</sup> neighbours explains why Chaudhari condemns society with confidence, defines it as 'fetid' as it ruins her chances of her growing her own 'scented flowers'.

Although the phrase seems awkward when translated into English – the sentiment comes through in 'a row of tears always dims my eyes' – the narrator feels forced to live in darkness, part-blinded by the oppression inflicted on her by the society in which she is 'mired'. The overall tone of the poem is not so much one of resistance, but one of sadness, even acceptance. The

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<sup>175</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, (Polity Press, 2016) from the section 'Getting the History of Intersectionality Straight'

<sup>176</sup> (The most highly ranked names according to the caste system)

‘uproar’ stays within the narrator. The tears arranged in a ‘row’ extends these connotations of boundaries: the image invokes the idea of a barrier between the speaker and the rest of the world, and the borders between castes. It adds to the sense of separation in the poem – that the narrator is fenced in – that she is forced to live on the peripheries of the world.

In fact, Tharu women have plenty of reasons to fear the ramifications of upsetting high-caste people, who are often their landlords or sell them materials or services they need. Researcher Steven Folmar’s study on Dalit identity contains a telling example of this, as he describes an attempt to trouble-shoot with ‘untouchable’ women who were made to wash their own glasses after drinking at the local tea house:

In Jharuwarasi in 2007, women could attend classes in social mobility offered six nights per week by the Federation for Dalit Women, which is funded by the Communist Party. At one such meeting a leader recommended that rather than wash glasses they had used Dalits should break, then pay for them. Attendees have, again, not translated this strategy into action. Reluctance to do so is tied up in the uncertainty of the outcomes as told of in stories of Dalits being punished severely for opposing caste restrictions.<sup>177</sup>

However, Folmar does claim that less organised and less obvious methods of rebellion are employed. While members of Dalit communities might feel that a mass-resistance carries too many risks, low-level, individual acts of evasion do take place:

The social and political strategies Dalits employ in everyday life to bow to, quietly accept, dissent to or resist high caste domination are numerous. At times a single action

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<sup>177</sup> Steven Folmar, ‘Identity Politics Among Dalits in Nepal’ (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.27, 2007) 47

embodies several goals, even polar opposites, behaviours that seemingly accept the system but subtly challenge it.<sup>178</sup>

Folmar argues here that, in some cases, Dalit people do indeed subtly challenge those who try to enforce the rules of the caste-structure, even if it is not in a way that risks leading to confrontation.

In ‘The Hunger for Justice and the Water of Desperation’ (p.275), Manju Kanchuli visits themes similar to those of Chaudhari, as she writes of the experiences of women debilitated by poverty. Her tone, too, is similar: there is no attempt to mask her desperation, her feeling that she is running out of options. As in Chaudhari’s poem, there is a sense of impending uprising, an inability to endure a life of oppression for much longer. Her images are even comparable – ‘Fire rages on the riverbank’ – the idea of the hostile setting, like the thorns in Chaudhari’s poem, the ‘flood of water’ that creates a sense of chaos, of destruction, and of an environment that cannot continue in such a state. She also seems to experience the conflict alone, on a personal and lonely journey where she lives near others who benefit from the results of her oppression. ‘She does not need feasts like these’ say the people she feeds, as they eat her share of the food that she has prepared. They seem confident, because of her silence and servitude, that she will not rebel. This kind of misogyny is different from the institutionalised sexism that is often referred to when evidencing the marginalisation of women. Many domestic Nepali women face this type of personal, more immediate prejudice – a kind of ‘soft repression’ through interactional conflicts – in a domestic environment.

It is relevant that in a study of causes of female depression in Nepal, researcher Valentine M. Moghadam found, following a series of interviews with female participants, that ‘women’s narratives powerfully reflect the impact of their inequality on their lives and on their

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<sup>178</sup> Folmar, *Identity Politics*, 43



depression'.<sup>179</sup> Overwhelming psychological distress was almost always cited by patients, including but not limited to sexual abuse, physical abuse from a husband or in-laws, a heavy work burden with no freedom, and husbands who took second wives or threatened to do so.<sup>180</sup> All of the participants still resided in the marital home. The details of this study are shocking in that they reveal not only the extent of domestic violence as well as its catastrophic effects, but also the way in which many women are undervalued by the families they are married into, treated as second-class citizens in their own homes and living lives, in some cases, akin to slavery. The conflict of the inner pain and the outward compliance these women described is precisely the experience that Kanchuli articulates.

Something that stands out consistently in these poems, and particularly Kanchuli's, is the absence of education: female characters, including school-age girls, are in the fields or the kitchen, following the women, but there is a notable absence of learning opportunities.

Gender bias in Nepal is ranked as among the most severe in the world,<sup>181</sup> and this is nowhere more apparent than in Nepal's education system: even into the twenty-first century, opportunities for girls' education continue to be neglected across the country. Social and legal discrimination against women are cited as core issues in gender inequality as '[Nepalese] society has a strong preference for sons and prefers to educate boys over girls.'<sup>182</sup> Nepal's average adult literacy rate of 56.6 percent shows the disparity of male literacy rate at 71.6 percent, and just 44.5 percent for women.<sup>183</sup> During the civil war of 1996 – 2006 (though it was difficult to gather accurate data due to the internal volatility of the country and fractured state of educational

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<sup>179</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, 'Depression in Nepalese Women' from *From Patriarchy To Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements, and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia*, (Syracuse University Press, 2007) 251

<sup>180</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, 'Depression in Nepalese Women', 253

<sup>181</sup> Kushum Shakya, 'Changing Gender Status: Achievements and Challenges' from *Population Monograph of Nepal*, (Government of Nepal National Planning Commission Secretariat, Central Bureau of Statistics, United Nations Population Fund, 2014) 221

<sup>182</sup> Baker J, *Women's health in Nepal: the neglected dimension*, (The National Center for Biotechnology Information, US National Library of Medicine: National Institute of Health, 1994)

<sup>183</sup> National Planning Commission Secretariat (Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal, 2011), 80-82

institutions), some organisations suggest that school attendance dropped dramatically, and adult literacy suffered as a result.<sup>184</sup> When large numbers of adult men migrated to the gulf to find employment, it was predominantly school-age girls who made up the work deficit, with trades such as the carpet industry employing young girls in their thousands.<sup>185</sup> Project-induced changes have not been long-lasting and do not produce robust attitudinal changes towards the education of girls. Even in the Terai, where physical locality is less of a barrier to school, intake remains at among the lowest in South Asia amongst school-age girls.<sup>186</sup>

A proverb commonly heard in Nepal translates to ‘educating a daughter is like watering a stranger’s garden’. This betrays the way that many people never truly consider daughters to be part of their own family; they are a financial burden due to the dowry process and once married, will move to their husband’s home and serve his family, so precious resources would be wasted on someone who will not remain in the family home to bring in an income. As wives are commonly treated poorly in marital homes by their in-laws, with psychological or physical domestic violence experienced by more than 90 percent of married women, this illustrates how family structures systematically devalue women.

Manju Kanchuli grew up in a house which she describes as a place where ‘literature flourished’,<sup>187</sup> but often writes on the plight of women from poor areas who do not have access to education. As a counsellor for trafficked women (as well as a lecturer and poet), Kanchuli has an intimate knowledge of what life is like for many girls who never make it into the classroom.

In her popular poem ‘The Hunger for Justice and The Water of Desperation’, the narrator articulates her frustration at living the life of the silenced housewife whose purpose seems little more than a servant. As to the kind of ‘justice’ the narrator ‘hungers’ for in the title,

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<sup>184</sup> Quy-Toan Do, Lakshmi Iyer, *Geography, Poverty and Conflict in Nepal*, (Harvard Business School: 2009) 21-22

<sup>185</sup> ICF International, *Children Working in the Carpet Industry in India, Nepal and Pakistan*, (United States Department of Labour: 2012) 6,8,14

<sup>186</sup> Christine Heward and Sheila Bunwaree, *Gender, Education and Development: Beyond Access to Empowerment*, (Zed Books, 1998) 192

<sup>187</sup> Wayne Amtzis, *Manju Kanchuli*, (Poetry International, 2013) poetryinternationalweb.net

the poem highlights prejudice of a domestic kind, a kind where women wait second in line for every necessity. As we saw, other characters speak on her behalf, a nameless ‘they’ – ‘In her name / do not put out the rice the meal requires / She does not need feasts like these’; here the details convey a silent and lonely narrator, more lucid and aware than her family have given her credit for. Kanchuli rages against the demeaning definition of her as a ‘highly skilled housewife’; her value limited to her ability to provide for others, with no right to anything of her own, or a chance to improve her life. The poem captures a key societal attitude that acts as a barrier to rights such as an education for girls: as long as it is not in the interest of the patriarchy to give women a voice, it will always be acceptable for families to deny their daughters the right to go to school.

Benju Sharma’s poem ‘This Moment I am Thinking’ (p.276) similarly addresses domestic limitations, but focuses on issues in education in a literal and material sense. Around halfway through the poem, the narrator frets: ‘I think of my child’s school fees / notebook, pen, book and tuition.’ While this seems like an obvious financial concern that affects many families in Nepal, it is poignant when juxtaposed next to the succeeding lines: ‘I also listen to my mother / crying for her ailments ... my daughter / no longer a young woman, unmarried’. The narrator, struggling against poverty, counting empty sacks of rice, not only has to choose between the demands of her family’s needs, but specifically women’s needs she has to think about choosing between. As in most Nepalese households, women are less likely to be prioritised for healthcare and education. If girls do not receive an education, they are also much less likely to seek out health services once they grow up.<sup>188</sup> They are also more likely to go hungry than their male counterparts and to enter adulthood with disorders resulting from malnutrition. Poor families sometimes have the choice to send their children to government schools, but even these are

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<sup>188</sup> Brian V. Street, ‘Autonomous and Ideological Models of Literacy’ from *Literacy and Development: Ethnographic Perspectives*, (Routledge, 2001) 154

rarely free, as schools can use loopholes in the law to demand payment from parents for building repairs and materials.

In Sharma's poem, the narrator must consider her sick mother who is in pain. The only adjective used to describe her older daughter is 'unmarried'; it is telling that the daughter is described no further than her implied financial burden on her family; unmarried, not yet the responsibility of a husband's family, unable to provide any financial stability through her new family, as is common in Nepalese culture. Throughout the poem, we do not meet these family members as characters – they are merely components – financial strains to be accounted for, and there is a sense that not all their needs can be met. The narrator needs to choose between her child's schooling and her mother's treatment, and possibly even a dowry to marry off her older daughter. Just as with Kanchuli's poem, the woman in the poem is no more than a burden. She seems stripped of all signifiers of individual agency and merely exists as a burden to be shifted onto others.

'This Moment I Am Thinking' is also a reminder that until education is free and compulsory, and a more attractive prospect than sending girls into labour, money will always be a factor that prevents girls from going to school in Nepal. Girls with sick or deceased relatives are less likely to access education and are more likely to be relied upon to bring in a wage. It is apparent from interviews<sup>189</sup> that Sharma is also outspoken on traditional norms that degrade women. As someone who believes that poetry is a valid way to correct society's wrongs, her work advocates a literalistic approach to calling out inequality. Her work is explicit in expressing some of the biggest struggles for women that continue to be ignored.

Many Nepalese languages are not included or even permitted in the school curriculum, disadvantaging the children who grow up communicating in these languages. Language itself takes on a sense of tension and turmoil in many of the rural poems – there are themes of the

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<sup>189</sup> Wayne Amtzis, 'Manju Kanchuli', (Poetry International, 2013) [poetryinternationalweb.net](http://poetryinternationalweb.net)

survival of marginalised languages and the threats against them. Several poets articulate the ways in which Nepali people continue to be marginalised or face additional hurdles because of the mother tongue they speak and the ways their language has been targeted by systematic oppression.

Political scientist Mahendra Lawoti identifies the extinction of dozens of native Nepalese languages as a pressing concern in Nepal – not only do many communities risk a loss of their history and culture, but children who grow up speaking their native language instead of the national language face far greater barriers in education and are more likely to drop out. As mother tongue speakers are disproportionately poorer, this issue affects working-class children more seriously.<sup>190</sup>

Itisha Giri is explicitly damning of aspects of the social infrastructure in Nepal – specifically the traditions surrounding the rights of those from a low social status. Her poem ‘My Bastard Child’ (p.278) can be read as particularly critical of a culture that denies education to girls through low caste or illegitimacy. The subject, with each stanza (and each imperative) addressed to ‘my bastard child’, is most explicitly denied an identity in the last line: ‘you are a number.’

The references to the ‘foreign tongue’, suggests that Giri refers to a child with Dalit or indigenous origins whose first language is not Nepali. This is significant in the discrimination expressed towards the child, given the fact that the ‘foreign tongue’ is referenced three times, as if to purposefully distance the child from the narrator. Dalit languages do not have an equal status to Nepali in Nepal. The Panchayat system (the national scheme in place of political parties) spread Nepali and enforced teaching in Nepali only from Grade 3 onwards in schools in the 1960s,<sup>191</sup> and

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<sup>190</sup> Mahendra Lawoti, *Towards A Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society*, (Sage Publications, 2005) 125-137

<sup>191</sup> Krishna Hatchhetu, *Democracy and Nationalism Interface Between State and Ethnicity in Nepal*, (Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies Journal Vol.30, 2003) 228

the discourses of language rights and mother tongue education have only gained currency since the post-1990 era, [and] indigenous minoritized languages are still marginalized and multilingual practices are erased from public policies and discourses.<sup>192</sup>

The dropout rate for language-minoritised children is significantly higher than among children who speak Nepali as a first language – an issue that continues to be ignored as marginalised languages ‘have not received much attention in dominant language policy and educational reform discourses’ and mother-tongue courses have recently been replaced with English-speaking courses.<sup>193</sup>

Giri’s language reflects this dismissal of low-caste culture, language and appearance. The description of the ‘skin black like charcoal’, is a derogatory description, dark skin having long been perceived as a mark of the low-caste, and those who toil the fields and darken from long hours in the sun. Giri calls attention to the suspicion and stigma that surround children who are illegitimate or from low-caste families as she reflects the judgements on their language and appearance.

The imperative ‘tame that foreign tongue’ demands not so much a necessity to convert to the national language, with an effort to rob the child of their foreign identity, but more that it denies the child a new identity, and therefore access to opportunity: ‘be silent, do not speak, / do not let your mind wander’. The emphasis on the child remaining silent, and not letting their imagination reach beyond that of their own identity, implies a purposeful denial of knowledge. Despite the fact that Dalit castes (of which there are over twenty) make up over 13 percent of Nepal’s population,<sup>194</sup> some schools continue to deny entry to them, as ‘untouchability’ is still

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<sup>192</sup> Prem Bahadur Phyak, *Decolonising Language Ideologies and (Re)Imagining Multilingual Education Policies and Practices in Nepal*, (ProQuest Doctoral Dissertation Publishing, 2016) 5

<sup>193</sup> Prem Bahadur Phyak, *Decolonizing Language Ideologies*, 6

<sup>194</sup> Dalit Civil Society Organizations' Coalition for UPR, Nepal and International Dalit Solidarity Network, *Human Rights Situation of Dalit Community of Nepal*, (Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization, Central Office, Bakhundole: 2015)

practiced in many schools. As with many native castes, there is also a weak exercise of political rights, as Brahmin and Chhetri (high) castes continue to dominate the positions of political and economic power. Giri summons an image of a child entirely without rights, a voice, or opportunity to ever speak for themselves, robbed of their language.

Banira Giri's 'The Chant Freedom'(p.280) also explores the relationship between language and liberty, and how they affect access to education. Her poem is thematically not concerned with inequality so much as internal conflict and a search for personal liberty. However, the lines 'my cherished poem free me / from meaningless letters' implies a disparity between the narrator's own writing and the way in which she has been equipped to write; through the use of letters. The adjective 'cherished' to describe her own poem indicates that she needs to treasure it, to protect it from some outside threat. The contrasting adjective 'meaningless' to describe individual letters implies that language itself is alienating, that it does not equip the speaker for what she wants to say, and therefore the poem that she has succeeded in writing must be 'cherished'. This may be the reality for those who strive to be educated (the suggestion is that the narrator *does* have a level of education, if she writes poetry), but has to struggle against the system of education that is structured to serve only the most privileged. Those who are male, or come from high castes, and are raised speaking Nepali, will enter the education system distinctly more equipped to access the curriculum and communicate with teachers. In suggesting that letters are 'meaningless', Giri implies that written language is a failing in a society in which so few can read. It is her poem alone that can free her from this meaninglessness, as it is a mark that she can command her own meaning in her writing. It is a remarkable claim and one that elevates the poem into a new status of protest, as it overturns the reader's assumptions about the very power structures with which poetry is communicated. It is a clear statement that poetry is a political tool that, for the speaker, transcends the boundaries of a language system that functions hegemonically in Nepal.

Giri is widely considered one of Nepal's more influential poets; she was the first woman to be awarded a PhD from Tribhuvan University, and her 'feminist voice' is recognised by scholars, including Michael Hutt<sup>195</sup> and Momila Joshi.<sup>196</sup> She began writing poetry at a time when being considered a revolutionary was not without its risks (even in the present day it is not unheard of for revolutionist writers to be arrested at their readings: C.K. Raut was arrested at his reading on September 14, 2014). Although Giri expresses a deep love for her country, she is outspokenly anti-establishment, which explains the reason for her work's popularity.

The distancing from language continues: 'hey, / word that goes by the name / *freedom*' shows a further suspicion and awareness of the limitations of language. It is 'freedom' that has been called for throughout the poem, and yet now a critical eye is turned upon the word itself. '[F]reedom' sits alone and italicised on a line, personifying the word and lending it a particular focus. The word is separated from the name, stressing that the vast concept of what it means to be free can hardly be captured by a single word.

When women, regardless of caste or rank, joined the Maoist party in droves, they spoke unanimously of how the CPN (Maoist Party) was the only party prepared to work for the freedom of women.<sup>197</sup> However, as the war went on, it became clear that freedom was elusive and multi-faceted, meaning different things for different women – for women from Dalit groups, their demands were for the most basic rights. The role Dalits have played in the Maoist insurgency is unclear, but many identify 'an unverified assumption that because the movement espouses eliminating caste and other forms of discrimination, Dalits comprised many of the cadres.'<sup>198</sup> The speaker in the poem claims that the quest for freedom and the use of the word

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<sup>195</sup> Michael James Hutt, *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature* (University of California Press: 1991) 133

<sup>196</sup> Momila, Introduction to *Dancing Soul of Mount Everest: Collected Modern Nepali Poems* (Nepali Kalasahitya Pratishthan: 2010)

<sup>197</sup> Michael James Hutt, 'Gender Dimensions of the People's War' from *Himalayan 'People's War': Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2004) 160

<sup>198</sup> Mary Cameron, 'Considering Dalits and Political Identity in Imagining a New Nepal', (*HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.27, 2007) 15



itself is limiting, muddying, and elusive in a society where the structures that disadvantage women are so many and so complex.

Giri does not write in generalised terms when she writes about the concept of freedom; the poem seems explicitly specific to Nepal, as if freedom could be waiting on the other side of the border. Her plea ‘world free me / from the poisoned tipped stakes of your borders’ accuses Nepal not only of oppression and inequality but also of making it difficult for aid to enter the country. It is entirely feasible that this is a familiar experience for many Nepali people. There is a scepticism surrounding the success and sustainability of foreign aid. Institutionalised corruption is rife and one of the biggest barriers to development,<sup>199</sup> and certainly with regards to schools, some Western programmes designed to improve school attendance for girls have been disastrously ineffective, according to attendance figures: underfunded and poorly distributed.<sup>200</sup> Overall, the poet is condemning Nepali life in many ways, evoking a sense of frustration and imprisonment that seems common amongst young Nepali people.

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa’s poem ‘Exile: an invitation to a struggle’ (p.272), which I have discussed earlier, also alludes to the correlation between language and the ability to influence societal change. Like Giri, she addresses the tension in language use and the oppression of certain regional dialects in Nepal’s recent history. Mahendra Lawoti writes that

Inequality between native languages, religions and culture is widespread in Nepal, even though it has decreased compared to the Panchayat days ... the 1990 constitution only acknowledged Nepali as a national language’.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Coalition Against Corruption, *Corruption Perception Index*, (Transparency International Nepal, 2015) tinepal.org,

<sup>200</sup> Kedar Bhakta Mathema, ‘Crisis in Education and Future Challenges for Nepal’ from the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, (South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, 2007) 47-51

<sup>201</sup> Mahendra Lawoti, *Towards A Democratic Nepal: Inclusive Political Institutions for a Multicultural Society*, (Sage Publications, 2005) 122

Political debate and discussion are held in Nepali (unless they are international, in which case they are in English,) so families from remote regions, as well as Dalit or indigenous communities, are linguistically unrepresented and therefore excluded. Consequently, those who do not have access to education, and the opportunity to learn English or Nepali, are essentially silenced when it comes to politics. Women, particularly from low-caste families, stand very little chance of finding a successful platform with which to share their grievances.

Dhomba is explicit in her belief that a lack of access to language is a barrier to equality. ‘It is not enough to have one tongue.’ As a woman from Tibetan heritage, Dhomba is likely familiar with the challenges involved in trying to negotiate life as a woman with Nepali as a second language. ‘It cannot point to everything and in every direction.’ Again, we see Dhomba refer to an inadequacy that many feel in their mother tongue: that it does not grant them access to all walks of life, and also, perhaps, that in learning Nepali or English, the original mother tongue might be abandoned – a risk of losing identity. The phrase ‘in every direction’ suggests an inadequacy in general, as if no one language is enough, that something is inevitably sacrificed.

Next, Dhomba suggests a correlation between gender and power in language – that women’s subservience is forced, in part, through language. ‘We do not use our mother tongue / for our lovers. Beloved / *we speak your words.*’ Dhomba seems to emphasise the trend in male-dominated language, the pressure on a wife to abandon her mother tongue once her marriage is arranged, and to convert to her husband’s way of thinking, and therefore, a language in which her husband is likely to be more adept. Once again, the societal structure shifts language power out of the hands of women. Like Giri, Dhomba depicts robbed language as an act of violence, a purposeful stripping of identity.

Dhomba challenges this tradition later in the poem. Her sentence structure switches to imperatives; the voice of the narrator becomes empowered and commanding. ‘Protest in the mother tongue. Free *now* / from the notion of continuity.’ She demands a multiplicity in politics,

to be heard in her native language, and by extension, for minorities to be listened to without being robbed of their identities.

### *Urban Poems – Relegating Public Space*

One key feature of the poems with urban settings is the tone with which they express political contempt. Some of these poems are protest poems, expressing a political angle with confidence and clarity that is a comparatively new feature in Nepali poetry; this in itself is an important insight gained from the anthologising process

Before analysing poems that articulate themes of political resistance of any kind, it is important to consider the context of political protest in Nepal. Historically, Nepali people have faced a real risk of injury or incarceration for political protest, or even for speaking out publicly against their government or political regime. In their essay on Nepalese dialectic change, historians Joshi and Rose recount the ways in which civilians who spoke out against the oligarchy in the 1920s faced a range of punishments which included being beaten, paraded through the streets, imprisoned and banished to India.<sup>202</sup> Excessive violence by police forces to suppress political revolts continued throughout to the 1900s until the outbreak of the civil war. George N. Katsiaficas, an academic who studies East Asian uprisings, writes that in a seven-week rebellion in 1990, '[d]ozens of people were killed, hundreds injured, and thousands arrested,' and that street protesters, most of whom were students, were 'imprisoned, beaten, tortured and even killed'. Laws that criminalised civilians from inciting rebellion seemed to apply to any form of political collective: in 1990, five hundred students who formed a peaceful procession to celebrate the release of Nelson Mandela were 'brutally arrested and stripped of their clothing.'<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Bhuwan Lal Joshi and Leo E. Rose, *Democratic Innovations in Nepal: A Case Study of Political Acculturation*, (University of California Press, 1966) 51, 54

<sup>203</sup> George N. Katsiaficas, *Asia's Unknown Uprisings Vol.2: People Power in the Philippines, Burma, Tibet, China, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Thailand, and Indonesia, 1947-2009*, (PM Press, 2013) 219

Part III of the 1992 Constitution of Nepal presented thirty-three articles which provided comprehensive rights to its citizens, and among these were the rights to freedom, social justice, and judicial right against imprisonment or exile from the country.<sup>204</sup> However, these constitutional policies had almost no practical impact on the freedom to protest or even to speak out against the government, and in fact, Nepal was plunged further into a state of censorship in the early 2000s. Historian and linguist Sonia Eagle writes that ‘In February 2005, King Gyanendra dissolved parliament and took control of the government of Nepal. Politicians, journalists and others were imprisoned, and the media were brought under royal control.’<sup>205</sup> This era saw a new age of mass imprisonments for those who dared speak out against the royal reign.

Though one might argue that many countries have a history of violence against protesters, Nepal continues to address many kinds of political activism with violence and hostility today. Even freedom of thought remains under attack: in his thesis on regime changes in Nepal, Devendra Raj Panday writes that ‘[i]n the country’s modern history, one author was imprisoned for writing a book on the cultivation of maize’, and ‘[a] few other people were arrested for trying to run a public library’<sup>206</sup> – arrests made for attempting to influence collective thinking on the possibilities of social change. In 2010, several female activists were imprisoned for advocating a women-friendly constitution.<sup>207</sup> As Mary Des Chene points out in her essay on the limited legal rights of Nepali citizens:

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<sup>204</sup> Padma Mathema, ‘National Social Security Policy: A Reality Need for Nepal’, (*Administrative and Management Review*, Vol, 24, 2012) 59

<sup>205</sup> Sonia Eagle, ‘The Language Situation in Nepal: A 2007 Update’ from *Language Planning and Policy in Asia: Japan, Nepal and Taiwan and Chinese Characters: Vol, 1*, (Multilingual Matters, 2008) 226

<sup>206</sup> Devendra Raj Panday, ‘Social Movement, Civil Society and Regime Change in Nepal’, (*Nepal Study Centre: Development Review Quarterly*, 2008) 2

<sup>207</sup> Vanessa Daurer, *Raising their Voices: Women’s Mobilization in Nepal’s Conflict and Transition*, (Central European University, Department of International Relations and European Studies, 2014) 46

The provisions for warrantless arrest and 90-day imprisonment without charge, besides being a violation of basic rights, gives ample scope for torture. Recalling the broad definitions under which people can be arrested, it gives the state full rights to terrorize the public.<sup>208</sup>

Conflict scholar Bishnu Pathak describes a phenomenon of ‘enforced disappearance’ in Nepal’s police state, where officials simply dispose of political figures without any form of due process or trial. He also refers to the ‘extreme force’ that the police use with impunity at protests that can lead to dozens of fatalities in a single day.<sup>209</sup>

Events in recent years have led to deep distrust of police forces, particularly from minority groups who fear that police are emboldened to use violence against them when they are vilified and scapegoated in the media. In 2015, police opened fire on a group of Tharu protesters in Janakpur who were responding to clauses in the new constitution that compromised their land rights. Forty-five people were killed, some of whom were children trying to flee the scene.<sup>210</sup>

These examples provide a context for the kinds of risks that Nepali citizens have faced throughout the last century and continue to face if they criticise governmental corruption. However, the presence of low-key, domestic acts of resistance that are embedded in the routines of daily life are apparent in Nepal – acts that are not overtly organised and are more likely to go undetected by police forces. These types of resistance are particularly prevalent amongst women, for whom the risks of being perceived as rebellious can be punished domestically as well as legally. Subtle subversions of oppressive practices are carried out despite there being no formal organisation of protest.

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<sup>208</sup> Mary Des Chene, *‘Black Laws’ and the ‘Limited Rights’ of the People in Post-Andolan Nepal: The Campaign against the Proposed Anti-Terrorist Act of 2054*, (Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Vol. 18, 1998) 45

<sup>209</sup> Bishnu Pathak, *Nepal’s Enforced Disappearance Commission: Roles of International Community*, (Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2015) 4

<sup>210</sup> Tejshree Thapa, *Like We Are Not Nepali*, (Human Rights Watch hrw.org, 2015)

Though he writes his theories on the Mixtec diaspora, Michael Kearney's general theories apply to Nepal: he asserts that '...passive resistance is pervasive. Passive resistance is informed by a less articulate political consciousness, embodied in cultural form and contents that are usually called 'traditional' or 'indigenous'.<sup>211</sup> These types of resistance performed by Nepali women may be hard to measure by means of data or difficult to even recognise, as they are often entrenched in traditional practice specific to caste communities.

Some of these low-key acts of rebellion are not necessarily motivated by organised political movements, or even enacted with an awareness of political rebellion. They are frequently a response to immediate surroundings: practices that involve overt prejudice or oppression. They function outside of a recognised political structure and enter a realm of low-key, domestic politics. One thing that has become clear from the anthologising process is that poetry itself provides a means of accessing these kinds of politics in a way that other methods do not offer, because when shared, poems enter a space where they converse with one another, where voices can rally and fortify one another whilst remaining inconspicuous to systems of power.

In her work on conceptualising resistance, Susan Shaw claims that there are differences in 'the collective versus individual nature of resistance; the question of outcomes of resistance; and the issue of intentionality'<sup>212</sup> to be considered. She goes on to argue that intentionality should not be a defining characteristic of resistance. Unintentional resistance can be successful, just as deliberate resistance may have no effect but is still worthy of attention in its own right.

Several female Nepali poets from the contemporary decades have alluded to daily oppositional acts of non-dramatic resistance in their poetry. These poems are not always clear and direct calls for action, and yet they do create a keen sense that there is a need for change all

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<sup>211</sup> Michael Kearney, 'Mixtec Political Consciousness: From Passive to Active Resistance' from *Rural Revolt in Mexico: U.S. Intervention and the Domain of Subaltern Politics*, (Duke University Press Books, 1998) 134

<sup>212</sup> Susan M. Shaw, *Conceptualizing Resistance: Women's Leisure as Political Practice*, (Journal of Leisure Research, Vol.33, 2001) 186

the same as they record the lives that women embed practices that challenge oppression within their daily routine. Prabhati Mukherjee summarises the expectations of Hindu women as to be ‘prepared for domestic life, to be patient, obedient, and submissive to their husbands.’<sup>213</sup> When considering these stipulations, it is hardly surprising that while overt protest poetry, or even a written challenge of the government might be too reckless to consider, many female poets write poems that articulate more low-key oppositional acts.

In her study on the ways in which women politicise their activism following civil conflict, Åshild Falch claims that women in Nepal often engage in alternative methods of resistance when they find themselves omitted from official or organised political efforts:

... while women often are completely excluded from formal peace negotiations and only marginally represented in political decision-making structures, experience in various conflict-affected countries shows that women often participate vigorously in informal peacebuilding and policy-related activities.<sup>214</sup>

Anindita Ghosh’s views expand on Falch’s as she discusses the domestic acts of resistance committed by women who may not involve themselves in organised activism. Ghosh outlines the subtle, daily acts of subverting authority that are commonly present in societies where women are pressurised to submit to a strong patriarchy:

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<sup>213</sup> Prabhati Mukherjee, *Hindu Women: Normative Models*, (Orient Longman Limited, 1978) 145

<sup>214</sup> Åshild Falch, *Women’s Political Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Burundi and Nepal*, (Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2010), 7

Women are almost always conscious agents of resistance – intention and deliberation are constant, and they serve the express purpose of either subverting immediate authority figures or furthering the larger feminist agendas of consciousness-raising.<sup>215</sup>

Several female Nepali poets allude to these ideas in the tone of their poetry. Just as these daily oppositional acts are often subtle and embedded within complicit behaviour, these poets bring ideas of rebellion into the tone of poems that still contain themes of religious and domestic obedience, and sometimes they explore the tension between the two: the effort to both resist and comply.

These rigid codes of behaviour enforce a social idea of women as either entirely obedient or entirely rebellious. This causes a polarity in female identity, and this is expressed in the way that women are represented in literature. This is an idea that extends far beyond the boundaries of Nepal and far back in history. In their publication from 1979, feminist scholars Gilbert and Gubar identify this polarity in literary representations of women, where female characters are consistently characterised as either ‘angels’ or ‘monsters’. Gilbert writes:

A life of feminine submission, of ‘contemplative purity,’ is a life of silence, a life that has no pen and no story, while a life of female rebellion, of “significant action,” is a life that must be silenced, a life whose monstrous pen tells a terrible story.<sup>216</sup>

This identifies the lack of legitimate, rounded female characters in Victorian novels, and yet this remains an established binary for female characters long after the Victorian era. It is a literary trend that ensures that women do not assume a role in which they are granted the power and

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<sup>215</sup> Anindita Ghosh, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, (AIAA Ltd, 2008) 57



autonomy that men have: they are either angelic, innocent and obedient, and therefore no source of conflict, or they are mad and demonic and must be stripped of their power as they cannot be trusted.<sup>217</sup> The speakers in many of these urban poems seek to draw attention to the flaws in this unrealistic division in female identity that puts women in danger, as they punished for pursuing independence. Some even overtly protest the ways in which women are being punished just for entering public spaces – met with intimidation and violence on public transport and on the streets.

Poets like Itisha Giri are well practiced in protest poetry – work that draws attention to issues of inequality but demand change, and depict a different future for women. In contrast to many of the poems discussed here, Giri expresses boldness and confidence in rising up to face the violence she sees committed against women. In Giri's poem 'When I Have a Daughter' (p.282), she describes her plans for preparing a future daughter strong enough to survive Nepalese life. Despite this, the poem does not feel nurturing in its tone; the process this daughter must go through to equip her for adult life is fierce. Giri uses violent verbs, to 'pinch' and 'lash', and describes bathing her child in 'milk tinged with acid', in a way that it seems the daughter, in order to survive, must forego a nurturing childhood. There is a sense of inevitable violence as she prepares her daughter for entering a space where she will be the interloper, where she must be prepared to fight for her position in a space that is rigged against her.

In the poem, the narrator's concerns are of violent attacks at the hands of strangers. It is significant that Giri is writing at a time, at least in Kathmandu, where it has become acceptable for girls to leave the house without chaperones and to show more independence in day-to-day life. As the first generation who are exploring this kind of independence, these are the same women most likely to face street harassment, either verbal or physical. These dangers appear to be at the forefront of the narrator's mind, imagining the daughter 'cornered by a stranger's hand

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<sup>217</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)

at play’, the victim of ‘someone else’s stare’, and it is indicative of the mother’s fear over her daughter’s well-being that there is no mention of preventing the violence itself, of protecting her child or working to challenge the street harassment, but that these threats are inevitable and must be brought into the home in order to grow accustomed to them. It is also not a case of waiting to see *if* the child faces these threats, but *when*: ‘when someone calls her names’, ‘when someone decides to attack her’. The narrator is so painfully aware of the dangers of growing up female in Nepal that she imagines maiming her from birth just to ensure her survival.

This poem was written by Giri in response to an acid attack in 2015 against two school-age girls by a man whose advances had been spurned by one of the girls. The newspaper that published this poem also reported that the perpetrator, when caught, would face a maximum fine of a 2000NPR (about £14) and up to four months in prison.<sup>218</sup> Both male and female feminist activists across the country protested that the sentence reflected the societal attitudes towards women and girls: that they are considered dispensable. Furthermore, punishments like these, that would never usually be associated with violent crimes, send a clear message to girls – that it is not safe to spurn a man’s advances, and that if they do, the law will not protect them.

The last line of this stanza compares the daughter to a ‘snake charmer’, the acid to ‘venom’, and so, by extension, the attacker as the snake. It is notable that Giri chooses to compare man to animal, particularly a snake, as although the man might plan to strike with premeditation, might ‘choose to attack’, his being an animal makes it inevitable and unavoidable. There is a sense that as long as men are dominant over women, that their power is accepted, and their crimes treated as excusable, that it is no use addressing the problem of street violence itself because it is inevitable – so inevitable in fact, that a daughter must be prepared for it from birth.

The future is a bleak prospect for this imagined daughter who is allowed no illusion of comfort or safety. Her own bedroom must be covered in ‘a thousand wide-open cutout eyes’ so

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<sup>218</sup> ‘The Kathmandu Post’ *Ekantipur Reports*, (print ed. 26/03/15)

that she grows used to ‘someone else’s stare’. The ‘someone else’ is not identified at any point, but more specifically, the narrator does not intend to cover her daughter’s room with faces. As with the tongue and the snake, the identity of the attacker is never explored. It reminds the reader that this violence or abuse can be inflicted by almost anyone or even everyone at any time, that the girl will need to ‘disappear into thin air’ – not to stand up for herself or defend herself – but simply to be invisible. When we consider that the majority of women faced street harassment before they even reach adulthood in Nepal, it becomes clear why a mother may well not wait until a daughter reached adulthood or even her teen years before trying to teach her how to deal with public harassment.<sup>219</sup>

In her campaign to end street harassment in the USA, activist Holly Kears wrote: ‘While adults may advise teenage boys not to drive too fast, use drugs, or engage in other personally reckless behaviour, teenage girls are more likely to be given advice about how to avoid other people who are engaging in inappropriate behaviour.’<sup>220</sup> Though Kears focuses on American society, this social trend is also symptomatic of how Nepalese society legitimises male ownership: over space, over bodies, and over responsibility. In the poems set in rural farmlands, poets frequently explored tension over ownership of land and resources. While boys are more likely to be socialised into beliefs that all space is ultimately their territory, girls are encouraged to relinquish space, to make themselves less of a target by avoiding spaces dominated by men.

In poems set in urban Nepal, tension is just as present as in rural ones – it permeates all physical space. Buses, streets, classrooms and little girls’ bedrooms are all charged with female defensiveness as poets articulate their fight to inhabit the spaces that men have historically dominated and, in some cases, are unwilling to relinquish. Questions of autonomy are cast over bodily ownership, as women struggle to take control and make their own choices. Because the

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<sup>219</sup> Fiona Vera Grey, *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment: A Critical Analysis of Street Harassment*, (Routledge Research in Gender and Society, 2016) ('Inhabiting Ourselves' section)

<sup>220</sup> Holly Kears, *Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women*, (Praeger, 2012) 107

value of a Nepali woman is often based on her domestic and reproductive value as a wife, these tensions over space extend to conflict over the autonomy of a woman's body. In a country where dowry practice and dowry-related violence is still rife,<sup>221</sup> women's bodies are ultimately treated as property, and contested over in ways where women are pressured to relinquish control of their own bodily autonomy.

These metaphors to do with the physicality of women and the comparison of women's bodies to inanimate objects, as well as the exploration into the devaluation of women, is a theme that has been a focus for multiple female poets. In Malashree Suvedi's poem 'A Wreath for my Poem' (p.283), Suvedi writes a conversation between the narrator, female, and an un-named man. The premise of this part of the poem is interesting in itself – that the identity of the woman in question is up for debate, that it is not to be decided and dictated by the woman herself but that the male character might have an equal part in deciding what the nature of the woman is, and that the narrator has to compromise her perception of herself to account for the male perception of herself. As with much of Parizat's work, we sense a tension in the autonomy of the female characters, the most basic aspects of her power over her body are brought into question.

In the fourth stanza, 'You're not a poem, he says - / you're a lady, all flesh and bones' the male character not only defines the female character as entirely physical, but specifically says that she is *not* a poem. He does not allow that she could be imagined to be both and does not seem to entertain the idea that the narrator's identity might be shaped, even defined, by words, ideas, a speaking voice, or a message. Later, in the sixth stanza, he clarifies 'Maybe you're a poem ... But, a lady poem?'. Again, semantics around female identity are up for debate. If the woman is not allowed to be a poem but must be clarified to be a 'lady poem', the implication is that a default poem is a 'man poem' – that the nature of a poem, the characteristic of something

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<sup>221</sup> Katherine N. Rankin, 'Cultures of Economies: Gender and Socio-spatial change in Nepal' from *Gender, Place & Culture*, (A Journal of Feminist Geography, Vol.10, 2010) 111-129

defined by words, ideas, a speaking voice and a message, is so inherently male, that it cannot be ascribed to a woman's identity.

Steve Derné's work on the attitudes of Hindu men are helpfully illustrative here: he identifies 'macro gender structures are constituted through microinteraction rituals', and goes on to argue that 'Hindu men recognize their self-interest in these interaction rituals—they know that they benefit from women's subordination.'<sup>222</sup> The male character in Suvedi's poem actively discourages the narrator from stepping into a more independent, free-thinking role that is typically reserved for male-mindset.

Although in the fifth stanza the narrator resists the man's attempt to define her, 'I am a poem', she clarifies after he disputes it, by the last stanza she becomes unconvinced: 'I'm not poem, I take it all back'. Autonomy, again, is the focal theme of this poem, the tension of the woman who struggles to define herself against the expectations of the male character, who would rather not think about the narrator beyond her 'flesh and bones' physicality. There is consequence, then, in the title of the poem: 'A Wreath for my Poem'. There is finality in the man's words, in the final line of the poem where the narrator calls upon the male character to 'see what his words have done', the wreath ends up not used for the poet's past, as implied in the second stanza: 'I pluck flowers for my wreath, / as I dig a hole to bury my past' but for the poem itself. The poet no longer identifies as a poem. The poem is separate from her own identity, and she seeks to bury it and mark it with a wreath, because she abandons it as her own identity. It is a poem in which the male voice is louder than the female voice. As with many aspects of a woman's life, a male presence looms large over a woman's autonomy to decide her own identity. Just as Derné claims, the male character remains in control of the relationship because he is in a position to negate the terms of the woman's existence.

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<sup>222</sup> Steve Derné, 'Hindu Men Talk about Controlling Women: Cultural Ideas as a Tool of the Powerful', (*The Pacific Sociological Association Journal: Sociological Perspectives* Vol.37, 1994) 203

Similarly, Yukta Bajracharya's poem 'On Kathmandu's Streets' (p.285) which also addresses street violence in Kathmandu, opens with similar sentiment to Giri's 'When I Have a Daughter', when she writes 'All I want to be / on Kathmandu's streets / is invisible'. As with Giri's poem, there is no suggestion that the narrator might speak up for herself (and in a society where the very worst of the attackers only face four months in prison, who would?), but instead she second-guesses herself, tries to avoid creating a situation where she might even catch someone's eye or wear anything that might be considered suggestive. 'Should I wear something more mundane? / Is the colour of my hair suggestive?' The narrator's sense of identity seems to be under threat here, as she attempts to make herself more 'invisible', and just as in Giri's poem, the imagined attacker is never a whole person that can be identified, but is simply a series of body parts, 'a tongue, a pair of hands and a pair of feet'. Rather than looking out for specific people (as the poet clarifies, he could be anyone, he looks 'just like you'), she looks out for the parts of men that seem the most threatening. There is a de-humanisation of men in this kind of imagery – just as with Giri's snake metaphors – a distinct suggestion of a lack of trust. The void between men and women feels so deep, it seems that they may as well be different species. There is no sense of community or mutual understanding: men are reduced to the most dangerous parts of their anatomies.

As the poem continues, the threat to the poet's sense of identity and individuality is realised. The nameless harassers are the reason she cannot 'wear my favourite skirt / or walk in a pair of heels'. There are similar elements here to the themes discussed in Parizat's poem 'Mother'. Just as the narrator in Parizat raised questions to do with autonomy over the land, and ownership over space and body, Bajracharya raises these issues in a city environment. The setting is modern and urban, yet there are common features shared between these conflicts: women are being pushed out of public space.

Bajracharya expresses the issue explicitly: the line 'the man who walked down the street like he owned it', testifies that while for the first time, women might have the freedom to go out

in public alone, that there is in fact no such thing as public space. In the age of new-found independence for women, many are finding that ‘public’ space is fiercely guarded, marked as the territory of men through overt tactics of intimidation and harassment.

It should not come as a surprise that street harassment has become such a popular topic for poetry by women: more than 90 percent of women have suffered from street harassment in public vehicles in Kathmandu.<sup>223</sup> This figure helps illustrate why poets like Giri and Bajracharya write not of the attacks as hypothetical or imagined future events, but as attacks that will and do happen with a frequency that means few women avoid them.

Even in a less economically developed country, or in a country that suffers high levels of corruption, one might expect it to be reasonable for police to respond to complaints of violence, particularly in public and in the presence of eye-witnesses. However, when queried by in 2014, a Detective Inspector General of the Nepalese Police Force confessed:

We admit that our organization hasn’t been women-friendly. But we have now set up separate women and children’s cells in all 75 districts to make it easier for women to register complaints any form of violence they undergo and help them seek justice.<sup>224</sup>

This means that up until a few years ago, there were entire districts in Nepal, some of which cover nearly 8000 square kilometres, where it was not even considered safe for a woman, particularly a mother, to register a complaint about violence. It hardly seems surprising that a mother might think to take action against violence towards her own daughter before she is even born, knowing that her child might grow up in a society that offers no provisions for her safety, nor a system that might hold attackers to accountability.

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<sup>223</sup> Gita Neupane and Meda Chesney-Lind, ‘Violence against women on public transport in Nepal: sexual harassment and the spatial expression of male privilege’ from *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice Vol.38*, (Taylor & Francis 2014)

<sup>224</sup> Hari Kumar Shrestha, ‘Domestic Violence Against Women on the Rise’, (*My Republica: Nepal Mountain News*, 2014)

When comparing poems by women who set their writing in urban areas to poems that depict rural life, themes that explore the contestation of space and bodily autonomy are consistent. In the anthology of translated contemporary short stories and poetry *The Country is Yours* compiled by fiction writer Manjushree Thapa, a sub-section of writing titled ‘The Perplexity of Living’ groups poems set across different parts of Nepal. In the introduction Thapa addresses this juxtaposition of setting:

These works chronicle the meanness of urban life and the endless toil of rural life. What do we do to allay our hardships? We grovel and plead, we cheat, we sell our daughters and fight wars that are not our own ... the works in this section reflect on the immense perplexity of living in a rapidly altering society where all the old certainties have been destabilised.<sup>225</sup>

It is noteworthy that Thapa, one of Nepal’s most influential modern feminists, acknowledges that no one area in Nepal has yet overcome these abuses against women – that ‘we sell our daughters’ – that regardless of background or circumstance, it is the rights of women that are sacrificed first in a society that does not see the value in women.

The words Thapa uses to summarise development is also significant: she describes ‘old certainties’ as ‘destabilised’. From a feminist perspective it might be expected that the breakdown of tradition would likely have positive effects, that the customs and practices that might have placed limits on women are lifted to allow more freedom. Yet Thapa describes the experience as one of ‘immense perplexity’ – that the process of change itself, however beneficial in the long run, is not necessarily an easy or pleasant one, particularly those growing up at times of rapid

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<sup>225</sup> Manjushree Thapa, Introduction to *The Country is Yours*, (Penguin, 2009) 2



social adjustments. The first generation to experience more freedom can also experience stigma, violence, identity crisis, and alienation from the older generation.

In fact, poems that depict the experiences of women exercising new-found freedom often explore themes of violence, but also feelings of dissonance from their families and from society, and even feelings of guilt over falling short of their parents' expectations of how a good girl should behave. 'The Daughter of your Father: A Five Part Account' (p.287) by Bartika Eam Rai explores these experiences in detail, going so far as to suggest she has become less woman and more man as she experiences life in a way more similar to her male counterparts.

In a similar sentiment to Maharjan's poem, we sense a disparity here between the narrator and her environment, her education has set her apart from her family, her liberation comes at the cost of disappointing her mother. There is a deep sense of loss in this poem, a character who has accessed her own freedom but has been set no good example of how to function safely, the first of her family not to spend her life under the watchful eye of her mother – the only remaining parent in the house. The character seems to rebel without knowing how to, then recoil back to the comforts of theism that she does not believe in. Because behaviours that are considered deviant among women, 'Drinking. Sleeping. Smoking. Cursing' are forbidden in a traditional Hindu lifestyle, the character feels can no longer share faith with her mother. 'Reeking of cheap alcohol, you involuntarily / chant them to please the God you have now / borrowed from your mother' captures the dissonance the character experiences, the guilt that she does not share the faith of her mother, who is unaware of her 'growing defiance', but the danger she has encountered in the male-dominated world of staying out late and drinking: 'you would never have let yourself be so reckless', depicts a distinct sense of regret. 'You would have found better ways to rebel' suggests that exercising her freedom has not brought her the kind of liberation she might have hoped for.

The tone of the poem is bleak and ominous. The details of 'cheap liquor', the places 'out of bounds' conjure images of the *kajar ghar* and *bhanchha ghar* that are the popular drinking

destinations in Nepal, unregulated drinking huts – small, low-ceilinged and window-less, unlabelled and un-named, selling home-brewed *raksi* with an unrestricted alcohol content that catches out even those with the highest tolerance. It is unusual to see women frequenting these drink houses, and almost unheard of in remote regions. A reader who was familiar with Nepalese culture would easily sense the potential danger of such an environment, for the less that women inhabit any given space, the more dangerous it becomes for the few who do inhabit it.

The character tries to retreat to the simplicity and innocence of her mother's faith, even 'instinctively chanting the mantras' she was taught as a child for her own protection. But by the last stanza, she concedes that she has 'seen too much' and that she does not deserve 'her mother's God anymore'. The tension in the poem, the conflict between freedom and pride, have robbed the character of an identity. The poem ends with the declaration that in the process of letting go of her morals, she ceases to be considered woman, that her father who died early has turned her into him by leaving her a hundred-rupee note that 'took [her] places'.

Rai describes the same sense of defeat as we have seen in poems that depict a more traditional lifestyle in more rural districts, where every aspect of the woman's life is governed. It is as though, until a woman's freedom is made societally acceptable, it is unlikely to be fulfilling. The character in 'The Daughter of Your Father' describes waking 'in the middle of these nightmares, / frantic', the sense of turmoil is apparent, the girl who talks 'to the water'. In Nepal, a sense of community is considered important as it is a vital tool in keeping young people safe and addressing social problems before they grow out of control. The girl in the poem seems to be living outside these boundaries, unknown by her father, not fully known by her mother who does not know 'what [she has] turned into', and uncared for by the drinking culture she has joined, with men who are unlikely to see it as their role to show respect a girl who has deviated so drastically from the role that they expect her to play.

The tone of regret, and of reminiscence, is strong. Parts 'II' and 'III' begin with short declaratives with a strong, staccato effect. 'You remember.' 'You wish.' They depict someone

who lacked guidance, and certainly a common criticism of the way that culture in Kathmandu, which has been so strongly influenced by Western values at an unprecedented speed, has pushed a young generation of girls into liberation that is unmanaged and dangerous, without the appropriate education or precaution, and with a void of cultural values too big between them and their parent's generation. Thomas Bell describes impact of the West as having turned the city into 'a carnival of sexual license, a hotbed of communist revolution, a paradigm of failed democracy, a case study in bungled Western intervention, and an environmental catastrophe.'<sup>226</sup> This is one clear way in which these urban poems vary from the rural ones: poems from a rural setting have a strong sense of a lack of progress, a lack of change, and an absence of Western intervention, a stark contrast from the tone of poems like Rai's, where women are thrust into a new code of patriarchal values and new social obstacles to traverse. It is easy to see, from Rai's poem, how a woman who might be the first in her family to ever receive an education and have access to the internet might experience some crisis of identity, no longer able to accept the role of domestic, uneducated and family-oriented, but also deeply uneasy with a freer lifestyle still so heavily dominated by men.

In her study of female identity and agency in Nepal, Dorothy Holland found that when she interviewed young women in Naudada (North-Central Nepal) about what kind of people they considered themselves to be, that the girls all mentioned the same qualities about themselves: namely that they were good girls who did not lie or quarrel, who did not talk with boys, who did not speak unnecessarily and never lost their tempers. The virtues they were keen to claim they held were all linked to obedience and passivity, and certainly not to do with ambition or education. Holland wrote:

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<sup>226</sup> Thomas Bell, introduction to *Kathmandu*, (Random House India, 2015)

The girls' responses had a certain canned quality. They were recitations that varied little in content or format. In these self-descriptions the girls were rehearsing themselves in relation to the figured world of the expected life path of the 'good Hindu woman'. In daily life and in rituals experienced in childhood and beyond, girls were presented with a variety of messages related to what was expected of them as women ... The generic woman's roles in this figured world were family-centred, and the favoured characteristics were those which supported the patriarchal family.<sup>227</sup>

If women are taught that the most important desirable traits for them to exhibit are related to passivity and obedience, then by extension a girl who shows independence would be likely to feel the crisis of guilt portrayed by Rai.

To return once again to Parizat, 'A Room, a Goal and an Intellectual Woman' (p.290) explores a similar theme to Rai's poem, the female character isolated from society as a result of her emancipation and education. It is a significant detail, in this poem, that the woman who seems to live in isolation save for the 'boy-friends that come up to the bed often', has 'an English novel' on her desk alongside her marks of femininity, 'cream, powder and eyebrow pencil'. The choice to describe the novel only as 'English' suggests not only a high level of education – the ability to follow a text in a second language – but also a level of exposure to Western norms and values, literature where women might think and behave in a way that is unaccepted in Nepal. Additionally, the novel placed on the same desk as the daily newspapers, suggest a certain comparison, that the character reads about the politics of the country alongside the fiction of another country. Indeed, the poet confirms, 'this is the room of an intellectual woman'.

The character might seek intellectual stimulation with other men, with the 'boy-friends' hyphenated to suggest their role might not just be that of 'boyfriend' – and certainly the physical

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<sup>227</sup> Dorothy Holland, 'Authoring Oneself as a Woman from Nepal' from *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, (Harvard University Press, 2001) 216

'memories' of their 'cordial conversations' are not particularly symbols of romance – 'cups of tea and the butts of cigarettes' suggest that they keep company in the day-time (it is not custom to drink tea in the evening), and the description of the conversation as 'cordial' suggests warmth and friendliness rather than passion. There is a sense that the woman's interest in politics and literature, and her ability to access these things, having presumably been sent to a school where she was taught fluent English, have separated her from other women; there is no mention of sharing the room with a mother or sister, and in fact the presence of frequent male visitors makes it unlikely that she lives with anyone at all, as inviting multiple men into the home would not be accepted even in Kathmandu. Education may have separated her from commonality with less privileged women, but so has her lifestyle.

Perhaps by reading about Western culture, growing to know the idea of making male friends and perhaps even having casual relationships with men rather than focusing on marriage, have alienated her too. The description of the men who 'come up to the bed often' picks out the detail of them coming upstairs to her room. This detail, along with the clarification that it is 'often', betray the likelihood that neighbours observe this, perhaps even family members, and in a society where a woman's honour rests alone on her reputation within the community, that her value can be seen to diminish over nothing more than gossip, is significant here, the character may be irreversibly isolated from friends, family and community.

The intellectual woman feels 'uneasiness' and 'restlessness' as memories of powerful women in history surround her in her room: she calls to mind Queen of Jhansi, Joan of Arc and Madame Curie. Although she is preceded by women known for political resistance and scientific breakthroughs, she knows that 'society mocks' her as she fails to achieve her own goals, as she lives in such surroundings with few material possessions and multiple male visitors. She holds an acute awareness of these precedents of female strength: her flair for reading has allowed her to educate herself on some of history's most inspiring and influential women, and yet she feels restless and uneasy, unable to fulfil her potential as she is stifled by society's judgement.

These are all women to whom the narrator can relate: Marie Curie worked out of a stable, and her discoveries were ignored for years at a time with prevailing sexist attitudes in science. Jeanne d'Arc died an accused heretic and witch, and Rani Lakshmibai (Queen of Jhansi), is still often depicted to this day as an unmotherly, promiscuous and bloodthirsty woman. These themes of societal rejection, perceived promiscuity and ultimately the sense of loneliness and danger in walking a path previously untrodden by women are all themes that the narrator feels familiar with, alone in her simple room and in a society that 'mocks at her in reaction'.

Mohan Koirala, popularised in the 1960s and still one of the most renowned poets today, was known for subverting mythological symbolism and utilising it to express discontent. Parizat adopts a similar technique here: she feels the absence of Radha, Sita and 'Manu's respected one' (Satarupa: the first female deity created by Brahma along with Manu). While the woman in the poem feels the 'memories' of history's powerful female scientists and symbols of political resistance, she feels only the absence of these female Hindu deities: their presence is not felt from her room.

The woman still exists in a 'hard life-cycle', shedding 'drops of her tired sweat'. There is a barrier between her and her goal – her desire to do something powerfully significant like the women in history she mentions – she suffers the societal exclusion that her heroines suffered, but feels an 'uneasiness' at her failure 'to cope with the goal', feeling restless at the memories of powerful women but also disconnected to her country's powerful female deities.

The pillow 'always carries the dreams of discontent'. The fact that 'discontent' is the first emotive description of the woman's state adds weight to the word – it strikes the reader as significant, partly because it is not necessarily the description one might expect of an otherwise free and seemingly privileged lifestyle, a woman comparatively unrestricted by demands of manual labour and family commitments, free to drink tea and talk with friends throughout the day. There is another potential reading here: that these encounters are happening in the speaker's

imagination ‘without transgressing’, that she is literally dreaming of them ‘discontentedly’. These are not real relationships but ones that she dreams of having the freedom to pursue.

So, where has the discontent come from? Just as with Rai’s work, much of the poem suggests a deep dissonance with the rest of society, a loneliness, or more specifically, a sense that the woman has forged ahead and created independence for herself before society was ready for independent women. In the process of standing up for herself, she has lost the women around her who are not able or allowed to live as she does. The respite of close community relationships that are often present in poems set in rural areas are absent in this poem. The title mentions ‘a Goal’ and yet there is no clue as to what this goal might be, so a reasonable inference is that the goal has been lost, that the boy-friends come to talk and to ‘lie down on the soft pillow’ but she does not have a sustained and meaningful relationship with them. They do not stay the night and could even be interchangeable, each one no better or worse company than the last. There is a possible reading here, even, that the visitors are incorporeal, imagined – that the poem involves an element of wish fulfilment in which she imagines a world where she could enjoy a relationship that, in reality, she does not have the freedom to seek.

The mirror that reflects ‘the realities of life’ reflects objects, not people or even the paraphernalia of other people, of co-habitation or intimate company. There is loss in the tone of this poem, that the ‘intellectual woman’ has been forced to forego some of the most meaningful relationships other women might have, in order to pursue her goals of intellect, to live the lifestyle she has read about. As with Rai’s character, she has achieved independence, only to find herself lonely.

The juxtaposition of urban and rural poems presents us with the paradox for women – that to be denied the power to make decisions over education, marriage and family-planning can leave a woman at the perpetual continuous mercy of men who care little for her independence and wellbeing, and yet the speakers in the poems who receive an education and seek independence find themselves disjointed from society. Women at the forefront of progress are

also on the front line; they find themselves vulnerable in a society where men are reluctant to relinquish any control over spaces and privilege historically reserved for them. A commonality these poems show is the way they express a perpetual state of tension with the space they inhabit. This shows that their poetry is not merely reflective of social realities – it is also analytical – it scrutinises the way that the speakers' relationship to the environment is not neutral or benign, but a connection in a constant state of negotiation.

Ujjwala Maharjan's poem 'Durbarmarg' (p.292) (Durbar Marg is a road in Kathmandu that is popularly considered the heart of the city) takes a rather different look at the reality of schooling for girls, including those who do make it into full-time education. The city setting is significant; Kathmandu is, in many ways, a world apart from the rural parts of Nepal, and a place of far more opportunities. The content of the poem has a distinctly contemporary feel to it; the setting is a social occasion yet there is no mention of men, which gives the reader an insider's view to a woman's social reality. They are no longer under the watchful eye of a chaperone (as would still be expected in many regions of Nepal), yet, despite the thin veil of independence, there is a harsh sense of judgement, as if girls balance on an abstract precipice of expectation from which it is easy to fall; to evade tradition and to, by definition, break from societal norms. There is a sense of unpleasant risk in this depiction of surviving as a girl in Kathmandu. There are several lines in this poem that offer a tantalising peephole into an aloof world that is defined by these harsh social expectations of women. In fact, the whole poem is elusive in its tone, never quite explaining or expanding, as if even as a reader we cannot quite be privy to the secrets that women bear as they enter adulthood.

The most value-laden line – 'a good girl turned corrupt beast with more pamphlets in her bag than books' betrays a certain set of principles to the reader. Maharjan is a young woman in Kathmandu where Westernisation has impacted behaviour and cultural norms at a phenomenal speed, largely due to an increase in Western tourists, and widespread access to the internet. Acceptable behaviour seems to have become complicated, and multi-faceted. With access to



knowledge has also come a desire for freedom. Unlike in more remote regions, some women have begun to wear dresses, have boyfriends, and speak openly about their political opinions. Premarital sex and risky sexual behaviours are on a rapid increase.<sup>228</sup> In response to this, there has been a move in the education system in Kathmandu (where schools already are of a higher quality, on average, than the rest of the country), to teach sex education in a way that allows for relationships outside of arranged marriage.<sup>229</sup> A tone of irony enters the poem here at the suggestion that this access to knowledge has corrupted the character. Information handed out freely, on topics of contraception, STDs, access to reproductive healthcare, and perhaps voting information as well, has transformed a ‘good girl’ for the worse. It is telling, that before the acquisition of knowledge, the character was not only ‘good’, a word that here is synonymous with obedient and innocent, but that by acquiring information, even in a form as benign as ‘pamphlets’, ceases even to become human and is transformed into a ‘beast’ – an animalian form that is a danger to others. The word ‘beast’ holds heavy connotations of ugliness and threat, as if through this specific type of education (books are permitted, but pamphlets are not), the character ceases altogether to be a woman.

Later in the poem, the narrator reverts to second person narrative to describe the woman at the centre of the scene: ‘[w]hile you just sit there / looking expensive / Poised’. This central woman in the poem is socially safe merely *because* she is no more than well-dressed and mute. She has avoided pitfalls of weeping for a ‘lost lover’ or ‘selling herself’. Her description never strays beyond the purely aesthetic. In all ways, she is depicted as the perfect traditional wife: obedient, silent and well-presented. She never once speaks, and never risks displaying the trappings of an education. As a reader, we do not know how her education compares to her friends’, because there is no mention of it. She is elevated purely by her *lack* of expression, her obedience in

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<sup>228</sup> Ramesh Adhikari and Jyotsna Tamang, ‘Premarital Sexual Behavior among male college students of Kathmandu, Nepal’, (*BioMed Central Public Health Records*, 2009)

<sup>229</sup> DR Acharya, ER Van Teijlingen, P Simkhada, ‘Opportunities and challenges in school-based sex and sexual health education in Nepal’, (*Kathmandu University Medical Journal*, Vol.7, 2009) 447, 449

keeping to beauty alone. In many ways, she captures the grim reality for girls waiting to be married off, as well as the reality of a harsh, male-dominated educational environment. The poem encompasses the discriminatory values that prevent girls from pursuing an education. Women must be willing to cast off the aura of the silent and obedient housewife and risk being perceived the 'corrupt beast'.

Maharjan employs a literary trope we see commonly in literature that challenges assumptions about the role of women. Political science scholar Stephanie Tawa Lama points out that 'the Hindu pantheon includes a number of female deities, who are conveniently divided into two main categories: benign goddesses and fierce goddesses,'<sup>230</sup> and goes on to claim that women in Hindu literature are often represented as either wrathful temptresses or servants to men, but rarely as having human qualities. This dichotomy is reflected in Maharjan's representation: the obedient girl who seeks an education risks arriving at the other end of the spectrum, succumbing to corruption, with no suggestion of a reasonable middle-ground.

Jerusha Rai's poem 'The Little Dancer' (p.294) is an example of a poem that, in many respects, has a modern, urban setting. The characters enjoy the privilege of being able to observe occasions and celebrate festivals with a level of extravagance often not seen in poor, rural areas. However, the girl character in the poem has little agency over her life.

The phrase 'they put her in a pink dress' is vague in its depiction of the influences on the girl – 'they' could be anyone who encourages delicate femininity in little girls from a young age, not just the person who physically dresses the girl in a dress. '[S]he sees nothing' clearly describes the experience of spinning so fast that vision becomes blurred, but also implies that the girl is being pushed into a state where the world is purposefully hidden from her, and where adults prevent her from interacting with society in the most truthful and meaningful way. She sees

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<sup>230</sup> Stephanie Tawa Lama, *The Hindu Goddess and Women's Political Representation in South Asia: Symbolic Resource or Feminine Mystique?* (International Review of Sociology, Vol.11, 2010,) 5

nothing, not just because her vision is impaired, but because she is not treated as a person or even as a child, but as a show piece raised to posture for others, characterised by her servitude.

The relationship between the narrator and reader play a significant role in the tension of this poem: the speaker directly calls upon the reader to examine themselves and their own acceptance of the way Nepali girls are raised. In the last line, there is a shift in register and address, as the narrator says, ‘the little girl is dancing / she is twirling and twirling for you’. By involving the reader in the poem in the last line, she asks the reader to examine their own role within society’s acceptance of the way girls are raised. The reader who, until this point, has observed the scene as an outsider, is asked to consider their own expectations of girls.

Earlier in the poem, the narrator asks who will take an active role in protecting the girl from a process where, in her effort to please others, she is wasting away. ‘[W]ho will hold up the mirror / and say this is your flesh / say, look, you are already disappearing[?]’ shows an urgent need for allies for young women, for people to interrupt the process of them being prepared to appease men, for someone to intervene at personal cost and blow the whistle on the effects of teaching girls from an early age to behave subversively and submissively. The shift at the end of the poem when Rai ends with ‘twirling for you’ – the emphasis on the ‘you’ submits that, if you have not already intervened, if you do not actively oppose the exploitation of women, then you are part of it – you are complicit in it.

To return to Anindita Ghosh’s writing: her statement that ‘[i]t seems imperative that we seek new frameworks to understand women’s resistance,<sup>231</sup> certainly applies to the livelihoods of high-caste, urban women who are treading unfamiliar territory and exploring new modes of resistance, as some of the first women able to access the privileged education historically reserved for men. She goes on to say:

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<sup>231</sup> Anindita Ghosh, *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia*, (AIAA Ltd, 2008) 57

... individuals often engage in acts of embedded resistance that are not necessarily politically articulated, and require little or no formal co-ordination. These are acts of resistance that are integrated into social life – daily oppositional acts that exist between or at the side of any large-scale organised anti-government action. What has been systematically excluded from accounts of women’s struggles is the everyday realm of social relations in which power is constantly and relentlessly negotiated.<sup>232</sup>

Instances of these ‘constant negotiations’ are explored in poems like ‘Tradition’ (p.295) by Benju Sharma. Here, Sharma describes the experience of looking at a photograph, treasure by her family, and failing to find comfort and solace in her family ties or cultural traditions. In breaking away from the roles that the older women in her family followed, she finds herself following an untrodden path of independence that separates her from the comfort of her family.

The desire, in the poem, to smear the photo with red is not a violent or disrespectful act towards the photograph, as red is traditionally applied to pictures with tilika dust or vermilion paste as the mark of a blessing. However, the respectful mark of a blessing, in this case, is also used to obscure the image in the photo so that she no longer has to look at it. The narrator asks ‘How long must I turn towards it? / What solace am I to find there?’ which calls into question the utility of tradition. In an age when women are accessing a more comprehensive standard of education, traditional beliefs become not only inadequate and cease to serve as a comfort, but even apply friction to liberation. Sharma speaks to a loss of religious faith, and the taxing nature of some of the tactics necessary to lead an independent life, that are becoming increasingly common experiences for women who demand equality for Nepali women in their day-to-day lives. Everyday ritual has been too often left out of the discussion of female resistance, yet in his

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<sup>232</sup> Ghosh, *Behind the Veil*, 6

work on power dynamics in social constructs in South Asia, anthropologist Douglas Haynes invokes 'the possibility that ritual could constitute an important site of resistance.'<sup>233</sup>

This is precisely what we see in this poem: '[w]hat solace am I to find there?' describes a sense that traditional beliefs no longer answer questions, provide comfort, or allow women to live a fulfilled life. The conflict is drawn from the narrator's need to follow the advice of her elders and to honour the values that were taught to her from childhood. At the end of the poem, she imagines burning the photo, the picture 'done away' with, putting an end to generations of tradition so that she can live an existence without the guilt of photographs to remind her that she has deviated from her family's values.

The photograph is a symbol of ritual, and it embodies the traditions of family members who came before the narrator, and yet the description of the picture itself invokes such a strong sense of decay, of a lack of renewal, as if it is in the process of dying. 'Frayed, done in by insects and rats' verges on grotesque, and describes the difficulty of leaving tradition behind, the challenges in cutting ties with belief systems that govern every aspect of life but are dying out.

Sharma explores the guilt that is so often associated with the process of a search for freedom, and for more liberty than the women who came before her. Sharma specifically recalls the women in her family, how the religious idol was 'worshipped' by the grandmother, 'hung with pride' by the mother', and her experience of simply looking at it, 'askance'. This single experience embodies the displacement that women who grow up at a time of rapid social change and overwhelming Western influence risk experiencing. There is a rift in the family: women and girls are valued for their obedience above all else in the family unit, so the narrator's need to destroy the photograph and seek renewal is marked with the sense of the end of everything that her female relatives have stood for in the home.

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<sup>233</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (University of California Press, 1992), 219

Wayne Amtzis wrote of Kanchuli: '[i]n her poetry Manju Kanchuli senses herself marked by the age, her culture and society and most readily by the hand of men who make use of privilege, knowing well the situation of woman in their country,'<sup>234</sup> and this seems no more apparent than in poems like 'A Strange Temple' (p.296), where Kanchuli depicts a similar experience to the one described by Sharma – as she challenges the structure of faith, and a loneliness and even guilt associated with questioning the foundation of much of the culture of Nepal. This is a poem in which the narrator, educated and analytical, questioning of her Hindu upbringing, seems lost in the wake of her doubt in the power of the temple, and the visits and the deities within it. As with Sharma's poem, the tone of the piece is tinged with doubt and uncertainty as she considers her religious upbringing with a newfound scepticism.

Early in the poem she quotes a passage she has read many times: "[b]ehind the locked temple door there is no god at all!" It is noteworthy that the narrator has read this idea, rather than simply heard it, as if her education has led her away from blind faith in a theological upbringing. Even a basic education will teach students that logic and reason should not be influenced by superstition, and that traditional practices should not necessarily be continued merely on the basis that it is the way things have always been done.

The recurrent symbol in the poem is the door of the temple, which the narrator cannot see behind. There is no serenity or faith here – the narrator is plagued with doubt and guilt – she builds emotive language with 'shame', 'harass', 'cry', creating a sense that her relationship with the temple is one of anxiety, and borne of internal conflict. It raises the question of whether an education is incongruous with a lifestyle based on religion and tradition, and of religion rather than a need for evidence. That is not to say that those two systems of belief cannot be reconciled, but that the journey to balancing them can be lonely, especially if the previous

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<sup>234</sup> Wayne Amtzis, 'Picture of a Lost Man: The Poetry of Manju Kanchuli', (*Kathmandu Post Review of Books*, 2013) [poetryinternationalweb.net](http://poetryinternationalweb.net)

generations of women and their lack of education have led them to an unquestioning faith in the country's dominant religion.

Even today, most women in Nepal still hold the view that it is in their *dharmā*<sup>235</sup> to be obedient and respectful to their families; those who question the faiths of their own families can find themselves on a difficult path.<sup>236</sup> But that does not mean that efforts to evade the demands on them do not exist, though they may go unnoticed to outsiders. Julia J. Thompson claims that women from even the strictest Hindu families subvert religious tradition and use Hindu structures to refuse to conform to their mute, domestic roles:

Brahmin and Chhetri women also embed forms of resistance into their religious activities to protest against traditional Hindu gender models.... high caste women appear to conform to Hindu ideals through their participation in various religious activities, but in their daily worship, weddings, fasting and funerals they are able to express their resistance, demonstrate dissatisfactions and, in essence, not conform.<sup>237</sup>

In her poem 'Me and My Past' (p.298), Parizat touches on themes of shame and judgement of those who 'disgrace' women who seek for more than what society allows them. She describes experiences of secret shame similar to the one that poets like Kanchuli and Sharma articulate: in her poem, the narrator describes herself as 'disgraced' and says, 'I'm off to kiss the past' as if the disgrace itself prompts her to leave, to liberate herself from a judgemental environment, and make peace with 'the past' before leaving it behind. Her past is 'broken, cracked' something which, as the 'bamboo tree', she cannot continue to exist within, and must be liberated from.

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<sup>235</sup> Concept that signifies behaviours that are considered to be in accordance with the natural way of things in order for the universe to function in harmony. These include duties, rights and virtues.

<sup>236</sup> Mahesh Puri, Jyotsna Tamang and Iqbal Shah, *Suffering in silence: consequences of sexual violence within marriage among young women in Nepal*, (BMC International Health and Human Rights – BioMed Central, 2011)

<sup>237</sup> Julia J, Thompson, *Speaking of Dissent, Speaking of Consent: Ritual and Resistance Among High-Caste Hindu Women in Kathmandu*, (CNAS Contributions to Nepalese Studies Journal Vol.20, 1993) 2

This poem was written some thirty years before the poetry of Sharma and Kanchuli, and it is probable that the judgement she describes is somewhat more acute, more overt, and more universal than a woman might experience in more modern times. Unlike Kanchuli and Sharma's poems, the speaker does not block out symbols of wrath or judgement with tikka or a temple door, but instead rejects it completely and runs – seeking independence.

In contrast, Yukta Bajracharya laments over the conflict of living a more independent lifestyle in Kathmandu, facing the risks of travelling alone, in her poem 'On Kathmandu's Streets' (p.285). Initially, the setting of the poems feels to the reader that the narrator has made it: she's living the life of freedom, travelling alone on a bus, away from the watchful eye of her male chaperone. But the repetition in the first and last stanzas of the poem frames the development of the narrator's attitude towards her position in urban Kathmandu. She goes from wanting to be 'invisible' to 'invincible'. There is a marked move away from the way she has been instructed to avoid harassment on the streets or on public transport – rather than trying to blend in and not draw sexualised attention to herself, as she certainly would have been instructed to do – to dress modestly and without individualistic markers – her intent becomes distinct from the desire to blend in. An intent to be 'invincible', to resist threats rather than to avoid them, to be strong rather than to be unnoticed, is a drastic development but also a step away from one of the strongest societal expectations of women. It is also an attitude that comes with associated risks in a society that still asks of harassed women 'What did you wear? Who were you with? Where were you looking?'

Feminist Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reminds us in her writing that, should women choose to try to defend themselves in these situations or confront men in their abusive behaviour, that they do not have the support of a society that values their safety over the freedom of men. She writes frankly:



...why and how the prohibition on [women's] speech is imposed and maintained, what the implications are of both silence and its obverse, speech, for the construction and understanding of women's subjectivities, and how the social uneasiness wrought under the weight of women's silence is nevertheless negotiated and resolved within the ideological resources of a culture that sanctions their killing, under different circumstances and in many guises – as foetuses, as newborn babies, as wives, as widows.<sup>238</sup>

When considering this context, the bold attitude in Bajracharya's poem is significant and should not be understated – it is the adoption of agency and a move of resistance rather than submission, despite the risks. The poem *reminds* the reader of the risks of resistance and the lack of societal support in doing so. Aesthetic deviations and expressions of individuality are not, necessarily, acts of resistance in all contexts. But in an environment where women feel as though any physical details that could be interpreted as drawing attention, to wear what one likes rather than what blends in is certainly an act of defiance – as the narrator says in the last stanza – a desire to be invincible.

When analysing the contents of these poems – the themes that recur throughout them and the images they return to – it is easy to draw this binary between urban and rural settings. The images of the land and the crops in the rural poems are loose and sprawling, where time loses its meaning in the monotony of survival. It is an obvious contrast against the tautness and tension of poems in urban settings, where women contest the space around them, and tread new ground as the first educated women in their families to reject tradition and pursue independence. Yet in a way, this is a false binary, or at least only one that is surface-deep. Because while there are clear variations in imagery and symbolism, the tone of the poetry feels, in many cases,

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<sup>238</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (Routledge, 1993) 79-80

unified. Irrespective of the environment the speakers in the poems describe, the purpose they return to is the resolve to expose the ways in which they are devalued. Nepal is still experiencing its first wave of feminism. The criticisms that Mary Wollstonecraft levelled at eighteenth-century Britain and the way it treated women as ornaments to be kept by men or property to be traded in marriage are the same arguments that Nepali women are making today as they denounce a society that values them only for their domestic and reproductive labour.<sup>239</sup>

Whether women are contesting public space or autonomy over the land they work on, they still live in a society that treats their bodies as property to be owned, and their fight to reclaim autonomy over their bodies is shared regardless of geography, class or caste. The details are dressed up differently because oppression stems from different parts of the infrastructure, from traditional Hindu values or poverty, but the argument is united. While some women lament their lack of schooling and others find themselves isolated as a result of their education, they both speak from the margins of a society that does not seem ready or willing to accept educated women. Irrespective of setting, women are interlopers in educational environments. This thesis draws together poems that depict different environments and express a range of experiences and yet, at their core, they come from a position of speaking back from the peripheries and claiming their place in the world.

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<sup>239</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*, (New York Vale, 1845) 6

## Commentary on Creative Practice

*emfühlung: 'feeling our way into another'*

### *Writing the Terai*

The voice of the poetry registers complexity and ambivalence: there was difficulty in constructing a suitable tone in the poetry because it was crucial to represent the lived environment with vibrancy and immediacy, yet the voice is that of an outsider, something which was non-negotiable as, however long I spent in Nepal, my perspective would always remain a European one.<sup>240</sup>

There is also tension in the approach to difficult topics of gender-based inequality: the drive of the poetry is not to cast judgement or to engage the reader in issues of judgement. However, the poems do prioritise exposing injustice and detailing the experiences of women that otherwise are not witnessed outside of the community where they take place. Just as the poems with rural settings that were discussed in the analysis section of this thesis consistently use animal and crop motifs to establish their claims to do with women's position in society, I also engage with these tools in order to write about oppression without relying on an overtly moralistic tone.

As the collection began to take shape and recurrent characters were brought to the forefront, there emerged a conflict of focus between the speaking subject and the Nepali characters. In order to create a collection that put the stories of Nepali women at the centre of the work, I removed any poems where the narrator was "in front of the lens" of the poem, as it were, in order to keep the focus of the project on the intended subjects. I had also been concerned that the collection might, in some way, reinforce the misconception that is sometimes shared in the West that there is some inherent benefit to the presence of a Western, educated person in a developing country. By removing poems in which the focus was taken away from the

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<sup>240</sup> Also see p.27

Nepali women and into the Western presence, this avoided any unintentional bolstering of ideas to do with Westerners having an innately positive influence on communities in developing countries.

There was a duality in the forces that started the creation of this collection: the inspiration came from the time I spent living in the Terai, and the poetry by Nepali women that I read. Between hours of research in Chitwan there was quiet farm life: long days of labour with women full of songs and stories, long evenings standing around prodding fires and talking about Nepal's politics and the way women live in Nepal. At the same time, I was reading poetry by women, not just in journals or as inclusions in anthologies, but as I began to run workshops and teach English. I read the work of those women who did not consider themselves poets: women who were nervous about their literacy and whether they had anything important to say. Some of the poetry I read, particularly the ones by women from poor, rural areas, contained familiar ideas and themes: realities that I recognised from Chitwan. I used these writing styles as a structure with which to write my own poetry about Nepal.

Setting was one focal point that grounded the collection from an early stage. Westerners have long been fascinated by Nepal: popular conceptions of hippies and mountaineers alike show it to be a place of exoticised adventure and enlightenment. The indigenous are depicted as living quaint and simplistic lifestyles with panoramic views of the Himalayas, with mountain guides mute in the backgrounds of the heroic ascents of Everest on which Westerners embarked. The reality is that the Himalayas make up just 15 percent of the country's geography, and poverty and oppression are more the norm than the exception. I was keen to avoid contributing to the conceptual pitfalls of exoticism as famously theorised in *Orientalism* by Edward Said. Said emphasises the ease with which scholars can fall back on stereotypes based in exoticism and 'othering', simply because those tropes are so common and have existed for so long:

Every writer on the Orient ... assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. The ensemble of relationships between works, audiences, and some particular aspects of the Orient therefore constitutes an analysable formation ... whose presence in time, in discourse, in institutions (schools, libraries, foreign services) gives it strength and authority.<sup>241</sup>

Instead, I've concentrated my research on the people of the Terai region of Nepal, the southern strip of the country that borders India – stiflingly hot and torn by insurgency and caste divides and barely acknowledged by the West. Parts of the Terai such as Chitwan, close to the Indian border, remain heavily forested to form a strategic barrier against invasion.<sup>242</sup> It is a taxing place to live – the heat makes farm work intense, and the extreme weather conditions preclude a lot of structural development; monsoons and subsequent flooding mean that most structures barely last a year. These weather conditions also lead to higher levels of disease than the rest of the country. Rebel-enforced strikes shut down institutions for days on end, so schools and businesses grind to a halt, and to use public transport is to risk one's life. National parks are home to a rich habitat of jungle animals, but these are the same animals with which the locals live in dangerous proximity. There is a contrast in the beauty and peril of the jungle region, the remoteness and realness of it.

Tension can be created between character and setting when the setting is at once monotonous and unpredictable. The Terai often feels cut-off from the rest of the country, forgotten in politics and unrecognisable in landscape. It is often overlooked in Nepal's literature,

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<sup>241</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978) 20

<sup>242</sup> Elizabeth Enslin, *Collective Powers in Common Places: The Politics of Gender and Space in a Women's Struggle for a Meeting Center in Chitwan, Nepal*, (Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies Vol.12, 1992) 13

as are the *Dalit* communities who cultivated the land and now suffer oppression from the high-caste groups who control the area and stigmatise the native population. To explore the area through the medium of poetry is at once worthwhile and challenging; to cross cultures, landscapes and languages.

My fieldwork took place over four years. Each year involved spending a few months at a time in Chitwan, located in south-central Nepal in the Terai. Before I began work on a PhD, I spent six months in Chitwan, living and teaching in boarding schools in 2012, so I had firmly-established relationships in the local communities and with schools and families. Once I started fieldwork, I lived in the Tharu communities of small villages along the bank of the Rapti river in Chitwan. These communities rely on fishing, crop and livestock farming, and bee keeping as their livelihoods. I lived with families there from April to July 2015, September to November 2015, September to December 2016, and October to December 2017.

The Tharu are indigenous to the Terai and cultivated the land in Chitwan before high-caste hill-dwellers moved into the Terai. They are considered to be low-caste, ranked as ‘clean’ (not untouchable) but ‘enslaveable’ and ‘alcohol-drinkers’.<sup>243</sup> They face a great deal of suspicion and stigma to do with their culture, and can face degrading and inhumane treatment from authorities and from people from higher castes. Nepali scholar Ram B. Chhetri describes how the discourse around how the Tharu are treated has developed over the years: ‘The entry of the element of bonded labour and slavery as features had turned the person who worked very hard into some sort of ‘a commodity’ to be owned, bought and sold, and exploited to the extent possible.’<sup>244</sup>

Some of the children attend school but many, particularly girls, stay home to help their mothers around the house and in the fields. Houses are mostly made from mud and bamboo,

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<sup>243</sup> Deepak Thapa, ‘The Making of the Maoist Insurgency’ from *Nepal in Transition: From People’s War to Fragile Peace*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012) 44

<sup>244</sup> Ram B. Chhetri, ‘The Plight of the Tharu Kamaiyas in Nepal: A Review of the Social, Economic and Political Facts’ from *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 9, (Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, 2005) 32

with tin rooves. Electricity and water sources are limited. Alongside researching Nepalese literature, local oral tradition, and the politics and culture of the country, I spent my time teaching English at local schools (and tutoring children who didn't attend school) and helping with rural and domestic labour. Literacy levels among the Tharu are lower than the national average (as an example, the literacy rate for Tharus in Bardiya<sup>245</sup> is 17.2 percent, while for the non-Tharus is 37.5 percent),<sup>246</sup> and drastically lower again than the rest of South Asia, where the literacy rate is 90 percent for men and 82 percent for women. Although there has been little scholarly interest in the Tharu caste specifically, anthropologist Mary Ann Maslak cites the Tharu as having one of the lowest educational participation rates in the country.<sup>247</sup>

Elizabeth Enslin discusses the experiences of women she lived with in the Terai who attempted to start a women's literacy class in 1990, but were sabotaged by the men of the community:

Both drunken and sober men harassed women along the pathways at night as they walked to their classes. Some men also disturbed the classes. Many men began hanging around outside the [classroom], talking loudly and sometimes disrupting the classes. Some were curious about the classes or concerned for the safety of their friends or wives. Others purposely teased women or attempted to direct the lessons when they did not approve of women's discussions.<sup>248</sup>

This example goes some way to demonstrating women's lack of control over resources, common spaces and the opportunities that these things should provide but are often purposefully

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<sup>245</sup> District in the Terai, further West than Chitwan, with a large population of Tharu citizens

<sup>246</sup> Ram B. Chhetri, 'The Plight of the Tharu', 25

<sup>247</sup> Mary Ann Maslak, *Daughters of the Tharu: Gender, ethnicity, religion, and the education of Nepali girls*, (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2003) 26

<sup>248</sup> Elizabeth Enslin, *Collective Powers in Common Places: The Politics of Gender and Space in a Women's Struggle for a Meeting Center in Chitwan, Nepal*, (*Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* Vol.12, 1992) 15

withheld from them. As an environment in which to carry out fieldwork, the discrimination towards women was blatant and easy to identify.

Tharu communities exist in close proximity to high-caste areas, and I observed the prejudices faced by Tharu people. In places like Bagmara, the riverbank communities are formed along tracks that led off of the tarmacked roads where there are concrete houses and wealthier, high-caste people, so although the proximity is close, the standard of living was markedly and visibly different. It is not unusual for Tharu houses to be washed away in the rainy season and then rebuilt every year, making it difficult for families to save enough to build a more substantial structure. People outside the Tharu were candid about the suspicions of their low-caste neighbours, and the Tharu people I worked with often told me of the stigma they face. Maslak even claims that the frequency with which the Tharu are forced to tolerate discrimination from high-caste neighbours increases their own sense of identity as second-class citizens. This power imbalance forces them to ‘assume a subservient status’ in a way they might not if their neighbouring communities were equally poverty-stricken.<sup>249</sup>

Women from low caste families often find themselves working against more than one system of oppression. As Sambriddhi Kharel identifies in a study on Dalit identity:

There is a gender dimension to caste discrimination since women are those involved in the day-to-day activities that entail the most routinely performed rituals of discrimination—getting water, buying groceries, going to temples and performing religious duties, and taking their children to school.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Maslak, *Daughters of the Tharu*, 60

<sup>250</sup> Sambriddhi Kharel, *The dialectics of identity and resistance among Dalits in Nepal*, (University of Pittsburgh Dissertations Publishing, 2010) 142



This forces women to manifest more frequent resistance in their everyday spaces as their interactions with the people around them more often involve expressions of discrimination.

It is also important to note, however, in an odd but significant anomaly, that women from particularly poor, low-caste areas of Chitwan seemed to have more freedom and face less judgement from men within their communities. I noticed, for example, a difference in the way people responded to my own appearance. Though I always dressed modestly, I was caught out a couple of times returning from a local athletics meet in shorts. When neighbours beckoned me into their yards on my route home as they always did, to chat and have tea, and though I was nervous that they had caught me wearing shorts, they seemed to not even notice. Acquaintances in high-caste villages, where women are more frequently held to strict Hindu ideals (laid out in the book of Manu as ‘shy, patient, good, sequestered, devoted, faithful, restrained, and always protected by a man’)<sup>251</sup> were already curious and a little suspicious of my presence in Chitwan without a male chaperone, and shorts would draw critical comments on how they were too eye-catching and only meant for boys, whereas for Tharu villagers who toiled the fields where the heat frequently forced them to strip down, shorts seemed entirely unremarkable. It was, in part, this comparable lack of preoccupation with appearance, reputation and feminine appeal that made the fieldwork productive: women were generally prepared to be pragmatic and honest about their lives, their culture and the prejudice they faced. Other researchers have noticed similar trends and while women who carry out fieldwork in Kathmandu often detail judgement and harassment, Sambriddhi Kharel wrote of the rural community she studied:

... upwardly mobile Pariyars were more concerned about modesty, etiquette, culture and good behaviour in comparison to lower class sweepers and metal workers. In contrast, metal workers and sweeper women were not concerned about how they talked and

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<sup>251</sup> Julia J, Thompson, *Speaking of Dissent, Speaking of Consent: Ritual and Resistance Among High-Caste Hindu Women in Kathmandu*, (CNAS Contributions to Nepalese Studies Journal Vol.20, 1993) 3

behaved. They were less concerned about modesty. Women in the low-class communities talked openly about domestic violence and acute alcoholism amongst Dalit men. They also laughingly admitted that they drink sometimes but they do not misbehave.<sup>252</sup>

This detail is important in that it demonstrated the variables in oppression – that some women, while fighting for an education, may be free to go to the market unaccompanied by a man, yet a woman from a high-caste community might have access to education and healthcare but experience precious little personal freedom until her marriage is arranged. The kind of inequality that I witnessed and wrote about is not necessarily representative of the experiences of women from other classes and regions.

By spending time simply being a part of daily life in Chitwan, of involving myself in the ordinary labour of farming and childcare, I was able to share in experiences from people whose livelihoods are almost always overlooked. Particularly during times of great political and environmental trouble – in 2015 alone the country suffered terrible earthquakes, a subsequent constitution that redacted many women's rights, a border blockade on India's side that brought the country to a halt – I witnessed the way Nepal's most vulnerable were pushed further into poverty. It provided me with a first-hand, in-depth understanding of the constant instability that vulnerable people in rural areas face. Despite being a cultural outsider, I found that people were keen to share their lives with me and talk about how they'd grown up. I sensed this was less to repay me for community work, and more out of a desire to be recognised, for inequality and hardship to be recorded by someone from a country that was perceived to be powerful, and for a valuable culture that had survived against the odds to be acknowledged.

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<sup>252</sup> Sambriddhi Kharel, *The dialectics of identity and resistance among Dalits in Nepal*, (University of Pittsburgh Dissertations Publishing, 2010) 142

Of course, this position as an outsider can be negotiated, and the cultural gap between the Tharu and I can diminish, but it can never disappear entirely. There is a duality in the setting of several of the poems I have written as this cultural gap is exposed and explored, and settings enter a new and surrealist space that meet neither the expectations of Western nor Eastern environments. I ultimately intend to avoid a collection that dogmatically instructs people with moral or cultural judgements, so these surrealist strategies are a way by which to enter the world as a foreigner. Dream-like imagery and incongruous juxtaposition are popular surrealist tropes that, here, have equipped me to not only bridge Eastern and Western worlds, but also real and dream worlds with these defamiliarizing images. The canoe that turns out to exist only in the narrator's head in 'Canoe', the personified tikka that embarks on an imagined moral crusade in 'The Blessing Dust', and the unwelcome re-naming of a river manifesting as a cowardly horse in 'Beasts Wilder' all aim to defamiliarize the reader's understanding of Nepal and overturn the objects by which we communicate.

The use of these techniques comes with risk that the subject of the poem is "othered" by the distance that surrealism can impose between the reader and the subject. There is always a negotiation in the distance or familiarity between narrator, subject and reader. In my poem "Fishing with Khusbhu", the last couplet "Her fish suffered perfectly – / like an art gallery; all colour and no sound" is an example of one of how there is a risk of "othering" because of the distance through which the narrator observes her reproductive pain – neither connecting with it not understanding it – but merely witnessing it. This position of witnessing without judgement can come close to the tropes of "exoticism" because it lacks familiarity and understanding: defamiliarizing images are, by their very nature, removing the subject from the comprehension of the reader. Yet the alternative – and one that I explored over years of writing and ultimately rejected – is one that suggests that the stories of Nepali women can be told through a Euro-centric perspective, through the means of Western-style poetry, and be culturally familiar. Poems that I wrote in this style felt inauthentic and misleading: I was acutely aware that I was conveying

the experiences of some of the most marginalised people in the world – illiterate women, sex workers, women who were treated with suspicion and stigma – and through vigilance of avoiding creating myths about their existences, I imposed more of a distance: a sense that the existences depicted in poetry were beyond the knowledge of the reader, and that they *should* be kept on the outside.

This thesis and my poetry are ultimately written from a Euro-centric point of view, and no matter how much time I spend living in Nepal, always will be. My position will always be one of a Westerner, engaged in the fourth wave of feminism in the UK while Nepal is still in its first. For this reason, negotiating concepts of universalism in these poems is a complex process to which there are no straightforward answers. In much of this thesis I argue against problematic concepts of female universalism that suggest that, beneath surface differences, that women suffer the same subjugation across the globe. However, one exception to this is my poem “tharu corn husk dollies”: a poem in two parts that compares Nepalese corn dolls with strings of paper dolls that children make in the West. The poem compares the regulation of female body image between the West and the East, drawing comparisons that, elsewhere in the thesis are rejected. This exception plays an important part in the shape of the collection though – a nudge to the Western reader to remember, before they draw conclusions about Nepal being in some way “behind” the UK in some linear misconception of gender-based development, that notions of aesthetic female perfection are considerably more prevalent and more toxic in the West than elsewhere. The first part of the poem uses the symbol of the doll fashioned from a corn husk to explore the role of Nepalese women as domestic and passive, and the second half of the poem draws links between paper dolls and female characters in Western fairy-tales – conditioning Western girls, from the earliest ages, to be meek and thin enough to “tear themselves in half”. The poem does not particularly argue that the two types of doll share similar traits, but more makes sheds a critical light on gender-based dynamics in the West, where women are still valued by their appearance first and foremost.

Another recurring theme in the poems is the use of land as an allegory for the life of a woman in the rural regions. Many Nepali female poets use images of bamboo, rice crops or weeds as metaphors for female physicality. Often these images are used tactically, to avoid romantic ideas about feminine beauty. I engaged in a similar way with the Terai environment, using the network of rivers, which are both a source of life and of danger, to frame the experiences of women as I witnessed them. The river is a source of freedom as well as a tool of captivity in my poem 'Canoe', and a childhood mistake when cultivating rice ultimately costs Neemu her adult independence in 'Red Moon Through Clouds'. Villagers are at the mercy of the political stand-offs and the subsequent crop failures in 'Harvest During the Blockade'.

Anthropologist Graham Clarke identifies this metaphoric connection between people, animals and the land as particularly prevalent in the cultural traditions of Nepal:

... people may be likened in characteristics to various types of animals, such as bears, foxes, and monkeys. Another equally common idiom is the extension of biological terms beyond their literal sense, such as the use of 'to plant' as a common metaphor for to sow the seeds of a course of action.<sup>253</sup>

Particularly in rural areas, cultivation aphorisms make their way into the language around all aspects of life – so poems that use this kind of imagery have a distinctly rural feel to them – markedly different from poetry that comes from urban areas but closely affiliated to the oral traditions of the farmlands. By engaging with language that links people with animals and the land, the collection anchors not only in the traditions of oral tradition from the Terai, but also with poems written by women from remote areas.

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<sup>253</sup> Graham E Clarke, 'Thinking through Nature in Highland Nepal' from *Asian Perceptions of Nature: A Critical Approach*, (Routledge: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1995) 91

Just as the poems analysed in this thesis frequently make references to the ugly hopelessness of street dogs and caged parakeets, I have characterised animals in several of my poems, using them as metaphors of human experience as well as symbols of culture. The slaughtered chickens in 'Pink Peacock' and the silent, gasping fish in 'Fishing with Khusbhu' all function as part of a comment on the normalisation of suffering and the acceptance of it as part of daily life. Although goats are owned by most households in the Terai, they do not feature as mere animals in my poems but rather as victims of superstitious violence: poisoned in 'Untouchable' and ritualistically beheaded in 'Khusbhu'. In 'Khusbhu', too, the character associates the violence of the beheading of the goat with the arrival of her brother – the celebration of his birth linked inextricably with the graphic death of an animal slaughtered inside her home.

There is something, too, in the inclusion of violence in poetry that works to process violence, reconcile it and delve within it. Poetry that depicts violence can become material with which a community can use to process violence as a societal problem. In a discussion of the ballad tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica, John Holmes McDowell writes 'It seems incontrovertible that poetry addressing violence might provide, in the right circumstances, a release from the despair that is a natural consequence of experiencing such difficult situations.'<sup>254</sup> Although he discusses a different culture than Nepal's, his sociological claims are pan-national; he goes on to assert that indulging in violent details in poetry can have a cathartic effect, both for writer and reader as violence is processed in literature and its boundaries are explored. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why poems like 'When I Have a Daughter' by Itisha Giri became popular amongst women, because they address and respond to violence – in this case an acid attack on two school girls that shocked the nation. I explore violence of a similar nature in poems like 'Fishing with Khusbhu', where the character Khusbhu tries to reconcile the pain of

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<sup>254</sup> John Holmes McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica, Volume 1*, (University of Illinois Press, 2009) 173

her reproductive experiences as she inspects the fish she has caught ‘suffering beautifully’ in the bottom of her bucket. The symbol of the quietly suffering fish gives a name and image to the huge, abstract issue of reproductive rights.

As a consequence of my location during fieldwork, many of my poems feature the landscape and features specific to this part of the Terai. Certainly, fishing is a pivotal part of Tharu culture that is rarely featured in the day-to-day lives of Nepali people in the rest of the country. The river becomes a recurring symbol throughout the poems: a source of danger and sustenance, a place people gather in the day or escape to alone at night. It is also a source of potential freedom, as in the poem ‘Canoe’ and at once a landmark that hems villages in and keeps them cut off. In ‘Birds and Prey’, the narrator attempts to use the familiar cycle home through the orange grove as a moment of escape, where she can turn off her bicycle lamp and escape the jungle for a moment, but the light from the night sky, the smell of the oranges and her own tiredness prevent her from imagining she is elsewhere: ‘I’m no sooner / out of this world / than grounded, sobered / and pulled in / by the pinch / of oranges and betrayal of / worm-ish gleam / and spin of wheels / and tired breathing’. As in poems like Nasala Chitrakar’s ‘Before I Forget’, the narrator toys with escape, imagines it, attempts it, but ultimately is reeled in by her demanding environment. In the Terai, where many young people dream of being able to leave for a better life, but few acquire the means to do so, the sense of entrapment can be overwhelming – a theme that the poem hinges on.

Symbolism and literary motifs play a significant role in contemporary Nepali poetry, and were tropes I considered carefully in my own work. When Carolyn Forché wrote the line ‘there is no other way to say this’ in ‘The Colonel’, she was right. When confronted with the shocking and grotesque image of a bag of ears spilled across the table, there was no image more appropriate to summarise the crimes committed against the people of El Salvador. The cruelty and suffering were so aptly embodied by the act of the colonel, the spilling of ears, that there was no requirement of allegory or metaphor. Too frequently, however, in writing about the toll of

poverty, the years of political stagnation and the lack of progress for the lives of women in rural regions, there is no single image that sufficiently symbolises the quiet, forgotten suffering of so many rural women. I found increasingly in my own poetry, as in the poetry of Nepali women, that it had to be sustained in the setting of poems and built up over the collection: in dead and dying crops, in animals tethered from infancy, in un-used canoes and monsoons that dragged on for weeks.

In day-to-day life, however, the relationship between families and their livestock or the wildlife around them struck me as significant. Distance from animals is something of a luxury. Western styles of housing livestock require a certain level of development. For families who rely on their livestock but have no land for them, chickens run underfoot, and goats eat from haynets tied to the front door. The normality with which a family might share their living space with an animal before calmly slaughtering it serves as a metaphor for the normalisation of suffering, the lack of opportunity for moral high grounds or hand-wringing. The acceptance of loss, of sacrifice, of little more than a utilitarian existence. Similarly, the ways in which wild animals are killed in pre-emptive defence with calm efficiency: venomous snakes, spiders, wild dogs, showed a clinical efficiency that somehow seemed linked to the functional responses to everything in poverty, the frank need for survival. In her writing on the ways in which animals are perceived across cultures, Erica Fudge writes, 'When we look to differentiate humans from animals it is straightforward: the categories are owner and owned.'<sup>255</sup> She goes on to claim that when people own animals they inherently place themselves in a position of dominance, casting the animal in the role of object, but also conversely that to own an animal is to know it and assign it a character: it is at once objectified and known intimately. This illustrates why imagery containing animals is such well-visited territory; the relationship between man and animal is such a useful

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<sup>255</sup> Erica Fudge, *Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*, (University of Illinois Press, 2002) 116 - 117



symbolic vehicle for representing human relationships corrupted by the needs and necessities that come with poverty.

There is also a common assumption that women, as those who give birth and typically nurture the young, are better suited to domestic and farm work than men – an idea I seek to challenge. Timothy Clark writes: ‘It is not that women are actually closer to nature than men ... but throughout history, men have chosen to set themselves apart, usually, ‘over and above’ nature and women.’<sup>256</sup> This is a phenomenon apparent across most of the writing analysed in this thesis – there is far less of a sense that women feel an innate kinship with nature, even though literature (across many cultures) has historically portrayed birth and reproduction as synonymous with being closer to nature, and more a distinct feeling of being forced into a role that is close to the environment: to the earth, to livestock, to the cultivated fields and farm life. In the women’s poems, women’s relationships with the environment are far from romanticised. The imagery of the farmland is not idyllic. The characterisation of the animals is not sympathetic. The writing reveals how poverty of the land leads to poverty of women, first and foremost. This is not only a dominant characteristic across a lot of the poetry, but also an important theme to replicate – the idea that women’s link to the landscape is neither innate nor romantic – that it causes women to suffer more acutely from poverty and inequality. Many of my own poems, too, challenge the romantic notion of women as innately domestic beings: the narrator in ‘Duped by the Gods’ nearly cuts off her own toe in an effort to feed a house full of men, and one narrator in ‘Omens of M’ admires a cobra before cutting off its head to avoid it injuring anyone. They are poems that criticise the presumption of harmony between women and their domestic roles and instead draw attention to the hardship and dangers that many women routinely face.

### *Poetry of Witness*

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<sup>256</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, (Cambridge University Press 2012), 116

There were several project-driven collections I consulted in the process of creating my own writing: Carolyn Forché's work in particular, along with her concept of 'Poetry of Witness', has offered an inspiring theoretical framework when writing about Nepal. Her anthology 'Against Forgetting' offered a concept-driven collection of testimonial-style poems from a range of eras of modern conflict around the world. Moreover, even the process of analysing and critiquing Forché's angle on political poetry was a useful route to shaping my own views and assessing the way I approached the topics in my own work through a critical lens.

However, although I spent much *in-situ* writing time working with the 'Poetry of Witness' ideology at the forefront of my creative framework, it became clear over time that the extent to which ideas like Forché's could be applied had their limitations. The definition of the 'witnessing' of events seems elusive, upon closer inspection. In her article for *Poetry Foundation*, Carolyn Forché concludes her thoughts on the 'Poetry of Witness' concept by saying:

... we enter an inter-subjective sphere of lived immediacy. In the poetry of witness, the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem *is* the experience, rather than a symbolic representation.<sup>257</sup>

Exhaustive, complex and drawn-out wars, like the most recent one in Nepal that has shaped the lives of its citizens, are rarely represented or even experienced in 'lived immediacy'. 'Experience' is seldom so linear. There is no straightforward way to define what it means to witness a political event; whether the poet's literal presence is necessary, or whether they record the stories of those who were personally affected. In addition, when considering the drawn-out and fluctuating trends of poverty and conflict, how does one decide what it means to be present? In Nepal,

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<sup>257</sup> Carolyn Forché, *Reading the Living Archives: The Witness of Literary Art*, (Poetry Foundation 2011) poetryfoundation.org

where remote regions have suffered their own versions of protracted civil conflicts and scattered instances of police violence, it seems problematic to try and decide what it means to be present during these periods of unrest. In areas that are entirely isolated from the rest of the country, so few people are physically present to bear witness to injustice or violence, that to demand a first-hand account from a poet would cause so many stories to be lost forever. Who's to say who has earned the status of 'witness'?

Part of this process involved considering my position as a writer to subject and character. The risk of writing as an outsider is that the content of the poems is filtered through a Western perspective, even after extensive fieldwork. The reader receives the poems from a distance, through the self-conscious lens of a foreigner. There is a risk that sanitising visceral details will lead to work that falls back on the more predictable 'othering' tropes that Edward Said warned against – something that might make work more comprehensible to a Western audience, but also risks diluting Nepali culture. If culture is translated plainly and directly, it should, to an extent, keep a foreign reader unfamiliar. It is essential to preserve elements of Nepalese language and culture, even if it makes the content of some of the poems elusive to an unaccustomed reader.

In her writing on translating the cultures from the developing world, Anuradha Dingwaney identifies the West's need to constitute the Third World as an object of study as an exercise of colonial power. She states:

[Given] the asymmetrical relationships of power obtaining between the cultures being studied and those doing the studying, these translations of cultures proceed, not surprisingly, in a predictable, even predetermined, direction: alien cultural forms or concepts of indigenous practices are recuperated via a process of familiarisation whereby they are denuded of their 'foreignness', even, perhaps, their radical inaccessibility.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> Anuradha Dingwaney, 'Translating Third World Cultures' from *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996) 5 - 6

Dingwaney goes on to implore those who translate Third World cultures not to take it for granted that their language already possesses the necessary concepts with which to represent the translated culture.

Some of my poems, such as ‘Duped by the Gods’, are dense with references to Hinduism, superstitious beliefs, Nepalese recipes, traditional festivals and even slang terms that acknowledge the richness of rural culture but also require a reader to delve into them, to de-code them, in order to be apprised of the stories they tell. They keep the reader defamiliarised, on the outskirts of Nepali culture. Some phrases are untranslated and are simply included in Nepali in order to avoid the process Dingwaney refers to as practices ‘denuded of their foreignness’, so the meaning of the word or phrase is clear or partially clear from the context, but the significance of the phrase for which there is no English alternative is not forfeited.

The other side of this creative process is the risk of writing too boldly, with too much authority, on issues which belong to marginalised groups of people, in this case Nepali women. The understanding of culture as a type of property to which ownership can be definitively assigned is, at the very least, problematic, but it is vital that historical, political and social imbalances are acknowledged, and that there is no sense of entitlement to the stories of others when writing.

The writing of this collection has happened at an interesting time in terms of the wider social and political conversations taking place around identity politics and the concept of ownership over certain types of writing. On 8 September 2016, Lionel Shriver’s opening keynote speech at Brisbane Writers Festival<sup>259</sup> addressed the question: what are writers allowed to write? Shriver denounced the idea that writers have any obligation to write responsible portrayals of characters from minorities and claimed that authors should be able to write with freedom and

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<sup>259</sup> Full speech transcript: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>

impunity on any culture without hesitation. Her speech was so controversial that members of the audience left before she had finished, and Brisbane Festival publicly distanced themselves from her comments. Although it seemed that Shriver's speech was insensitive and unhelpful as she turned significant literary questions on representation into a 'political correctness gone mad' grievance, her controversial angle did invite opinions from many other writers from around the world on the author's right to write on the experiences of others, and the pressure to avoid harmful stereotypes. My creative writing on Nepal has been crafted at a time when there has been enormous social focus on identity politics and authenticity of cultural writing that holds writers strictly to account over the content of their work and the way they represent cultures outside of their own.

Certainly, it felt important to retain an awareness of how Nepali women have been written about in the past. There has been a prevalent history of omitting women from the literary landscape, of using them as plot devices to prop up male characters, of normalising their subservience and oppression, and of depicting them as two-dimensional characters stripped of any signifiers of autonomy. Even in literature written in English for Western tourists, women are represented in a way that would surely face criticism for being regressive were they white women in Western novels.

In the anthology *Home Girls*, Barbara Smith addresses the question of why there is such a stark absence of black lesbian characters in American literature, and amongst the multitude of potential causes she states: 'Publishers were not interested in books with Lesbian themes; a money-making market was inconceivable. The socio-political temper of the times had not given rise to the activism of the women's or gay rights movements of the sixties.'<sup>260</sup> Low-caste women in Nepal today face something of a similar problem – the minority within a minority – in an environment that simply does not seem ready to accept feminist literature.

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<sup>260</sup> Barbara Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, (Rutgers University Press: New Ed edition, 1999) 84

Many of the poems explore a space seldom occupied by women in literature set in Nepal. Much of my work aimed to counter the plethora of unrecognisable and inaccurate women from historically prejudiced accounts. With poems like ‘Red Moon Through Clouds’ and ‘Omens of M’, part of their purpose was to create tension by exploring themes of quiet rebellion and secretive acts of opposition so rarely considered in the writing of Nepali women’s lives. ‘Red Moon Through Clouds’ explores what happens when girls are prevented from growing up into independent women, when they are reduced to ‘good’ or ‘pretty’, or in this case, ‘not pretty’. In ‘Questions for Ada’, Lagos-born Ijeoma Umebinyuo writes ‘I told him ‘beautiful’ / is a lazy and lousy way / to describe me’,<sup>261</sup> a sentiment that is explored in ‘Red Moon’ when a character who ultimately rejects the notion that she should be devalued for her loss of looks after she breaks her teeth.

### *Deriving Themes from Nepali Poetry*

In a society that is seldom prepared for women as strong, educated leaders, or as lobbyists and *gundini* (female insurgents), literature often tends not to explore these types of roles for Nepalese women – they’ve simply not been the female roles that readers have engaged with in popular writing. I was mindful of writing about women whose roles are inherently uncomfortable as they increasingly occupy spaces historically reserved almost exclusively for men. In my poetry, I explore characteristics of independent women who reject religious upbringings and roles of servitude, like the narrator who beheads a cobra in my poem ‘Omens of M’, and women who evade arranged marriage customs as in ‘Butterfly Dowry’. Just as increasing numbers of Nepali women now have access to an education that contradicts the traditions and superstitions that they grew up with, these characters are faced with the dilemma of rejecting their family’s beliefs.

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<sup>261</sup> Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Questions for Ada*, (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015) 121

In 'Omens of M', the daughter analyses the death of a cobra with ruthless pragmatism amidst the suspicious warnings of the competing narrator; the two conflicting monologues talk over each other as second speaker struggles to reconcile suspicion with science. In 'Butterfly Dowry' the character contemplates the logic in purposefully devaluing herself before marriage so that she is not worth dowry. She describes 'wading into the river to kiss the drunk fisherman on his birthday' – a public act that, in rural regions, would be enough to wreck the reputation of a girl. This conflict of progression versus obedience is one explored with frequency in the poems of the analysis; in 'Dubarmarg' by Ujjwala Maharjan, the women in the poem poise and preen and compete for the affections of onlooking men while the narrator decides her safest option is to simply stay still and quiet, as if invisible. With these characters I seek to offer a literary correction to the cookie-cutter predictability of compliant, domestic female characters: they embody the characteristics I recognise in many women in Chitwan: the book-worms, the go-getters, the mischievous and the quietly courageous.

With regard to poetic technique, I drew from both Nepali and Anglo-American influences, in the same way that most of these poets read Western work as much as Nepali poetry. In some of the poems, there is a blend between the style of the poem, which sometimes follows a strict traditional form, contrasted with the content of the poem which challenges the traditional content of poetry by subverting the role of the female subject or by criticising some societal norm. The way in which Nicholas Dirks challenged the idea of ritual as a static phenomenon can be applied here, as he claims that social shifts are integrated into the same cultural structure, and that 'fundamental assumptions are constructed and re-constructed in the course of the rituals themselves.'<sup>262</sup> Ultimately, he argues that traditional vehicles of communication are often a successful mode of resistance.

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<sup>262</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, (University of California Press, 1992), 214

With this in mind, I experimented with ghazals<sup>263</sup> because they were popularised in Urdu writing which later influenced the styles of many contemporary Nepali poets. Whenever poems share a form they tend to naturally fall into conversation with another, so I set out to create a duality between the structure of some of my poems and the Nepalese ones. Not only do these formulaic poems share length, but also the restrictions of their length of argument or counter-argument, their depth of description and, in the case of ghazals, their repetition of imagery. Whether or not the limitation of syllables is arbitrary, the restrictions allow the poems to feel related to one another, however different the culture or language of content might be.

There are limitations to this relationship between poems of the same form. The rules that might serve a central creative purpose in some forms can become arbitrary in English, just as if we go back far enough in English poetic style, the length of the sonnet is not wholly fortuitous. Even the 5-7-5 rule of the haiku in English is something of a corruption of the original guidelines around writing haiku in Japan, because Japanese lexis rules do not count syllables as the English do, so poems written with seventeen syllables in English count rather more sounds when read with Japanese phonetic rules.<sup>264</sup> Similarly, the Nepalese ghazal has taken on a different form to the original Arabic structure, and although they retain the popular spiritual themes, they are less to do with unrequited or unattainable love.

Certain tropes from these poetic forms, however, translate not only to the popularised Nepali form but also to English. The term *kireji* (from the Japanese *tanka*) refers broadly to imagistic juxtaposition – creating just the right amount of distance between a small and large-scale image – neither too close nor too obscure. This is a technique commonly utilised in contemporary Nepali poetry and something I experimented with in some of my poems including

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<sup>263</sup> A type of poem originating in 7<sup>th</sup> Century Arabia and popularised by Persian poets, traditionally written on themes of love and philosophy. They are made up of five to fifteen couplets, each one autonomous, and the last line of each couplet is the same.

<sup>264</sup> Kenneth Yasuda, *Japanese Haiku: Its Essential Nature and History*, (Tuttle Publishing, 2002) 37



the tanka sequence 'Floods', as the poem focuses on the detail of the two ducklings floating on a flip-flop, and then in the final two lines pulls back to describe the rising flood waters.

Recurrent characterisation is another prominent trope in many of the poems. Poets like Tsering Wangmo Dhompa employ the use of characters that re-appear in their work over time and develop with increasing depth. Dhompa's popular character, 'M', became profound and well-rounded over time, multi-faceted and full of small contradictions, with a complexity that we rarely get to see in the way that South-Asian women are portrayed in poetry. Many themes are explored through the lens of the M's perspective. I used this technique in my recurring character 'Khusbhu', who, through different poems, goes through adolescent developments of stubbornness, shyness, outright rebellion and inquisitive romanticism. It can be challenging to relate to large-scale poverty or over-whelming human rights abuses, especially in a single poem, so to follow one character over time breaks down these issues into experiences that can be better humanised.

Contemporary poetry in Nepal has moved on from the inflexible structure that was seen in earlier poetry in the 1900s. Few scholars have commented in detail as to why this might be, but I have speculated, along with some of the poets featured here, about the popularity of free verse as part of a deliberate step away from the elitist nature of the complicated poetic structures that used to define accomplished poetry. Classic Sanskrit meters in the early 1900s were extremely strict: *shardula-vikridita*, a popular form of epic verse, dictated the number of syllables and position of caesura with no flexibility for adaptation or compromise. Because of the rigidity of these expectations, this type of poetry was preserved for highly erudite sections of society; they could only be learnt through diligent study and effective teaching. It was a privilege most Nepalis in the 1900s, and particularly women, stood no chance of attaining, and many see it, retrospectively at least, as the deliberate, conscious exclusion of all but a few choice writers. As many of these poets write on themes that, at their core, involve values of equality and diversity,

the accessibility of their poetry matches those values in that it is not written with the rigid structure seen in early scholarly poetry.

Several of my poems reflect these free verse styles, the varying line length, the use of space to control tempo (as opposed to relying exclusively on punctuation), as well as a prosaic, narrative style to them, influenced by Nepal's folktale culture. The poems work in conversation with poems that are analysed in this thesis, not only structurally, but also with regards to content – narrating specific events and telling stories that apply to many women across Nepal. Poems like 'Red Moon Through Clouds' and 'Pink Peacock' are narrated in a style usually associated with folktales – with a plot driven journey as opposed to a purely imagistic one. It is interesting to note that Nepali poet and academic Sewa Bhattarai found that, in a comparison between folktales in Europe and Nepal, one consistent similarity between the two was the reiteration of patriarchal values, and that even when stories differed in all ways involving narrative style, structure and cultural details, their commonality was the punishment of female characters for deceit, insubordination, or promiscuity.<sup>265</sup>

The poem 'cobwebbing' also experiments with space and layout as a way of controlling pace, in a way commonly employed in Momila Joshi's poems as she varies line length and omits punctuation, and Pranika Koyu, who places emphasis on certain words by spreading them out over a line. It is possible to emphasise certain details that otherwise might seem ordinary and arbitrary in order to cast a fresh perspective on them, to elevate them from their menial position and utilise them in a way that is new and unexpected. In 'cobwebbing' the projected character who dies in the earthquake is remembered not by her treasured possessions, but by the junk that she has hoarded; the things that relay her life more truthfully than significant keepsakes because they capture her chaos and spontaneity.

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<sup>265</sup> Sewa Bhattarai, *Comparison of persecution narratives in folktales of Nepal and Europe*, (Western Illinois University Dissertation Publishing, 2011) 54 - 65

The collection is strongly grounded in context; it comments on a specific time and space. One aim was to comment boldly, not just on the forgotten lives of the marginalised, but on current events that were the centre of discussion, both socially and in the media. The collection narrates the post-revolution era, a time of free speech, the age of relentless protest and insurgency, of political unrest and deep distrust in government, of strike culture and police violence. Specific events, though not strongly recurrent, are present in the poems – events like the Tikapur riots ('Politician and Gods'), the earthquakes and floods ('Circus Bugs') are explored, and both of these poems were published in Nepalese newspapers and literary journals as part of a wider commentary of these social phenomena. When exploring certain areas or cultures with a new perspective, it was important to be literal about events, places and time periods – details that readers could be familiar with – and could understand as any reader understands literature that is for and about them.

It seems apt to quote here Stephen Slemon's claim that the genre of mountain climbing literature serves as an allegory for colonialism. He summarises his argument with the following:

... mountaineering literature differs from imperial travel writing in that mountain climbers journey towards fetishized arrival points that are by definition *unpeopled* by cultural others ... mountaineering literature uniformly suspends the generative agency of the enabling, 'native' guides on climbing expeditions. 'Native' figures in climbing writing never really stop being just coolies<sup>266</sup> or porters, and even when they climb as team members on the final pitch, they are never route finders, and they never get there first.<sup>267</sup>

In the same way that literature has long since characterised Everest as 'unpeopled' in order to cast it as romantic and unchartered territory, the characterisation of local people in Western

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<sup>266</sup> 'A Nepali term for mountain guide

<sup>267</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Climbing Mount Everest', 57-58

literature as peripheral, secondary characters of no real value has dominantly shaped the way in which the West consumes images of Nepal. Ultimately, this collection aims to serve as a literary correction to the ways in which perceptions of Nepal are consumed by readers – to present counter-images that contest the stereotypes of unpeopled mountains and instead draw literature into the jungles and flatlands, to bring people and their culture, experiences and lives to the forefront of the poems by engaging and interacting with poetry by Nepali women, which is, for the first time, finding a community and a platform.

## **Birds with Wolf Hearts**

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\*

the split tongue, the writing

### Spilled from the Salt Rack

Chili Powder – generous, blood for a stranger,  
 the colour of lipstick Khusbhu wears uncarefully,  
 not pressing her lips first to each other  
 and then to a tissue, but a thick swipe for reddening  
 cheeks and collars, for open-mouth laughing

Himalayan Salt – faces pressed together at a cliff-edge,  
 more pink and alive than cymose shoots in the shade  
 of blossom trees, more pink and alive  
 than Khusbhu's treasured childhood corn snake,  
 sun-fearing with sky-coloured eyes

Mix Masala – Khusbhu misread the word *chaat* as *chatur*  
 and bought what she imagined was a peppered bird  
 that tucks into a hole in the Himalayan salt cliffs,  
 so high that voices thin and choke to a whisper  
 and the air is all imaginings and silence

Cumin – all noise like chili powder, scattered mouths  
 and eyes, Khusbhu plays with a balding street dog  
 on the market junction or far on a hillside,  
 the quarrel of her capable voice could feed a hungry pack,  
 life clings to the flesh of men and birds

Cardamom – Khusbhu cries loudly from the kitchen,  
 thin shell and epidermis, too much for the small space  
 like a bird panicked in a low-ceilinged room,  
 darting at walls, the fire close to dying, the un-cracked pods  
 like squeezed-shut eyes embarrassed by all this noise

Black Pepper – the trace of it like the kiss of the moon  
 on the daytime sky, printed lipstick pressed to a tissue,  
 the abyss of the early morning too thin  
 and mountain-high to colour cheeks and collars,  
 too close to cliff-edge and salt-rock to ever be misunderstood



## Beasts Wilder

*In 2016, the Nepalese Government knocked down the sign by a river in Saptari District, changing its name from the Tharu word 'Gaihri' (Deep) to replace it with the name 'Gabidi'. Tharu villagers quickly knocked down the new sign and put their old sign back up.*

How could you slip a new history across the water  
 on the back of the name so close to the word for horse?  
 Such an ill-bred history. An all blubber and no muscle horse.  
 Ears flat back horse. Like winter to touch horse.  
 Horse that clicks the dull machines of its eyes,  
 which are in the front of its head.  
 The angled bowl of its chest tips over  
 as it balks along the riverbank.  
 A horse, spilling its pigeon-heart.

Crossing the river, its dish hooves would churn under its weight.  
 It is swept along.  
 Of all the names – the most un-beautiful horse.

It would turn to look at the broken mechanics  
 of its body and think –  
 How did it get like this, these rusty pistons, this empty birdcage?  
 Bred by cowards. Teetering stones for shoulders.  
 The body: a wet, clenched fist.  
 Much too tight. A horse that's all scarred knuckle, bone fractured like a map of the river.  
 The white rings of its eyes would pool like milk.  
 Teeth show pathetically. Nostrils balloon.

A horse, grunting now, muzzle sinking below the water's surface.  
 A horse no match for the people who named the river  
 for the dash of its current, its depth, its love of drowning.

## Omens of M

The head is a cocked fist, a rosebud. The blade swipes it away

*don't wash your face at night, you'll marry an old man*

Blood drips like a metronome. I flick the head a safe distance

*chew and spit a dry chrysalis to stop the pain*

and there are eyes in the back of its head, like M

*fish in your dreams will bring you gold*

The underbelly is orange, so pretty I hardly want to skin it

*don't sweep the house after sunset*

It squirms once more; a whip-stroke in the sand

*don't enter the kitchen while bleeding, you'll rot the food*

Poison from the wet stem of its throat smells like a delicacy—

*don't borrow salt, a salt debt is bad luck*

I could feel guilty. While M struggles to find purpose

*a crow calling on your roof invites new guests*

crouched in the doorway for warmth without smoke

*whistling at night invites the devil*

there seems so much of it in a dead cobra

*a dog howling on your doorstep invites death*

posing in the clay and the dust, waiting to rebel

*are you listening to me, chori?*

waiting to prove the purpose of its life

*don't bring snakeskin into the house, however pretty the underbelly*

waiting to dance as if watched by nothing but its own eyes.

## Fishing for God

You clear yourself with the river  
and tell me you hear Indra echo like a poem in the sky,  
but there is uncertainty today.  
The river quivers between night and day under the tin-foil sky.

I untangle my Tharu *belka*, and pass you *mahseer*  
one-by-one. With your knife you undo  
them gut to tail, pull their singing flesh,  
but they are little more than squall and sky.

*There is nothing to them*, you say,  
the way women complain about their daughters.  
Each catch spills its own pain like a story.  
The wind is brittle and there is dryness in the cut-throat sky.

I am learning the colour of hunger:  
scales that worry our wet skin and nacreous  
fish-eyes that root themselves in the sockets  
of the shore, sulking at the dwindling sky.

My spare hand locks your hair behind  
your sun-warmed ears. I've seen you count  
the broken mosaic of the stratosphere,  
net the stars as easily as *mahseer* and drink sky

from your sky-filled bucket, but God's absence  
is tightening around you like a harness.  
You're held back like a monsoon,  
your heart two netted butterflies the colour of sky,

one beats, flaying itself with the fear  
that it has forgotten how to fly,  
the other folds up and sleeps against the weave,  
breathes the sky.

\*

**tharu corn husk dolly**

## I.

The Tharu corn husk dolly's face is a wrinkled straw mask with yarn crosses for eyes and no particular mouth. Her arms are held away from her sides so she can be propped against a pillow or tied to a pillar, and her waist is thick; good for child-bearing. Her back is slightly curled over with toil and her corn-head bulges, enough room for folksong and malady cures. There is a noose of grass tight around her throat to keep her grass hair tidy, and another around her ankles to hold her legs together. It is how she was made. Her straw dress is long and modest so that unless you cared to look, you might not tell what held her together. Nobody brings them inside during bad weather. Their hands are the first to tear. They flutter in storms; the wind shakes them and turns their skirts the way children turn in sleep as they endure their dreams. How well we admire their short existences.

## II.

There were dollies we made on messy, bored Sundays with rain angry at the windows; where we smudged Daily Mail ink with glue sticks and scissored at pages until we had a chain of paper girls joined at the hands and feet — caught in the ritual of a party game. We dotted on eyes with permanent markers, inked in the black O of each mouth. Experimented with how small we could make the waists before they tore in half. We strung them across windows where they stuck to the condensation and curled over and over until their faces touched their knees, exposing the skeletons of last week's headlines. It was the pose of weak women, hugging their knees to save themselves; girls with pricked fingers and grazed knees, swooning at the sight of their own blood.

\*

## Fishing with Khusbhu

We stood waist-deep on the bend in the river  
with our skirts resting like lilies, freshwater *mabseer* pitted  
against the current, easy to scoop out with a *tapi*

where they would ripple like the hands of ballerinas.  
I learnt to twist the edge of my net and snap it tight  
so the fish were flung high into the air.

Shuffling in the water and squinting at the sky  
like a cricket fielder with my bucket outstretched,  
I would catch one, and it would explode in the bucket

and spray blood over my face, while the rest would fall back  
to the water, the twists of their silver bellies  
pirouetting against the young night sky.

Khusbhu, though, liked to pick hers out of the net  
the way she plucked roadside geraniums out of thorn clumps,  
and lay them in the bucket

where she could pick at the shiniest scales  
and inspect the heaving black spots of their mouths.  
*Khusbhu, you have to kill them*, I'd say, blood beading on my face.

Her silver-speckled hands closed around the bucket  
as if it were a cloudy womb full of ruptured injuries  
that she knew intimately.

Her fish suffered perfectly –

like an art gallery; all colour and no sound.



### **Glass Teapot in an Earthquake**

A heart that multiplies the light.  
A heart that is frosty to the touch.  
A heart that does not beat,  
A heart, dewy in the mornings.

This is what happens when you let a heart into your house,  
not hidden as hearts should be, deep in the bone forest,  
but displayed proudly, high and empty on the kitchen shelf.

Seize your children.  
Stand beneath the doorframe  
or crawl under the dining table.  
Cross your arms over your head  
and anything else you value.  
Show me a real heart,  
and what it looks like when it breaks.

There it goes.

Ice on the kitchen floor.  
A watery bird in your empty shoe.  
Rain on the tiles.  
A piece of heart on your pillow,  
A piece of heart on the chopping board,  
A piece of heart sinking in the water bucket,  
A piece of heart is looking at you –  
don't reach for it.

Blood in the doorway and under the table.  
Somewhere,  
a glass body with a tear where the heart should be.

A heart, dividing up the sunlight.  
A heart, troubled by all this love.  
A heart you can see right through.

## The Waiting Village

We're biking to the temple to offer mukhi beads  
and beg Surya for the sunlight.

Old women wrapped in waterfalls of fabric  
hold aloft their bribes, dangle the sunlight.

See the slump of millet plants, leaning bicycles,  
the oxen preserving themselves.

There is weariness in the angle of everything:  
the goatherd's back, the slope of sunlight.

He brings home a sack of oranges,  
each one bulging and malignant with disease.  
The bag has cut lines in his shoulder.  
He drops it and it spills a little, trailing sunlight.

From my hammock I watch him fishing at night.  
He prays, casts his line  
through the silence and awakens the river.  
He plunges the hook through sunlight.

Shristi leans against me, her voice hot in my ear.  
*They say you swam like a boy in the Rapti,  
and wearing no dress. You'll get in such trouble,  
bathing in the sunlight.*

When he speaks in a different tongue of *Tharu*  
or too fast on purpose, I watch for cracks  
that might let me sneak in. I reach for a word,  
break it and it oozes sunlight.

We conceal the smell of smoke  
with anything: achiote powder, garlic,  
the summer rainfall. We search for perfume  
in a waiting storm, a shift in weather, sunlight.

Please, stop trying to wander  
off the edge of the world. Unpack, sit with me.

Let's talk about how all of it will look in the end.  
How the colours will seem different in sunlight.

## Sayapatri Garlands

Their breaking stems  
sound like joints pulled  
from their sockets;  
the injurious pop from the wet ground  
where they rot theatrically.

The monsoon was tireless this year.  
It washed away the buttery lustre  
in the tangle of florets.  
It found its way through layers  
of pleated silk and diseased  
the dormant buds.

We dumped heaps on the kitchen floor  
where they waned damply on the tiles.  
They weren't thick and yolky  
as garland flowers should be,  
but more the washed shade  
of stones pulled back and forth  
on a beach by an anxious tide,  
or an ancient wedding veil  
folded into a shoe-box.

The air was heavy with decay  
as we ripped away leaves  
and threaded petals onto yarn,  
and when I stopped to suck  
on a thorn-pricked thumb,  
their essence had left a taste of drowning.

Tihar arrived and we hung them from the doorframes,  
draped them round the bony necks of street dogs  
and laid them at the feet of Lakshmi.  
Here and there, the colour of thieving weather.

I thought that hunger was the absence of something  
until I tasted the miserable storm on my skin.

I thought that faith was an abstract noun  
until I dressed in a string of flowers like it was a gold necklace.

\*

## Red Moon through Clouds

A stone in rice that finds its way to the mouth is a dumb shock to the jaw. It is a clapped hand over lips, a finger that explores for injuries, a slap to whoever's job it was to wash stones from the rice in the first place. But Neemu was seven and the stone angled just so; snapping her new front teeth. She had washed the rice herself and there was nobody to slap.

Her tongue spilled through the gap, clean as a cut in a pig's throat, and I guessed that she had been taught to compensate by rarely smiling or speaking, with the punishment of a drunkard for a husband in the future or none at all. I had visited her mother's shop several times before, a place where you waited on a straw mat while your vegetables were weighed. Neemu, inside the house, would pull a loose brick from the wall and eye me through the gap.

'A daughter with half a face,' her mother told me, 'and not even a son, for the funeral fire.' Neemu kept her teeth in a tiffin can with some other treasures. She showed them to me shyly, with glances at the door. I knew the sharp edge of the teeth from childhood. It was in the embarrassment of broken china, snugly fitted shards, red-faced reprimands. I, too, had been the clumsiest of children, paying the price less severely now, with herring-bone scarred knees and a bent nose on which boys liked to comment. 'I have teeth in a box at home, too,' I whispered. 'Not mine though. Some from buffalo, and a puppy.' I leaned closer. 'One from a python my grandfather killed, also.'

Her mother called me back outside to collect my vegetables. Neemu touched her tongue to her lips, still cautious, and I noticed that one of her tooth stubs was snake-sharp. I was usually unconcerned with faces, nervous of tying girls down to *pretty* or *beautiful*, but I was quite certain that hers was a face I have seen before. In fact, I must have loved this face as a child, perhaps on one of my elders, liquid-lipped and blinking as if in sunlight, the quick smiles as rare as a red moon through clouds. 'Come again,' the mother said without smiling, and marched inside. Neemu helped me tie the vegetable sacks to the back of my bicycle. When I dropped the tomatoes, she hurried to gather them. Wiping each one on the front of her kurta, she began to smile but in a flickered kind of way, a smile that grew as she fought with herself, like a match catching light against a breeze.





hungry for the answers to

noise

noise

noise

wings      pages of books

the calamity

of your own deafening footsteps

that outgrew Taleju's stockings

that have no religion

no meaning      no great purpose

or metaphor

## The Pink Peacock

Swesha showed up without warning to my short story class, smelling of blood. I recognised her from somewhere. She wore a school uniform and wrote feverishly, without glancing up, as I lectured on creating empathy to a near empty classroom. Hardly anyone came, so there seemed no point in telling her it was supposed to be a class for adults. At the end, she handed me a finished story and lingered, shuffling her feet. I skimmed it: it was about a peacock farm that caught fire; the farmer was forced to save the birds by opening the barn doors and setting them free. It was a good story until the end, when the farmer described the beautiful sight of dozens of peacocks, each a different colour, lined up along the telephone wires. I realised how I knew her – she was the daughter of the chicken farmers.

‘You failed to prepare the reader for such an unlikely ending,’ I told Swesha. ‘Peacocks are blue. They don’t come in all different colours.’ ‘I saw a pink one. In Lumbini park,’ she countered, twisting her fingers together. ‘I’d seen that peacock too, some years before. Ugly and flesh coloured with a tail like a ballgown.’ ‘Truth is no excuse for fiction,’ I recited. ‘And don’t describe things as beautiful. It is not interesting.’ I thought she’d go home, stepping over drifts of feathers before reaching the house. Her softly-spoken mama would still be working, and Swesha would sit inside, patiently, waiting for the sound of wings against the ground, the wall, the roof of the farmhouse, to finally stop. I did not imagine Swesha would ask her mama for ten rupees to buy paper, so she could write a new story. I did not think she’d go home to open the chicken coop and set the birds free.

\*

**Flood**

A pair of ducklings  
float forty-five miles on a  
flip-flop before they  
wash up on a tin roof. The  
confusion of solid ground.

The family on  
the roof points. The girl saves them  
with her school tie, flat  
on her belly, her sister  
holding her feet. A small cheer.

The birds sleep in a  
beer crate that's been empty for  
days. The girl tries on  
the flip-flop, admires how  
red it is while water climbs.

## Canoe

If you asked me what it was like,  
I'd tell you about Baba's dugout canoe

that leant on the back of our house. At sunrise  
I would help him drag it down the riverbank

and push it into the shallows. I'd wade in up to my knees,  
and he would stand on the back with a bamboo pole

to steady himself, wave at me as he rotated  
and found his place in the current. I'd dry my feet

in the long grass, awaiting my turn to use the canoe too.

But there was no canoe.  
We did live on the river, but it didn't lead to anywhere.

Yet, can't you imagine it?  
Heavy against the house like an exoskeleton.

Dogs sheltered beneath it in the rain.  
Imagine the wood without splinters,

the long process of sanding and varnish,  
the pleasure in the colour when it heals.

All the times I could have set sail  
on a river that would unzip itself for me.

## Circus Bugs

Remember the boy crouched high on the lost hill in Gorkha,  
sharp and fragile as the bent-pin legs of a sparrow,  
and the early-afternoon sun beginning to slip down the sky,  
perfectly angled to varnish the backs  
of a parade of Red Leaping Bugs  
scaling the ridge of a fallen banana leaf.

Remember how he stopped to laud them and the way  
they turned like neat goat-eyes, their scuttling geometry,  
his own private circus.

Remember how steadily he held the leaf aloft,  
inspected that sky-breathing galaxy, mapped in his hand,  
their lives as brief and lovely as pinhole apertures.

Of course they were made for him,  
a small stage of such fine performers,  
that he might become lost in their leaping finale.  
As the ground began to jolt  
he even believed for a moment that he could  
vault from the side of the hill  
and unlearn the world,  
butterfly away on a Himalayan stratasform,  
follow the slipping sun off the edge of the universe ...

\*

## White is for Widows

Khusbhu uses her spare hand to dig into the open sugar sack.

It pulses with jungle ants and she catapults a spoonful

into the pan over the fire. Her other hand, though,  
is fumbling, as it often does when she talks these days,

as she re-lives secrets: wedging a chair beneath the door handle,  
stealing offerings of orange slices out of the statue's hand,

tugging the gold watch from the dead man's wrist,  
shielding her face from the everyday this-and-that.

The ants whine and pop in the boiling water.

The night Khusbhu's brother was born her father crowed

with a new voice and sloshed moonshine into a jug  
while Khusbhu watched, with her head cocked to one side,

the body of a headless goat spray and jerk on the kitchen floor.

The night Khusbhu was born, (she was told), her father spat

from the doorway and re-tethered the goat for a better occasion.

Some girls are written on                      smoothed over

like a beach. Khusbhu is stretched like a taught night sky,  
empty      unreached      no map of stars

through skin and sinew. Her brother sleeps with his back to her.

White is for widows but Khusbhu wears it

like an everyday colour.

Black is for all the unknowns to be feared in the darkness,

but Khusbhu holds onto it, as though comforting a goat  
that takes too long to die.



## Humans in Disguise

lately the nights have been flicking fast  
 through the ward in a slide show  
 blink blink

you'd have to imagine the sleeplessness;  
 the whites of their eyes and twitching wires  
 a bloody syringe on a steel trolley

in a state of blindness not unlike forgiveness  
 strangers hold hands across the beds  
 the way near-dead leaves clasp their branches

the way branch-tips clutch their skyline  
 like baby birds trying to cling  
 to a cloudless stratosphere

a grip of skin and sinew out of place  
 sometimes they can't quite find the strength  
 to let go

holding on beneath the clatter of the ceiling fan  
 through the livid sputter of a newborn  
 and the distant steps of a G4S guard doubling as 'nurse'

blink blink  
 there goes the night in a click  
 and light breaks through the slatted walls

in a cruel mood, striping their skin  
 disguising the dying ones as frightened zebra  
 and the ones clinging on as starved, predatory cats

## The Great Shout of Sky

I won't feed the bull  
     cos it is in its war-mood  
 its spit-in-your  
     -open-mouth mood  
 I'm spitting too and think  
     ugly things  
 the word *nakkali*  
     threatens my throat  
 my grandmother's god  
     created her and I too alike  
 because I think some other  
     grandma would say  
 'what use is speaking up  
     if you're never silent?  
 what good is all this progress  
     if you've grown  
 disgusted with waiting?'  
     'go,' she should say,  
 'find a little snake to kill  
     if it makes you  
 feel tough,  
     hunt it down in its  
 sun-warmed pothole  
     goad it into  
 an impressive choke-hold  
     *nakkali, haina?*  
 be sure to see  
     no gift of calmness,  
 no claim, no calamity  
     of stillness, no precious lungful:  
 kill a snake  
     and use no skill for all I care  
 I'll tackle the bull  
     for myself shall I?  
 take no notice  
     of my grey hairs  
 tight across

the great shout  
of sky  
between the bull's horns.'  
but it is *my* grandma  
who knows the delicate balance  
of peace vs time  
who remembers  
how insurgency  
is tripped in an instant  
who fears snakes  
since she knows them  
more intimately  
their throats thick  
with poison  
heads like  
wet pebbles  
in the palm  
coiled like loaded springs.  
the storming bull  
grows thinner  
yanking at its own tether.  
my grandma and I stay inside  
and feed on each other's fear

**Birds and Prey**

The mile home  
through the citrus grove  
is so straight  
and tented by trees

that I switch off  
the bicycle lamp,  
longing, as if drunk,  
to hang in an

empty precipice,  
to puppet with an  
unseen end,  
dream-like

or at least weightless,  
to pedal in the night's  
disguise. The stars  
are tucked behind

the canvas,  
yet moonlight  
regathers itself,  
skulks like roots

into a doorframe  
or rain under a door.  
There is no absence  
of light to hide

a terminal absence  
of freedom,  
an absence of secrecy,  
an absence of forks

in the road,  
escape routes;

I'm no sooner  
out of this world

than grounded, sobered  
and pulled in  
by the pinch  
of oranges and

betrayal of  
worm-ish gleam  
and spin of wheels  
and tired breathing.

## Politicians and Gods

*Following the 2015 constitution, Tharu citizens in Kailali district took to the streets to protest the redaction of their rights. 42 protestors, including children, were killed when police opened fire.*

### I.

The streets mangle beneath the tight-lipped sky.  
 Each stone looks like a weapon.  
 Each cooking fire is a funeral.

He would have preferred his son to be killed by the earthquake,  
 if he had to go. The simplicity of indiscriminate tragedy,  
 (gods, Brahmins, buffalo,) not to mention the comfort in numbers.

The constitution is an 'x' page document,  
 a prison sentence. Each word reads like a weapon.  
 Its victims are circled in ink.  
 It rallies militia in uniform, plans a god-shaped war.

He knows the policeman who shot his son.  
 He still works in Tikapur, at the road block,  
 checking licenses and selling Mary-Jane;  
 100Rs for the bribe to avoid a fine.  
 100Rs for an eighth wrapped in a maize leaf.

The village is silent, of course, to balance things.  
 History does not repeat itself,  
 it has not gone and returned,  
 offered an era of respite.  
 History is in the bones of the *Tharubhat*.

As usual, nature takes sides.  
 There are no wreaths growing from the dead earth.  
 Summer has brought the kind of heat  
 that withers the maize plants  
 'til the leaves are dried into blades  
 and the husks are empty cells.  
 The monsoon is a blanket that smothers the fires.

Tikapur is a temple;  
 a burned copy of the constitution  
 dirties the outstretched hands of a statue.

Tikapur is a ransacked museum  
 weighed down with history,  
 looted by politicians and gods.

## II.

Wind rattles the streets like a tin can.  
 Low-slung clouds bruise the empty spaces.

He is almost recalled in the *everyday*;  
 the flinch of a thunder clap,  
 raindrops that retreat down the spine  
 of a banana leaf,  
 a knock on the door after dark.  
 The surface of a puddle that puckers up  
 for a passing breeze.

The brink of his presence,  
 the shrill pain of the *almost*  
 unnerves the hollow streets.

The gods have recoiled  
 and compare wounds.  
 Unravelling like a thread across the void,  
*almost* here,  
 it is as if he presses his face  
 against the torn fabric of the world.

Tikapur is no place to linger.  
 Villagers hack down banana trees  
 and retire to the muffled cocoons of their attics,  
 too weary to even imagine him.

\*



## **Khusbhu's Horses**

I asked Khusbhu again if she wanted to come with me, but she pretended to be asleep. I left while it was still dark and when I arrived in Mustang, I got off the bus early by mistake and had to walk through the desert.

The strangest thing: I met a man who, like Khusbhu, was scarred from brow to chin. It was a burn from infancy; from being perched too close to a pan of tea balanced on bricks over fire. The scar stretched and puckered like a thread pulled through silk.

I imagined Khusbhu here alone, slumped in a deckchair, staring into the dry expanse where Upper Mustang lake used to be. Her hands would be clenched around the arms of the chair as she waited to see a horse up close.

I found the horse herd on the lake bed. They were tired and scattered, uninterested in me. They tossed their heads and clusters of flies resettled on their scaly noses. The shelves of their bones creaked and clicked. Burns from babyhood are a story. There is no memory of the pain but a tale retold on demand, embellished over time. Proof of the imperfect mother, and being able to stroke the numb web of skin and decide what to believe.

One horse screamed to another – an ugly noise that cut through the sunrise. It screamed so hard its sides shook. I levelled a pebble with my toe and kicked it. I wasn't kicking it at the horses, but they fled anyway.

Later in the year, it would rain. Upper Mustang lake would return. The new foals would plunge down the hillside, cocksure and faster than their mothers, and find themselves drowning. Khusbhu would be here, alone, wading in to join them.

Home before dawn, I drop my bag and it wakes her. I'm brown with dust from the lake bed. I want to know the urge that makes unattended infants reach for the flames. Her eyes are slits in the dark room, her back to the children who sleep under her shawl. She wants to hear how the horses were glossy and nickered softly to each other. She wants to hear that foals stretched velveteen muzzles towards me from between the legs of guarded mares.

## The Sunshine Stag

He was young. Six months perhaps,  
 his hind-quarters still wash-coloured,  
 ears not quite grown into,  
 giving him a doe-look.  
 I don't think he'd seen his first winter.  
 His two front hooves were stretched  
 towards the verge where he'd been hit in retreat.

A yellow line pasted itself thickly across his face,  
 set his coat solid and blinded his open eye,  
 filled up his pin-hole nostrils  
 and continued onto the tarmac  
 without so much as a sputter of hesitation.

I wanted to pick the paint out of his eye,  
 maybe to show him:

*see how all things continue to fall,  
 like winter.*

I used the toe of my boot to turn him over and shuffle  
 him a little towards the verge. He was so stiff,  
 I could have been kicking at timber or stone.  
 There was fear there, but only a hint,  
 as if he tried it out for the first time.

The underside of his face  
 was forgetting itself already,  
 his skin breaking down to expose his jaw,  
 his eyeball that had been pressed  
 to the road now fixed on the twelve-inch break  
 in the yellow rail,

his face split with an ironic smile  
 when he saw the gap in the

sunshine  
 coloured

stripe

that ran straighter  
than a stag

who rears  
who sprints for the open.

### Harvest During the Blockade

A hasiya blade, grass-wet and through my belt loop,  
nagging on the weak jut of my hip bone

until I twist it out of the way, horizontal,  
but its point snags at my wrist

so I try it tucked into my shorts, like a trophy,  
but its cold edge threatens me as I bend down

so I sling it over my shoulder like a shotgun  
where it slips down and pulls a thread from my shirt.

I turn it over in my hands and it is the weight of a country,  
I'm suddenly unsure of how I could carry such a thing.

I look over at you with your scarf knotted around  
your waist where you wear all kinds of knives.

You, too, have become too sharp for words,  
so heavy it is hard to believe I was ever close to you.

## Duped by the Gods

There'd been so much chaos,  
 you had to wonder if Lord Vishnu was aging,  
 or if deities were getting killed off early.  
 You dropped the sacks, rubbed the grooves  
 on your shoulders, rubbed *kajal* from your eyes,  
 sorted ingredients on the kitchen floor.

Men you loved crowded in, shuffled decks of cards  
 and slammed them down with pupils like prayer wheels,  
 demanded *oe nakkali, bring bhang-lassi, kailey*.  
 You thought it was Holi,  
 but now, remembering the heat, it can't have been.  
 You were a closed lotus on the kitchen floor,  
 hands busy and lit cigarette  
 glued in place and wetting your eyes.

There was not enough *bhong* by half,  
 not enough for everyone to get high.  
 You swore and bulked the lassi with *sabji masala*  
 and cardamom, whisked it hard, squatted with your feet  
 round a sickle blade to shred mangos,  
 pounded with a pestle until whey ran to your elbow  
 and hoped nobody would notice.  
 You cursed yourself for getting duped by a *bhong-wallah*,  
 promised yourself you'd get even if you saw him again.

\*

The violence from that week had made you complacent  
 and your naked foot slipped into the concave of the sickle blade.  
 Dust filmed over the worm of blood that sprinted for the gutter.  
 Someone slammed down a final, triumphant playing card  
 and crowed like a wild animal.

One of the kids was telling a story of the Gods – his favourite –  
 the time a calf was born with two heads over in Nawolprayasi,  
 and though it died quickly and efficiently

his mama sent him over for worship.  
 He queued, choked in a cloud of engorged flies  
 to bless its mutant corpse with a twice-kissed mandarin,  
 asked it for rainfall which never came.

\*

You were pleased with your silence as the blood ran out of you.  
 It was everywhere, on the mangoes and filling the spice bags.  
 It was on the glasses and they'd drink it anyway,  
 keen to get high, and you wiped your hands in your hair  
 and thought, wouldn't it be lovely  
 to cut off the toe completely, to walk differently.  
 For people to ask *who did this to you*  
 and for you to smile back *I did it to myself*.

The thought of interrupting the men you love  
 by calmly holding up your toe on your palm made you snigger.  
 Instead you reached for a rag and you reminded yourself  
 that when Lord Vishnu dreamt up the universe  
 he then had to protect it with an independence you knew well.  
 You poured ten glasses of *bhang-lassi* without much *bhang*  
 and when the men didn't glance at you,  
 you promised to be the mutant withholding the rainfall.

## The Fall of Taleju

No more thrown out of bars for fighting  
 No more staggering in the square at night  
 No more sharing warm bottles of Everest  
     nor brown paper bags of dates  
 No hawking the stones across the cobbles  
 No making kites from the paper bags and drawstrings

No more tangling kites in the crown of Goddess Taleju  
 No more cursing and climbing her,  
     lying drunk in her arms  
 No spilling Everest in her cleavage

No more untangling kite strings from her brass fingers  
     or peeling the paper from her face  
 No *look up here! up here!*

Only the fallen steps, the fissure in the square,  
 Only kneeling in the rotten mulch  
     of old oranges and flowers  
 Only ears to the ground  
     listening for tremors  
 Only crying hard      *Tale-ju, Tale-ju,*

Only Taleju is on her side  
     with broken fingers  
     and a knowing face  
 how ugly we look  
     how sorry

Only cracks go all the way through her  
     and she wears them well.

\*



## Untouchable

All too quickly, she grew too big for the room she was born in,  
 sturdy from dragging buffalo with her fingers in their nostrils,  
 plump because she grew up in Mama-ji's *khaja-gar*, raised on

*panipuri*, *chatpatti*, glasses of sweet chai and ring donuts  
 for breakfast, sitting on the kitchen step. Kicking away goats who stole from her plate.  
 The threats of what would happen if she *touch*ed (the river, the crops, the well)

were so crude and whimsical they could have been dreamt up  
 by a child in a rage. They were an open invitation  
 for cunning, for loop-holes, for tempting wrath; balanced on tip-toes

to glare down an engorged papaya without touching,  
 provoking the river with hunks of brick, spying on the men  
 through the vent in the kitchen wall. A kiss for the goat

on its way to slaughter. The returned curiosity over the shaving mirror which  
 she viewed side-on, through slitted eyes. In its reflection,  
 sometimes a square of tin ceiling, a square of brick and sky,

\*

a square of menacing silence,  
 a square of big fat girl.  
 As a teenager, clumsy, she's struck down by the fear that

in a godless fumble as she spills boiling water into an icy sink,  
 steam will crack the mirror, and in a falling splint of it she'll catch the flash of her eye  
 before it is squeezed shut but there'll be

nothing      nothing      nothing      no curse,  
 no arrogance of blackened papayas or emaciated rice crops,  
 no poisoned goat, no omens marching robustly into this dull life:

fragments of the room she was born in will stage themselves  
 in the tedious science of broken glass, and all suspicion and punishment  
 shows itself to be cruelly and entirely human.

## No Mangoes

Disease had aged the boy. His face  
 was an unfolding map,  
 his hands tugging at my dress were hands  
 that had survived a hundred winters.  
 The reversal of roles is as sudden as an over-turned soup bowl,  
 when he points to the mango tree, one hand clamped  
 over his convex belly and my voice is sorry:

*Bhai, all ripe mangoes, they are gone.*

But he stretches tip-toed –

*Mam, Mam –*

points to the untimely rock-seeds  
 on the top branches, barely there and surely inedible –

*Mam, please –*

until, swearing and with my dress tucked in my pants,  
 I hoist myself up through the branches,  
 wrench at a couple and throw them down to him.

He rubs amber salt and spice from his pockets  
 into these part-born globs,  
 his half-missing teeth have returned to the food chain  
 when they punch through eye-watering, greenish meat.  
 He holds aloft the undeveloped curves of their bones,  
 shows me how their colour is weak, not-yet-born light.

Un-survived.

He holds the third up to me, grit-red and ugly.  
 Two months ago, the spice would have burnt  
 my throat to a soup.

### Drawn with a Burnt-Out Match

On the bus I sit next to a prostitute  
 who shows me her sketches of sleeping, naked men.  
 She plucks tobacco that sticks to her lipstick.  
 Smoke flowers in her lungs.

A Tharu grandmother pushes rice plants  
 into the flooded fields, curled over like a heron  
 busy with hunting, a bird with a wolf heart,  
 leeches that nurse at her ankles for weeks.

Khusbhu leans over a water bucket,  
 checks her eyeliner in the reflection. She's cutting  
 her own hair, cutting her skirts in half.  
 Scissoring those strings of perfect paper dolls again.

A schoolgirl, cycling home, her path blocked  
 by a fallen buffalo. She tugs on its ears and tail,  
 heaves her bicycle over its rump, scrunching her nose,  
 not checking whether the beast is dead.

Khusbhu can swim, but sometimes she sinks  
 to the bottom of the river and waits  
 for someone to rescue her. Hair drifts like dead weed.  
 One day she will pull someone under.

Crossing the bridge over the Rapti and the little girl  
 is waiting for me. She dangles  
 a white rabbit over the water, shouting  
*fifty rupees, quick Mam, fifty rupees before she drown!*

Khusbhu, bunched up tight like a folded love letter,  
 diving into a river that runs too fast  
 to reflect the stars. A gift in my pocket, a torn-out  
 sketch of an old man drawn with a burnt-out match.

Leeches are burnt off with lighters or shrivelled with salt  
 and fed to the dogs. A white rabbit twists in a little girl's hand.

Khusbhu is not afraid to swim where it is deep.

Khusbhu is not afraid when dogs have a taste for women's blood.

## The Blessing Dust

*Tika is a mark created on the forehead using red powder during Hindu ceremonies to symbolise a consecration.*

*Priyanka* has a spine like a Tharu crossbow.  
Each palm is an atlas, she marks my head  
wordily with finger and thumb. I scrub  
at the mark with the back of my hand.

This dust is thinner than a snowstorm,  
but it gathers in drifts. I've begun  
to notice it hiding in the creases between pages,  
the pores of my shirt; odourless.

A bindi can be peeled off and stuck  
back onto its paper, a one-time blessing,  
as neatly packaged and self-contained  
as a tourist's tin charm,

but with tika, scarlet dust flurries from my hair  
for days. During Dashain, Jitiya,  
the girls wear it thick, it is in the river,  
I catch the scent of it in alleys, in ploughed fields.

It infiltrates my rucksack like bed-bugs. Back in England,  
it will not allow itself to be washed down  
some porcelain sink. It will storm up and down  
city streets, guarding women without fathers, husbands.

Here, *Priyanka's* blessing is an enduring blot  
in my hairline. I scrub and scrub at the stain  
while *Priyanka's* laugh whistles  
through the gap in her teeth.

\*

## Stone and Clay Crows

They filled the sky, weeping to each other.

Your pockets had long been heavy with stones  
to bring down their nests, not so much from cruelty,  
but to save them from a life of hiding.  
It was enviable, how they soared  
into a sky that was coloured with cries  
and dropped back down  
to the broken ground,  
lights out, silent.

Admit it, you'd long been hungry for freedom.  
When the world was, not tame exactly,  
but tightly-wound and read to hatch,  
you escaped after dark like an arrow from a crossbow,  
raced through storms beneath lightning  
that sliced the horizon like a blood orange.  
You watched thunder punch holes in the sky,  
searched for crows' nests to bring down.

Admit it – that kick of excitement  
when the whole earth hatched into panic.

## Butterfly Dowry

It was tempting fate to name their daughter Putali, *the butterfly*.

The Terai does not allow these types of flights  
and freedoms, not this particular set of wings.

Putali had her photo taken for the paper,

sitting up straight in the hospital bed, as instructed by the reporter,  
posed the way an obedient wife should with her fingers  
tucked under her chin and her hospital gown pulled up  
to show her pregnant belly littered with cigarette burns.

She told the reporter that if it had been  
so very important for her to bring a cow buffalo as dowry,  
then her husband should have married a cow buffalo  
and had done with it.

A *butterfly* is better off caught in a net and sold  
at the roadside in uncertain weather with garlands,  
already past their best, better that than to be worth a dowry.  
How dangerous to be valued at ten lakh, five acres

of tobacco farm, and a new timber house  
with a new timber door where a *butterfly*  
can be squashed against a window by a squeamish in-law  
or nailed to the timber doorframe and her wings plucked off.

What if she had taken a *kebukuri* and cut off all her hair?  
Stripped fruit from the stone rudely with her teeth,  
ridden her bike standing up and with boys  
who smoked and were *untouchable* and with boys

from the elephant stable and boys with alcoholic fathers.  
What a cunning plan and dangerous plan, wading  
into the Narayani river in front of everyone  
to kiss the drunk fisherman on his birthday.



**cobwebbing**

if my sister was killed in an earthquake  
 she would linger in our home for years

    if we let her  
 the dandruff of old receipts  
 dried-out chapsticks

jars with the labels peeled  
 full of biros

    half-used batteries  
 buttons in clear plastic baggies  
 postcards blotted with oily blu-tack marks  
 and teacups with lipstick prints

    perhaps letters  
 from old boyfriends and debt collectors

all squatting deep  
 in the bunched-up guts  
 of our home

    when his sister was killed

    that was that

and the house was an empty dry lung  
 not so much as an unmade bed  
 a space at the dinner table  
 a weathered photograph cobwebbing above a doorway

    only her voice  
 like the un-arrived letter home

    only her heart  
         like the punch  
 through the tinfoil roof

\*

**the split tongue, the writing**

we're forbidden from saying the word *love*  
so I show it as the women have taught me –  
with lemons and pilfered honeycomb  
for your morning tea  
your cigarette rolled on the saucer  
dates left on the chopping board  
a foot-long sugarcane pushed into your back pocket  
spiced cashews saved on a high shelf

you show it differently –  
flicking stones at my window in the early morning  
hand-written messages on dust and wet glass  
I'm late home and it pours from you like sand from a shoe

it is showing itself more and more –  
your tongue split on all that sugar cane  
the smear of your writing on the window  
words that remain after it rains on the flagstones  
the stamp of my mouth on your collarbone

## **Ethics Discussion**

My thesis did not require ethical approval as my research did not formally or informally involve human participants in the direct outcomes of my research. However, I did adopt the ethical approach recommended for all ethnographic fieldwork that follows these basic ethical principles:

### **Informed Consent**

As there were no formal lines of enquiry during fieldwork there was no need for informed consent for interviews. However, anyone with any involvement with fieldwork was also informed of the nature of the research. Due to illiteracy, this disclosure was verbal. Locals were made fully aware that details of Tharu culture, tradition, and certain social problems like poverty and alcoholism might be discussed but it was made clear that nobody would be named, and nobody's personal information or stories would be written up directly. As any details about Tharu life were likely to act as a counterpoise to existing misconceptions about the Tharu, it seemed clear from the outset that any impact the publication of information had would be positive.

### **Openness and Honesty**

I always explained to anyone I worked directly with of my purpose for being in Chitwan and the nature of my fieldwork. As literature does not play a big part of the communities where I researched, due to high levels of illiteracy, most people expressed little interest in the specifics. However, in translating and writing cultural songs and folklore, it was made clear that English versions would appear in print for the thesis. All translations were written in conjunction with community members.

### **Right to Withdraw**

As there was no formal participation there was no formal process of withdrawal. There were people who did not involve themselves in any aspects of fieldwork, but this was due to their

beliefs that research into women's rights lacked any value. At no time did anyone express concerns about the process or outcome of the fieldwork.

### **Protection from Harm**

Usually protection from harm refers to the ways in which the results of a thesis can be used to in some way harm participants. As the results of my research are creative and the claims I make are supported by academic studies already in the public arena, there was minimal risk of the results of the thesis exposing new information that might cause harm or conflict. One additional aspect of potential harm I was careful to consider, however, was my potential impact in a place with limited exposure to Westerners and Western values. My mere presence, regardless of my aims, had the potential to be divisive, living in a country still in its first wave of feminism and coming from a country in its fourth wave.

### **Debriefing**

There was no debriefing for the immersion part of the fieldwork, and such a formal event would have not been possible as the research took part over years so very few people who had some involvement at the beginning were still present at the end. However, in the process of compiling writer bios there was a debriefing process for a lot of the women whose poems were featured in the analysis. By email, we discussed the arguments that had been made in the analysis and how their work had been used to support those arguments.

### **Confidentiality**

People whose poems were in the analysis were named. However, none of the Tharu people had their individual stories repeated, and any events written in the creative section were fictional, and whilst they were accurate representations of life in the Terai they were not accounts of real events.

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## Appendix

### Contents:

#### **Mother – Parizat (p.260)**

In 1959, Parizat's first poem was published by *Dharti*. She later published three poetry collections: *Akansha*, *Parijat Ka Kavita* and *Baisalu Bartaman*. She has written ten novels, one of which, *Sbirish Ko Phool*, is considered a seminal piece of literature in Nepal. Parizat supported many social causes and initiated attempts like Prisoners' Assistance Mission. Parizat's three poems that were selected for analysis in this thesis were sourced from Shailendra K. Singh's pamphlet *Poems by Nepali Women*, published in 1994, which he dedicated to Parizat. Shailendra K. Singh, who translated these poems, is a poet, critic, writer and translator who teaches at Tribhuvan University. He has dedicated much of his career to the translation of Nepali poetry into English, and has paid particular attention to poetry by women in an effort to increase interest on both poetry and women's studies.

#### **Rice Grains of Words – Susmita Nepal (p.262)**

Susmita Nepal writes poetry in Nepali. The focus of much of her work is of the forgotten suffering of women in rural Nepal. She is a member of 'Gunjan' – a group formed in 1998 to amplify the voices of Nepali women writers. Kiran Manandhar painted one of her poems on a canvas, and it was featured at the event 'Troubadors' at the Image Ark Gallery. I sourced Nepal's poem from the Literature Archives of *The Nepali Times*, 2001, Issue #73, where the poem was published after Nepal translated the poem to English herself.

#### **In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks – Pratisara Sayami (p.263)**

Pratisara Sayami writes poetry in Nepali and Newari language. Her poems are featured by the *Sanjaal Corps* initiative. Her work has been translated by many writers including Manjushree Thapa and Wayne Amtzis. The poem 'In the Shadow of the Paddy Stalks' was translated by Manjushree Thapa and published in Thapa's anthology of poetry and short fiction *The Country is Yours* in 2009.

Manjushree Thapa, who translated these poems, was born in Kathmandu and is a Canadian writer and translator. She has published multiple novels and non-fiction books as well as anthologies containing short stories and poetry she has translated from Nepalese languages into English. Thapa's translation of Indra Bahadur Rai's 'There's a Carnival Today' won the 2017 PEN America Heim Translation Grant, and *Forget Kathmandu: An Elegy for Democracy* was shortlisted for the Lettre Ulysses Award in 2006.

#### **Before I Forget – Nasala Chitrakar (p.265)**

Nasala Chitrakar works with 'Word Warriors', a Kathmandu-based spoken word group. She spends her time running writing workshops and helping to introduce children to an education in creative writing. She writes and performs poetry in English, and much of her work is on subjects of feminism and growing up in urban Nepal. I was running a poetry session in Kathmandu and Chitrakar brought this poem to workshop.

### **Cycle of Family History – Sewa Bhattarai (p.268)**

Sewa Bhattarai is a journalist for Nepali Times Weekly, and has also written for The Kathmandu Post and for the BBC World Service. In 2014, following an email exchange, Bhattarai sent me some of her poems to read, all of which she had written in English – 'Cycle of Family History' was included.

### **Raised by Mom – Yukta Bajracharya (p.269)**

Yukta Bajracharya writes in English, Nepali and Nepal Bhasa. She often writes about family and relationships, and much of her poetry is concerned with the experiences of growing up in urban Kathmandu. She is a spoken word poet and runs school workshops in writing poetry for students. Bajracharya showed me this poem at Quixote's Cove in Kathmandu in 2016 where we attended a reading together.

### **New Year – Toya Gurung (p.271)**

Toya Gurung is a member of the Royal Nepal Academy. She is well known for her long poems, particularly her experimental poem 'Chha' and her book-length poem *Dhoopi*, which has been translated to English by Ann Hunkins. Her tone is often wry, playful, and ironic. Gurung had two poems featured in a 2001 edition of The Nepali Times, translated by Manjushree Thapa, which is where I first read her poetry, and later found 'New Year', translated by Shailendra K. Singh, in *Dancing Soul of Everest* which is the teaching anthology for the English course at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu and was published in 2011.

### **Exile: Invitation to a Struggle – Tsering Wangmo Dhompa (p.272)**

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa was born to parents who fled Tibet in 1959. Raised by her mother in Tibetan communities in Dharamsala, India, and Kathmandu, Nepal, Dhompa earned a BA and an MA from Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi, an MA from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University. She was a finalist for the Northern California Independent Bookseller's Book of the Year Award for 2012. Fluent in several languages and dialects, including Tibetan, Hindi, and Nepali, Dhompa writes in English. This poem was published in Dhompa's collection *My Rice Tastes like the Lake* in 2011.

### **My Mind is not at Peace – Urmila Kumari Chaudhary (p.274)**

Urmila Kumari Chaudhari, also known as ‘Udasi’, writes poetry in the Tharu language. Deeply familiar with the discrimination faced by indigenous castes, she writes about the hardships of rural life in Nepal, particularly for women. This poem was translated by Manjushree Thapa for *Rastriya Bhasaka Kabita* and published by the Royal Nepal Academy: the national institution for the promotion of literature and languages in Nepal.

### **Hunger for Justice and Water for Desperation – Manju Kanchuli (p.275)**

Manju Kanchuli was born the youngest daughter of the Nepali dramatist, Bhim Niddhi Tiwari. She has worked as a lecturer in English and Psychology, and as a clinical therapist and counsellor for trafficked women. Her poetry is often politically charged and protests the corruption and inequality that causes the suffering of women in Nepal. I read this poem where it was published in the anthology *Secret Places (Manoa)* in 1992.

### **This Moment I Am Thinking – Benju Sharma (p.276)**

Benju Sharma – The eldest child of the Bhim Niddhi Tiwari and sister of Manju Kanchuli, Benju Sharma has a Master’s in Nepali literature and a PhD in Ancient Nepalese History, Culture and Archaeology. She is currently an academic in the poetry section of the Nepal Academy and is also the editor of its literary journal, *Kavita*. This poem was previously published in *Days in the Life*, where it was translated by Wayne Amtzis.

The translator, Wayne Amtzis, grew up in New York and moved to Asia in his thirties. He has an MA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University and has published two poetry collections: *City on Their Backs* and *Sandcastle City/Quicksand Nation*. He has translated poems from both Nepali and Nepal Bhasa into English, having focused particularly on the work of Benju Sharma, Manju Kanchuli and Banira Giri.

### **My Bastard Child – Itisha Giri (p.278)**

Itisha Giri is a Nepali writer based in Kathmandu. Her poems have been published in *La.Lit* magazine in Kathmandu and she works freelance as an editor. Her poem ‘When I Have a Daughter’ responded to a high-profile acid attack in Nepal, and was published by several newspapers as the case went to trial. Her poem was published in *La.Lit* – one of Kathmandu’s leading literary journals – in 2015.

### **The Chant Freedom – Banira Giri (p.280)**

Banira Giri was born in Kurseong near Darjeeling in West Bengal. She became the first Nepali woman to be awarded a PhD from Tribhuvan University, for her work on the revolutionary Nepali poet, Gopal Prasad Rimal. The force and intention of Rimal’s anti-establishment voice animates much of Giri’s writing. Giri is one of the few Nepali women writers to have established a reputation outside Nepal. This poem was published in Giri’s poetry collection *From the Lake, Love* in 2000. Giri co-translated this poem in English with Wayne Amtzis.

**When I Have a Daughter – Itisha Giri (p.282)**

I sourced this poem where it was published in La.Lit journal in 2015.

**A Wreath for My Poem – Malashree Suvedi (p.283)**

Malashree Suvedi is a poet and writer, who has in the past also curated and conceptualised small-scale art projects. She is the co-founder of ‘Ka Baata’, an arts collective for community-based art, with children often being the primary focus. She thrives in an environment where she works with other writers, so she eventually aims to be a part of a long-term collaborative writing effort. Suvedi emailed me this poem after we met at a poetry event in Kathmandu in 2014.

**On Kathmandu’s Streets – Yukta Bajracharya (p.285)**

Bajracharya brought this poem to a Poetry in Extremis: a workshop for women that I was running in Kathmandu in 2016.

**The Daughter of Your Father – Bartika Eam Rai (p.287)**

Bartika Eam Rai is a writer, song writer, radio jockey and teacher, who is passionate about all areas of the Arts. She grew up in Nepal and then moved to New York, where she found it easier to develop a more individualistic style. Rai was raised in a household of fearless expressive women, and the most rewarding aspect of her writing is seeing her mother’s reaction to her work. Her poem was written in English and published in *These Fine Lines – Poems of Restraint and Abandon*, edited by Itisha Giri in 2016.

**A Room, A Goal and An Intellectual Woman – Parizat (p.290)**

This poem was also published in Shailendra K. Singh’s pamphlet *Poems by Nepali Women*, published in 1994.

**Durbarmarg – Ujjwala Maharjan (p.292)**

Ujjwala Maharjan is a spoken word poet who writes poems in both Nepali and English. She performs her poems at poetry slams around Kathmandu, and has poems published in the anthology *These Fine Lines*. Ujjwala believes in making poetry accessible for everyone – not just for people with a privileged education. She has also found that spoken word is a great form of expression for those who have been taught not to speak up in life. After seeing Ujjwala perform at a Word Warriors event in 2015 she sent me a link to her blog [simplyujj.wordpress.com/author/simplyujj/](http://simplyujj.wordpress.com/author/simplyujj/) where this poem was posted.

**The Little Dancer – Jerusha Rai (p.294)**

Jerusha Rai is a writer, singer, composer and musician who spent her later youth selling Nepalese dumplings in Camden, London, and more recently moved to the US to release an album. Jerusha remembers much of her childhood in Nepal as bewildered by the social absurdities of the country. Her writing can be found at [jerusharai.net](http://jerusharai.net). Rai's poetry was recommended to me by Nasala Chitrakar and Yukta Bajracharya in 2015 – I contacted her and asked her to send me some of her poetry.

### **Tradition – Benju Sharma (p.295)**

Benju Sharma – The eldest child of the Bhim Niddhi Tiwari and sister of Manju Kanchuli, Benju Sharma has a Master's in Nepali literature and a PhD in Ancient Nepalese History, Culture and Archaeology. She is currently an academic in the poetry section of the Nepal Academy and is also the editor of its literary journal, *Kavita*. Her poem was published in *Two Sisters: A Collection of Poems* in 1998. Sharma co-translated this poem into English with Wayne Amtzis.

### **A Strange Temple – Manju Kanchuli (p.296)**

This poem was first published in *Secret Places (Manoa)* in 1992. Kanchuli co-translated the poem into English with Wayne Amtzis.

### **Me and My Past – Parizat (p.298)**

This poem was also published in Shailendra K. Singh's pamphlet *Poems by Nepali Women*, published in 1994.

### **Cultural Songs (p.299)**

These songs were co-translated with Anil Mahato, who works for the community forest group in Chitwan National Park. His work involves conservation of the jungle animals and their habitats, as well as preservation of Tharu culture and history in conjoined work with the Tharu Culture Museum in Bachhauli.

PARIJAT

**Mother**

*Translated by Barbara Soros*

I was asked

What are your symbols?

Himalayas

Rhododendron

Danfey

Musk Deer

What is your form?

Fertile valleys

entangled by numerous rivers

green forests

abundant natural resources

What is your name?

Mother

Who is the old man

lying passionately

on your lap?

This malnourished infant

is my son, born of rape.

His father unknown,

even to me.

How do you survive?

I labour.

Yellow woman, are you anything  
but a twelve ribbed skeleton  
with two pendulous breasts?  
What is yours of this  
fertile and abundant land?  
Where did you find the blood  
to form this child?

The blood is mine  
I am one of the mother tribe.

After he was gone  
I looked again at my son.  
His face wrinkled and drawn  
as a man of nearly seventy.

Inside my sympathy surged  
but I refused to cry.  
I knew for the bloodless  
there are no tears.

SUSMITA NEPAL

**Rice Grains of Words**

*Translated from Nepali by Susmita Nepal*

Picking stones out of rice grains of words  
she prepares a meal of experience

Time peers from the gas stove  
Setting pots of emotion on the stove  
stirring word rice with a pen  
she prepares a meal of experience

Each morning spills onto her face  
Each evening squeezes her expression  
Placing these sights onto the plates of her eyes  
she serves a meal of experience

The bangles of torment tinkle and chime  
Hungry stomachs rumble  
She continues serving meals of experience  
and as she serves, she serves up herself



PARIZAT

**Me and My Past**

*Translated from Nepali by Shailendra K. Singh*

Like a bamboo tree  
disgraces by a sharp wind of *Jyestha*  
I'm off to kiss the past.  
In the cracked, sun-scorched land  
lies my acquaintance with my past.  
Without any present or future  
I can tell  
my past is broken, cracked.  
And my past knows  
I am hollow inside like a bamboo tree.

PRATISARA SAYAMI

**In the Shadows of the Paddy Stalks**

*Translated from Nepali by Manjushree Thapa*

Next to the road I had reached:  
 green, quivering paddy stalks  
 As soon as the breeze started  
 they laughed and tittered in play  
 pushing and shoving each other,  
 these young women  
 so full of life

After five or seven days:  
 those same stalks, now bent in abashment  
 decked with golden flowers  
 like brides arriving at their new homes

After some time:  
 how they had stooped, these stalks  
 like trees burdened with fruit  
 like a wife preparing to bear a new life

Today again I saw the same stalks  
 turned into straw  
 and laid out on the fields:  
 like a woman just through  
 with delivery

like the bloodless face  
 of a woman suffering anaemia

NASALA CHITRAKAR

**Before I Forget**

We're almost done with the conversation.  
From the other end of the couch,  
he gently strokes my extended palms,  
takes in their paleness,  
turns them over,  
fiddles with a thumb that bends over backward  
and tells me that  
I have pillow hands.  
And I let him.

Even on days my hands feel like extra parts  
I have to be careful not to trip on,  
they open up to become pillows  
and umbrellas and winter coats.

My tired eyes go from  
being rubbed under pillow hands  
and seeing dried Mustang apples  
to become clear mirrors for others.

My ears become the acoustic dead ends  
to secrets.  
The secrets,  
they seep into my head  
and toss and turn in my dreams  
that are barely remembered come morning  
but will stay in my bones  
through the day.

My chest heaves and suffocates

under a perpetually stuffy nose,  
and resembles a trampoline in action  
more than a cloud  
but it feigns a calmness  
that people almost always trust.

My tongue is a spring.  
The yes-es flow,  
they coil and bounce off easy,  
like a dog's first trick.  
Despite scolding her for caring too much,  
I hear myself mimic my mother's unwelcome concerns:  
*Keep yourself hydrated.*  
*Make sure you eat.*  
*Is there anything you need?*

In my group of friends,  
I get declared the most likely to be a good mother.  
But my waist is a bed  
that mothers more weeds  
than flowers, and spreads.  
They want me to pluck off the weeds.

It won't be anything new if I did.  
You see, empathy and accommodation is inheritance.  
I am used to taking apart  
parts of my body  
and bartering them for self-worth.  
So much so,  
I feel like a sun that shines,  
but does not warm.  
My body feels like a hospital emergency sign.  
Some nights, I wonder what I'm left with  
except this need to hug

something not human,  
like bookshelves and trees.

I have taken to leaving myself  
sticky notes on the mirror.

*Be kind to yourself.*

*Take care.*

*Breathe.*

And wonder how many other ways

I can look back at my reflection  
and say this

*I love you*

*I love you*

*I love you*

before I forget.

SEWA BHATTARAI

**Cycle of family history**

Often strong mothers  
Seem to bring forth  
Weak daughters  
Little girls for whom  
Their mother is the world  
And they need no more,  
Are content to follow her around  
And live in her warm glow  
And when they grow up  
Are so cowed down  
By their mother's effervescence  
That they decide beforehand  
Not to compete  
Since there is no shame  
In losing to mother

YUKTA BAJRACHARYA

**Raised by Mom (After Kelly Norman Ellis)**

I was raised by  
 non-stop *chiya* drinking,  
*hvocha mari* baking,  
 Saturday means minced meat and rice for lunch,  
 ‘*Chu laa taya ja neu,*  
 Here, have more of it for you’  
 (even if it means less of it for me)  
 ‘I will only cook fish curry if you are coming home for dinner, won't you come home for  
 dinner?’  
 kinda women.

Rough,  
 not slender but tender hands,  
 fingers that have been worn to the bone,  
 those that have only known  
 how to make things  
 turned silver into jewelery  
 knit warmth of patterns from muscle memory  
 worked, worked, worked  
 ‘I may not know much but I need to make this work’  
 type of women.

How to make enough of less  
 but always give all you've got  
 ‘I live for my children,’  
 have lived for them even before they were born  
 kind of mothers.

No-pain showing,  
 a line of men showering her love, married the wrong man,

but still living, still laughing  
like she's still sixteen  
'*Hellann. chbori*, you don't even call me anymore.'  
Kinda aunts.

Raw egg and rice craving,  
secretly *pani-puri* and chocolate loving,  
not giving up,  
'One day, everything will be alright. It will.  
You will make things alright'  
Hope-birthing,  
synonym for, no, the word strength,  
Kinda women.

I grew up on my own  
but I was raised by women.



TOYA GURUNG

**New Year**

*Translated from Nepali by Shailendra K. Singh*

New Year

Coming every year

Is like a stray dog:

Disobedient and skinny

Despite its greedy habit of loitering around every refuse-heap;

Which, hiding its tail but showing its tusk,

Goes from door to door

Carrying the summon of the court.

TSERING WANGMO DHOMPA

**Exile: an invitation to a struggle**

Mother tells me to eat well.

Mother who knows best, asks,  
how are you? She has asked this  
all of my life. There are only two  
answers to this question. Two answers  
keep us mother and son,  
mother and daughter.

The distance is a question.

The question is also a statement  
of a struggle.

If the word is a struggle,  
you understand.

We cannot continue as we are.

We cannot forget we are guests  
who have overstayed. I invite you  
to living against (as we do.)

It is not enough to have one tongue.

It cannot point to everything  
and in every direction.

We do not use our mother tongue  
for our lovers. Beloved,

*we speak your words.*

*What do we want? Freedom.*

*When do we want it? Now.* Protest  
in the mother tongue. Free *now*  
from the notion of continuity.

The present is the utterance;  
now is too late.

Flowers plucked for later,  
not now, they are dead. Stem,

stamen, piston: I do not ask  
if they are perfect.  
I am not to blame for the flies  
who dive into a cup of tea.  
Life after death is a belief.  
There is no heaven because  
there is no hell.  
After rain, a swarm of flies  
misbehave like stubborn stubble.  
Claimed by multi-legged beings,  
hair loosens from its comfort of a braid.  
Rain seeps into the animals who lie  
still, the wind bored from blowing.  
Until sun convinces us to take  
our layers off; dismisses the hats  
we wear.  
We predict the contraction  
of bones, of skin stretching to oblige  
the dress picked for a summer caper.  
It is not possible to remain  
free of the suffering of knowing  
and of ignorance.  
In fifty years, dogs from rival villages  
have lost and won their wars. Their heirs walk  
with tails between their legs.  
We pray for a better life.  
The inevitable, here, then gone.  
Snow bound ground, snow topped ground, the only  
assurance we have  
is, it will melt.  
Our bodies covered  
and uncovered  
are not the same.

URMILA KUMARI CHAUDHARI

**My mind is not at peace**

*Translated from Tharu language by Manjushree Thapa*

How can I walk forward to dispense faith  
when I am mired in a society of disbelief?  
How can I start to grow scented flowers  
when the behaviour of our society is fetid?  
How, with my inner soul, can I take pity  
on those who play with the lives of women?  
How can I struggle to truly define life  
before a society which idealises falsehood?  
My mind is not at peace for a moment,  
An uproar is taking place within me.  
I had wanted to laugh with a brightly lit heart  
but a row of tears always dims my eyes,  
I had wanted to traverse a world filled with flowers  
But thorns and needles always bar my way ...

MANJU KANCHULI

**The Hunger For Justice And The Water Of Desperation**

After preparing a feast  
 satisfying the entire family  
 like a highly skilled housewife  
 satisfying herself  
 she licks the empty cauldron and pan  
 or swallows the slightly burnt leavings  
 And then hungry and weepy-eyed this rainy night  
 falls asleep. Not without fulfilling you in your bed room  
 She's been spending her days licking the salty grit  
 on the empty pan provided by legislation  
 No justice has come to ask—'Have you eaten?'  
 It is not just this century-long night  
 she has slept without food  
 There were many nights like that  
 Today too there is a feast at her house  
 Tell them: In her name  
 don't put out the rice the meal requires  
 She does not need feasts like these  
 For amid great feasts, she already has  
 the habit of fasting herself to sleep  
 Fire rages on the riverbank. With a flood of water  
 she has blanketed that terrible inferno of hunger  
 She has doused the blaze sufficiently  
 with the unfathomable depths  
 of a single desperation

BENJU SHARMA

**This Moment I Am Thinking**

*Translated from Nepali by Wayne Amtzis and Benju Sharma*

I, today this moment  
 having freed myself from the busy day  
 centered in myself

I am thinking of myself

I think of

being burdened

by the vacuity of empty sacks of rice

I think of

emptied kerosene tins

and exhausted canisters of sugar

I now this moment

I think of

your eyes glaring in the afternoon

your mind

turned in another direction.

Now I

all day with palms bowed in greeting,

I think of competing

in the marathon of serving and flattery.

Again this very moment

I think of my child's school fees

notebook, pen, book and tuition.

At this very moment

I also listen to my mother

crying for her ailments.

This moment

I also think of my daughter

no longer a young woman, unmarried

I think of many things.

In one moment,  
I think of a multiplicity of things  
Sometimes I think of country,  
sometimes of declining values and morals  
I think of polluted society, undermined  
I think only complexity, chaos, problems.  
I, in this one moment  
thinking of these things,  
I think myself a migraine.  
Hunger, disease, love, money, affection, country  
always thinking.  
Now, to close down my brain, heart, eyes  
intelligence, feelings, sympathy and stomach  
I beg this country for a lock,  
I am begging for a lock  
without a key.

ITISHA GIRI

**My Bastard Child**

You – my bastard child,  
you have learnt to speak, after years -  
in words -  
that are too big for you and  
too foreign to my ears.  
A giant leap for the frog you were  
at the bottom of my well.

You – my bastard child  
you speak of human lives and dignity  
but you lived yours like a stray dog  
on my fields, licked my feet  
and called me master.

You – my bastard child  
with your foreign tongue  
you have yet to master my speech,  
let's find common ground  
let's talk in numbers.

I can spare one of you for 100 gas cylinders  
two for 200 petrol tanks  
three for 300 sacks of onions  
and for taking 40 -  
I will let your kind be remembered.

You – my bastard child  
with your foreign tongue  
your skin black like charcoal  
and your skull under my boot,  
go back to my lands and build monuments



for your martyrs -  
on my blood-stained borders.  
Get down on your knees and wipe that slate clean,  
come back to me when the blood dries -  
I will let you sit on my table and  
feed you leftover scraps of my meal.

You – my bastard child -  
tame that foreign tongue,  
be silent, do not speak,  
do not let your mind wander -  
do not forget, my child -  
you are a number.

BANIRA GIRI

**The Chant Freedom**

*Translated from Nepali by Wayne Amtzis and Banira Giri*

temple free me  
 from the sounds of bell and conch  
 sky free me  
 from electric bolts  
 tree free me  
 from bent and curving branches  
 palm free me  
 from fate's tangled lines  
 street free me  
 from footsteps' heavy fall  
 love free me  
 from the need to fuck  
 river free me  
 from force and sounds  
 sound free me  
 from needless susurrations  
 war free me  
 from machismo's claims  
 peace free me  
 from necessary sacrifice  
 whisky free me  
 from nettled irritation  
 property free me  
 from a childless couple's store of treasure  
 day free me  
 from the sun's hoofed gallop  
 night free me  
 from the owl's eyes  
 nation free me

from tyrant's statues  
world free me  
from the poisoned tipped stakes of your borders  
life free me  
from always hastening  
death free me  
from never-ending emptiness  
my cherished poem free me  
from meaningless letters  
hey,  
word that goes by the name  
*freedom*  
free me from the honesty  
and depths of your letters words  
and meanings

ITISHA GIRI

**When I Have a Daughter**

When I have a daughter,  
I will pinch her every day so her skin turns to rhino hide -  
so she feels no pain when cornered by a stranger's hand at play.

When I have a daughter,  
I will lash her with my tongue -  
so she is ready for it when someone else calls her names.

When I have a daughter,  
I will cover her room with a thousand, wide-open cutout eyes -  
so she is used to someone else's stare.

When I have a daughter,  
I will teach her to disappear into thin air, like a ninja -  
so she is never in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

When I have a daughter,  
I will teach her of lust and of pleasure -  
so she never feels any shame.

When I have a daughter,  
I will bathe her in milk tinged with acid every day,  
so when someone decides to attack her,  
like a snake charmer, she is immune to the venom and its decay.

MALASHREE SUVEDI

**A Wreath for my Poem**

Bare-fingered poets hold shot glasses and guns like they're holding  
pens:

tight grips and swift movements, born to kill.

I like being killed.

Does that make me a poem?

Am I a poem? I ask him as I pluck flowers for my wreath,  
as I dig a hold to bury my past.

He looks through me.

His silence thickens the atmosphere,  
moss grows on my skin.

Do you know what a poem can do? I ask him.

You're no poem, he says –

You're a lady, all flesh and bones.

I am a poem, I say,

but estranged from the poet.

I pay attention to fingers, palms, wrists and knuckles.

looking for the poet, everywhere I go.

Maybe you're a poem, he says.

But a lady poem.

Did I mention that we are in a garden and he wants to leave?

Up he goes, walking away,

and, left to my womanly self, I am still working on my wreath.

I'm no poem, I take it all back.

I'm a broken lighthouse

on the shore of some sea.  
He isn't my poet.  
Maybe I'm a discarded thing.  
I will bury myself along with my past and  
let the poet come looking for me.  
If he wants to find me,  
he needs to dig me out.  
He needs to find his words and  
see what his words have done.

YUKTA BAJRACHARYA

**On Kathmandu's Streets**

All I want to be  
on Kathmandu's streets  
is invisible.

I swear  
the man who walked down the streets like he owned it  
and then reached out his hands towards my thighs  
like he owned me –

looked just like you.

If I didn't know you,  
you would be just like him:  
a face with a tongue, a pair of hands and a pair of feet  
that can, any moment now,  
come hissing or grabbing at me.

I have to think over and over again before I step outside my house.  
Will the purple bra strap that's slightly showing become a trap  
I cast for myself?  
Should I wear something more mundane?

Is the colour of my hair suggestive?  
Is this umbrella I'm carrying too attention-seeking?  
Will they think my looking in their eye is an invitation?

On Kathmandu's streets  
every man I don't know is a potential harasser  
until proven otherwise.

Because –

the man who commented on the thickness of my thighs,  
the other man who zipped down his pants and asked me if I wanted to suck his dick,  
the other man who pinched my tits,  
and the man who blew me an air kiss –

all of them, I swear  
looked like you.

A face with a tongue, a pair of hands and a pair of feet.

But of course you are different.

‘Not all men are like that.’

Sadly I’ve met too many men who are  
the reason why I can’t take the more silent, shorter route,  
or wear my favourite skirt,  
or walk in a pair of heels,  
or carry my rainbow-shaded umbrella,  
or go back home alone at night,  
or go to the bus stop alone early in the morning,  
or breathe.

On Kathmandu’s streets  
all I want to be is me,  
all I want to be is free,  
all I want to be is  
invincible.



BARTIKA EAM RAI

**The Daughter of Your Father: A Five Part Account**

I

You and your mother  
do not pray to the same God anymore.  
Truth be told, you have stopped praying, and,  
as if you make up for it, you talk to the water.  
You throw your prayers, promises and hopes into it,  
whatever little that remains.

Your mother keeps on praying to her God  
that she has extravagantly erected  
on her bedroom walls,  
unaware of your growing defiance.  
You have now turned into a disappointment –  
like the girl from you mother's nightmares.  
Drinking. Sleeping. Smoking. Cursing.  
Unholy.  
'You are the daughter of your father!'  
You mother would have said  
if she knew, what you had turned into.

II

You remember.  
You remember your brother walking  
around your father's dead body  
in the backyard of Patan Hospital.  
His innocence burning away,  
like the incense sticks he tried so hard to  
hold together in his tiny hands.  
'He is the son.'  
But, what sense did that make?

So much pressure on a six-year-old,  
 to rest his father's soul, while  
 behind the crying grandmother,  
 the long-lost relatives gossip about your mother,  
 'I hear she was never a good wife.'

### III

You wish.  
 You wish you had been raised being told  
 there is no shame in desire.  
 You would have then said No,  
 not to please your uncles and aunties but  
 for the sake of your own body.  
 Had you known, you would never  
 have let yourself be so vulnerable,  
 you would never have let yourself be so reckless.  
 Shrinking. Letting. Degrading. Polluting.  
 Hurting.  
 Hating.  
 You would have found better ways to rebel.

### IV

You have joined the parades of  
 measuring daughters on the societal scale –  
 fixing their marriageable age.  
 You wake up in the middle of these nightmares –  
 frantic, instinctively chanting  
 the mantras, your mother taught you  
 when you turned seven.  
 'It is for your protection.'

Reeking of cheap alcohol, you involuntarily  
 chant them to please the God you have now  
 borrowed from your mother.

Scared. Protective. Guilty.

Defensive.

You try to guard your mother's ego.

In her entire lifetime, her pride

is the only thing she has

ever truly owned.

V

But you do not deserve

your mother's pride,

your mother's ego,

your mother's prayers or

your mother's God anymore.

You went everywhere

that was out of bounds.

Drinking. Sleeping. Laughing.

There is no way back home –

you have seen too much.

That single hundred-rupee note that you inherited

from your father took you

places. Perhaps,

you are the Daughter of your Father.

Your mother would have confirmed it

if she knew, what you have now become.

PARIZAT

**A Room, a Goal and an Intellectual Woman**

*Translated from Nepali by Manjushree Thapa*

The window facing the wind  
 blowing in the opposite direction,  
 an ordinary table,  
 a mirror reflecting the realities of life,  
 lampblock, cream, powder and eyebrow pencil,  
 a few daily newspapers,  
 and an English novel:  
 this is the room of an intellectual woman.

The empty cups of tea  
 and the butts of cigarettes  
 are the memories  
 of the just concluded cordial conversations  
 with the boy-friends.

A Nepali mat,  
 followed by a cotton carpet  
 fixing the border.  
 Without transgressing the border of any ideal,  
 the boy-friends come up to the bed often  
 and lie down on the soft pillow  
 which always carries the dreams of discontent.

There is an uneasiness in this room,  
 a restlessness  
 and the memories of  
 the Queen of Jhansi, Joan of Arc and Madam Curie.  
 For failing to cope with the goal and the surroundings,  
 society mocks her in reaction.

Where is Krishna's Rada?  
Ram's Sita and Manu's respected one?  
Here her daily labour  
has already accepted a hard life-cycle.

Here the drops of her tired sweat  
are but the deposits for a handful of paper notes  
she received at the end of the month  
as her graduate pay scale.

UJJWALA MAHARJAN

**Durbarmarg**

You're the most decked up of them all

Of course!

You had royalty in your lap.

Nails painted to perfection.

Blemish free skin

And hair so shiny,

You must have come straight out of a shampoo advertisement.

Your style is not ornate though.

No nooks and crooks of gold jewellery

No heavy embroidery

You're sleek.

Everything about you-

Confident, modern,

with the air of a colonial lady

You're basically class, as people of class define it.

You're one of your kind here.

Surrounded by many, not your kind at all.

Your closest acquaintance is a flirt, painting herself with the lights and colors of neon, selling herself to the world –

the world that bowed down on your feet

Another, a good girl turned corrupt beast with more pamphlets in her bag than books.

Your other acquaintance, the classic beauty, has secluded herself from all of you behind ugly bars, weeping still, for her lost lover.

And there are others, around you, rising up from backward slums, imitating you, importing the same expensive wears as yours.

All their envious eyes pinned on you

While you just sit there

looking expensive

Poised

and sometime smiling to yourself

a resigned smile, thinking  
'I pity you don't pity me.'

JERUSHA RAI

**Little Dancer**

I shut my eyes  
because my heart is heavy  
because somewhere in the world  
a little girl is dancing  
they put her in a pink dress  
and she is twirling and twirling for all to see  
my heart is heavy  
because she too sees nothing  
but the world simply spinning, madly  
who will knead her like clay  
who will hold up the mirror  
and say this is your flesh  
say, look, you are already disappearing  
throw coins in wishing wells  
and spit after it, trembling  
because tomorrow  
the flowers will do their violent blooming without you  
the sun will break into your room  
you will be gone  
utterly gone  
my heart is heavy  
because the little girl is dancing  
she is twirling and twirling for you



BENJU SHARMA

**Tradition**

*Translated from Nepali by Wayne Amtzis and Benju Sharma*

For years a picture  
hung on the wall of my room.  
Frayed, done in by insects and rats,  
recognizable only by those  
who had seen it when . . .  
An effaced semblance demanding to be  
this picture  
worshipped by my grandmother  
this picture  
hung with pride by my mother.  
Today, I look at it askance.  
How long must I turn towards it?  
What solace am I to find there?  
Now, I want  
this picture smeared with red, effaced.  
Let flame reach the far corners.  
I place a lit match  
in its midst done with, done away,  
in its midst.

MANJU KANCHULI

### A Strange Temple

The idol behind the shut door of god must be  
 arrayed with vermilion and rice  
 That I don't know  
 Before meeting the deity I've seen  
 nothing but naked figures on the struts above  
 I've read so many times  
 'Behind the locked temple door there is no god at all'  
 A long time has passed...these days  
 I haven't opened that temple door with flowers of hope  
 Its inner wall might have transformed into a mirror,  
 blossoming in the mirror the priest's aroused mind  
 might have bulged forth with a flood,  
 the mirror on the torso turned towards his mind  
 might have melted with immense shame  
 That I don't know  
 Out of shame I haven't till now  
 parted that mirror's curtain  
 Encountering yellow sunlight everywhere  
 the priest's robe of black clouds might tremble  
 Tangled in the loincloth of a hurricane  
 it might be hovering above some gorge somewhere  
 That I don't know  
 I haven't forced that cloud to land  
 in the theater of the earth  
 I haven't harassed it with bright sunlight  
 History, upon a wall of mud, has been written with lines  
 in the vacuum of space, with voices  
 over the forehead of earth, with blood  
 in the ink of the heart, with red  
 into the pen of the human, with a cry;

beneath the layered soil of earth, with bones  
into layers of sedimentary rock, with coral  
inside black coal, with illuminating diamond  
But I've never understood  
the meaning of the blank paper smeared with spider shit  
in the piled garbage bin near the temple  
An old wall might have been changed into a new mirror  
that new mirror crawled upon by a snail  
into parchment of fresh slime  
That I don't know  
I've taken those walls, mirrors, and blank sheets  
to be your undergarments  
and have never in front of anyone else  
parted them till today  
I haven't opened the temple door  
I haven't disrobed the priest The image inside the closed door of god  
must still be arrayed with vermilion and rice  
That I don't know  
Before meeting the deity  
I've seen nothing but naked figures on the struts above

PARIZAT

**Me and My Past**

*Translated from Nepali by Shailendra K. Singh*

Like a bamboo tree  
disgraces by a sharp wind of *Jyestha*  
I'm off to kiss the past.  
In the cracked, sun-scorched land  
lies my acquaintance with my past.  
Without any present or future  
I can tell  
my past is broken, cracked.  
And my past knows  
I am hollow inside like a bamboo tree.

**Chaubandi Ma Patuki:**

**Cultural Songs**

## Teej Songs

### **The Porcupine's Moustache**

*Translated by Eleanor Walsh and Anil Mahato*

When I was a child I needed books and pens  
but now I have a spade.

I don't want to leave you father,  
because my husband is like a porcupine.

I don't want to go to his house  
and share food with him.

I don't want to go papa,  
really I don't want to go.

My husband is a porcupine  
it's so frightening to see!  
My husband's moustache is a porcupine,  
it's so frightening to see!

Every night when it is time to sleep  
he stuffs his lips with tobacco,  
how can I share a bed with a man like this?

I don't want to go to his house  
and share food with him.

I don't want to go papa,  
really I don't want to go.

My husband is a porcupine  
it's so frightening to see!  
My husband's moustache is a porcupine,  
it's so frightening to see!

He eats two bowls of rice and snores all night!

I cannot sleep around him.  
My husband – is he a man or jungle beast?!  
He doesn't work – he just drinks  
and goes from here to there with no purpose,  
how can I build a life with him?

I don't want to go to his house  
and share food with him.  
I don't want to go papa,  
really I don't want to go.  
My husband is a porcupine  
it's so frightening to see!  
My husband's moustache is a porcupine,  
it's so frightening to see!

## Dumsi Khade Junga

Kapi kalam line hat ma, kodali ra kuto,  
 Jyan gaye ni khanna baba, budho poe ko jutho.  
 Kapi kalam line hat ma, kodali ra kuto,  
 Jyan gaye ni khanna baba, budho poe ko jutho.  
 Janna baba janna ma ta, janna baba janna ma ta.

Timro jowe ko ghara, janna baba janna ma ta,  
 Timro jowe ko ghara. Dumsi kade junga ko.  
 Lagchha male dara. Dumsi kade junga ko,  
 Lagchha male dara aya. Dumsi kade junga ko,  
 Lagchha male dara.

Rati sutne bela pani,  
 Sadhai khaini khane, testo poe ko bistara ma.  
 Ma kastari jane, rati sutne bela pani,  
 Sadhai khaini khane, testo poe ko bistara ma,  
 Ma kastari jane, janna ama janna ma ta.

Janna ama janna ma ta, timro jowe ko ghara,  
 Janna ama janna ma ta, timro jowe ko ghara.  
 Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara,  
 Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara,  
 Aya Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara.

Manchhe ho ki ban manchhe ho,  
 Chhaina ranga dhanga, kyari juni katnu dada,  
 Maile testo sanga, manchhe ho ki ban manchhe ho.  
 Chhaina ranga dhanga, kyari juni katnu dada,  
 Maile testo sanga, janna dada janna ma ta.

Janna dada janna ma ta, timro jowe ko ghara,  
 Janna dada janna ma ta, timro jowe ko ghara.  
 Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara,



Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara,  
Aya Dumsi kade junga ko, lagchha male dara.

## The Curl in the Dog Tail

*Translated by Eleanor Walsh and Anil Mabato*

### **Man:**

Don't you have brothers in your home  
to teach you how to dress like a woman?  
Why are you wearing that short dress?  
Look! Your body is half naked!  
Why didn't you follow my orders?  
Don't you know how to put on a sari?  
Your behaviour will never improve.  
You can put a pipe on the tail of a dog to straighten it,  
but remove it after twelve years and the tail will still be curled.  
You can't wear whatever you like,  
you must wear the cultural dress!

### **Woman:**

You want to act like a hero?  
Don't try to teach me – I am the teacher.  
Yes – my body is uncovered.  
Don't speak to me like this.  
You should learn to catch up to modern society:  
A pipe on a dog's tail?  
I dress how I like.  
Those times are gone.  
The days of freedom for women are near!

## Bango Puchhar

### Male:

Timra pani dai hola bhai hola yati chhoto khaoi kina laaiholan?

Aadha sarir nagai hajur nangai?

Maile bhaya mandinau sari launai jandinau?

Barsah dugroma haleni bango puchhar!

Hunna her manpardi launa. Parchha hamle saskriti jogauna

Aadha sarir nagai hajur nangai.

Maile bhaya mandinau sari launai jandinau

Barsah dugroma haleni bango puchhar.

### Female:

Aadha khojchhau hiro jhai banna?

Mastarnilai nasikau gaf hanna,

Aadha sarir nagai hajur nangai,

Maile bhaya mandinau sari launai jandinau

Barsah dugroma haleni bango puchhar.

Timle pani jharchhau sana.

Feridai chha din dinai jamana

Aadha sarir nagai hajur nangai.

Maile bhaya mandinau sari launai jandinau

Barsah dugroma haleni bango puchhar!

## No Cloth to Hold Knives

*Translated by Eleanor Walsb and Anil Mabato*

There is no cloth to hold knives wrapped around my waist

I cannot cut down the crops myself.

But still, you should call me a Nepali woman

Because I am still a daughter of my country, Nepal,

And I need love, just as I give love.

Because I am still a daughter of my country, Nepal,

And I need love, just as I give love.

I love the look of traditional eyeliner and tikka,

Even if I don't often wear them.

I'm no good at cutting down crops,

It is not something I have ever done.

The countryside is an unknown place for me,

But all the same, I love the soil of my country.

I am not familiar with traditional folk songs,

But I still know how to sing for my country,

And I know how to perform the traditional dance,

I respect and remember my country's culture,

But I am a modern woman:

I have my own way of respecting my culture.

There is no cloth to hold knives wrapped around my waist

I cannot cut down the crops myself.

But still, you should call me a Nepali woman

Because I am still a daughter of my country, Nepal,

And I need love, just as I give love.

Because I am still a daughter of my country, Nepal,

And I need love, just as I give love.

### Chaubandi Ma Patuki

Chaubandi ma patuki badhya chaina bhandai ma.  
 Pakheri ma ghas katna janya chaina vandai ma.  
 Malai Nepali haina vanna kaha payincha,  
 Ma ta Nepal ko maya garne chori, malai ma jastai maya chayincha.  
 Gajalu tiki ramrai lagcha laune bani chaina,  
 mero laune bani chaina.  
 Gajalu tiki ramrai lagcha laune bani chaina  
 mero laune bani chaina.  
 Gothala ra melapat ma dhaune bani chaina,  
 mero dhaune bani chaina.  
 Ukkali ra oraliko na hideko bato,  
 tara pyaro lagcha malai merai desh ko mato.

Chaubandi ma patuki badhya chaina bhandai ma.  
 Pakheri ma ghas katna janya chaina vandai ma.  
 Malai Nepali haina vanna kaha payincha,  
 ma ta Nepal ko maya garne chori, malai ma jastai maya chayincha.

Dohori gauna najane ni tukka gasna aaucha  
 malai tukka gasna aauchha.  
 Dohori gauna najane ni tukka gasna aaucha  
 malai tukka gasna aauchha.  
 Maruni ra samala ma kambar vachna aaucha  
 malai kambar vachna aaucha.

Ritithi ra sanskriti lai  
 mero ni samman cha,  
 adhunik ma chori tara merai aafnai saan cha.

Chaubandi ma patuki badhya chaina bhandai ma.  
 Pakheri ma ghas katna janya chaina vandai ma.

Malai Nepali haina vanna kaha payincha,  
ma ta Nepal ko maya garne chori, malai ma jastai maya chayincha.

### **There's an electric cable in Pokhara**

*Translated by Eleanor WALSH and Anil MABATO*

*There's an electric cable in Pokhara.*

Listen to how this drunk husband behaves:

He gets up in the morning and goes straight to the hotel.

And who does all the chores for the day?

The girl in the hotel makes tea.

He's spent all the money on raksi  
and the hotel girl.

The farmland lays in waste because he's drunk all the money.

It doesn't matter how much money you have, you drink it all!

Two bottles, four bottles, it's never enough for you!

If I ask him not to drink, he simply replies by saying  
it's not my family's property he is drinking.

The land is used up, and he has no idea how much money he has drunk.

How can we live now he has drunk everything?

All day he drinks, I tell him not to bother coming home in the evening.

*There's an electric cable in Pokhara.*

So, what will happen to you, husband?

Find a second wife, increase your problems.

She'll wear the same worried expression.

Sell the buffalo, the pigs, sell your second wife,

become a beggar on the streets,

and I'll return to my parents' home.

If I wanted another man, I could find one in a moment.

What a shame that for my parents' dignity,

I have to stay married to you.

## **Pokhara ko Bajarma Bijuli ko Laina**

*Pokhara ko bajarma bijuli ko laina,*

Raksi khane swamiko suna byaana.  
 Bihaana uthera rodi hotel jharni,  
 gharko ghar dhanda kasle garni?  
 Ciya pakai rakhi holi hotel ki nanlle.  
 Paisa jati sakiyo tato panile,  
 gharko paisa sakiyo hironllai liera.

Gairi khet sakiyo raksi piera.  
 Bistis rupiya paisale hajurlal pugdaina,  
 dui, char botal raksle chudai chudaina.  
 Nakau raksl bhannu bhani tero bauko khachaina.  
 Gairi khet gai sakyo ajha tha [thaha] chaina.  
 Gairi khet becera raksl khane swamile,  
 ke garera jivan bitau hamlle?

Din bhari swami raja botal bhari iarkina,  
 bharai dekhi pardaina ghara pharkina.

*Pokharama bajarma bijuliko laina,*

yo gharko sampati mero chaina.  
 Gharko srimantilal bahira bato laincha,  
 yo gharko sampati jammai cahincha.  
 Yo nari nabhae arko nari paincha,  
 bikasi bhaleko tauko samaincha.  
 Kina tauko samauchau rago sugur maside.  
 Gharko srimantilal laera becede.  
 Srimanti becera hida jogi bhaera.  
 Ma chori ta basl dinchu maita garera.  
 Khoje hudi paincha timi jasto sahu,



malai ta cahieko bau amako nau.

## Jititya Songs

### **A Life Enslaved**

*Translated by Eleanor Walsh and Anil Mahato*

Please parents, listen to the lamentations of a daughter.

I want to go to school! I cry to go to school!

God, you brought this tragic fate upon on me,

You had me born into a poor family.

I see my friends go to school, carrying books,

I can't even recognise the *ka, kha, ga, gha*,<sup>268</sup>

I watch my sisters go to school and feel my unluckiness.<sup>269</sup>

They carry school books, I carry heavy loads.

Unlucky girls like me always carry these heavy loads,

I want to study but will spend my life enslaved.

When I am married I will go to my husbands' home with nothing,

the brothers fence in their properties.

They have so many clothes that they rot away in a drawer,

But when my parents must give me just one sari, tears come to their eyes!

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<sup>268</sup> First sounds of the Nepali alphabet

<sup>269</sup> 'sisters' and 'brothers' here do not refer to biological family members, but female and male peers from other families.

## Mela Song

*Translated by Eleanor Walsh and Anil Mahato*

Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
*one godajogey pairi*  
 Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.

Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
*one dadawaka dadkasawa*  
 Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.

Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
*one hathawaa ka mathawaa*  
 Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.

Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
*one bahiyakaa tadiya*

Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.  
 Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
 one *grarawakaa hasuli*

Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.  
 Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
 one *kanawakaa kanafulawaa*

Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.  
 Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
 one *nakawakaa fotriya*

Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.  
 Let it be morning,  
 Let it be the next day,  
 Let it be the mela,  
 Because we wait for that time of year – the mela –  
 Daughter I want to buy for you,  
 I'm sure I will be able to buy for you,  
 one *matawakaa mantikawaa*

Don't worry, I promise to buy it for you.

**Translations:**

Each Tharu term is a name for a piece of heavily weighted silver jewellery worn by women during Jitiya and other culturally significant occasions. They have names according to where they are worn:

*godajogey pairi* – around the ankle

*dadawaka dadkasawa* – around the waist

*bathawaa ka mathawaa* – around the wrist

*babiyakaa tadiya* – around the arm

*grarawakaa basuli* – around the neck

*kanawakaa kanafulawaa* - earrings

*nakawakaa fotriya* – in the septum

*matawakaa mantikawaa* – tika on the forehead