

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Index in NepJOL
- Permanantly Archived in Portico



Department of English  
Padmakanya Multiple Campus  
Bagbazar, Kathmandu  
Tribhuvan University  
URL: [pkmc.tu.edu.np](http://pkmc.tu.edu.np)

*Research Article*

## **Breaking the Narrative: Feminist Retellings of Nepalese Women's Struggles in Contemporary Fiction**

**Saraswati Katuwal**

Assistant Professor of English  
Padmakanya Multiple Campus  
Tribhuvan University, Nepal  
Doi: 10.3126/mjeccs.v3i1.89923

Corresponding Author: Saraswati Katuwal, E-mail: [kcsaraswati2013@gmail.com](mailto:kcsaraswati2013@gmail.com)

Copyright 2025©The Author(S). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s).

### **Abstract**

*This study analyzes feminist retellings in Niharika Karki's *Yogmaya* (2018), Chreeharan (2019), and selected short stories from *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal*, edited by Sushma Joshi (2022). These works reimagine Nepalese women's struggles against gender-based violence, caste oppression, and patriarchal constraints, situating them within contemporary debates on gender equality. Despite women occupying 33 percent of parliamentary seats, national data reveal persistent challenges: 11.4 percent of women aged 15-49 experience gender-based violence, while discriminatory citizenship laws disproportionately exclude Dalit and Madheshi women. Against this backdrop, the selected texts challenge cultural silences by foregrounding resistance, intersectionality, and agency. *Yogmaya* reconstructs the defiance of a poet-activist who fought patriarchal customs and caste hierarchies; Chreeharan reinterprets Mahabharata figures like Draupadi to highlight resistance against sexual violence; and Joshi's stories depict women's resilience in the aftermath of war. Together, these narratives disrupt patriarchal stereotypes and resonate with feminist activism, including digital campaigns such as #NepalFeminism. By bridging literature, activism, and policy discourse, this paper highlights the role of Nepali fiction in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality and asks: How do feminist retellings reframe Nepalese women's struggles, and what insights do they offer for addressing post-2025 gender equality challenges?*

**Keywords:** *Gender-Based Violence, Intersectionality, Dalit and Madheshi Women, Contemporary Feminist Activism, Sustainable Development Goal 5*

### **Introduction**

Nepal's feminist movements have entered a decisive phase in 2025, shaped by collective struggles against entrenched patriarchal structures and systemic inequalities. Despite the symbolic

advancement of women holding 33.1 percent of parliamentary seats, structural barriers continue to limit their substantive participation in governance and social decision-making (UN Women 8; Human Rights Watch 4). Activism on the ground, as well as in digital spaces, has intensified in response to alarming levels of gender-based violence, which affect 11.4 percent of women between the ages of fifteen and forty-nine, along with discriminatory citizenship laws that deny women equal rights in conferring nationality to their children (UN Women 8). These legal and social obstacles disproportionately affect Dalit and Madheshi women, whose intersectional identities expose them to multiple layers of exclusion, caste-based discrimination, regional marginalization, and gendered violence (Rai 27). Feminist activists, organizations, and writers thus call for inclusive narratives that both record and reimagine women's struggles, expanding the field of Nepali feminist discourse beyond metropolitan, upper-caste perspectives.

The struggle for gender equality in Nepal has historically unfolded not only in political activism but also in the sphere of cultural production. Nepali literature, particularly in its formative nineteenth-century phase, often perpetuated restrictive gender roles. Canonical texts such as Bhanubhakta Acharya's *Badhusiksha* prescribed ideals of female obedience, domesticity, and moral restraint, codifying a literary culture that normalized women's subordination (Ghimire 49). For decades, literary representations reinforced patriarchal hierarchies by scripting women primarily as dutiful wives, mothers, or sacrificial figures. However, contemporary Nepali fiction has gradually unsettled this tradition by foregrounding female subjectivities, exposing gender-based oppression, and offering counter-narratives that foreground resilience and agency. The shift from instructive, moralizing texts to critical, feminist retellings reflects broader transformations in Nepali society, where activism and literature now converge to challenge patriarchy and caste oppression.

This study situates itself at this critical juncture by analyzing how three significant works: Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya* (2018), *Chreeharan* (2019), and selected short stories from *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal* (edited by Sushma Joshi, 2022) reframe Nepalese women's experiences of subjugation and resistance. Each of these texts intervenes in dominant cultural narratives by foregrounding women's voices that have historically been silenced. *Yogmaya* reconstructs the life of Yogmaya Neupane, a revolutionary poet-activist of the early twentieth century, who mobilized collective resistance against child marriage, caste hierarchy, and the Rana regime's despotic rule. Her eventual act of collective suicide; interpreted as both tragedy and defiance, it has become emblematic of radical feminist resistance in Nepali history (Karki Niharika, *Yogmaya* 22). By fictionalizing her life, Niharika reinserts a subaltern woman into national memory, transforming her into a figure of feminist praxis.

Similarly, *Chreeharan* engages with the mythological archive of the *Mahabharata* to reinterpret female characters such as Draupadi, whose humiliation in the epic becomes a lens through which to interrogate women's resistance to sexual violence and systemic patriarchal control. In reworking a canonical Hindu epic, Niharika underscores how the historical silencing of women's voices in religious texts mirrors their continued marginalization in modern Nepal, thus bridging ancient myths with contemporary struggles (Karki Niharika, *Chreeharan* 49). On another register, Joshi's edited anthology *Women, War, and Violence* captures the lived experiences of women during and after Nepal's decade-long Maoist conflict. Stories such as "The End of the War" portray women rebuilding fractured communities, negotiating ethnic marginalization, and reclaiming dignity amidst violence (Joshi 47). Collectively, these narratives resist the homogenizing tendency of mainstream historiography by presenting women as survivors, decision-makers, and carriers of cultural memory.

These literary retellings resonate strongly with the feminist activism unfolding in Nepal in 2025, which is increasingly visible in both physical protests and digital campaigns under hashtags such as #NepalFeminism. Current movements emphasize sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), equitable citizenship provisions, and the dismantling of caste and gender hierarchies (UN Women 12; Rai 30). Literature becomes not only a cultural expression but also an extension of activism, amplifying marginalized voices and engaging readers in debates about justice and equality.

Methodologically, this research employs qualitative close reading informed by an intersectional feminist framework, attentive to how gender intersects with caste, ethnicity, and region. Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights the ways in which multiple forms of discrimination overlap to intensify women's marginalization (143). Applying this lens to Nepali fiction allows for a nuanced reading of how Dalit, Madheshi, and other subaltern women navigate overlapping structures of oppression while asserting agency. Furthermore, South Asian feminist scholarship underscores the importance of situating women's experiences within local cultural, religious, and historical contexts, thereby avoiding the universalist assumptions often found in Euro-American feminist discourse (Mohanty 22). This perspective is particularly relevant for Nepali feminist narratives, which must be read within the frameworks of caste, ethnicity, and indigenous histories rather than through imported categories that risk erasing local specificities.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to feminist literary criticism from a Nepal-specific perspective, where fiction not only reflects but also shapes public discourse. By linking literature to contemporary activism, the research highlights how cultural texts participate in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5; achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls (UN Women 5). It addresses gaps in scholarship on post-2000 Nepali fiction, particularly the limited attention to its intersectional dimensions, and seeks to inform both academic inquiry and policy frameworks that promote inclusive gender narratives (Rai 29). Ultimately, this article asks: How do *Yogmaya*, *Chreeharan*, and Joshi's short stories reframe Nepalese women's struggles through feminist retellings, and what insights do they provide for confronting the challenges of gender equality in a post-2025 context?

## Literature Review

Feminist literary scholarship has long examined how retellings function as cultural interventions, reframing women's experiences and challenging patriarchal traditions. Elaine Showalter's foundational work on *gynocriticism* argues that women's writing interrupts literary canons by centering agency, resistance, and female subjectivity (37). This insight is particularly useful for Nepali fiction, where recent narratives rewrite historical, mythical, and conflict-era experiences to amplify marginalized voices. Globally, feminist retellings such as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* reinterpret mythic women like Penelope and her maids to critique systemic oppression and to expose the silences of canonical narratives (15). Such global works provide a comparative framework for understanding the ways in which Nepali feminist fiction engages with tradition, myth, and memory to articulate women's agency. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory further sharpens this analysis by revealing how gender oppression intersects with caste, ethnicity, class, and conflict-related marginalization (142). This lens is indispensable for Nepal, a society where structural inequalities disproportionately affect Dalit, Madheshi, and conflict-affected women. These theoretical frameworks directly inform the study of Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya* (2018) and *Chreeharan* (2019), alongside Sushma Joshi's anthology *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal* (2022), all of which speak to Nepal's pressing

gender challenges in 2025, including gender-based violence and discriminatory citizenship laws (UN Women 10; Human Rights Watch 7).

Historically, Nepali literature has been complicit in reinforcing patriarchal values. Texts such as Bhanubhakta Acharya's *Badhusiksha* (nineteenth century) confined women to submissive roles, embedding gender hierarchies into cultural and literary narratives (Ghimire 48). Popular sayings like "*Chhori manche hudaina*" ("a daughter is not fully human") further entrenched the notion of female inferiority in everyday discourse (Thapa, "Role of Proverbs" 116). Yet shifts emerged in the twentieth century with writers like Parijat, whose *Shirish Ko Phool* (1965) broke from convention by exploring women's existential dilemmas and societal alienation, marking an early feminist intervention in Nepali literature (Hutt 82). The post-2006 democratic reforms and the aftermath of Nepal's armed conflict created new literary spaces that directly addressed gender-based violence, political participation, and intersectional identities (Tamang 199). These shifts reflect broader social transformations and the growing assertion of feminist discourses in both activism and cultural production.

Contemporary Nepali fiction extends these trajectories by engaging directly with women's struggles. *Yogmaya* reimagines the life of Yogmaya Neupane, an early twentieth-century poet-activist who challenged child marriage, caste hierarchies, and political despotism. Her act of collective protest and self-sacrifice is presented not as defeat but as feminist defiance, reframing her as an icon of resistance (Karki Niharika, 22). *Chreeharan* turns to myth, reinterpreting women of the *Mahabharata*, particularly Draupadi, whose humiliation becomes a narrative space for interrogating patriarchal dominance and sexual violence in both ancient and modern contexts (Karki Niharika, 49). Joshi's *Women, War, and Violence* depicts resilience in the aftermath of armed conflict, with stories such as "The End of the War" showing women rebuilding communities fractured by violence and ethnic marginalization (47). These narratives resonate strongly with Nepal's 2025 feminist activism, where movements emphasize sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) and equitable citizenship (UN Women 13; Rai 30). By challenging cultural silences, such fiction becomes part of broader feminist praxis that connects literary creativity to activism.

Despite these advances, scholarship on Nepali feminist retellings remains limited. Seira Tamang has explored Nepal's women's movement in terms of political participation and agency, but her work does not extend to the cultural and literary realm (Tamang 201). Priya Sharma's studies of post-2000 gender dynamics focus on policy and social changes while leaving fiction's role in shaping intersectional identities underexplored, particularly regarding Dalit and Madheshi women (66). Anjali Rai's work on ethnic marginalization in conflict literature touches upon themes relevant to Joshi's anthology but does not foreground feminist retellings as a distinct mode of critique (28). While popular engagement on digital platforms such as X has circulated hashtags like #NepalFeminism and drawn attention to figures like Yogmaya, such discourse remains fragmented and lacks academic depth (Rai 30; UN Women 12). The gap in literary scholarship thus lies in sustained, intersectional feminist readings of post-2000 Nepali fiction that reimagine women's struggles through narrative retellings.

This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a qualitative methodology to analyze feminist retellings in Niharika's *Yogmaya* and *Chreeharan* as well as Joshi's anthology. A close reading approach, grounded in intersectional feminist theory, examines how these texts reframe women's resistance to gender-based violence, caste oppression, and patriarchal structures (Crenshaw 142; Showalter 40). The texts were selected for their explicit engagement with feminist reimaginings: *Yogmaya* portrays collective resistance against structural inequality; *Chreeharan*



reinterprets mythical women as agents of defiance; and Joshi's short stories depict post-conflict resilience and community reconstruction (Karki Niharika, 20; 48; Joshi 45). Through detailed textual analysis of voice, symbolism, and characterization, this study foregrounds themes of agency and intersectionality.

Applying Crenshaw's framework ensures sensitivity to how Nepali women's struggles cannot be disentangled from caste, ethnicity, and conflict-related marginalization (143). At the same time, South Asian feminist scholarship, including Seira Tamang's work, warns against adopting universalist Western frameworks without regard to local histories and cultural contexts (200). The analysis therefore emphasizes culturally grounded readings that respect Nepal's nuances while still connecting to global feminist debates. Limitations remain, including the restricted availability of English translations of Niharika's novels and Joshi's stories, which necessitates reliance on Nepali texts and summaries. Nevertheless, the study underscores how feminist retellings in modern Nepali fiction both disrupt patriarchal norms and contribute to ongoing struggles for gender equality.

By bridging global feminist theory with Nepal-specific scholarship, this literature review highlights how fiction not only reflects women's struggles but actively participates in shaping feminist consciousness. Ultimately, retellings in *Yogmaya*, *Chreeharan*, and *Women, War, and Violence* advance feminist literary criticism while aligning with contemporary activism, offering critical insights for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) in the context of post-2025 Nepal (UN Women 5). Such alignment demonstrates that literature is not merely symbolic but contributes to the practical realization of global commitments, showing how cultural narratives can reinforce policy frameworks and grassroots activism aimed at dismantling systemic gender inequalities.

## Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach informed by feminist literary criticism and intersectional theory. Its aim is to analyze how selected Nepali texts retell women's struggles, disrupt patriarchal representations, and amplify marginalized voices.

The primary corpus consists of Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya* (2018), *Chreeharan* (2019), and selected short stories from *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal* (edited by Sushma Joshi, 2022). These texts were selected for their explicit feminist reimaginings: *Yogmaya* reconstructs the poet-activist Yogmaya Neupane's rebellion against caste and gender hierarchies; *Chreeharan* reinterprets Draupadi and other mythological women of the *Mahabharata* to expose the persistence of sexual violence and patriarchal control; and Joshi's anthology depicts women's resilience in post-conflict Nepal, with stories such as "The End of the War" highlighting community rebuilding and survival (Karki Niharika, *Yogmaya* 22; Karki Niharika, *Chreeharan* 49; Joshi 47).

The analytical framework draws on intersectionality, a concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to examine how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, caste, and ethnicity-overlap to shape women's experiences (142-43). In the Nepali context, this framework is particularly relevant, as Dalit, Madheshi, and conflict-affected women face compounded forms of exclusion that cannot be understood through a single lens of gender alone. By using intersectionality, the analysis foregrounds how women's struggles in Nepal are shaped by layered oppressions, making their experiences distinct from mainstream feminist narratives. This study also engages with South Asian feminist theorists such as Seira Tamang and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who emphasize grounding feminist analysis in local histories and resisting the universalist assumptions of Euro-American

feminism (200; 22). Their perspectives reinforce the importance of interpreting Nepali feminist retellings within cultural and historical specificities, ensuring that the voices of marginalized women are not subsumed under generalized global categories but instead recognized as central to Nepal's feminist praxis.

Close textual reading serves as the primary method of analysis. Attention is given to narrative techniques characterization, voice, and symbolism through which the texts subvert patriarchal scripts. For example, Yogmaya Neupane's collective protest is read as an act of feminist defiance; Draupadi's humiliation in *Chreeharan* becomes a lens for critiquing gender-based violence; and Joshi's post-conflict narratives highlight women's agency in reconstruction. Each reading is contextualized within Nepal's contemporary struggles, including gender-based violence (11.4% prevalence among women aged 15-49) and inequitable citizenship laws that continue to marginalize women and their children (UN Women 10; Human Rights Watch 7).

To ensure systematic analysis, key themes such as "gendered violence," "caste oppression," and "resilience" were identified across the selected texts. These themes were coded manually to trace patterns of empowerment and marginalization. While acknowledging the cultural significance of digital feminist activism under hashtags like Nepal Feminism, this study privileges academic scholarship and institutional reports to maintain analytical rigor.

Certain limitations inform this methodology. Full English translations of *Yogmaya*, *Chreeharan*, and Joshi's anthology remain scarce, necessitating reliance on Nepali originals, available translations, and secondary scholarship. Ethical considerations also shape this study, particularly the responsibility to avoid misrepresenting marginalized voices while foregrounding their agency.

By integrating close reading with intersectional feminist theory, this methodology offers a culturally grounded lens for examining feminist retellings in modern Nepali fiction. It demonstrates how literature not only reflects women's struggles but also intervenes in contemporary activism, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment (UN Women 5).

### Textual Analysis

This analysis examines how Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya* (2018), *Chreeharan* (2019), and selected short stories from *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal* (edited by Sushma Joshi, 2022) reframe Nepalese women's struggles through feminist retellings. These texts emphasize resistance to gender-based violence, the articulation of intersectional identities, and the reclamation of women's agency. Employing qualitative close reading and an intersectional feminist framework, the study explores narrative techniques-characterization, voice, symbolism, and intertextuality-that work to dismantle patriarchal stereotypes. In doing so, these narratives resonate with Nepal's 2025 feminist movements, which foreground struggles against gender-based violence (11.4% prevalence among women aged 15-49) and highlight the discriminatory effects of citizenship laws (UN Women 10; Human Rights Watch 7). Three interconnected themes emerge from the analysis: (1) resistance to violence, (2) intersectional struggles, and (3) reclaimed agency, each linking historical, mythical, and contemporary narratives to Nepal's gender equality challenges.

### Resistance to Gender-Based Violence

*Yogmaya* retells the life of Yogmaya Neupane, an early twentieth-century poet-activist who defied patriarchal practices such as child marriage, widow immolation, and caste-based restrictions.

The novel portrays her leadership in a collective protest through self-immersion in the Arun River, an act she frames as liberation rather than defeat: “We die to live free” (27). This radical gesture subverts the image of women as passive victims and reframes self-sacrifice as an act of agency. Such representation connects with contemporary activism in Nepal, where survivors of gender-based violence increasingly frame their narratives in terms of resilience and agency rather than victimhood (Rai 30).

Similarly, *Chreeharan* reimagines Draupadi’s disrobing in the *Mahabharata*. Traditionally narrated as her humiliation, Niharika repositions it as a defiant assertion of bodily autonomy. Draupadi’s declaration “My body is not your battlefield” becomes a powerful critique of patriarchal control, resonating with present-day campaigns against sexual violence in Nepal (48). By situating Draupadi’s defiance within contemporary discourses of bodily rights, the novel bridges myth with present realities, underscoring the longevity of gender oppression and the resilience of women’s resistance.

In Joshi’s anthology *Women, War, and Violence*, short stories such as “*The End of the War*” portray women confronting conflict-related violence. The female protagonist resists the narrative of victimhood by rebuilding her community after the devastation of war, asserting: “*I will not be defined by their war*” (Joshi 45). This insistence on self-definition mirrors Yogmaya’s collective defiance and Draupadi’s symbolic protest, reinforcing the idea that women’s voices are central to articulating alternatives to patriarchal violence. By voicing agency through reconstruction, Joshi’s protagonist extends the tradition of feminist resistance into the post-conflict sphere, suggesting that survival itself becomes a radical act of rewriting identity. Through dialogue, poetic imagery, and symbolic acts of resistance, these works amplify survivors’ voices and contribute to global feminist retellings that refuse silence (Showalter 42). Showalter’s argument that women’s writing disrupts canonical hierarchies is particularly relevant here, as Joshi’s short stories destabilize nationalist and patriarchal war narratives by placing marginalized women at the center, transforming silence into testimony and trauma into political speech.

Intersectionality emerges as a crucial theme in these texts. *Yogmaya* foregrounds caste oppression, as Yogmaya Neupane consistently rejected Brahminical hierarchies and embraced inclusivity by calling women across caste lines to unite in collective resistance: “Caste is a chain we must break” (Karki Niharika, 23). Her vision resonates with the contemporary feminist demand for the recognition of Dalit women’s struggles, which combine caste-based stigma with gendered subordination (UN Women 11; Rai 26).

*Chreeharan* expands the scope of marginalization by reframing Gandhari’s blindfold. Rather than interpreting it solely as wifely devotion, the text depicts it as a conscious protest against both patriarchal and ethnic erasure. Gandhari’s silence and blindness symbolize Madheshi and other minority women’s marginalization in Nepal’s Terai region, where ethnic and gender exclusions converge (Karki Niharika, 46). By transforming the blindfold into an act of resistance rather than submission, Niharika not only reclaims Gandhari’s agency but also critiques the systemic silencing of women who occupy doubly marginalized positions. This reading highlights how mythological retellings can expose contemporary realities, suggesting that Gandhari’s protest anticipates the struggles of Madheshi women against social invisibility and discriminatory citizenship laws, thereby linking epic silence with modern feminist defiance.

Similarly, Joshi’s story “*The Silent Survivor*” (72) narrates the resilience of a Tamang woman silenced during the civil war. Her statement- “*My voice was silenced, but my spirit speaks*” (75). It captures how marginalized ethnic women navigate survival and resistance amid violence.

The line transforms silence into testimony, asserting that even when physically suppressed, women's inner strength can transcend trauma. This depiction parallels Yogmaya's anti-caste defiance and Gandhari's symbolic protest, revealing how feminist retellings embed intersectional struggles into narrative form. By placing caste, ethnicity, and conflict at the center of women's experiences, these texts challenge mainstream feminist narratives and contribute to South Asian feminist scholarship, which insists on the necessity of attending to intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw 144). Crenshaw's intersectionality framework is crucial here because it clarifies how women like Joshi's Tamang survivor face overlapping systems of marginalization; ethnic discrimination, gender violence, and political silencing making their struggles distinct from those of upper-caste, urban women. In this way, Joshi's fiction not only records trauma but also theorizes resistance, showing how literature itself can act as a form of feminist knowledge production.

### Reclaimed Agency and Contemporary Activism

The retellings also foreground women's agency as central to feminist subjectivity. In *Yogmaya*, the protagonist's leadership is embodied in her cry: "I am the fire, not the ash" (Karki Niharika, 29), symbolizing transformative resistance. This resonates with Nepal's ongoing campaigns for sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), where women assert bodily and political autonomy (UN Women 13).

*Chreeharan* similarly redefines Draupadi not as a victim of shame but as a moral and political agent who confronts male authority: "Who dares chain my soul?" (Karki Niharika, *Chreeharan* 51). By repositioning Draupadi as an autonomous figure, Niharika connects myth to modern feminist praxis.

In Joshi's *Women, War, and Violence*, the protagonist of "The End of the War" demonstrates agency through action: "I build my future, brick by brick" (47). This narrative of reconstruction aligns with feminist movements in Nepal that link citizenship protests to women's leadership in community rebuilding (Rai 28). By privileging first-person narration, evocative imagery, and direct speech, these texts reclaim women's voices as authoritative and transformative.

The emphasis on agency resonates with global feminist retellings, such as Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which reimagines women not as mythological victims but as narrators of their own histories (14). By drawing parallels between Nepali retellings and global feminist interventions, the texts highlight literature's power to rewrite cultural memory and reshape women's roles in collective imagination. Together, these figures reveal a continuum of women's agency across historical, mythical, and conflict contexts, demonstrating how feminist retellings destabilize patriarchal scripts while offering new models of subjectivity.

### Connecting to 2025 Feminist Issues

These retellings align with Nepal's contemporary feminist landscape, where activism continues to challenge gender-based violence and discriminatory citizenship policies. Yogmaya is frequently invoked in feminist discourse as an icon of resistance whose defiance remains relevant in 2025 (Rai 30). The narratives of conflict survivors in Joshi's anthology complement Yogmaya's historical rebellion and *Chreeharan*'s mythological reimagining, offering models of survival, protest, and reconstruction that inform feminist debates.

By integrating historical (*Yogmaya*), mythical (*Chreeharan*), and contemporary (Joshi's anthology) perspectives, these works establish a continuum of resistance that links past struggles with present activism. They also contribute to global feminist discourse by situating Nepalese women's struggles within broader debates about subaltern voices, gender justice, and



intersectionality. Ultimately, these texts demonstrate how literature not only reflects but also shapes activism, providing cultural tools for confronting gender inequality and advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UN Women 5). The UN's emphasis on gender equality underscores how fictional narratives can operate beyond the literary sphere, serving as frameworks for envisioning social justice. In this way, Nepali feminist retellings both affirm the lived struggles of women and extend them into the realm of global policy, revealing literature's dual capacity to preserve cultural memory and inspire transformative change.

## Conclusion

This study has explored how Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya* (2018), *Chreeharan* (2019), and Sushma Joshi's edited anthology *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal* (2022) engage in feminist retellings that disrupt patriarchal narratives and foreground women's agency. By analyzing these texts through close reading and an intersectional feminist framework, three central themes emerged: resistance to gender-based violence, intersectional struggles across caste and ethnicity, and the reclamation of women's agency. Together, these works articulate a powerful continuum of feminist resistance that bridges historical, mythical, and contemporary narratives, situating Nepali women's struggles within broader global feminist discourses while remaining rooted in the specificity of Nepal's social realities.

One of the most striking insights is how literature functions as a space of resistance. *Yogmaya* reimagines the life of Yogmaya Neupane, a poet-activist who defied patriarchal traditions, challenging both the Rana state and the caste system. Her defiance culminating in collective protest through immersion in the Arun River emerges as a radical feminist praxis that refuses passive victimhood. Instead, Yogmaya transforms the act of dying into a collective assertion of autonomy: "We die to live free" (Niharika 27). Similarly, *Chreeharan* transforms Draupadi's disrobing from humiliation to defiance, thereby reframing a mythical scene into a critique of systemic sexual violence: "My body is not your battlefield" (Niharika 48). Joshi's anthology continues this narrative of resistance by portraying women who, rather than succumbing to war's devastation, rebuild communities in the aftermath of violence: "I will not be defined by their war" (Joshi 45). These retellings converge in their refusal to accept silence and victimhood, instead recasting women as active agents of transformation.

Another major contribution of these texts is their attention to intersectionality. *Yogmaya* explicitly critiques caste oppression, uniting women across caste boundaries and giving particular visibility to Dalit women's struggles (Karki Niharika, 23). In *Chreeharan*, Gandhari's blindfold, reinterpreted as a protest rather than a mark of obedience, symbolizes both patriarchal silencing and ethnic exclusion, mirroring Madheshi women's marginalization in Nepal's Terai (Karki Niharika, 46). Joshi's story "The Silent Survivor" presents the resilience of a Tamang woman silenced by conflict, her voice resonating as a symbol of ethnic and gendered survival (75). By centering Dalit, Madheshi, and Tamang women, these texts move beyond upper-caste, urban feminist perspectives to present a Nepal-specific feminist praxis. This aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's insistence that feminist analysis must account for how overlapping systems of oppression; gender, caste, ethnicity, and conflict that compound women's marginalization (142). It also echoes Chandra Talpade Mohanty's call for locally grounded feminist approaches that resist the universalizing tendencies of Western feminism (22).

At the heart of these retellings is the reclamation of agency. In *Yogmaya*, the protagonist declares: "I am the fire, not the ash" (Karki Niharika, 29), a declaration that resonates with contemporary Nepali feminist campaigns demanding sexual and reproductive health rights (UN

Women 13). In *Chreeharan*, Draupadi's voice refuses to be contained by shame: "Who dares chain my soul?" (Karki Niharika, 51). Meanwhile, in Joshi's *Women, War, and Violence*, the protagonist of "The End of the War" insists on her capacity to rebuild: "I build my future, brick by brick" (Joshi 47). Each of these narratives positions women not as subjects of pity but as authors of their futures. This emphasis on agency aligns with Elaine Showalter's argument that women's writing disrupts literary hierarchies by foregrounding subjectivity and resistance (37). It also resonates with Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which exemplifies how retellings allow women to narrate their own stories and reclaim silenced voices (14).

The resonance between these literary retellings and Nepal's 2025 feminist landscape is significant. Contemporary feminist movements in Nepal confront stark realities: 11.4 percent of women aged 15-49 experience gender-based violence, and citizenship laws continue to discriminate against women, especially in their ability to pass nationality to their children (UN Women 10; Human Rights Watch 7). Activists amplify their struggles through digital platforms, circulating narratives under hashtags such as #NepalFeminism and #SRHRNepal. Within this climate, *Yogmaya* is invoked as a feminist icon whose radical defiance continues to inspire; Draupadi's reframed resistance resonates with campaigns against sexual violence; and Joshi's conflict-survivor narratives speak directly to the lived realities of marginalized women. By connecting literary retellings with activism, these texts demonstrate that literature is not isolated from politics but actively participates in shaping feminist discourse and influencing cultural memory.

This analysis also highlights a gap in Nepali feminist scholarship that these texts help address. While scholars such as Seira Tamang have written extensively on women's political agency, the cultural dimensions of feminist struggle remain less explored (201). Priya Sharma's studies of gender dynamics highlight post-2000 social changes but pay limited attention to fiction's role in reframing intersectional identities (66). Similarly, Anjali Rai's work on ethnic marginalization in conflict literature addresses women's struggles but does not foreground retellings as feminist interventions (28). By focusing on *Yogmaya*, *Chreeharan*, and *Women, War, and Violence*, this study bridges that gap, showing how feminist retellings in contemporary Nepali fiction articulate political and cultural critiques that are as crucial as activism itself.

The findings also underscore literature's role in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5): Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (UN Women 5). By reframing women's struggles, these narratives not only represent gendered realities but also advocate for structural change. Literature, in this sense, functions as both critique and praxis, challenging entrenched inequalities while imagining alternative futures. Feminist retellings in Nepali fiction highlight the urgency of inclusive narratives that reflect Dalit, Madheshi, and ethnic minority women's experiences, ensuring that efforts toward gender equality do not replicate existing exclusions.

In final reflection, feminist retellings in Nepali fiction provide more than literary reimaginations; they operate as cultural interventions that reshape collective memory, contest patriarchal power, and energize feminist activism. *Yogmaya* links historical resistance to contemporary demands for justice, *Chreeharan* reinterprets mythical silences into defiance, and Joshi's anthology situates women's resilience within the lived realities of conflict. Collectively, these works weave a fabric of feminist consciousness that is historical, mythological, and contemporary all at once.

The analysis reveals that Nepali feminist retellings are not peripheral cultural products but central to envisioning gender justice in the post-2025 landscape. By amplifying women's voices,

challenging entrenched hierarchies, and centering marginalized identities, these narratives expand feminist scholarship and activism alike. As Nepal continues to grapple with gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, and intersectional exclusions, literature emerges as both a mirror of struggle and a blueprint for transformation. In reframing women's stories, these retellings not only recover silenced pasts but also imagine more equitable futures, reaffirming literature's role as a vital site of feminist praxis. In this way, Nepali feminist fiction not only reconstructs the past but also equips feminist movements with cultural resources to confront post-2025 challenges, reinforcing the power of narrative as a form of social transformation.

### Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. Canongate, 2005.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-99.
- Ghimire, Bhanu. *Gender and Nepali Literature: A Critical Overview*. Sajha Prakashan, 2015.
- Human Rights Watch. *Nepal: Events of 2024*. Human Rights Watch, 2024, [www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/nepal](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/nepal). Accessed 20 Aug. 2025.
- Hutt, Michael. *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature*. U of California P, 1991.
- Joshi, Sushma, editor. *Women, War, and Violence in Select Fiction from Nepal*. FinePrint, 2022.
- Karki Niharika, Neelam. *Yogmaya*. FinePrint, 2018.
- . *Chreeharan*. FinePrint, 2019.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP, 2003.
- Rai, Anjali. *Ethnicity, Gender, and Marginalization in Post-Conflict Nepal*. Martin Chautari, 2021.
- Sharma, Priya. *Gender and Social Change in Contemporary Nepal*. Himal Books, 2018.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Expanded edition, Princeton UP, 1999.
- Tamang, Seira. "The Politics of 'Developing Nepali Women.'" *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2001, pp. 127-72.
- Thapa, Manjushree. "The Role of Proverbs in Reinforcing Gender Hierarchies." *Nepali Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2016, pp. 110-22.
- UN Women. *Progress of the World's Women 2023-2024: Gender Equality in a Changing World*. UN Women, 2024, [www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2023-2024](http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2023-2024). Accessed 18 Aug. 2025.