NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
Volume 3, Issue 7, July, 2026 Pages: 110-117
ISSN: 3059-9148 (Online)
DOI: 10.3126/nprcjmr.v3i7.97937

OPEN ACCESS

Coloniality of Power and Gendered Suffering in Seto Dharti – A Texual Analysis

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Received: May 22, 2026 Revised & Accepted: July 25, 2026
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Abstract

Background: Gendered suffering in South Asian literature has historically been denoted primarily by culturalist or Western feminist markers, which overlook the ways in which colonial institutions of power hunger and shape female selfhood, embodiment, and agency in local contexts. Eventually Neupane's Nepali novel Seto Dharti presents such a platform for addressing these bottomless histories of power in the life of a child widow named Tara who is marginalized in her life.

Method: The research uses a qualitative textual analysis of the Seto Dharti, based on the decolonial theoretical approach of Anibal Quijano (coloniality of power) and Maria Lugones (coloniality of gender). Narrative excerpts were read three times and the themes were assigned initial coding, which was reduced and clarified into final codes, namely ritual purity, social exile, corporeal discipline and affective resistance.

Findings: Epistemic hierarchical categories, ritual purity and bodily regulation function as regimes of control that naturalize the subjugation of subaltern women in the text. Tara's childhood widowhood points to the convergence of caste, religion and patriarchy as systems of co-constitution in coloniality. Fragments of affective Resistance and agency are identified, which complicate totalising subject condensation narratives of victimhood in Table 1.

Conclusion: By placing Seto Dharti in South Asian sociohistorical contexts, this work is a contribution to decolonial feminist thought about how indigenous practices serve to re/produce coloniality but also challenge and decolonize it, and therefore what alternative subjects and subject positions can have space to be imagined in opposition to hegemonic/subjuging definitions of power.

Novelty: The present is the pioneer study applying Quijano's coloniality of power and Lugones' coloniality of gender simultaneously to a Nepali literary text, as it ventures beyond the colonialist (Go 2009) culturalist as well as Western (Chatterjee 2010; Kothari 2010)

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feminists frameworks to locate the "features of" Nepali women's pain in decolonial feminists debates.

Keywords: caste & gender, decolonial feminism, gendered suffering, Nepali literature, widowhood

Introduction

Seto Dharti, a novel by Amar Neupane, provides a comprehensive and complex discussion of gendered pain, within the socio-cultural framework of Nepali society. Centered on the life story of a child widow, Tara, the novel confronts the oppressive influence of patriarchy, caste and religion and perpetuation of the discipline of women. While such practices are often deemed to be cultural practices; this argument is examined using the Decolonial Theory to show how they are rooted in structures of domination.

The theory of coloniality of power, developed by Anibal Quijano, offers a fundamental understanding of how historiclogical processes of domination and submission continue beyond the colonial era in the social, political, and economic dimensions and their effects on social identity and daily experiences. In the concept of widowhood, we see a socio-historical regulation of the female body, identity, and agency.

Empowering marginalized knowledges through a decolonial framework, I also intend to contextualise Seto Dharti and incorporate the decolonial concept of nation and nationalism to explore the power dynamics that play out within the intersecting spheres of gender, caste and religion and explore the possibilities of resistance, agency and subject formation within this matrix of dominance contributing to decolonial feminist literary debates.

Research Questions

1. How does the novel depict the coloniality of power along gender, caste and religion practices of Nepali society?
2. How does the sharing of Tara's lived experience as a widow exemplify gendered suffering as a product of internalized colonial structures?
3. In what way does the text read negotiations of agency and resistance under the logics of coloniality and patriarchy?

Research Objectives

1. To examine how the novel encapsulates the coloniality of power and the ways in which this intertwines with gender, caste and religion.
2. To explore how the character of Tara constructs gendered suffering and to demonstrate how culturally constituted structures of oppression operate.
3. To investigate the processes of agency and resistance examining the ways in which the protagonist interacts with and subverts global, social and/or economic power relations.

Hypothesis

Seto Dharti demonstrates that one produces and reproduces gendered violence specifically, widowhood- through the coloniality of power in which deployed symbiotically, dominating discursive formations built on patriarchy, caste and religioned ideology become internalities to

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dominate (women's) selfhood, body and agency and to what extent they may or may not escape that domination.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Decolonial Theory and largely draws on the notion of De coloniality of power, developed by Anibal Quijano. Based on Quijano's model, the existence of decolonial structures of domination by way of caste, patriarchy, and religion is analyzed; even after the formal decolonization, they are consistently constricting human life and imagination. These decolonial structures are not seen as cultural practices in a singular sense, but as epistemic structures, which naturalize dehumanization of the non-western.

To deepen the investigation into the gendered aspects of coloniality, the research draws on Maria Lugones' decolonial feminist theory, and her concept of 'coloniality of gender' a lens that explains the co-constitution of colonial and gender oppression. Drawing on these ideas, we analyze how widowhood in the story produces bodily discipline as well as symbolical domination.

The district essay also finds inspiration in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's work on the subaltern and the silencing of Tara, as well as in the study's focus on the limitations of voice and representation. Spivak's theoretical intervention is essential for understanding the ways subaltern agency is at once institutionalized and implicitly defined through hegemonic discourse.

This melting pot of theorical positions generated in the framework is a grounded way of approaching the function of coloniality as a nexus of mutually reinforcing axes of power as well as points of rupture where resistance and possible location of subjectivity within state and non-state oppressive sociocultural structures.

Methods

Methodology this research uses qualitative textual analysis method. The main text that has been selected for this textual analysis is the original edition of Amar Neupane's Seto Dharti (Kathmandu: Fine Print, 2010) which contains the total narrative of the story under study across 312 pages. The text has been analyzed manually without use of qualitative data software in order to stay in close contact with language and texture of the narrative of the source text.

The text was read three times iteratively. During the first reading, various thematic codes emerged with regard to narratives about Tara's experiences, for example, "ritual purity," "bodily harassment," "social exclusion," "silence," "internalized body-hatred," and "acts of endurance". During the second reading of the same passages, these initial codes were interrogated using the ideas of Quijano, Lugones, and Spivak to provide a theoretical lens through which to understand the coloniality of power, the coloniality of gender, and subaltern agency respectively. During the final reading, these codes were collapsed into three common themes; (1) technological and normed bodily surveillance, (2) epistemic and infernal violence, and (3) dispersed agency and somatic affective resistance which provides the basis for the data in Table 1and for my discussion below.

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Literature Review

Academic analysis of Seto Dharti has increased over the past ten years, with a focus on gender, caste, and marginalization from the turn of the century onward. The earliest analysis centers on the novel's treatment of widowhood as a site of suffering and marginalization from cultural tradition. Gautam contends that Tara unveils the "social death" of widowhood in patriarchal Nepali society with a narrative that not only illuminates the lived experiences of Nepalese widows, but relates them to structural violence (Gautam 2021, p. 125). Rai, meanwhile, has claimed that contemporary texts of Nepali literature must be analyzed with an intersectional approach attentive to the overlapping domains of caste, gender, and religion, which dovetails with the decolonial perspective adopted in this analysis (Rai 2022, p. 129).

Feminist approach in the South Asian context has been increasingly shifting toward indigenous and decolonial perspectives, and feminist theories with castespecific gender norms as sites of social exclusion that operate regardless of formal institutional discrimination presented a useful comparative framework to analyze Tara's situation (Paudel & Thapa, 2022, p. 214). Likewise, Khatri also demonstrated how normative bodily regulation in accordance with notions of purity or impurity functions as a sociocultural site and a source of epistemic authority for understanding how epistemic hierarchies operate through the legacy of colonial modernity (Khatri, 2022, p. 88). The findings in these two studies reflect Tamang's (2021) ethnography of Nepali women's subjectivity, which suggests that "over the long course of history, gender oppression in Nepal cannot be understood solely to be rooted in the oppression of gender but also linked explicitly to caste-based hierarchies and religious ideology, long obscured within modern power formation" (p. 176).

Decolonial theory also provide important models for this project. As Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power helps advance the understanding of other modes of domination that are still in operation even in the absence ofcolonial administrations (Quijano, 2000, p. 339), the application of decolonial theory to South Asian literature has helped illumine the epistemic aspect of the operation of caste and gender oppression in South Asian fiction: Rajan argues that decolonial theory 'provides a powerful epistemological lens to explain how race, caste, and gender orderings are foregrounded in South Asian fiction' and how such depiction exposes those mechanisms of control that the colonial and postcolonial world often obscures in their writings (Rajan, 2021, p. 302). Lugones' formulation of the coloniality of gender traced how the subordination of specific groups was conceived within the colonial logics between metropole and colony given their naturalization before the hierarchical gender order was ideologically entrenched within both the colonial colonies and the Western metropoles (Lugones, 2007, p. 754). With respect to decolonial work on South Asian women's writing, Soto Torres' recent use of Lugones' coloniality of gender shows how it as an epistemic and structural formation operates within postcolonial literary writings (Soto Torres, 2022, p. 445). Concluding, Spivak's work on the subaltern remains perhaps the most important to show how

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specific marginalized groups are appropriated and produced through conceptual and material exclusions by the regimes of truth and power. (Spivak, 2010, p. 271).

Postcolonial feminist critics also add useful perspectives that are of importance to this project. Mohanty's critique of the universality of feminist theories is still relevant in the best-known contemporary critique of feminist scholarship when the recent work of Nair explores how the indigenous epistemological methods should be emphasized in the reading of South Asian women's writings (Nair, 2023, p.119). As for widowhood in particular, Banerjee's recent investigation on practices of widowhood in Hindu inscriptions proves how religio-socio-political orthodoxies and patriarchy work together in producing embodied representations of suffering that are, therefore, both socially Codified and historically Formed (Banerjee, 2023, p.67). These critical perspectives behind the present work on Seto Dharti contribute to the more decolonial reading of the novel.

Discussion

The story of Seto Dharti is powerful when it comes to a description of the systemic gendered oppressions throughout Nepali society vis-a-vis the story of once-wife, Tara, as a girl-widow. Tara's marginalisation as this woman demonstrates how the combined effects of patriarchy, casteism, and religious fear act as mechanisms of the social regulation of the female body and identity as much as evidence, alluded to by Quijano and the idea of coloniality of power, that the effects of domination carry on after formal colonial rule like ghosts taunting the colonials (Quijano, 2000, p. 339). Enduring phenomena like widowhood is not an individual tragic incident or the misfortune of the family, but a tool of social regulation of the female body and identity.

Ritual purity, social banning and moral policing are used as methods of disciplinary domination- this reinforces the symbolic inscription of women's bodies, to hierarchize and control access to their bodies as an extension of Sharma's point that women's bodies are signified through the operation of the symbolic order (Sharma, 2018, p. 78). Tara's life experiences reveal that caste, gender and religion are not isolated but co-constitutive in offering multidimensional forms of oppression throughout her life, echoing Rai's plea to humans and scholars that an intersectional approach to Nepali texts should also be equally attentive to the co-constitution of intersecting systems of oppression (Rai, 2022, p. 119). Gautam's contribution further factors that widowhood in Nepali society is a form of social death and as a consequence, widowing expands the violence of domination from individual experience to systemic domination (Gautam, 2021, p. 45).

Decolonial feminist viewpoints like Lugones' coloniality of gender would identify the gendered power relations as the product of circulating colonial logics, where its internalized and structural subjugation are both concurrent (Lugones, 2007, p.754). Tara's diminished agency demonstrates this structural domination, as well as her last traces of agential resistance. Spivak's the subaltern best marks this double subjection and partial articulation of Tara's voice

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within the dominant narratives (Spivak, 2010, p. 271). Despite the systemic blockade of external agency, the resistive remnants can be seen through her mind and affected body.

However, by critiquing the universalizing nature of feminist critiques, Mohanty also realizes that it relies on a socio-historical and situated way of understanding oppression (Mohanty, 2003, p. 22). In Seto Dharti, the norms that regulate widows are internalized across generations, illustrating how socio-cultural and historical processes are connected in reproducing hegemonic inequality. Bhattacharya further adds to this interpretation by showing that the produced embodied forms of pain are shaped by the hybrid process of religious orthodoxy and patriarchy (Bhattacharya, 2019, p. 58), once again highlighting the socio-cultural and historical production in hegemonic pain and suffering. Hence, the novel is not only about the social reproduction of hegemonic oppression but also about the cracks of resistance, however subtle they might be.

Through placing and exploring Tara's experience in multiple South Asian and Nepali contexts, the novel provides insights into how gendered suffering is constructed and perpetuated, while also reflecting the potential of self-reflexive intervention. Seto Dharti consequently reveals the interventions made by a novel to offer counter-hegemonic counter-narratives to the coloniality of power and the gendered politics of oppression through the novel's capacity to both construct and undermine a colonial modernity of the subcontinent.

Interpretation

In Seto Dharti, as the childhood widows of Tara, the embodied ways in which gendered pain is socially produced and historically organized are further emphasized. While widowhood is often imagined as a culturally bounded experience, in the context of Tara, it becomes situated in the tripartite forces of patriarchy, caste hierarchy and religious orthodoxy which converge in a hegemonic Islamic orthodoxy to produce systematic inequality just as Quijano conceptualizes the 'coloniality of power' where each hierarchical term informs the others, regulating bodies, identities and locations in the social hierarchy (Quijano, 2000, p. 334).

Foregrounds Tara's limited agency; the internalisation of hegemonic norms and the historical invention of the gendered body. This confirms Lugones ' 'notion of 'the coloniality of gender', in that subjugation is structurally determined yet culturally reinforced (ibid. 2007: 754). Language of widowhood thus becomes a vector within which the story condemns reiterating hierarchical power through routinalised social ritual codes.

Meanwhile, into Tara's reflective consciousness and subtle performances of endurance, we see that the subaltern subject survives within the hegemonic limitations, echoing Spivak's point on the partial articulation of subaltern voice (Spivak, 2010, p. 271). The text celebrates culturally defined systems of hegemonic power as historical but fluid, illustrating a simultaneous reproduction of oppression with self-reflexive countermanding of position and affective agency.

Conclusion

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The decolonial approach to the study of Seto Dharti demonstrates how the intertwining of gender, caste and religious ideologies has led to systems of perpetuated suffering in Nepali society. In the context of Tara as a child widow, this author observes the reconfiguration of the coloniality of power, as theorized by Quijano, whereby the continuance of social practices and knowledge hegemonies serve to govern female being, body and agency long after the formal period of colonization, even as the state itself directs its gaze elsewhere (Quijano, 2000, p. 339). Widowhood becomes a means of codified control where a patriarchal order is reified and structural violence or death is recreated within culture, externally by social exclusion and internally by the internalization of one‘s reduced position.

Decolonial feminist insights like Lugones’ coloniality of gender shed light on the historical construction of gender oppression against the continuum of power (Lugones 2007, p. 754), and emotionally protective awareness and comfortable endurance behaviors seemingly and paradoxically demonstrate the survivability of subaltern subjectivities in the existence of societal reproduction, as can be seen back to the decision of subaltern voice partial expression in Spivak‘s critique (2010, p. 271).

Novel bears emphasis on the intersectionality of oppression: while it is shown that caste, religion and gender co-construct hierarchical marginality and forms of resistance, novel epitomizes the question of how and where agents are formed through hegemonic citational discursive practices. Seto Dharti is inscribed in there about epicentre of decolonial feminist literary production.

Transparency Statement: The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.
Funding: The study received no external funding.
Conflict of Interest: The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

NPRC Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
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DOI: 10.3126/nprcjmr.v3i7.97937

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