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THEORETICAL/CRITICAL ESSAY ARTICLE

## Yogmaya and Durga Devi: Different Modes of Resistance to Patriarchy

Kumari Lama

Department of English, Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa, Nepal

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*Corresponding Author:* Kumari Lama, Email: [klama54@gmail.com](mailto:klama54@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses Yogmaya and Durga Devi's modes of resistance against Brahmanic rigidity in Nepali society a century ago. It is based on Barbara Nimri Aziz's Yogmaya & Durga Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal (2020). Yogmaya and Durga Devi have resisted against Hindu patriarchal orthodoxy that has inflicted immense structural domination on women and validated various social injustices. Yogmaya has taken path of religion and spirituality, whereas Durga Devi fetches justice to victims through law. Hindu values were extremely rigid towards women that burning sati, child marriage, and widow system used to be the part of their life. Amidst patriarchal austerity these daring women raise their voice for social reforms taking distinct paths of resistance. Nonetheless, both voice against women's violence, corruption, and social injustices caused by Hindu authoritarian rules and religious fanaticism. This paper examines Yogmaya and Durga Devi's contrasting modes of resistance against Hindu patriarchal domination employing Judith Butler's perspective on patriarchal normative heterosexuality that treats several bodies including women as 'unlivable' and Margaret S. Archer's idea of resistance and human agency as fundamental theoretical backing.*

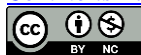
**Keywords:** Brahmanic rigidity, patriarchy, resistance, social injustice, women

### Introduction

Barbara Nimri Aziz encounters a group of religious ascetics (Bhaktinis) when she walks through the hills of Eastern Nepal in 1981. She hears the verse sang by women which ignites her curiosity; her enthusiasm leads her towards dissenting characters Yogmaya Neupane and Durga Devi Karki Ghimire. Aziz's immense dedication of unearthing the hidden reality of rebel women makes her visit Arun Valley hermitage at Manakamana six times in between 1981 to 1986. After her long research involvement about Yogmaya, hajur bani, and Durga Devi, she publishes a book, *Heir to a Silent Song: Two Rebel Women of Nepal (2001)*. Nearly after two decades of first publication, recently she has edited and published another book under the title *Yogmaya & Durga*

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*Devi: Rebel Women of Nepal (2020)*. I have taken her latest book to explore Yogmaya and Durga Devi's distinct modes of resistance.

In the early twentieth century, Nepali society was highly under the grip of Hindu patriarchal austerity when women and marginal castes and communities were immensely dominated. The society was engrossed by caste hierarchy, socio-cultural violence against women and social injustices. Amidst rigid Brahmanic patriarchal social circumstances, Yogmaya Neupane from Nepaledanda, Bhojpur started raising her dissenting voice against Hindu patriarchal normativity. She voiced against women's subjugation and social injustices entering inside the religious system itself. She spread social awareness among people through her verse, "hazurbani" and continuously resisted against Brahmanic rigidity.

Another dissenting character Durga Devi Karki Ghimire, a widow was equally audacious like Yogmaya from Arun Valley. Nonetheless she adopted different path of resistance; she took help of law and legal system to fight for women's rights and social injustice. She was a practical and action oriented woman. She exhibited modern feminist's spirit when she filled case against her in-laws for her property rights. She voiced for victimized girls and women for justice and rights. She equally resisted against corrupt bureaucrats, civil administrations, and myriads of social injustices existed in the society.

Yogmaya and Durga Devi both fought for women's rights, social reform, and justice; however, their mode of resistance differs. Yogmaya takes non-violent path of spirituality to challenge Hindu religious rigidities, whereas, Durga Devi searches practical and legal ways of dealing with injustice and corruptions. This paper has examined and analyzed different modes of resistance Yogmaya and Durga Devi have embraced to fight against Brahmanic patriarchal authority.

### **Yogmaya and Her Resistance**

The early twentieth century Nepali society was immensely under the domination of Junga Bahadur Rana's Muluki Ain (country law). Orthodox Hindu religious codes, priestly values, and Brahmanic system used to rule the society. The whole nation was under the radiance of Hindu ruling system established by Manu's code known as Manusmriti that explicitly initiated women's domination and established caste hierarchy. Hindu women used to get burnt alive as satis or compelled to stay as widows for whole life; the lower castes used to be treated as untouchable and impure. Within such social circumstances Yogmaya Neupane emerges as an audacious dissident in the Arun Valley of Eastern Nepal. She speaks against unbearable gender and caste discriminations, and rampant social injustices caused by Brahmanic rigidity.

Patriarchal society dominates women through heterosexual gender binary. Man gets higher rank in the gender hierarchy, whereas woman remains as his subordinate. Simon de Beauvoir has already convinced the world that gender is nothing but a social construct. As Beauvoir argues, "One is not born a woman but, rather becomes one" (301). Nonetheless, patriarchy has taken complete control over women's body. As a matter of fact, it takes woman either as a procreating vessel or a mere flesh of quenching carnal thirst of men. Beside that women have no worth; they are subject "unlivable" within phallogocentric structure as Judith Butler points out (3). Butler's idea of unlivable turns highly applicable to Nepali women who do not have their existence without men at their side. Hindu women used to get burnt alive with dead husband in this society which lucidly points towards horrific patriarchal domination against women. Yogmaya has raised her voice against Brahmanic patriarchy that never acknowledges women for their contribution, it rather uses and exploits them as commodity.

Yogmaya develops immense rebellious feelings towards discriminatory Brahmanic social values since her young age. She executes her dissenting characteristics very gracefully in her life. She challenges Hindu religious authority eloping with a man she loves despite being a child-widow. Undoubtedly, her elopement exhibits her resistance as well as her strong punch against patriarchal authority that incarcerates women's freedom. Barbara Nimri Aziz narrates the particular incident of Yogmaya's life and writes:

Before she became recognized as a savant, she endured years of difficulties, starting with the banishment from her village Nepaledanda. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century she had to run away because of her liaison with a man. She went to India. She returned home only after she was more than thirty years old. (159)

Yogmaya's decision turns unimaginably rebellious and defaming to her family as well as to the society she belongs. She listens her heart and dares to cross the boundary patriarchal society has drawn for women. She runs away with the man she loves. In this regards, Ninu Chapagain takes her as a dauntless fighter and a rebel, who has attacked against traditional malpractices (85). During Rana's regime speaking or acting against Hindu social values was like inviting own sufferings, which Yogmaya never took care of. Even though she has to stay a bit longer in India, her exile implants lot of maturity, intelligence, and determination in her. After getting back to Arun Valley she starts voicing against Brahmanic rigidity and lethal patriarchal social values.

Yogmaya voices against each social system that is against humanity. She is intolerant to Brahmanic authority that denies women's existence and treats them as objects; she expresses equally dissatisfaction towards caste hierarchy that divides people. Furthermore, she hammers Hindu orthodoxy entering within its domain and taking religious path for her resistance. Initially, she gains social acceptability through religion: and then she gets inner strength and consciousness by her long meditations. Illuminated by the inner light after meditations, she starts voicing against myriads of social injustices. Yogmaya prioritizes equality and justice to everyone and even demands "Dharma Raj" to Rana Rulers. In this context Aziz says: "Dharma Raj she articulated is a powerful concept. After meditating on the phrase for a very long time, I finally translated Dharma Raj as "justice". Others may prefer "human right" or "social justice"" (23). Certainly, she wants everyone to be treated equally and respectfully so that they can prosper together. Yogmaya wants total reform of social system. Matrika Timsina analyses Yogmaya's Dharma Raj Movement as the movement of social reform. He points that she is influenced by several religious movements going on in India against British rulers (12). Timsina's argument indicates higher level of her consciousness: she seems to be well aware of political and social situation going on around. Consequently, she voices against social disparities and demands for social reform.

Yogmaya denies caste system since it imposes hierarchy. Even though she is born in Brahmin family, she never discriminates people in terms of their caste and thereby welcomes everyone in her place. Many widows, lower castes people, indigenous groups, social outcastes, and suppressed people start hoarding in her dwelling. Nevertheless, Yogmaya gets initial success due to her close association with high-caste women and men like herself claims Aziz (162). Possibly her earlier acquaintance with her own caste people is her strategy to enter inside Brahmanic system so that she can get enough support from the privileged group. In fact, she becomes popular among Brahmin and Chettri; they start accepting her bani (message) that opposes Hindu religious rigidities, caste and gender discriminations, and priestly corruption prevailing in the society.

Yogmaya reveals her rebellious attitude towards existing social injustices. She directly challenges Brahmanic system and Rana rulers' indifference towards widespread corruption and inequality. She expresses her dissatisfaction and anger through her verse. Her compelling verse attacks priests and their diminishing characteristics.

Nowadays Brahmins, live as you wish,  
Like lords, you plunder the poor.  
How corrupted, you sell your trust.  
How deep, the roots of your greed. (144)

Yogmaya shows her direct dissatisfaction towards increasing greed and corruption of priests, who plunder stepping on people's faith. They are tricky enough to twist real religious message and use their knowledge of Vedas and Puranas for their own benefits. Yogmaya is audacious enough to challenge the whole social system a century ago when Brahmanic laws used to be the code of nation. Dipesh Neupane's opinion absolutely fits with her personality. As he says, "Yogmaya was a revolutionary voice who launched her protest against social evils and attacked Brahmins, Rana rulers, and government officials for their injustice and aberrations" (ii). In fact she is a firebrand and a real dissident, who voices against gender inequality, caste hierarchy, and various forms of injustices.

Yogmaya propagates social awareness among people through her bani. Even residing far away in a rural Eastern hill, she becomes successful to arrest the attention of powerful Rana rulers of Kathmandu while she unfolds her political awareness in her banis. Gyanmani Nepal claims that Yogmaya has some influences of Indian and Russian revolution when she focuses on religio-economic and social reforms (396). There is possibility of her being influenced by sociopolitical movement of India as she has stayed in India for long time. Aziz agrees with Nepal's view and says: "West Bengal was a fertile political ground for young dissidents, and at the time Yogmaya stayed there she would find diverse ideologies to ponder over" (166). She might have developed political consciousness along with her spiritual search in several places of India. She does not seem to be a sole religious ascetic in her hazurbani. She speaks wittily about ongoing social injustices and corrupt Hindu social system. She points out proliferating social injustice during Rana rules without getting intimidated by their powerful status. In fact she threatens them for ongoing activities and demands for the justice. One of her verses says,

When greed and malice fade,  
The earth will tremble, the corrupt will fall.  
Teen Sarkar, hear my verse.  
It's time for justice. (154)

Yogmaya highlights increasing corruption, towering greed of elites, and the urgency of social justice in her verse. She seems to be very determined about the issue of social reform and justice. Her dauntlessness gets visible when she gives ultimatum to the power blocs for social justice. As Aziz postulates, "Yogmaya finally confronted the ruler with an ultimatum: "If you do not grant us justice, we will die" she declared" (144). She attacks Hindu rulers stepping on the religious ladder. Brahmin murder is taken as unpardonable crime in Hindu religion; she bargains with powerful Rana Rulers holding the same value. Yogmaya is a real insurgent, who courageously raises her voice against Brahmanic rigidity and the power center. Moreover, she continuously threatens Rana rulers demanding for social reform and justice.

Yogmaya remains firm and demands for equality and justice for every individual in the society. She denies Brahmanic domination towards widow and marries the man she loves. One of her followers Manamaya narrates boldness of Yogmaya to Aziz. She explains, "Our Hazur eloped! She was just a girl; yet see how courageous she was"

(165). In fact, it is an example of tremendous courage of Yogmaya; she disregards Hindu restriction towards widows. Her action shows complete disowning of strict Hindu social system. On top of that, she shows her dissenting personality voicing against child marriage, widow system, and several discriminations. As Mathura Prasad Shrestha argues, “Probably Yogmaya was the first rebel in Nepal. She took initiation for the end of sati system and slavery” (175). She may not be the first rebel of Nepal; nevertheless, she is one of the rebels, who challenges the whole Brahmanic rigid social values. Her bani lucidly presents her favor for equality that urges to rise above the fences of caste and creed.

Before I owned a caste  
Belonging to Brahmin clan.  
Now look, I have no caste.  
Ho, I chucked it there in the hearth. (177)

Someone who is brought up in Hindu family can never think of rejecting caste system; nonetheless, Yogmaya denies Hindu *barna* system that hierarchizes people. She does not hesitate to throw her higher caste that only fuels for caste domination. It reveals her complete transformation as an insurgent, dissident, and a rebel. Her rebellious characteristics gets justified when Dambar Bahadur Basnet remembers her and narrates what she says: “To overcome the pain and sufferings of people we don’t have to hesitate for detention or even the death” (196). Her extreme opposing voice against Hindu orthodoxy becomes unbearable for the society. Aziz hears some rumors about Yogmaya: they say she is a religious fanatic, a communist and a prostitute (xxix). Normally patriarchal society attacks and shames a rebellious woman by spreading rumors about her personal life. Similarly, Yogmaya becomes a victim of conformist Hindu structural attitude. Nonetheless, she keeps on resisting against Hindu patriarchal rigidity through her banis.

### **Durga Devi and Her Resistance**

Yogmaya has laid a strong foundation for social reform and nonconformist spirit in Arun Valley. During 1940s many of her followers have started chanting and singing her banis. They gradually move down-river to Manakaman Shrine, which later turns to be a famous Manakaman hermitage. After Yogmaya, Durga Devi, a widow rises to be a strong voice against social injustice in the area. However, her resistance differs to Yogmaya, as she seeks legal solution to fix administrative corruptions and for social reform. Aziz takes her to be a dissident who markedly uses different strategy to win justice. She says: “Durga Devi was determined to challenge the status quo; ... She applied her sense of justice to assist others” (73). She uses her legal knowledge to fight for women’s right; firstly, she claims for her own property rights. As a widow, her property claim itself becomes a rebellion act against Hindu patriarchal society then.

Durga Devi’s assertion for her legal rights reveals her feminist reasoning. Her daring personality and sense of justice get visible since her childhood. As Aziz narrates, she travels to capital with her mother to ask justice for her imprisoned father and brother at the age of 12 in 1928. She manages to halt the imperial carriage and shouts, “My brother, my father; set them free” (86). Surprisingly, her voice is heard and her father and brother are released shortly by the authority. Voicing for justice in front of Ranas was impossible during Rana’s rule. However, Durga Devi dares to speak for justice even in her young age. It exhibits her dissent characteristics, which turns more rebellious along with time.

Property right and economic independence remain at the center of men’s strong social position. Private property and family lineage of man instigated for the

establishment of patriarchal social system in the past. Many social critics claim that the equal position between man and woman got gradually disrupted and resulted into gender hierarchy. Men's supremacy and women's subordination connect with their being deprived of resources and lack of property rights. As Frederick Engels claims, "The overthrow of mother right was the world historic defeat of female sex. The man seized reins in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children" (67). The concept of private property and family domesticated women and imprisoned her inside the household chores. At the same time, it also changed her identity and made her a personal property of her husband.

Consequently, they have become commodity; patriarchy has coded social values on their bodies. In Butler's term patriarchal normative heterosexuality treats human beings as "more human" and "less human" (8): obviously women are less human. The person who is not even regarded as human has no rights to claim for their human rights. However Durga Devi dares to claim for her basic rights like today's feminist activists shouting for their rights. In this regards, Durga Devi carries the spirit of modern feminist. Aziz analyses her characteristics and claims her to be an activist and a social reformer as she searches for justice with a personal appeal for her rights as a widow (87). Durga Devi's property claim itself stands as a historical resistance for women's right. She remains firm in her determination amidst her in-laws several tactics to deny her property claim. Her social position gets stronger and her voice becomes loud due to her sound economic condition.

Durga Devi exposes her feminist spirit when she seeks justice for a violated girl. Dom Kumari becomes victim of patriarchal gaze towards her body. Mainly it takes woman as an object, a commodity or just a heap of flesh. It counts women either as a domestic beings or a living object that fulfill men's physical desire. Kumari Lama claims that patriarchal normative heterosexuality validates women's worth only as procreators, besides that it treats them as flesh to pacify men's physical desire (6). It is the selfsame patriarchal attitude that supports violence against women. Consequently, rape and murder cases are proliferating day by day. Women activists are continuously raising their voice against violence against girls and women. Durga Devi raises her voice for rape-victim pregnant Dom Kumari. She takes charge of searching the perpetrator that threatens each prestigious person in the surrounding. Even though she cannot catch the abuser, she manages economic security for the hapless child. Mahili didi shares the incident to Aziz, "She opened a bank account for Dom Kumari to be managed by the Sherpa woman who continued to offer a home for the violated child and her baby, a girl, when it was born a few months later. Durga Devi left them enough money for years to come. They were comfortable; the child eventually went to school" (119). This incident points towards Durga Devi's economic independence and her generosity. She tries her best to bring justice to Dom Kumari that discloses her continuous resistance for women's rights.

Women need to develop agency to claim their own space within patriarchal system. They must speak, act, resist, and fight for their rights to ignite their agency. They should find the way-out by their own efforts to challenge repressive social orders. In this regard, Margaret S. Archer highlights the fact that the social actors can change the course of society through their actions. She says, "The intermediate position where structure and agency conjointly determine society's trajectory, whose shape is an unintended consequence conforming to the exact desire of no one, is passed over. If humankind cannot be the master of society it becomes the slave of one of its sub-systems, cultures..." (24). Durga Devi takes action against Hindu patriarchal structure that has continuously dominated women. She seeks her own way of justice and shows her

dissenting personality that challenges the hegemonic social norms and values. More importantly, she defies existing culture that subjugates women; she questions corrupt justice system and bureaucratic administration for social justice. Aziz is absolutely correct when she says, “Passive resistance was not her style. Durga Devi was the woman of immediacy” (87). She takes immediate action against any foul play around. Undoubtedly her rebellious voice is not welcoming to the society where women can be just listeners, not the speakers. Despite several obstructions on her ways, she keeps on taking actions against injustices. Her consistent resisting voice establishes her as a remarkable leader and a social reformer. Her actions and aggression lucidly depict her distinct mode of assertion to Yogmaya, who has taken religious and peaceful path of resistance.

Durga Devi becomes a trend-changer and an agent, who crosses the narrow cell of patriarchal rigidity. She takes initiation for her property rights and also carries on the death ritual of her mother-in-law despite several cultural restrictions. She disregards the whole oppressive Hindu cultural value that only subordinates and represses women. Her agency gets visible through her several actions that encompasses the characteristics of a real agent. As Michael Garnett claims, “To be an agent is to be, in some sense, an originator of action in your own right” (17). Durga Devi takes action for the property right and portrays her rebellious characteristics against male dominated austere Hindu society. Even though her in-laws give hard time, she does not get deterred from her path. Mahili didi (Durga Devi’s confidant) tells about Durga Devi’s struggle for possession of her land which involves a series of court cases that lasts for whole eight years (107). The lengthy legal process postulates women unfriendly administrative system of Nepal. Mainly patriarchal system imposes and tries to execute certain domestic regulations for women. However, in Durga Devi’s case, it turns quite contrary; she walks around the town and courts freely, and also demands for justice. Her in-laws’ reluctance to share their family property to a widow delays legal procedure and court’s verdict. Nevertheless, she remains determined and rather aggressive: she threatens the clerks and administrators time and again. Resisting spirit of Durga Devi does not match with traditional docile personality of a woman. In several occasions she posits rebellious characteristic; however, her lifelong widowhood as well as her passiveness towards child widow compels us to halt and think. While highlighting Yogmaya and Durga Devi’s characteristics, Aziz argues: “Ending child marriage and widowhood were critical to Yogmaya’s struggle. Not Durga Devi’s. She neither fought to overturn her fate as a child widow, nor did she campaign against the practice in general” (99). In spite of immense opportunity, Durga Devi remains indifferent towards radical changes. Mainly, she focuses for justice system; beside that she becomes a part of Hindu rigidity and accepts widow system. Even though she shows her agency and acts for social reforms she lacks full-fledged development of revolutionary characteristics within her. Ninu Chapagain denies her to be a rebel like Yogmaya. He argues that she is a social reformer rather than a rebel, as she accepts conformist foundation (np...virtual talk). She has concentrated more on legal issues and prevalent injustices rather than myriad of sensitive socio-cultural issues. Nevertheless, she stands as a strong resisting voice against women’s exploitation, social injustice and administrative corruptions. Moreover, she disseminates seeds of women’s right when she claims for her property right and fights against her in-laws. She inherits tremendous characteristics of modern day feminist apart from being a social reformer.

### **Conclusion**

Yogmaya and Durga Devi both incorporate enormous dissenting characteristics as they reject discriminatory social values accepted by patriarchal Hindu social system. Yogmaya has challenged Brahmanic rigidity entering inside its own system and embracing the path of religion and asceticism. She has pointed out priestly corruptions, challenged Teen Sarkar to end widespread social injustices, and demanded for dharma raj. She declines caste system, harshness against widows, and voices against child marriage and sati system. In spite of her nonviolent mode of resistance, her bani embedded with political consciousness and her resisting temperament always threatened powerful rulers. Yogmaya exhibits her real rebellious character as she attacks every adverse Brahmanic social system and attempts to dismantle the austere structure.

Durga Devi differs to Yogmaya when she voices against Hindu patriarchal social system and corrupt administrations using her legal knowledge. She proves herself to be a woman of action, who immediately intervenes the situation for on the spot result. She gets closer to today's feminist as she fights for her property rights and justice. Unquestionably, Durga Devi is a dissenting character; she not only claims for her property rights, but also fights for the justice of many defenseless victims. She is a rebellious woman for mid twentieth century Nepali society as she voices for women's right, social injustices, and administrative corruptions. In peroration, Yogmaya and Durga Devi both comprise resisting selves; nonetheless, they embrace distinct modes of resistance.

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