

## Representation of Karnali vis-a-vis the Marginalized Women Characters: A Feminist Reading of *Karnali Blues* and *Sunya ko Mulya*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the representation of women in Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* and Nawa Raj KC's *Sunya ko Mulya*, exploring how these novels illuminate the socio-economic, emotional, and cultural realities of women in Nepal's Karnali region. These texts locate the women in one of the most marginalized communities in Nepal where poverty, migration, reproductive work and systemic neglect is a burden they carry, and maintain moral and emotional support of their families. By examining the character of the mother in *Karnali Blues*, the paper investigates the endurance of the maternal as a basis for survival, and it spells out how childbirth, care-taking, and absence of women's suffering become emblematic of structural violence and the state's absence. Likewise, the novel *Sunya ko Mulya* is cast with the third-person voice of a non-narrated narrator, a preborn child who embodies the trauma of generations as it is passed down before being born. The study draws on feminist and post-colonial theories and concepts, such as the concept of 'intersectionality, otherness, emotional labour, and capacities' to conclude that these stories recenter women as agents of resilience and subtle resistance. In a fusion of realism and allegory, both texts unsettle women's marginal role in the literary discourses that come out of positions that focus on Kathmandu and place it at the center of perception of Karnali's problems. The study reminds us that there is a need for justice for women's endurance in the forms of better maternal health care, better rural infrastructure, recognition of the value of unpaid care work, adequate redistribution of resources and institutional accountability.

### KEYWORDS

*Karnali Blues, Sunya ko Mulya, women's representation, resilience, Nepali literature*

### INTRODUCTION

Writing about women's representation in literature is both an intellectual and emotional undertaking. The process requires sensitivity, critical distance, and deep engagement with the lived realities that literature seeks to capture. As a researcher of Nepali literature, I often find myself standing at the intersection of textual analysis and social reality, compelled not just to interpret what a text says but to reflect on what it means for those whose stories are being told. Literature, particularly that which emerges from Nepal's marginalized regions, is not merely an aesthetic object but a social document that carries the weight of memory, trauma, and survival (Williams, 1977). In this study, I focus on two powerful texts, Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* and Nawa Raj KC's *Sunya ko Mulya*, which bring to the surface the lives of women in the Karnali region women whose voices are often silenced in the national narrative. The

challenge is not just literary interpretation but ethical representation: how to engage with these voices without appropriating them, how to read their suffering critically without romanticizing it, and how to show that their endurance is not a justification for continued neglect but a call for justice (Mohanty, 2003).

I write this paper as a scholar who has long been drawn to questions of gender, power, and regional marginalization in Nepali literature. My academic training in postcolonial theory and feminist literary criticism has shaped the lens through which I approach texts, and I am particularly influenced by scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose works interrogate the structures that produce women as “Other” and examine the overlapping oppressions that shape their lives (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Spivak, 1988; Crenshaw, 1991). Like the dissertation supervisors who reflect on their own positionality in guiding their scholars (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mendez, 2013), I find that my own intellectual journey is closely tied to my personal encounters with the realities of rural Nepal. I have traveled through Karnali, spoken with women who walk hours to fetch water, and heard stories of childbirth without medical assistance experiences that inform my reading of these novels and deepen my sense of responsibility toward their representation. This study is therefore not only an academic exercise but also a reflective practice, a way of connecting my scholarly work to the broader struggle for gender justice in Nepal.

The Karnali region is one of the least developed in the country, marked by poverty, geographical isolation, and systemic neglect. Access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure remains limited, and state services are unevenly distributed (Bhattachan, 2012). These structural deficits place women at particular risk: maternal mortality is high, workloads are excessive, and mobility is restricted by both terrain and patriarchy. When men migrate seasonally for labor, women are left to manage households, fields, and children, effectively becoming heads of households without the recognition or resources that such a role should entail. This aligns with Silvia Federici’s (2012) argument that women’s unpaid reproductive labor forms the hidden foundation of economies but is systematically devalued. The emotional cost of such labor is equally significant. Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) concept of “emotional labor” helps explain how women are expected to manage not only their own feelings but also the morale of the household, ensuring that families remain cohesive even under dire conditions. In *Karnali Blues*, these realities are embodied in the figure of the mother, whose quiet strength sustains the family through hunger, sickness, and the father’s decline. Her story is not exceptional but representative, pointing to a collective experience of women across Karnali who keep their families alive against all odds.

This study not only offers analytical tools in the form of feminist and post-colonial theories from global scholarship; it also asserts the necessity of provincializing these theories in the context of Nepal. Research by Nepali feminists like Meena Acharya and Seira Tamang has revealed that caste, region, labour migration and state institutions all have a significant impact on gender inequality in Nepal. Their work helps to bring women's oppression in Karnali out of feminist paradigms and situates the study in the socio-political context of Nepal. This paper

uses a critical literary lens to examine how *Karnali Blues* and *Sunya ko Mulya* represent women's suffering, labor, and resilience. These novels employ different narrative strategies realism and allegory but both make women's experiences central to understanding the region's social fabric. This study differentiates between surviving and resistance to rescue the suffering from romanticization. Survival will be defined as women's ability to sustain themselves while living in structural deprivation and coping in the face of oppressive conditions. When the concept of resistance is mentioned, however, it suggests that opposition, negotiation or reaction occurs either explicit conduct or subtle conduct to the dominant patriarchal structures. Not all endurance is resistance, but this paper proposes that there are some both subtle and significant forms of agency in the act of caring, emotional laboring and persisting in Karnali.

In doing so, they answer what bell hooks (1989) describes as the call to "talk back," to make the margins speak in their own voice. Yet these voices are not always direct or easy to hear. Spivak (1988) reminds us that the subaltern cannot simply "speak" in the dominant language of power without mediation, and this insight is crucial for interpreting *Sunya ko Mulya*, where the unborn narrator gives form to the otherwise unspoken pain of the mother. This allegorical voice compels readers to confront the reality that oppression begins before birth, that trauma is inherited and transmitted, and that silence can be as violent as speech. By placing these two novels in conversation, I aim to show how literature can serve both as a mirror and as a critique of society, revealing the structures that oppress women while also honoring their strategies of survival.

My approach in this paper is informed by a commitment to intersectionality, recognizing that gender cannot be examined in isolation from class, caste, or geography (Crenshaw, 1991). The women in these texts are not simply women; they are rural women, poor women, often positioned at the lowest rungs of Nepal's social and economic hierarchies. This paper takes an interest in gender and class marginalization as well as geographic marginalization however it is not possible to overlook caste – this is a very important axis of inequality in Nepal. Surprisingly, there is little explicit treatment of caste hierarchy in either of the novels. This gap is a space filled with analytical interest for, not only because of the manner in which it may, at times, universalize the rural experience of suffering, but because it may obscure experiences of being excluded at a caste level. There is a greater need to contemplate the representation of Karnali women in future scholarship, focusing on the relationship between caste and gender, and regional marginality. Their experiences cannot be adequately understood without considering how these multiple axes of identity interact to shape their vulnerability. At the same time, I draw on Martha Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach to argue that literature highlights the ways in which basic human capabilities bodily health, bodily integrity, emotional expression is denied to these women. By reading the novels through these theoretical lenses, I hope to show that their representation is not merely descriptive but normative: they compel us to ask what justice would look like for the women of Karnali.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to argue that the representation of women in *Karnali Blues* and *Sunya ko Mulya* is a powerful act of re-centering, shifting attention from the capital to the periphery, from the male hero to the maternal figure, from public history to intimate survival.

Like an auto ethnographer who links personal narrative to cultural critique (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), I see this reading as a way of connecting individual stories to structural realities, illuminating the costs of systemic neglect and the quiet heroism of those who endure it. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a richer understanding of Nepali literature's role in representing marginalized voices and to invite further scholarship that places women at the center of our literary and critical attention.

### **Representation of Women in Karnali Region**

Karnali, the remote northwestern region of Nepal, has long stood as a symbol of hardship and resilience in the national imagination. The rugged mountains, scarcity of arable land, and lack of infrastructure make survival a daily struggle, and the region has historically remained marginalized in state development agendas (Bhattachan, 2012). Access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities is limited, forcing many men to migrate seasonally to India in search of work, leaving women to shoulder the burdens of household management, agriculture, and caregiving. Women's lives in Karnali are defined by relentless physical and emotional labor: they give birth often without medical support, fetch water and firewood across steep terrain, raise children under conditions of scarcity, and care for the sick and elderly with minimal resources. Their work is largely invisible in national statistics and discourse, echoing Silvia Federici's (2012) argument that women's reproductive labor is the hidden foundation of economies yet systematically devalued. Literature becomes an important space to render this labor visible, to give narrative weight to the lives that are otherwise excluded from political representation. Yet the history of Nepali literature has often failed to center women's voices, portraying them as idealized mothers or wives, or relegating them to the periphery of male-centered plots. Simone de Beauvoir's seminal observation that woman is historically constructed as "the Other" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011) holds true here: women are narrated, interpreted, and moralized about, but rarely allowed to articulate their own subjectivity. In a region like Karnali, this othering is compounded by geographical and cultural marginality, producing double erasure women are not only gendered "others" but also rural "others," far removed from the urban literary gaze. As Mohanty (2003) warns, homogenizing rural women as symbols of suffering risks turning them into static figures of pity rather than agents of change. This is why the representation of women in texts such as Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* and Nawa Raj KC's *Sunya ko Mulya* is crucial. Both novels depart from Kathmandu-centric narratives and present women's lives in Karnali not as background scenery but as the very heart of community survival.

In *Karnali Blues*, the narrator's recollections of his father's life are deeply intertwined with memories of his mother, who emerges as the quiet moral center of the family. Her labor, sacrifices, and endurance are what make survival possible, even though she is never at the center of dramatic action or long monologues. Her childbirth on a remote path, without medical assistance, sets the tone for her life story one marked by endurance under conditions of systemic

neglect. Her small gestures of care, her ability to maintain the family's emotional equilibrium, and her silent acceptance of suffering exemplify what Hochschild (1983) calls "emotional labor," the invisible work of managing emotions and sustaining relationships. Rather than romanticizing her suffering, Buddhi Sagar's narrative invites the reader to feel its weight, to sense how poverty, distance, and lack of state support shape her existence (Koirala, 2020). *Sunya ko Mulya*, by contrast, uses the striking device of an unborn narrator to explore the generational transmission of fear and trauma. The fetus's voice represents those who cannot speak women, children, the poor and forces readers to reckon with the idea that oppression begins even before birth. Spivak's (1988) question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes central: the novel both gives voice to the silenced and underscores the difficulty of fully representing their experience. Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality helps explain how gender, poverty, and rural isolation converge in these women's lives, producing a layered form of marginalization that cannot be captured by a single-axis analysis. Together, these novels depict women not as passive victims but as figures whose endurance itself becomes a form of resistance. bell hooks (1989) describe the margin as a "site of resistance," and in these texts, women's everyday practices of care tending fields, comforting children, keeping families together are reframed as acts of survival that challenge erasure. Yet, as Fraser (2000) cautions, celebrating women's resilience must not substitute for demands for justice: recognition must be accompanied by redistribution of resources to address structural inequality. By combining realism in *Karnali Blues* with allegory in *Sunya ko Mulya*, these texts reveal both the material and psychological costs of women's lives in Karnali and reposition them as moral protagonists of the region's story.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Oral discourse of close textual description of two books namely Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* and Nawa Raj KC's *Sunya ko Mulya* has been used for this study which is qualitative-interpretative in method. These novels have been deliberately chosen, as they both have a socio-cultural context of Karnali and rich representations of the lived experiences of women, who face marginalization, as their main theme. The analysis is done in a feminist literary critical manner that is shaped by the postcolonial and intersectional perspectives. Key excerpts for materiality, anguish, non-words, autonomy, and strength were identified, coded and thematized. The interpretation process also allows for the researcher to reflect on his positionality. The reflexive awareness while reading was to not lose himself in it and not romanticize the suffering of others, while the knowledge of the socio-cultural context of Karnali was used while reading it to get an informed account of the situation.

## **Maternal Figures, Suffering, and Resilience in *Karnali Blues***

Buddhi Sagar's *Karnali Blues* is often celebrated for its lyrical prose and its intimate portrayal of rural life, but its most profound achievement lies in its quiet centering of maternal

endurance. The narrative, structured around the son's memories of his father during the latter's final days, frames the father-son bond as the emotional core of the novel, yet the mother is the silent force that underpins the family's survival. Her story is not told through overt dramatic monologues but through fragmented memories, gestures, and actions that cumulatively reveal her significance. The image of the mother delivering her child on a rugged path without medical support is one of the most striking scenes in the novel, and it encapsulates the material realities of life in Karnali: the lack of infrastructure, the distance from healthcare, and the normalization of risk in everyday existence. This scene is emblematic of what Johan Galtung (1969) would call "structural violence," the slow and invisible harm caused by systemic neglect rather than direct aggression. In *Karnali Blues*, such neglect is not an exception but the background condition of life. The mother's survival of childbirth under such circumstances is at once a triumph and a tragedy, a testament to her strength but also a reminder of the state's absence. Her resilience is neither romanticized nor melodramatic; it is portrayed as necessary, even ordinary, which makes it more powerful. Simone de Beauvoir's observation that woman "is doomed to the immanence" of repetitive labor (Beauvoir, 1949/2011) resonates here, as the mother is trapped in an endless cycle of work tending to fields, raising children, cooking meals yet through this repetition she constructs the conditions of survival for her family. Her story is a reminder that in rural societies, women's work is not supplementary but constitutive of economic and social life.

Other maternal figures in the novel further illuminate the complexity of women's roles in Karnali. Mamata Didi, for instance, embodies the dual pressures of caregiving and economic responsibility, revealing the emotional and physical toll of being the family's anchor. Parvati's death during pregnancy is perhaps the most devastating moment in the novel, dramatizing the brutal consequences of inadequate healthcare access in rural areas. The father's frantic attempt to arrange a helicopter to take her to a hospital, and the eventual failure to save her, underscores the vulnerability of women's bodies in a system that fails to provide even the most basic reproductive care (Koirala, 2020). Martha Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach is particularly useful in understanding this narrative moment: it reminds us that the right to bodily health, reproductive freedom, and dignity are basic capabilities that must be supported by society. The novel shows how the denial of these capabilities produces not just individual tragedy but collective despair. The son's memories of these events are tinged with guilt and helplessness, suggesting that women's suffering leaves a deep psychological imprint on families across generations. Moreover, the mother's quiet dignity in the face of poverty exemplifies what Carol Gilligan (1982) calls an "ethic of care" a moral framework grounded not in abstract principles but in relational responsibility. Her care work is not voluntary charity but a necessary condition for the family's survival, an act of moral labor that sustains not only the household but also the very possibility of future generations. Buddhi Sagar's narrative thus elevates the figure of the mother from the margins of the story to its moral center, insisting that

her endurance is not merely background detail but the very substance of the region's history. The novel becomes a meditation on the cost of survival, revealing that women's suffering is both the hidden price of development and the silent protest against a state that forgets its most vulnerable citizens.

### **Symbolism, Voice, and Generational Trauma in *Sunya ko Mulya***

Nawa Raj KC's *Sunya ko Mulya* stands apart in Nepali literature for its daring narrative choice of employing an unborn child as the narrator, a device that immediately positions the reader in a liminal space between life and death, existence and erasure. This unborn narrator becomes a haunting witness to the world outside the womb, experiencing the mother's fears, anxieties, and suffering even before birth. This narrative voice symbolizes all who are silenced by structures of power: women whose lives are constrained by patriarchy, children who inherit poverty before they take their first breath, and communities who remain at the margins of state power. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?" reverberates through the novel: the unborn child "speaks," yet its very position reminds us that the voices of the oppressed are mediated, constrained, and often unheard by dominant structures. The narrative becomes an allegory of silence, revealing how violence is not only physical but also epistemic: a refusal to recognize certain lives as worthy of being heard or remembered. The fetus's reflections capture this intergenerational weight: the sense of inherited despair, the fear of repeating cycles of deprivation, and the impossibility of escape from structural neglect. In this way, *Sunya ko Mulya* explores what sociologist Avery Gordon (1997) calls "haunting," the persistence of unresolved trauma that continues to shape the living. The unborn child's voice is not merely symbolic but political, forcing readers to confront the moral implications of allowing such suffering to persist generation after generation. Concurrently, the unborn narrator asks major questions of representation and ventriloquism. As this narrative voice is written by a male writer, it leaves room to consider the possibility of it being tended to and reflecting men's imaginations of what it means for a woman. The unborn voice helps expose those mothers who are suffering, but also opens the possibility for the voice to speak for them instead of for them. The tension is reflective of Spivak's reservations about the politics of representation.

KC's choice of an allegorical, almost dreamlike narrative form allows the novel to delve into the psychological and emotional dimensions of women's oppression in ways that a strictly realist narrative might not. The mother's suffering, as perceived from within the womb, becomes visceral and unavoidable: the fetus feels her hunger, hears her sobs, and absorbs her dread. This maternal suffering becomes a site of what Crenshaw (1991) would term intersectional oppression, where gender, class, and rural isolation converge to produce a unique configuration of vulnerability. The novel's sparse, poetic language reinforces the sense of suffocation, as though words themselves are gasping for breath. Yet within this bleak landscape,

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the act of narration becomes an act of resistance the unborn child refuses to be merely a passive observer and instead names the injustice it witnesses. bell hooks' (1989) idea of "talking back" as a gesture of defiance resonates here: the fetus's voice, though unheard by the characters within the story, reaches the reader and disrupts the silence that surrounds women's pain. Moreover, the novel suggests that generational trauma is not merely a burden but also a catalyst for transformation. By articulating the unspeakable, the unborn narrator creates the possibility of breaking the cycle of silence, inviting readers to imagine a future where such suffering is neither normalized nor inherited. In this way, *Sunya ko Mulya* is not simply a story of despair but also of potential potential for recognition, for change, for a world where voices once silenced might finally be heard.

**CONCLUSION**

Reflecting on *Karnali Blues* and *Sunya ko Mulya* shows that these novels do more than narrate stories; they invite readers to confront the lived realities of systemic neglect and to recognize women as the central figures of Karnali's social and emotional landscape. The quiet strength of the mother in *Karnali Blues* becomes the thread that holds the family together, revealing that survival in this remote region depends on women's relentless labor, emotional discipline, and capacity to endure pain and loss. Her childbirth on an isolated path, her care for the sick, and her calm acceptance of hardship portray survival as a daily struggle that requires both physical resilience and moral resolve. Parvati's tragic death and Mamata Didi's unending burdens deepen the novel's portrayal of how fragile life becomes when health care, infrastructure, and state support are absent. In contrast, *Sunya ko Mulya* takes readers inside the womb, allowing them to hear the thoughts of an unborn child who absorbs the mother's fears and despair even before birth. This unique voice turns the novel into a testimony about generational suffering, showing that trauma is inherited and that deprivation begins long before a child opens their eyes to the world. The unborn narrator does not merely describe pain but transforms it into a quiet protest, reminding readers that silence itself can be an act of resistance when it forces others to pay attention. Together, these novels portray women not as helpless victims but as complex, thinking individuals whose endurance is itself a form of defiance. Their ability to keep families together, nurture children, and carry the memory of collective struggle becomes a subtle but powerful way of resisting erasure. By presenting both realism and allegory, these works expand the scope of Nepali literature and place women at the center of the region's moral and historical narrative. This change that is envisioned in these novels necessitates a tangible structural change, such as better maternal services/accessibility to reproductive care, poverty alleviation, strengthening of rural infrastructure, recognition of unpaid care work and policies which provide alleviations to inequality and differences among regions, castes and gender. Simply clearing symbolic hurdles in favour of Karnali women is not enough, but there is a need for the redistribution of resources and institutional accountability. The women of Karnali emerge from these texts not only as characters but as

living symbols of perseverance, urging readers to rethink what survival, dignity, and equality truly mean.

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