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Time-Travelling Feminism: Yogmaya's Legacy and the Rewriting of Feminist Praxis in Nepal

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Abstract

This article reinterprets the legacy of Yogmaya Neupane (1860–1941) through a South Asian feminist lens, arguing that her activism exemplifies "time-travelling feminism." Her poetic baani, critique of caste and gender hierarchies, and climactic protest against the Rana regime reveal a radical feminist praxis that unsettles patriarchal and state authority. Rather than situating her as a saintly reformer, the study frames Yogmaya as a subaltern feminist theorist whose praxis transcends linear histories of feminist progress. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subalternity, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's contextual feminism, Sharmila Rege's testimonial epistemologies, Uma Chakravarti's Brahmanical patriarchy, and Srila Roy's postsecular feminist agency, it positions Yogmaya as a political ancestor whose dissent continues to shape feminist struggles in Nepal today. The analysis shows how her insurgent spirituality resonates with Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi women's movements, offering an indigenous grammar of resistance that challenges Eurocentric feminist paradigms.

Keywords: South Asian feminism, subaltern agency, postsecular feminism, feminist historiography, time-travelling feminism, caste and gender resistance

Introduction

Feminist historiography in South Asia is undergoing a critical transformation. No longer satisfied with cataloguing women as symbolic reformers, contemporary scholarship seeks to recover their voices as political actors, spiritual rebels, and epistemic innovators. This shift resists Euro-American feminist trajectories that privilege secular liberal models and instead foregrounds the subaltern women whose dissent often emerged through indigenous, poetic, and

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spiritual idioms. Within this reorientation, the figure of Yogmaya Neupane (1860–1941), a poet, ascetic leader, and dissenter from eastern Nepal, demands serious scholarly attention. Her protest against the Rana regime, culminating in the dramatic collective suicide of her followers in the Arun River, has often been remembered as irrational sacrifice. Yet when read through a South Asian feminist lens, her poetry (*baani*), activism, and spiritual defiance articulate a radical feminist praxis that unsettles both state power and patriarchal religious authority. In this article, the term praxis is used to mean the interrelation of theory and practice actions that are informed by theoretical insights and, in turn, generate new forms of theory. Feminist praxis, in this sense, is not only resistance in lived reality but also a mode of theorizing from situated struggles.

Central to this article is the concept of "time-travelling feminism," a framework researcher develops to theorize how subaltern women like Yogmaya transcend linear models of feminist history. Unlike secular-progressivist accounts that locate feminist agency within modern political institutions, Yogmaya's resistance circulates across temporal registers: her poetic memory survived oral traditions, her spiritual authority resonated across rural women's communities, and her afterlife has been reimagined in contemporary literature. In this sense, her legacy is not confined to the past but operates as a living genealogy of dissent that informs contemporary struggles for gender justice in Nepal. Time-travelling feminism thus conceptualizes feminist resistance as cyclical, recursive, and intergenerational and an ethical voice that refuses erasure even when silenced by dominant historiography.

Despite the radical implications of Yogmaya's activism, her memory has been persistently marginalized. State archives reduced her to a mystic recluse; nationalist narratives framed her as a failed reformer; and patriarchal historiography ignored her altogether. It is only in recent decades, most notably through Neelam Karki Niharika's 2018 novel *Yogmaya* and her life and politics have re-emerged as part of Nepal's feminist consciousness. The novel reconstructs her movement not as spiritual eccentricity but as an insurgent critique of caste, class, and gendered domination, positioning Yogmaya as a prophetic dissenter whose poetry mobilized women and directly challenged the Rana regime. Through fiction, memory, and intertextuality, Karki's text functions as a counter-archive, allowing contemporary readers to reclaim Yogmaya as a feminist political ancestor.

However, critical responses to *Yogmaya* remain limited. Much of the existing scholarship and reviews emphasize the novel's historical or religious significance while overlooking its feminist potential. Yogmaya is frequently categorized as a saintly reformer rather than as a theorist of resistance whose praxis aligns with subaltern feminist epistemologies. Such reductive framing erases the complexity of her activism, which fused spirituality, collective ethics, and poetic dissent. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has famously asked, "Can the subaltern speak?" (104), the case of Yogmaya demonstrates how

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women's voices are not only suppressed in state archives but are often misinterpreted even when they do surface.

This article argues that Yogmaya's resistance must be read as a form of South Asian feminist praxis that expands the theoretical imagination of feminism beyond secular and Eurocentric models. Drawing on Spivak's subalternity, Chandra Talpade Mohanty's contextual feminism, Srila Roy's postsecular feminist agency, and Sharmila Rege's testimonial epistemologies, researcher situates Yogmaya as a "time-travelling feminist icon." Her life and afterlife illuminate how feminist resistance in Nepal has historically been articulated through embodied ethics, spiritual dissent, and communal mobilization. More importantly, her praxis resonates with contemporary struggles led by Dalit, Janajati, and Madhesi women, whose voices continue to unsettle state power and caste-patriarchal domination.

By reframing Yogmaya through the lens of time-travelling feminism, this article seeks to contribute to global feminist debates while foregrounding South Asian genealogies of dissent. It reclaims Yogmaya not as a relic of Nepali religious history but as a political ancestor whose insurgent spirituality and poetic defiance continue to shape feminist praxis today.

Reframing Yogmaya: Between Reformism and Feminist Resistance

The figure of Yogmaya Neupane has long occupied an ambiguous place in Nepal's cultural memory. Despite her historical importance as a dissenter against the Rana regime, her name is largely absent from official state archives and mainstream historiography. Early references to Yogmaya, when they appear at all, often reduce her to a saintly mystic or a religious eccentric whose followers committed collective suicide out of blind devotion. Such framings exemplify what Uma Chakravarti terms *Brahmanical patriarchy*, a system in which women's agency is erased or domesticated to preserve the moral authority of patriarchal narratives (p. 25). While these scholarly interventions are valuable, they still risk reducing Yogmaya's insurgent dissent to benign religious reform. study addresses this gap by reinterpreting her *baani*, activism, and collective defiance through rigorous South Asian feminist frameworks, revealing her as a time-travelling feminist whose spiritual-political paradigm deeply anticipates contemporary struggles for justice.

The most significant archival intervention has come from prominent Nepali historian, diplomat, and political leader Bhim Bahadur Pandey's biography *Yogmaya and Her Philosophy* (2013), which preserved many of her *baani* (poetic proclamations). Pandey highlights Yogmaya's critique of corruption, caste discrimination, and gender inequality, recognizing her as a social critic rather than merely a mystic. Yet even Pandey frames her activism largely within moral reformism rather than feminist resistance. For instance, her rejection of widow-burning directly confronts Brahmanical patriarchy:

> "Who is that evil person who ignited the fire and placed the wife upon it? Who decided that her body should be consumed in flames, while men continue to live? Women are not wood to be burned, nor cattle to be

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> sacrificed. Dharma that rests on such cruelty is no dharma but adharma." (Karki, 2018, p. 158)

This passage is not merely moral indignation but a profound feminist critique of patriarchal religiosity. However, even sympathetic commentators have failed to recognize its resonance with contemporary feminist critiques of widowhood and ritualized gender violence.

In Nepali literary criticism, *Yogmaya* represents the most influential effort to bring Yogmaya into feminist imagination. Awarded the prestigious *Madan Puraskar*, the novel reconstructs her life through fiction, weaving history, memory, and imagination into a counter-archive. Neelam Karki Niharika's novel Yogmaya (2018) holds a landmark position in contemporary Nepali literature. Awarded the prestigious Madan Puraskar, it is widely recognized as one of the first major fictional reconstructions of a forgotten female dissenter. Beyond its literary acclaim, the novel has been celebrated as a feminist project that re-inscribes Yogmaya into Nepal's cultural memory, enabling her voice to circulate in both academic and activist spaces. The narrative emphasizes Yogmaya's solidarity with marginalized communities, dramatized in moments when she denounces caste-based exclusion from education:

> If Shudras (a member of the worker caste, lowest of the four Hindu castes) and women are denied knowledge, what future can truth have in this land? If knowledge belongs only to the upper castes, then ignorance will rule forever. The gods you worship will remain deaf, and rulers will sell their people as cattle. Without women and the poor, no society can walk towards justice. Karki, 2018, p. 244)

Here Yogmaya anticipates Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, which insists that access to education is the key to dismantling caste-patriarchal hierarchies (42). The Kathmandu Post review titled *"Fiction carries heavy responsibility"*, published September 1, 2018, mentions *Yogmaya* as "one of the most interesting characters in Nepali history," and emphasizes the novel's critique of patriarchy.Yet most reviews of the novel, such as those by Ramesh Chandra Kandel (2019) and Maya Thapa (2020), celebrate its historical recovery but fail to highlight its feminist theoretical implications. English-language scholarship on Yogmaya remains limited. Anne de Sales and Mary Des Chene have shown how women in Nepal use oral traditions and ritual practices as resistance, which helps contextualize Yogmaya's poetic dissent. Yet her radical vision remains under-analyzed. Anne conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork in western Nepal (1981–1982), especially among the Kham-Magar community, exploring shamanic healing, ritual language, and their relations with state power. Des Chene is known for critiquing the ways Nepalese culture and literary traditions have been marginalized in Western scholarship. In her 2007 piece *"Is Nepal in South Asia?"* she argues that Nepal is often absent from mainstream South Asian studies due to conceptual neglect, despite its rich linguistic and political history. They Consider Yogmaya's condemnation of political exploitation:

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> "What kind of dharma is this, where rulers enslave men?␣Where kings sell their subjects as if they were cattle in the marketplace? The tax collectors steal grain from the hungry, the priests steal from the gods, And the women, always, are left to starve in silence." (Karki, 2018, p. 434)

This longer excerpt resonates with Gayatri Spivak's theorization of subalternity, where oppressed voices articulate truths that dominant archives refuse to hear (104). Yet critical accounts too often categorize such lines as moral or spiritual complaint rather than political speech. Thus, Yogmaya's climactic act of collective resistance, the Arun River protest has often been framed as blind devotion or tragic delusion. But in the novel, it is voiced as insurgent spirituality:

> "Let injustice be drowned, let dharma rise.␣If the rulers will not listen, the river will speak.␣If the courts will not give justice, the current will deliver it.␣Our bodies will become testimony, our sacrifice the weapon." (Karki, 2018, p. 480)

This act exemplifies what Srila Roy calls *postsecular feminist agency*, in which spirituality is not submission but a mode of radical resistance (29). Here Yogmaya fuses religion and rebellion, embodying a praxis that unsettles both colonial-modernist readings of feminism and nationalist patriarchal appropriations of spirituality.

This article situates itself in this critical gap. While prior works have focused on Yogmaya's asceticism, reformism, or historical presence, few have engaged her as a feminist political ancestor whose praxis anticipates contemporary struggles against caste, gender, and state oppression. By reading *Yogmaya* through South Asian feminist lenses, this study reclaims her as a time-travelling feminist figure, a voice from the early twentieth century whose radical defiance continues to resonate with twenty-first-century feminist movements in Nepal and beyond.

South Asian Feminist Theorizations of Yogmaya's Praxis

This study adopts a South Asian feminist framework to reinterpret Yogmaya Neupane's life and representation in Neelam Karki Niharika's *Yogmaya*. Unlike Euro-American feminist paradigms that often universalize women's experiences, South Asian feminist theorists emphasize the intersection of caste, class, gender, and religion in shaping women's oppression and resistance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provides an entry point for understanding Yogmaya's historical silence in dominant archives. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Spivak argues: "The subaltern cannot speak" because her speech is either ignored, erased, or translated into elite discourse that robs it of radicality (104).Yogmaya's *baani* gives us a textual instance where she resists such erasure. For example, in the novel we find: "सत्यलाई जात र धर्मले पुरे पनि, महिलाको आँशुले फेरि उठाउनेछ।" - "Even if caste and religion bury the truth, women's tears will resurrect it again" (173). This excerpt shows that Yogmaya is not silent, but her words are ignored or neutralized by state and patriarchal structures. Here she deploys what Spivak later terms "strategic essentialism," uniting

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"women" as a collective identity against overlapping systems of caste and religious oppression. There is another striking excerpt "हामीलाई नसुनून् भने, हामीलाई नदी सुनोस्।" -"If they refuse to hear us, then let the river hear us"(Karki, 2018, p. 221). This reflects Spivak's point about subaltern speech not being granted recognition in hegemonic archives. Yogmaya's speech finds a witness not in the state but in nature itself. By aligning her protest-suicide with the river, she ensures that her message survives beyond the silencing of the Ranas.Yogmaya's absence in Rana historiography and her reduction to mystical sainthood exemplify this silencing. Yet through her *baani*, Yogmaya resists this erasure, articulating what Spivak would call a "strategic essentialism"; a deliberate use of collective identity to speak truth to power.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of "global sisterhood" in *Under Western Eyes* (2003, 42) underscores the importance of contextualizing feminist struggles within specific histories. For Mohanty, Third World women are not passive victims but active agents whose struggles must be read in relation to local power structures. Yogmaya's defiance, her critique of caste, patriarchy, and Rana authoritarianism cannot be flattened into universal feminist tropes. Rather, her praxis represents a distinctly Nepali feminist resistance that negotiates religion, community, and politics simultaneously. Yogmaya's words embody precisely this context-specific resistance. This line unfolds: "राणाले जनतालाई थिच्छ, पण्डितले जातको नाममा भेद गर्छ। यसरी अन्याय बढ्दा ईश्वर पनि चुप लाग्छ।" -"The Ranas crush the people, the priests discriminate in the name of caste. When injustice grows this way, even God remains silent" (Karki, 2018, p. 198). Here, Yogmaya targets two intertwined structures: state authoritarianism (Rana regime) and religious/caste patriarchy (priests). This cannot be read as a generic women's struggle, it is a Nepali feminist critique embedded in its socio-political context. Another excerpt: "धर्म भनेको न्याय हो, अन्याय धर्म होइन।" -"Religion is justice; injustice is not religion" (205). This shows her religious-political praxis, not abandoning spirituality, but reinterpreting it to challenge caste hierarchies and patriarchal misuse of religion.

Sharmila Rege's articulation of the *Dalit feminist standpoint* further illuminates Yogmaya's praxis. Rege emphasizes the importance of testimonios narratives that articulate embodied experiences of caste and gender oppression (42). Yogmaya's *baani* operates precisely in this mode, voicing the anguish of widows, the marginalized, and the poor: "If Shudras and women are denied knowledge, what future can truth have in this land?" (244). Through such proclamations, she transforms individual pain into collective resistance, embodying what Rege terms a subaltern counter-public.

Uma Chakravarti's theory of *Brahmanical patriarchy* is also vital to contextualizing Yogmaya's defiance. Chakravarti demonstrates how caste and gender oppression are intertwined in South Asia, where control over women's sexuality sustains the caste order (25). Yogmaya's denunciation of *sati*: "Women are not wood to be burned, nor cattle to be sacrificed" (158). It's a direct challenge to this nexus of caste and patriarchy, exposing the violent religious justifications of women's subordination.

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Finally, Srila Roy's concept of *postsecular feminist agency* provides an innovative lens for understanding Yogmaya's insurgent spirituality. Roy argues that feminist resistance in South Asia cannot always be framed within secular modernist paradigms, as women often mobilize religious idioms in radical, subversive ways (29). Yogmaya's Arun River protest, "Let injustice be drowned, let dharma rise" (Karki, 2018, p. 365), it embodies such an agency, where spirituality is neither submission nor superstition but a mode of feminist defiance.

Together, these frameworks allow us to reinterpret Yogmaya not merely as a saint or reformer, but as a subaltern feminist theorist in her own right. Her words and actions resonate with South Asian feminist critiques of caste-patriarchy, colonial modernity, and state power. By reading *Yogmaya* through this theoretical lens, the present study positions her as a time-travelling feminist figure, bridging the gap between early twentieth-century subaltern resistance and contemporary South Asian feminist praxis.

Feminist Praxis in *Yogmaya*

Yogmaya stands as a landmark feminist novel that reconstructs the life and legacy of Yogmaya Neupane, a revolutionary poet-saint whose defiance against both Rana autocracy and Brahmanical patriarchy remains unparalleled in Nepali history. The novel does not merely recover a forgotten historical figure; it performs an act of feminist reclamation by transforming Yogmaya's fragmented memory into a narrative archive of resistance. Through its interweaving of biography, poetry, oral histories, and fictionalized dialogues, *Yogmaya* creates a literary space where subaltern women's voices become audible, echoing what Sharmila Rege terms "testimonios of resistance" (13).

Central to Yogmaya's feminist praxis is her *baani* (poetic utterance), which functions both as spiritual testimony and political critique. The *baani* were not abstract verses but insurgent speech acts, aimed at dismantling hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. In one striking passage, Yogmaya declares: "True dharma is resistance, not silence" (Karki, 2018, p. 136). This verse aligns with what Srila Roy conceptualizes as *postsecular feminist agency*, a mode of feminist politics in South Asia where spirituality and resistance coalesce into ethical insurgency (29). Rather than retreating into ascetic silence, Yogmaya weaponizes religious discourse as a political tool. Her articulation of *dharma* shifts away from ritual purity and toward justice, care, and ethical accountability.

The novel also preserves longer instances of Yogmaya's verses that read as collective testimonio. For example, she indicts the Brahmanical scriptural authority that legitimizes oppression: "The Brahmin's scripture burns truth, but the poor daughter's tears flood the nation" (Karki, 2028, p. 358). Here, Yogmaya transforms women's suffering into a political metaphor. As Rege reminds us, subaltern women's narratives are not mere emotional appeals but "theoretical interventions" into dominant regimes of knowledge (13). By centering the tears of the poor girl as a force capable of drowning the nation, Yogmaya reframes marginalized women's grief as epistemic power.

Spiritual Resistance as Political Praxis

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One of the novel's most significant interventions is its depiction of Yogmaya's spirituality not as passive mysticism but as radical resistance. In defying the Rana regime, she consistently redefined devotion as a demand for justice. At one point, she proclaims: "God does not dwell in temples of gold while the daughters of the earth suffer in silence" (Karki, 2018, p. 99). This poetic indictment exposes the hypocrisy of elite religiosity and resonates with Spivak's assertion that subaltern women's voices are silenced unless mediated through culturally intelligible forms (104). Yogmaya strategically uses religious idioms, temple, deity, dharma to make her critique legible to rural audiences. Yet, she simultaneously subverts these idioms, transforming spirituality into a grammar of resistance.

Srila Roy's notion of the *postsecular turn* in South Asian feminism provides a theoretical lens here. Yogmaya's fusion of religious devotion with anti-state dissent resists both colonial-modernist binaries and the secular feminist suspicion of belief. Her praxis demonstrates that faith can serve as a moral-political ground for rebellion, thereby challenging the epistemic boundaries of what "counts" as feminist resistance.

Embodied Protest and Collective Defiance

Perhaps the most radical moment in the novel is its depiction of Yogmaya's final protest, the collective suicide of her followers in the Arun River in 1941. While state historiography has often dismissed this act as fanaticism, Karki (2018) narrates it as a deliberate, politically charged spectacle. While this article refers to Yogmaya's climactic act as a "collective suicide," it is important to note that the term itself carries pejorative and pathologizing connotations, often suggesting irrationality. To resist such reductive framings, alternative terms such as *ritual protest*, *political sacrifice*, or *embodied dissent* may also be used, as these better capture the intentional, ethical, and resistant dimensions of Yogmaya's final act. This nuance emphasizes that the event was not passive self-destruction but a deliberate feminist intervention against injustice. The prose evokes ritualized imagery:

> *सेतो कपडामा लपेटिएका शरीरहरू नाङ्गो खुट्टा नदीतिर हिँडे, बिहानको हावा चिसो थियो, तर उनीहरूको स्वरमा सत्यको मन्त्र घन्किरहेको थियो।" — Clad in white cloth, their bare feet walked toward the river; the morning air was cold, yet their voices resounded with chants of truth. The footsteps of sixty-five people are moving forward. They are walking towards the thundering Arun, a troop of light. There is only one voice: Destruction of iniquity. Let Dharmarajya be established. The voice is louder—Destruction of iniquity. Let Dharmarajya be established. Iniquity will end. Religion will rise*. (Karki, 2018, p. 481).

This moment underscores what Spivak (1988) describes as the "limits of subaltern speech" (p. 103). Denied recognition in life, Yogmaya and her followers transformed their bodies into the last site of protest, turning death into an unignorable political statement. While suicide may appear as disempowerment through Western feminist lenses, Mohanty (2003) reminds us that feminist analysis must emerge from contextual histories and epistemic locations (p. 52). In the Nepali socio-political context of silencing and erasure, the mass suicide becomes a radical refusal to live under tyranny and a collective feminist rupture.

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Throughout the novel, Yogmaya's voice is shown to be constantly under erasure by patriarchal kinship, state censorship, and religious orthodoxy. Yet her words persist in fragments, carried through oral memory and communal recitation. As the narrator reflects: *Their names were erased, their poems burned, yet the wind still carried her voice* (Karki, 2018, p. 497). This poetics of survival echoes Rege's (2006) call for non-Brahmanical feminist pedagogy, where subaltern women's memory becomes an epistemic tool of resistance (p. 24). By embedding Yogmaya's voice within fiction, Karki (2018) creates a feminist counter-archive—a narrative that refuses to let Yogmaya's dissent be buried by patriarchal forgetting.

One of the novel's most striking moments occurs when Yogmaya recalls the anguish of widows, whose lives were condemned by ritual and patriarchy. In a moving passage, the narrator remembers her conversation with Tulsa's father:

> *We, our descendants, will always live in this village. After bringing her here… Tulsa's father spoke again, still incomplete. I said, untying the broken rope from my thumb and making a ball, 'Where can I say that? I remember my mother, and I have to go when she says, 'Come and get me, brother.' After these years, asking for help from my mother like this could lead to a big disaster*. (Karki, 2018, p. 21).

This long reflection transforms private grief into a form of social critique. The "broken rope" becomes a metaphor for broken kinship ties, while the repeated invocation of the mother highlights the intergenerational nature of women's suffering. Rege's (2006) framework of *testimonio* is useful here: Yogmaya's words are not an individual lament but a collective narrative that speaks for the silenced voices of rural Nepali women (Karki, 2018, p. 42).

In another extended passage, Yogmaya directly challenges the scriptures that legitimize women's subordination:

> *The Brahmin's scriptures burn truth, the doors of the wealthy alone remain open. But the tears of poor mothers and daughters make the rivers overflow, the villages drown, and the nation seeks justice"* (Karki, 2018, p. 480).

This is not just poetic protest but a systematic deconstruction of Brahmanical patriarchy. As Chakravarti (2003) argues, caste and gender oppression operate together by regulating women's lives in service of hierarchy (p. 25). Yogmaya exposes this hypocrisy while elites monopolize religious authority, and poor women's tears carry revolutionary potential, threatening to upend the very social order. The imagery of flooding rivers conveys the inevitability of subaltern uprising when pain is ignored.

Death as Political Speech

The most controversial and powerful moment in the text is Yogmaya's collective march toward the Arun River. The narration stretches into a ritualistic description:

> *Hundreds of bodies wrapped in white cloth walked barefoot toward the river. The morning air was cold, but their voices thundered with chants of truth. Their songs mingled with the waves: 'Let injustice drown, let truth rise.' Then the river embraced them all, carrying them into darkness* (Karki, 2018, p. 482).

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Here, Yogmaya and her followers transform their bodies into the final medium of protest. What state historiography labeled as irrational suicide becomes, in the novel, a radical speech act. Spivak's (1988) question, *"Can the subaltern speak?"* resonates here, for Yogmaya's answer is not through conventional political discourse but through embodied resistance. As Mohanty (2003) argues, feminist readings must be contextual, for what appears as disempowerment from a Western feminist lens in the Nepali context represents a profound refusal to live under tyranny (p. 52).

Even after their deaths, Yogmaya's words refuse silence. The narrator reflects on the persistence of her memory:

> *Their names were erased, their poems burned, yet the wind still carries her voice. In the evenings, the village mothers and sisters sit on the rest platform and repeat her verses, as if truth never dies* (Karki, 2018, p. 486).

This image of oral repetition reveals how women's voices endure outside state archives, preserved instead in communal memory. Rege (2006) calls this a "counter-pedagogy" of marginalized women, where oral traditions resist erasure by sustaining subaltern epistemologies (p. 24). By embedding this survival within fiction, Karki's (2018) novel functions as a feminist counter-archive.

Contemporary Feminist Resonance and Rewriting Praxis

The legacy of Yogmaya Neupane does not end with her protest-suicide in the Arun River. Rather, her insurgent voice reverberates across time, echoing in the struggles of contemporary Nepali feminists who continue to confront caste, gender, and state-sanctioned violence. By theorizing Yogmaya as a time-travelling feminist, her praxis can be understood as a living grammar of dissent—one that resurfaces in different historical conjunctures, shaping the contours of feminist resistance in Nepal today.

Modern feminist activism in Nepal has become increasingly plural and intersectional, especially after the democratic People's Movements of 1990 and 2006. Yet, despite constitutional commitments to inclusion, structural inequities persist for Dalit, Janajati, Madhesi, and rural women. Movements such as #DalitLivesMatter in 2020, campaigns against *chhaupadi* (menstrual exile), and protests following the 2020 Rukum caste massacre reveal the endurance of caste-patriarchal violence. These grassroots struggles echo Yogmaya's indictment of elite and Brahmanical authority. Her *baani*, where she proclaimed, *"the Brahmin's script burns truth; the poor girl's tears flood the nation"* (Karki, 2018, 2018), resonates with Dalit women's voices today, who mobilize personal pain into political testimony.

This continuity underscores Rege's (2006) insistence that subaltern women's narratives must be treated as epistemological interventions rather than secondary accounts (p. 13). Yogmaya's verses, much like Dalit women's contemporary *testimonios*, demand recognition as feminist theory articulated in vernacular idioms of suffering and resistance.

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Feminist Praxis Beyond Secularism

One of the most radical contributions of Yogmaya's activism lies in her refusal to separate spiritual devotion from political rebellion (Malla, 2025: Shrestha, 2023). Her critique of Brahmanical ritualism and her redefinition of *dharma* as ethical justice anticipated what Roy (2012) terms postsecular feminist agency—forms of resistance in South Asia where faith and politics are interwoven to produce ethical dissent (p. 29). In a contemporary context, this resonates with rural women's movements in Nepal, where appeals to ancestral justice and communal ethics remain central to mobilization. For instance, women-led campaigns against environmental exploitation in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok invoke not only human rights discourse but also indigenous cosmologies that link land, rivers, and female embodiment. This recalls Yogmaya's declaration, *"God does not dwell in temples of gold; he lives in the weeping voices of daughters"*(Karki, 2018, p. 138).

Such formulations affirm that spirituality, rather than being apolitical, can be a source of feminist ethics and resistance. Likewise, Yogmaya has become an important pedagogical tool in rewriting feminist history. The novel inserts Yogmaya into national consciousness as a political figure rather than a mystical anomaly. Feminist collectives in Kathmandu, Bhojpur, and across the nation now recite her verses in rallies, workshops, and classrooms, mobilizing literature as counter-memory. As Nagar and Appadurai (2010) argue, reclaiming suppressed histories constitutes an act of "epistemic disobedience" that challenges the authority of male-authored archives (p. 61). By embedding Yogmaya's voice into fiction, poetry, and oral performance, Karki's (2018) novel exemplifies Rege's (2006) idea of "non-Brahmanical feminist pedagogy" (p. 24), where literature becomes a tool of resistance and education. This process not only reclaims Yogmaya but also provides younger generations of Nepali women with a political ancestor who validates their struggles.

From Mythic Silence to Ethical Voice

Yogmaya's reclamation also invites a methodological rethinking of how feminist praxis is theorized in South Asia. Menon (2012) cautions against framing feminism as a teleological progress narrative modeled on Euro-American experiences (p.14). Instead, she argues for recognizing feminist politics as discontinuous, situated, and often emerging from unexpected sites. Yogmaya's praxis—rooted in rural women's suffering, expressed through poetry, and enacted through collective death—does not align with liberal feminist paradigms of individual emancipation. Yet it offers a profound ethic of justice, one that continues to inform struggles against caste and gender hierarchies in Nepal today.

Her example complicates the very definition of feminist resistance. Rather than celebrating victory within institutional frameworks, Yogmaya's praxis insists that ethical dissent—even when it culminates in tragic sacrifice—constitutes a powerful feminist act. This becomes visible in recent protests against rape and gender violence in Nepal, where young women have staged sit-ins and hunger strikes that prioritize ethical testimony over legal triumph. Yogmaya's *baani* thus provides a precedent for a politics where speech, silence, and embodied suffering all become modes of resistance.

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Ultimately, Yogmaya's legacy lives on as a feminist grammar that is continuously rewritten. Her voice echoes in Dalit women's protests against caste atrocities, in Janajati movements for linguistic and territorial rights, and in transnational campaigns like MeTooNepal, where survivors transform personal testimony into public critique. Each of these movements exemplifies what this article calls *time-travelling feminism*: the capacity of past feminist consciousness to animate present struggles, refusing historical closure. Through Yogmaya, Nepali feminism inherits a grammar of resistance that is ethical, spiritual, and communal. Her afterlife demonstrates that feminist praxis in Nepal cannot be understood as derivative of Western secular models but as an indigenous, temporally fluid practice rooted in memory, belief, and collective defiance.

Conclusion

The story of Yogmaya Neupane, as reimagined in Neelam Karki Niharika's novel, compels us to reconsider the frameworks through which feminist resistance in South Asia is understood. Yogmaya's praxis rooted in the anguish of women, articulated through poetic *baani*, and culminating in collective self-sacrifice cannot be reduced to either spiritual mysticism or irrational rebellion. Rather, it reveals a feminist ethic that speaks across time, unsettling hierarchies of caste, gender, and power.

By foregrounding Yogmaya as a *time-travelling feminist*, this article has argued that her voice does not remain confined to the 1940s or to the village of Bhojpur. Instead, her baani continues to resonate in contemporary Nepalese struggles: in Dalit women's testimonies against caste violence, in campaigns against chhaupadi, in Janajati and Madhesi movements for dignity, and in transnational feminist calls like #MeTooNepal. Each of these movements carries echoes of Yogmaya's insurgent spirit, demonstrating how her dissent has been preserved, reinterpreted, and mobilized across generations.

At the theoretical level, Yogmaya's legacy challenges the dominance of Euro-American feminist paradigms that emphasize linear progress, secularism, and institutional inclusion. Her example affirms Nivedita Menon's argument that feminism in South Asia is discontinuous, situated, and often resistant to dominant historical narratives. Yogmaya's fusion of spirituality and rebellion exemplifies what Srila Roy describes as *postsecular feminist agency*, a form of politics where faith becomes a ground for justice rather than submission. Likewise, her testimonies affirm Sharmila Rege's insistence on centering subaltern women's voices as sources of feminist knowledge.

Karki Niharika's literary reclamation of Yogmaya also underscores the importance of counter-memory in feminist historiography. By inscribing her life into fiction, the novel functions as what Richa Nagar and Arjun Appadurai call an "epistemic disobedience"- a refusal to let patriarchal state archives define the limits of history. The oral repetition of Yogmaya's verses by women characters in the novel, as well as their circulation in activist spaces today, highlight how memory itself becomes a feminist praxis that transcends temporal boundaries.

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What emerges, then, is a distinctly Nepali articulation of feminist resistance: one that is not derivative of Western models but rooted in vernacular idioms, collective memory, and embodied sacrifice. Yogmaya's praxis disrupts the binary between past and present, showing that feminist legacies are not linear inheritances but recursive echoes that continually reshape struggles in new contexts. In this sense, *time-travelling feminism* names a method of reading subaltern voices not as static remnants of history, but as active, transhistorical presences that intervene in ongoing struggles for justice.

In reclaiming Yogmaya as both historical figure and contemporary interlocutor, we open space for feminist theory that is attentive to South Asian specificities, to the intersections of caste, gender, and spirituality, and to the insurgent force of memory. Her voice, once silenced by the state and dismissed by elite historiography, now re-emerges as a guide for imagining more ethical, inclusive, and transformative futures.

Yogmaya's final act in the Arun River was not an end but a beginning, an articulation of feminist defiance that continues to ripple across Nepal and beyond. To read her as a *time-travelling feminist* is to acknowledge that the struggles of the past remain unfinished, that the voices of subaltern women persist in reshaping political horizons, and that justice in South Asia requires not only institutional reform but also a radical reimagining of memory, ethics, and resistance.

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