The Politics of Masculinity in Tony Gould’s *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas*

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**Abstract**
The main concern of this paper is to study on masculinity and more importantly the hyper masculinity of the Gorkhas in *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas* by Tony Gould. The writer describes the courage with discipline and dedication, the Gorkhas had while fighting for Nepal, their homeland during the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) and for Britain in the First and Second World Wars, following the other wars and confrontations in many parts of the world. Despite a lot of hardships and pain in wars, they never showed their back to the enemies, but kept Britain’s imperial image always high with victories. They received Victoria Crosses along with other bravery medals. As a masculinity, the hegemonic masculinity is obviously present in the book since the high ranked British Officers are in the position to lead the Gorkha soldiers. However, the masculinity here is associated with the extreme level of bravery and that is the hyper-masculinity of the Gorkhas. Since this is a qualitative research work, the researcher has consulted various books, reviews and journal articles related to the Gorkhas. It is a new concept in the study of the Gorkhas in the particular book by Gould. So, it will certainly be a new insight for the future researchers in the related area.

**Keywords:** Confrontations, courage, hyper masculinity, loyalty, world wars

**Introduction**
In general, the term “masculinity” refers to maleness. There are certain qualities with males that make their maleness. “Masculinity is a set of qualities, characteristics or roles generally considered typical of, or appropriate to, a boy or man” (Siddhanta and SK 1). Traditionally, a male is believed to be strong, brave, capable to face risks, independent and able to give protection to his family members. Females are said to be weak hearted, sensitive, passive, and dependent upon the male authority. In our society, males are usually found involved in risk bearing tasks such as carrying heavy loads; driving heavy vehicles; flying planes; rescuing people from natural disasters and so on. Murray Drummond asserts, “…the visual aspects of males, such as large muscular
bodies, and traditional stereotypical “masculinized” roles including financial provider, along with the heteronormative construction of being a protector of families and females” (1). Males do outside works and manage daily needed goods in a family. Females usually stay home and do cooking, washing, feeding children and supporting the males. However, now-a-days, an exchange in gender roles between males and females can be observed in some societies. For example, husbands stay busy in the household works and wives go to office and earn money for the families. People are a little liberal in the matter of gender role in the society these days. What is more, about the plurality of masculinity Sanjeev Uprety argues that “there is not a single, universal model of masculinity; rather, there are multiple masculinities shaped by a variety factors, including class, ethnicity, and institutional and political location” (41). The sense of masculinity has been multiple in the modern days.

The homosexuality of males is a form of masculinity. People would remain silent about the homosexuality prior to the 19th century. Sean Nixon notes, “Jeffrey Weeks has charted historically the formation of a range of (largely masculine) sexual identities from the late eighteenth century onwards” (297). Giving space to homosexuality in discourse was illegal in the society. The same sex relation was strictly prohibited in the past. Only after the 19th century, people began to talk about homosexuality especially male homosexuality. For John Brannigan, “Male homosexuality also found itself too often expressed through farce” (638). It became a subject matter in literature only in the early 20th century. Since then, people began to write and read about homosexuality in the Western universities. The openness of homosexuality in the society is a power play of masculinity as “the criminalization of male homosexuality in England and Wales in 1885 was an important part of this process” (Jary and Jary 273). It was a big challenge to the conventional society. It concerned with the sexual identity of males. As a result, homosexuality stands as one of the modes of plural masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is another form of masculinity. It occupies a strong space in everyday life in our society. The term “hegemony” is introduced by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci about which Murray Drummond writes, “Hegemony is a concept arising from Antonio Gramsci’s early works in relation to the formation and destruction of social groups based on winning and holding power” (1). The meaning of ‘hegemony’ is a rule over people by winning their consent but not by imposing force upon them. In the similar way, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ indicates the control of male over not only females but also other males of lower class, caste or ranks in offices. According to Sofia Aboim, “Although hegemonic masculinity is essentially directed at the domination of women thereby nourishing a traditionally dichotomized gender system that cuts across social class, it similarly discriminates against men from lower classes and, even more so, gay and non-white males” (3). The females are already subordinated to male authority but in hegemonic masculinity, males also are submissive to males in power. In hegemonic masculinity, there is “men’s domination over women and power of some men over other (often minority groups of) men” (Connell 113). They are in margin having lack of access to the power in centre. Hegemonic masculinity is not strange because it is a common practice that we have in our society.

The most extreme form of masculinity is hyper-masculinity. It is introduced by Donald L. Mosher and M. Sirkin. The prefix “hyper” signifies “over or beyond, excessive” (Brown 121). So, hyper-masculinity is a super level of masculinity. That is sometimes counted as unusual intelligence, skill or power and it attracts attention of many people in a positive way. Moreover, it is also concerned with the topmost level of courage and bravery of men in their action. On the other hand, it sometimes roles...
negative as well. Matt C. Zaitchik and Donald L. Mosher argue that hyper-masculinity is an extreme form of masculine gender ideology, often comprised of a cluster of beliefs that includes toughness, violence, dangerousness, and calloused attitudes toward women and sex (228). That is why hyper-masculinity denotes also the masculinity which has a destructive, irrational and erotic nature. However, warriors’ war heroism, the hyper-masculinity should not be taken as “destructive and exaggerated” (Herek 66). Though there are deaths, injuries, violence and destruction in wars, it is headed for something good. The Gorkhas’ masculinity is their hyper-masculinity because their heroic battling has made them victorious in many wars around the world. Their worldwide popularity in war heroism has made not only themselves and Britain but also Nepal known to the world.

The book *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas* by Tony Gould talks about the Gorkhas’ bravery they showed in the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-1816) for their motherland and in many wars around the world along with the First and Second World Wars on behalf of Britain. With extreme courage, they fought against the British East India Company who had to face many deaths of their soldiers, but eventually the Gorkha soldiers were compelled to accept their defeat because they lacked modern war weapons like their enemies had. After their recruitment in the British East India Company, they were able to make the British authority happy because they succeeded to suppress banditries and mutinies that were a great headache for them. Similarly, in the First and Second World Wars, the Gorkhas’ heroic battling helped Britain to expand her imperial power around the world. The Gorkhas were one and only the power to keep the name and fame of Britain high in the world. Even after the Second World War, they have contributed their hard work to Britain by over-coming the confrontations in Malaya and Borneo Island and defeating Argentina in Falklands War. All these contributions of the Gorkhas are concerned with their masculinity, but it goes beyond the common masculinity and it is their ‘hyper masculinity’ which this paper aims to study on in *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas*.

**Masculinity and the Anglo-Nepal War**

The masculinity and hyper-masculinity of the Gorkhas exhibited in the Anglo-Nepal war has occupied an important place in the history of Nepal and should even be the same in the British and the world history. The various principalities of Nepal had already been united into a greater Nepal by the hyper-masculinity of the late King Prithvi Narayan Shah and his successors. For Tony Gould, the Gorkhas were highly “courageous and indomitable soldiers” (116). By the time of Anglo-Nepal war, Nepal had already been a huge power emerged to compete the British East India Company or the British colonial power in India. There were confrontations and wars in many places between the British and the Gorkha soldiers. Though they had low in warriors’ number, lack of war weapons and modern war skills, the Gorkhas were the “extreme example of physical, hyper-masculine Gorkhali manhood” (Uprety 13). The Britishers had the impression about the Gorkhas that “hard countries breed hard men” (Heathcote 93) despite their defeat in the war. After their recruitment in the British Army, they have fought in wars in several places of the world for Britain together with the British soldiers.

The high level of masculinity shown by the Gorkha soldiers during the Anglo-Nepal War impresses the British authority. In spite of the Gorkhas’ weakness concerning the war technology, it was quite hard for the British soldiers to defeat them due to “their bravery, integrity and discipline of a very high order” (Tiwary 808). Tony Gould appreciates the extremity in the masculinity of the Gorkhas as “there was the sheer
ferocity of the Gurkha attack on the British stockade” (55). Britain had the policy of fighting and colonizing small and weak nations. In fact, both the British and the Gorkhali forces were “vying for supremacy” (Gurung 2). The British soldiers were well-equipped with modern weapons and war techniques whereas the Gorkhas were not despite their super “masculine power” (Zaitchik and Mosher 232). Tony Gould asserts, “Ochterlony knew that his Bengal sepoys were no match for the Gorkhas in hill combat, so he avoided such encounters as far as he could and placed heavy reliance on his artillery” (54). The Gorkhas had a high capacity of fighting in hill geography. It was not easy for enemies to dominate their “martial spirit” (Caplan 591). They were famous in having a high order of masculine courage.

The Gorkhas did not have any artillery as modern war weapons. Their best weapon was only the high masculinity they had as they were “imbued with the warlike qualities” (Northey 98). Describing Khalanga war, Tony Gould reports, “In the west, General Gillespie’s frontal assault of 31 October 1814 on the fort at Kalanga (near Dehra Dun), defended by a mere 600 Gorkha troops, ended in disaster, with the general himself being killed, along with many of his officers and men” (44-45). Though the writer has said Kalanga, it is Khalanga in Nepali writing. In Khalanga, there was a huge and dangerous war between the Gorkha soldiers and the British force. Both sides had to face a lot of loss of lives as Byron Farwell declares that “Kalunga was a bloody affair” (31). Though one side becomes winner and another side is a loser in war, there is always a great loss either it is of lives or properties and even of both in wars. War at Khalanga claimed a lot of deaths of soldiers of British as well as Nepali sides. Eventually, the Gorkha General Amar Sing lost the war at Jaitthak and at Malaun which became the “decisive victory in April 1815” (Gurung 313) for British soldiers. Despite the defeat of the Gorkha soldiers, their super masculine performance in the battles drew a high admiration from the British authority.

The supreme level of masculinity with loyalty and discipline of the Gorkhas made the British government decide to recruit them in their army. They had the idea that the “martial masculinity” (Upret y9) of the Gorkhas would help them in their imperial movement. After the Anglo-Nepal War was formally concluded with the “Treaty of Segauli” signed on 4 March 1816 (Gould 67), the British authority started recruiting the Gorkhas in their army. Ranjit Thapa takes the recruitment of the Gorkhas in the British East India Army as “an outcome of the war” (114). Nevertheless, a question is why and how the British administration came to decide to allow Nepali youths or the Gorkhas to join their army since they were their enemies. The reason behind it could be no other than their “masculine virtue of heroism” (Zaitchik and Mosher 233). Tony Gould argues, “Gurkhas were covered by an aspect of the martial races theory mentioned by MacMunn- the philosophy of climatic difference, the supposed superiority of temperate-zone man over tropical man” (125). John Ship in his memoir writes, “Run they would not, and of death they seemed to have no fear…” (qtd. in Farwell 30). The British government needed such highly masculine subjects in battling to expand her imperial power around the world. Britain thought of being benefited a lot by the Gorkhas’ tremendous martial quality.

Initially, the Gorkhas had to get their martial masculinity and loyalty tested before joining any wars for Britain. They were to maintain the internal peace and order in society. Vijaya Kumar Tiwary asserts that the Gorkhas were not deployed directly for “regular war” but for “local security” in the Indian society (803). In fact, the British East India Company wanted to have confidence regarding the Gorkhas’ war masculinity with honesty. While chasing dacoits, “One, cornered and disarmed, begged for his life in the most humiliating manner known to a Hindu. On his knees he stuffed grass into his mouth
while crying, ‘I am your cow!’ A Gurkha cut him down with his kukri” (Farwell 37). The Gorkhas were able to suppress the dacoits and robbers. Moreover, they were also able to exploit the mutinies against the British authority. In various mutinies, the Gorkhas employed their fighting skill to suppress the rebels and established peace in the society. About the Gorkhas’ masculinity, Tony Gould concludes, “Like all mountain folk they were brave and, in addition, they were amenable to discipline” (112). The Gorkhas earned more fame than before for their masculine courage (Upreti 14). They were able to win the trust of the British authority. They were regarded “as something more than good ‘native infantry,’ as something special” (Farwell 48). The closeness between the Gorkhas and the British institution increased. They could be involved in wars as regular warriors for Britain then onwards.

**Masculinity and the First World War**

In the First World War, the Gorkhas were the main war masculine heroes to fight and defeat the enemies in several places around the world. Their heroic battling made Britain conquer and annex many countries into her. Tony Gould admits:

> During the First World War Gurkhas fought in all the main theatres of war, from the fields at Flanders to the hills of Gallipoli and the deserts of Mesopotamia and Palestine. Once they succeeded in coming to terms with the alien conditions and a type of warfare outside their previous experience, they acquitted themselves with honour and enhanced their already high reputation as stalwart warriors. (176)

Their masculine martial performance in the First World War was no less than what they had before but developed their fame higher in relation to their “unmatched martial qualities” (Tiwary 803). Their success in wars kept their standard of war heroism greater than before. Byron Farwell talks about a Gorkha rifleman Motilal Thapa who was “lying on the lip, his shattered arm hanging by a thread of flesh” and “softly muttering: I must not cry out. I am a Gurkha” (93). The terms “super masculine bravery” and “Gurkhas” never remain separate. Lionel Caplan argues that where there is Gorkhas, there is strong power of masculinity (585). The Gorkhas’ reputation was of having fearlessness and patience. Tony Gould claims, “Acts of selfless devotion to British officers by the Gorkha soldiers were not uncommon” (187). The Gorkhas’ masculinity with loyalty was not a new thing. It was like a permanent tag to them.

Kulbir Thapa, a rifleman, was one of the hyper-masculine warriors in the history of the British Gorkhas. His gallantry seems to be uncommon. According to Byron Farwell, “Rifleman Kulbir Thapa of the 2/3rd suddenly found himself alone and wounded. Then he stumbled upon a severely wounded soldier of the Leicestershire Regiment. Thapa made him as comfortable as possible and lay beside through the rest of the day and night” (93). Unbeatable war masculinity with patience makes the Gorkhas successful in their mission. It is hard to remain safe in wars. There should be strong mind and courage as “a staunchness in a kind of warfare” (Gould 189). Talking about Kulbir, Byron Farwell writes further, “Farther on, he found a shell hole in which he could shelter the Leicestershire soldier while he went back for the Gorkhas. He brought them both safely into the Allied lines, then turned back to the shell hole” (94). Kulbir’s “superior masculinity” (Zaitchik and Mosher 231) in battling as well as rescuing comrades in the war was really his hyper-masculinity. In wars, soldiers either kill their enemies or get killed. In the meantime, safeguarding the wounded co-warriors is a tough work. Kulbir Thapa did all these works putting his own life in risk. For such ‘an exceptional courage’ and determination, the British authority honoured him with Victoria Cross (Biggs 43).
He is known as the first Gorkha Victoria Cross winner in the history of British Gorkhas as well as Great Britain.

**Masculinity and the Second World War**

The Gorkhas fought for Britain with strong masculine gallantry in various places of the world even during the period of Second World War. They had been in wars in Burma, Persia, Italy, Greece, Malaya, North Africa, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and other many places (Farwell 178). At the battle of Akarit in North Africa, Subedar Lallbahadur Thapa of the 1/2nd Gorkhas exhibited his heroic war strength defeating the enemies. Maurice Biggs describes that Lallbahadur and his comrades had already killed the “garrison” of the outer posts with their khukuris and “the next machine-gun posts were dealt with, Subedar Lallbahadur Thapa personally killing two men with his kukri and two more with his revolver” (50). Thapa’s contribution was of a very much high masculinity. He was awarded Victoria Cross for his “outstanding display of leadership as well as bravery” (Gurung 53). Tulbhadur Pun who fought at Mogaung, also became a Victoria Cross winner. For Tony Gould, he received a Victoria Cross “for spectacular acts of individual bravery in an attack on a strongly defended railway bridge at Mogaung” (260). Likewise, Ganju Lama, a rifleman, was another war hero to win a Military medal along with a Victoria Cross for his “aggressiveness and endurance of hardships and physical toughness” (Hale 713). He had knocked out two of the five light enemy tanks and also took on three enemy medium tanks single-handedly in order to weaken the position of the enemies in Burma (Gould 262). It was his fearful fight against the Japanese attack in Burma during the Second World War.

Another hyper-masculine warrior of the Second World War was Lachhiman Gurung who was heavily wounded but continued firing singly over the Japanese soldiers and caused a lot of casualties in the side of the enemies. He battled with a high masculinity of “unparalleled bravery and determination” (Gurung 9). His tremendously fierce attack over the enemies made him victorious. Tony Gould observes, “Under attack from the Japanese, Lachhiman’s trench was peppered with grenades; twice he picked up these time-bombs and hurled them back at the enemy, but the third time he was not so lucky; the grenade exploded in his hand and shattered his arm, also wounding his face, body and right leg” (268). Lachhiman Gurung was a highly courageous and devoted towards the land he was fighting for. Despite being severely injured, he did not care about his injuries but kept fighting in order to save every inch of the land. Byron Farwell admires Gurung’s heroism in battling that “Lachhiman, in spite of his grievous wounds and the use of only one arm, wrenched his rifle into position and managed to fire, even to reload, with his left hand, calling out, ‘Come and fight! Come and fight! While I live I will kill you!’” (226). His unprecedented masculinity in bravery worked a lot to defeat the enemies. So, he was happy even though he lost his right arm and left eye. For the honour of his great contribution, he was awarded a Victoria Cross.

**Masculinity and After World Wars**

The Gorkhas’ unchallengeable masculinity played the role of a backbone for Britain’s worldwide fame not only in the First and Second World Wars but also in the confrontations and wars that took place afterwards. They were involved in the military operations in Malaya and Borneo Island and Falklands War. Tony Gould writes, “For the first two decades of their service in the British Army, from 1948 to 1966, the Gorkha infantry battalions were almost continually engaged in a war, first in Malaya, where it was known as the ‘Emergency,’ and then in Borneo, where it was called ‘Confrontation’” (323). With their previous experiences, the Gorkhas were able to
suppress the confrontations and win the war. Sanjeev Uprety argues that their “valour and fighting skills” (7) are immeasurable. In the Borneo confrontation, Lance-Corporal Rambahadur Limbu performed his best and defeated the enemies for Britain. He was awarded the thirteenth Victoria Cross from the Gorkhas. Tony Gould describes:

When he and his two companions came under machine-gun fire Rambahadur rushed forward, killed the machine-gunner with a hand grenade and took the first trench. His group now became the focus of fire from two other machine—guns which he knew would have to be knocked out; but in going forward his two comrades were both hit and wounded. Rambahadur, though the target of close-range and accurate fire, succeeded in rescuing them both and carrying them to safety. It took him twenty minutes to bring them in and both, alas, had already died of their wounds. (355)

His co-warriors’ injuries and death enraged Rambahadur extremely. He could not tolerate it and continued firing over the enemies. He promised to avenge the enemies for his companions’ death (Farwell 274). Rambahadur’s high masculinity of fighting and rescuing actions succeeded to defeat the enemies. His victory was highly celebrated. It was like a miraculous victory for Britain.

The Gorkhas’ ultra-masculinity played a remarkable role in the defeat of Argentine soldiers in the Falklands War (1982). Their involvement was greatly needed for Britain’s victory in the war. Byron Farwell states, “When Britain decided to recapture the Falkland Islands in 1982, the army sent in its first team, its finest, which included, of course, a battalion of the Gurkhas” (288). Argentina had already heard about Gorkhas’ reputation regarding their bravery. The Gorkhas were already popular in the world for “their martial character and innate penchant for military activities” (Gurung 316). They also saw the pictures of the Gorkhas attacking enemies which “struck terror into the hearts of young Argentine conscripts” (Gould 367). The pictures created a psychological effect in Argentine soldiers. The 1/7th Gorkhas moved ahead defeating Argentine soldiers and were about to reach Port Stanley, “The Argentines fled when they realized that they were being outflanked and that those outflanking them were Gurkhas” (Farwell 292). The Gorkhas were strongly present for the victory. Argentine soldiers could not continue fighting but they surrendered.

Conclusion

The Gorkhas’ hyper-masculinity in the wars has established their identity as it is ‘better to die than live a coward’ in the world. Their extreme masculine bravery has taken an important space not only in the history of Nepal and Britain but also the whole world. Despite the Gorkhas’ defeat in the Anglo-Nepal War, their unbeatable courage and loyalty never let Nepal be colonized. What is more, their high level of masculinity demonstrated in the Anglo-Nepal War attracted the British East India Company to recruit them in their army. They were able to exploit the banditries and mutinies in the Indian society that was a great problem for the British authority. The Gorkhas’ involvement in the First and Second World Wars and the victories they earned made their masculinity popular worldwide. In fact, it was their high level of masculinity, a hyper masculinity. In the confrontations and military operations in Malaya and Borneo Island and the war in Falklands, the Gorkhas’ masculinity played the main role in their victory for the image of Britain. The Gorkhas’ hyper masculinity is also evidenced by the Victoria Crosses and other medals of bravery they received during the war times. The book Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas by Gould draws a vivid picture of the Gorkhas’ super-gallantry as hyper-masculinity in the world.
The Politics of Masculinity in Tony Gould’s *Imperial Warriors*

**Works Cited**


