

Recovering Marginalized Voices through Hermeneutic Interpretation of Nepali Folk Stories

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Abstract- A hermeneutical approach to analyzing Nepali folk narratives provides an understanding of how cultural hierarchies shape the power dynamics between characters through the act of resistance. Hermeneutics draws upon the theories of Zhang Jiang, contends that meaning is generated through the relationship of the text to culture and through the interpretive acts that connect the text to its reader(s). By examining the folktales of *The Latte Damai* and *The Smart Daughter-in-Law*, deeper symbolic meanings can be revealed. The results of the research indicate that social hierarchies are negotiated through character actions and therefore are not static; *The Latte Damai* reflects caste driven marginalization and the unstable nature of power relations through deceit; while *The Smart Daughter-in-Law* illustrated how wisdom and reasoning can be employed to contest authority. The research identifies resistance to authority as subtle and strategic and sustainable power as derived from lived experiences. In conclusion, this research applies a hermeneutic approach to Nepali folk narratives which provides an opportunity for uncovering hidden meanings and revealing the voice of those who have been marginalized by social inequality; thus, Nepali folk narratives represent dynamic texts that, while holding onto cultural traditions, assert and challenge social inequalities.

Keywords: Nepali folk narratives, hermeneutics, caste and gender, social hierarchy, resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nepali folk narratives function not merely as forms of entertainment but as repositories of cultural values, social norms, and collective memory. They convey symbolic meanings, represent human–nature relationships, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations (Budhathoki, 2024; Dahal & Bhatta, 2021). As Gómez (2017) suggests, such narratives operate as collective social imaginaries that shape patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior within specific socio-cultural contexts.

However, a significant limitation in existing scholarship lies in the tendency to examine caste, and gender through dominant cultural perspectives. As a result, marginalized characters are frequently represented as passive figures, while their agency, strategies, and lived experiences remain underexplored and ignored. In addition, the use of hermeneutical methods in the study of folk literature has been limited, resulting in a lack of focus on the symbolism and culture of the narratives being studied. The absence of a hermeneutics-based research framework has created a barrier to understanding local folklore as a reflection or negotiation or opposition to structural social inequality. The

present research project aims to fill this gap in understanding by using a hermeneutical research framework in the identification and recovery of voices that have been historically marginalized from a sample of Nepali folk literature. Hermeneutics, as defined by Palmer (1969, p. 8), is study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts.” Expanding this perspective, Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) argues that understanding is historically situated, emerging through the interaction between past traditions and present interpretation. Similarly, Zhang Jiang (2021) conceptualizes the hermeneutic circle as a dynamic interaction among historical tradition, present context, and the interpreter, through which meaning is continuously reconstructed.

This study is based on three research objectives, which are: (1) the identification of marginalized characters and their experiences within a selected sample of Nepali folk stories; (2) the analysis of the symbolism and culture of these stories; and (3) the application of hermeneutical interpretation to recover suppressed voices and values. Therefore, the central research question is: *How can hermeneutic interpretation of Nepali folk stories recover the voices and experiences of marginalized characters?*”

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Caste, Gender, and Intersectionality in Nepali Society

Caste in Nepali society is a birth-based system that fundamentally shapes a person's social identity and hierarchy, as well as everyday interactions. Caste as a hereditary social group that has many restrictions on food, marriage, occupations, and social relations (Chalaune, 2022). Further, as stated by Astha KC (2020) and David N. Gellner (2007), the caste identity is assigned at birth and defines one's social belonging to a specific caste community, usually identifiable by one's surname. Apart from serving as a way to identify social belonging, as historically institutionalized through the use of legal-cultural mechanisms, the caste identity continues today. For example, as noted by Subedi and Maharjan (2021), the Muluki Ain 1854 formalized the caste hierarchy using the principles of ritual purity and pollution to structure social relationships and reinforce inequality. Despite some social progress, caste continues today to dictate daily interactions. Subedi (2010) has found that there are clear distinctions between interactions between individuals of different castes in the public and private spheres. The caste system and its discrimination demonstrate that the caste system does not simply reflect social systems but rather continue to reinforce social exclusion and power inequalities.

The construction of Gender is similar to caste; both are socially constructed and continuously produced and reproduced. Judith Butler (1999) defines gender as performative. Gender is not a fixed or natural category, but rather created through repeated social practices and not fixed on stable identities. Asmita Bista (2020) reiterates this idea by defining masculinity and femininity as socially constructed characteristics. However, most of this literature focuses on Western contexts. What remains unclear is whether performativity operates differently in caste-stratified societies like Nepal, where gender and caste intersect in ways Butler's framework does not fully address. Bishwakarma (2020), for example, shows that proverbs and sayings valorize men as strong and powerful yet portray women as weak and subservient. As Uprety (2023) states, men are usually constructed as leaders and decision-makers, whereas women are expected to provide care and support. These structures are reinforced through patriarchal systems that restrict the ability of women to have a voice and exercise agency. Adhikari and Sharma (2022) state that women are often perceived as being vulnerable and incapable of expressing themselves, while Gupta et al. (2021) say societal norms continue to silence and limit women's participation in the public sphere. Nevertheless, recent social changes have started to break down the inequalities and discrimination experienced by women and other marginalized groups (K.C., Pasa, and Khatri, 2022), but gender-based discrimination is still rampant in Nepali society.

While caste and gender are often viewed separately, an intersectionality perspective shows that these two systems work simultaneously to form compounded and layered forms of marginalization. Crenshaw, in defining the concept of intersectionality (1991), asserts that no system of oppression can be understood in and of itself; rather, systems intersect with other systems to create unique forms of subordination. This is exemplified in the Nepali context with the experience of lower caste women who experience not only caste-based exclusion, but also gender based subordination. According to Limbu (2025), intersectionality exposes these overlapping structures of inequality and

describes the impact on daily life as formed by multiple forms of discrimination. As Subedi (2010) points out, lower caste individuals are generally viewed as inferior because of the caste system, regardless of their actions. When this inferiority is combined with patriarchal gender roles, an additional layer of marginalization is created.

A further layer of inequality is sustained through various institutional and cultural practices. Pokharel (2020) provides an example of how society is divided into "pure" and "impure" categories which legitimizes the practice of untouchable and provides disproportionate power to the dominant classes. In this society, the position of lower caste women is particularly marginal due to their dual subordination by the ritual hierarchy system of superiority and the tradition of patriarchal gender roles—resulting in very little power. Thus, the relationship between caste and gender demonstrates that caste impacts the level of gender inequality; as such, it is inadequate to analyze caste and gender as separate categories of analysis.

A hermeneutic approach has strong analytical potential in interpreting Nepali folk narratives. As cultural texts, folk narratives encode social hierarchies, value systems, and symbolic meanings that reflect broader social structures. Through hermeneutic interpretation, it becomes possible to critically examine how marginalized characters are represented, silenced, or negotiated within these narratives. In addition to enhancing the understanding of the cultural implications of these texts, this process also facilitates the recovery of silenced voices and reinterpreting traditional stories through a more inclusive and critical lens.

III. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This research applies the hermeneutic paradigm as articulated by Zhang Jiang; Zhang stresses using the concepts found in language, culture, and history to understand how people derive meaning, and he criticizes what he calls "imposed interpretation." He defines this term as the tendency of people to impose their preconceived notions onto others' texts, and he argues for the need for an interpretive process that is attentive to the internal coherence of a story's logic. From this perspective, understanding does not exist in a fixed location, but rather it develops dynamically through negotiation between the fragments of meaning and the unfinished meaning of the entire picture. This notion of understanding is similar to the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013), who discusses the interplay between past and present in terms of understanding, and to Paul Ricoeur (1976), who describes the multiple levels of meaning that a symbol can reveal.

The classical folktales were selected from published collections of Nepali Folktales and Tales of Kathmandu. Selection criteria included: (a) representation of a protagonist from a marginalized caste or gender position, (b) presence of explicit negotiation with hierarchical structures, and (c) wide circulation within Nepali cultural memory. Analysis proceeded through three iterative phases: first, a close reading of each story independently; second, contextual interpretation situating each story within caste and gender hierarchies as described in the literature; third, comparative analysis across both stories to identify patterns of resistance and power sustainability. This circular process, repeatedly moving between part and whole, text and context, significantly embodies the hermeneutic method described above.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative hermeneutic approach, moving progressively and repeatedly between close textual reading, contextual interpretation, and critical reflection. This process reflects the hermeneutic circle, in which understanding develops through continuous engagement between individual elements and the broader narrative structure. The analysis focuses on two widely circulated Nepali folk narratives including *Latte Damai* and *Smart Daughter-in-Law*. They are selected for their representation of marginalized protagonists and their potential to illuminate issues of caste and gender.

IV. ANALYSIS

a. Shifting and Negotiating Hierarchy

The classical narratives of *The Lame Damai* and *The Smart Daughter-in-Law* present clearly identifiable social hierarchies that gradually demonstrate patterns of transformation throughout the course of the narratives. *Latte Damai*

is originally framed through the lens of caste-based discrimination. Latte, as a member of the lower caste, has been oppressed due to his social standing, which is associated with ritual impurity. The actions of Latte to make food impure early in the story, therefore, are not just random acts of mischief but rather represent a deliberate attempt to manipulate the structure of the pre-existing social hierarchy.

By controlling the notion of caste-based pollution in Nepal, he is able to carve out a place for himself within a social system that does not traditionally allow a Damai to exist. Likewise, Latte's later deception of the king and his temporary ownership of the river signify a reversal of the typical power structure. However, Latte's transformation is ultimately unstable, as the social hierarchy is restored following collective efforts by the community to resist his deception. This suggests that power gained through deception is neither sustainable nor legitimate in the long term, particularly when it undermines the communal good.

Conversely, Smart Daughter-in-Law demonstrates a different approach to the negotiation of hierarchical structures. The majority of authority in this narrative rests with males (the father and the king). The daughter-in-law, being in a subordinate role, eventually reshapes this hierarchy by thinking her way through her response to the king's challenges rather than by deception. By using her interpretive skills and practical reasoning, she is ultimately able to gain authority through a successful decoding of figurative language and resolution of conceptually complex issues presented to her by the king. Unlike Latte, her transformation is supportive of social order and is consistent with the terms and conditions of the same social structure.

The two stories indicate that while hierarchy is a fundamental structural principle, it is open to negotiation by different means. Through Latte Damai, transformation can be achieved through manipulation of ritual beliefs, whereas through Smart Daughter-in-Law, transformation occurs via the use of interpretive intelligence. Ultimately, the difference in the outcomes from the two mechanisms of transformation indicates that the various valuations of each means of acquiring power, as established by the story, are a fundamental component of the way in which power is legitimized in each story.

b. Forms of Resistance

Resistance appears in both stories through indirect and subtle tactics rather than through overt confrontations. Latte's resistance follows within the traditional set of rules established by the caste system, which excludes him from standard modes of participation in society. To stay alive and advance within these rules, Latte relies on strategic deception for his own benefit rather than necessarily using this method in solidarity with others. Because of this, his tactics will inevitably create some backlash from society, which leads to Latte's removal. This kind of resistance that is not based upon ethical or collective values is ultimately portrayed as untenable over time. In contrast, the daughter-in-law's resistance uses reasoning and creative problem-solving. When confronted by authority with obstacles, she does not directly confront authority at all, but develops an alternate view of authority through her intellectual means. As described above, this type of resistance will not only provide an effective means of resistance against the existing system, but it could also be beneficial to the broader social environment through providing support to families and bringing relationship balance. In this case, the daughter-in-law uses a more subtle form of resistance against the established order while still participating in it.

By doing this, the daughter-in-law creates new opportunities for herself as an individual without completely violating the norm in which she operates. Both stories show that resistance must be strong enough to have an impact on the system, but not so extreme that it creates instability in the social order. The daughter-in-law's approach demonstrates that resistance can create significant societal change through the use of calculated resistance-based strategies that are socially and culturally meaningful.

c. The Nature and Sustainability of Power

The two stories present power as a central theme, although the origins and stability of power in the narratives are very different from each other. Latte uses deception and manipulation to obtain his power; he acquires temporary power by deceiving the king into believing that he is the rightful ruler. However, this power is ultimately not stable; it is not legitimate socially or based on any sense of ethical or moral responsibility. Moreover, the disruption of community resources, particularly the river, creates a collective response against him, resulting in his loss of power. Because of this, the narrative demonstrates that power based on manipulation and self-interest are inherently unstable and fragile.

Conversely, the daughter-in-law's power is created through her ability to interpret and apply knowledge and wisdom to resolve the king's challenges. The way in which she responds to these challenges shows that there is a connection between what she knows and how she has experienced life; therefore, her authority is not only acknowledged but continues to be maintained within the community. This distinction can be understood from a hermeneutical standpoint, drawing on Zhang Jiang's idea that understanding emerges through the dynamic relationship between lived experience and cultural context. The actions of the daughter-in-law reflect this interpretive relationship, as they are meaningfully embedded within the social context, whereas Latte's actions appear less grounded in shared cultural meaning. As a result, one form of power demonstrates relative sustainability within the social structure, while the other remains unstable and ultimately unsustainable.

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research study is to determine if hermeneutic interpretation can assist in making recovered voices of excluded individuals from the folk narrative of Nepal. The findings indicate that employing this type of hermeneutic approach can be very useful; however, successful employment of this type of approach requires careful consideration of both theoretical assumptions about hermeneutics as well as limitations placed upon hermeneutic researchers.

Analyzing the findings also indicates that hierarchical relations found throughout these narratives are not entirely permanent, but are negotiable for limited time periods. These findings extend the previous body of literature related to caste and gender hierarchy that have primarily been studied in terms of these types of power relations being present over time (Subedi, 2010; Pokharel, 2020). Although caste and gender hierarchies emerge as dominant structures throughout the narratives, the stories highlight the ways in which characters temporarily shift their positions within these power structures through deception, interpretive skill, and rational thinking. While such temporary shifts in power do not represent structural changes, they do maintain examples of cultural representations of negotiated authority, and of limited negotiating power, used by characters.

The research also adds to the existing literature related to representations of gender. Although earlier researchers focused on the perpetuation of patriarchal cultural norms found within Nepali cultural expressions (Bishwakarma, 2020), the story *Smart Daughter-in-Law* provides an alternative representation indicating that the daughter-in-law is able to exert considerable authority through agency, thereby indicating that folk narratives might provide a different space to reflect on women's competence and authority. While the systematic comparison of Latte's unsuccessful resistance reflects characteristics of other theories of subaltern resistance, the narrative portrayal of Latte's unsuccessful resistance may reflect how dominant cultural forces shape narratives of resistance or could simply indicate that the author of this narrative developed some type of moral structure different from what other dominant cultural forces would expect with subaltern resistance. This ambiguity establishes the connection between multiple interpretations of the same text.

A major limitation of this research study relates to the positionality of the researcher. As an upper caste male, my given interpretations are constructed based on a certain given set of cultural/ social assumptions inherent to someone who is in the upper caste. While reflexivity provides some degree of awareness so that there is some possibility of reducing

imposed interpretations, it cannot fully eliminate any possibility of imposed interpretations. Therefore, I anticipate that recovering marginalized voices will remain an incomplete and context dependent endeavor. For example, my perception of Latte's actions as 'selfish' reflects an upper-caste moral standard, not an objective assessment of his options. Latte operates within a social structure that offers him no legal or dignified means of resistance. Therefore, judging his actions by a standard of 'selflessness' may itself be an act of imposed interpretation. Research should incorporate dialogic/participation approaches, allowing research conducted by Dalits and/or women in relationship to negotiating the aforementioned limitations.

VI. CONCLUSION

Through the lens of a hermeneutic framework, this study has developed two folk narratives from Nepal's cultural heritage to show how both the creators and the interpreters of these tales define the hierarchy of power and the potential for resistance within their respective social structures. The analysis concluded that both narratives did not present a fixed structure, but instead highlight negotiations among the socially disadvantaged and show that they were capable of changing their position for a relatively short period of time. An example of this is presented through Latte Damai, where the temporary change of power is achieved through deception and self-serving behaviors, whereas in Smart Daughter-in-Law the power achieved through logic and contribution to society is recreated over time.

These classical narratives reveal the fact that folk narratives do more than simply perpetuate existing hierarchical relationships, they also contain numerous subtle forms of resistance and alternative meanings. This research makes three contributions. First, it demonstrates that Zhang Jiang's hermeneutic framework can recover marginalized voices without romanticizing them. Second, it shows that folk narratives encode culturally specific theories of power—sustainable power comes from interpretive wisdom embedded in shared meaning, not from deception. Third, it models reflexive interpretation by acknowledging how the researcher's upper-caste position may shape judgments of characters like Latte.

Additionally, the emphasis on the reflexive nature of interpretation highlights the fact that no interpretation exists outside the position of the interpreter within the context of their society. The findings from this study suggest future research that utilizes the same methodology would benefit from including as many interpretative voices as possible from marginalized groups, thereby expanding the hermeneutic inquiry and providing a more inclusive context to sympathetic and collaborative interpretations of Nepali folk narratives

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