



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

**A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol 11 No.1 March, 2026**

Editor-in-chief: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.11/No.1, March, 2026

Gorkhali Birta and the Narratives of Masculinity and Femininity in Madhu Gurung's The Keeper of Memories

Dr. Jemima Sakum Phipon

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
M.U.C Women's College,
Burdwan, West Bengal

Received- 15/02/2026, Revised-26/02/2026, Accepted-16/03/2026, Published-31/03/2026

Abstract: The discourse of the 'bir' (brave) Gorkha reifies the Gorkha as a brave soldier armed with a khukuri (traditional machete) who decapitated the heads of enemies in the battlefield with unflinching 'birta' (bravery). This popular narrative of the Gorkha jati conflates the colonial formulation of the 'Gorkha' as a single, simplistic identity and the colonial narrative of the 'Gorkha' as a martial race. Ironically, this discourse which has also caught the popular imagination of the Nepalis/Gorkhas is essentially narrow, androcentric, and martial. It disregards domesticity and the quotidian, the other Nepali/Gorkha masculinities, and the female and the feminine. This paper looks at Gorkha women and their quiet, quotidian and enduring birta in Madhu Gurung's *The Keeper of Memories* (2016) and few select lyrics. For generations, Gorkha women have glorified and validated the martial identity of the Gorkhas. Nepali mothers play a significant role in conditioning young men to join the Indian military service. Though Indian Nepali society boasts of being more liberal and considerate towards their women in comparison to many other Indian communities, the Nepali society is essentially patriarchal. Nepali women have been pushed to the margins and rendered silent and invisible. Madhu Gurung holds up a mirror to the realities of Gorkha/Nepali women across time and place. Indian Nepali women writings chronicle (her)stories of suffering, injustice, and oppression which have been silenced, and overshadowed by the dominant discourse of the masculine and martial Gurkha. These narratives portray that birta is not always about brandishing a khukuri but quiet endurance, waiting and 'keeping' familial and jatiya memories, tradition and culture.

Key words: Birta, dominant discourse, martial identity, margins, quotidian.

Gorkhali ko chhoro ho ma.

Gorkhe mero naam.

Aailagne shatru ko ma garchhu kam tamam.

Itihas paltai hera ya purkha lai sodha.

Jitekai chhau sansar lai...

Bir bir bir Gorkhali, bir bir bir Gorkhali. (Mantra 00:35-1:20)

(I am the son of Gorkhali

My name is Gorkhe.

The charging enemy I annihilate.

You may flip through the pages of history or ask my ancestors about it.

We have triumphed the world...

Brave, brave, brave Gorkhali, brave, brave, brave Gorkhali)

This popular song by Mantra, a rock band from Darjeeling, sheds light on Gorkha subjectivity that idealizes and celebrates the *bir* (brave) Gorkha (Gorkhali here). The *bir* Gorkha is reified as a *khukuri*-brandishing brave soldier who has received accolades for his unflinching *birta* (courage) on the battlefield. To the imagination of the Indian Nepali/Gorkha/Gorkhali the Nepali/Gorkha/Gorkhali *jati* is brave, martial, and essentially masculine. The narrative of the *bir* Gorkha was constructed by the British and evolved out of nineteenth century barracks and battlefields in British India. Therefore, it is androcentric, martial, and non-inclusive of the female, the feminine, and other genders. This martial identity bestowed by the British was readily appropriated and internalised by the *Gurkhas* (anglicised term for Gorkha that refers especially to soldiers). It moulded their identity, culture, and their perception of themselves even after formal decolonization. Nepalis (both Indian and Nepalese) /Gorkhas, have always celebrated and subscribed to the masculine, martial, *khukuri*-wielding, identity of the *bir* (brave) Gorkha imposed on them by their British colonizer. Nepali/ Gorkha popular culture has also greatly contributed to celebrating, reiterating, and disseminating the martial image of the community. Well-loved Nepali movies like *Lahure* and songs like “Birta ko chhino” (*Lahure*), “Bir, bir Gorkhali” by Mantra, “Nepali ho” by 1974 A.D (Nepalese music band), “Hami Nepali” (Dakshina) to name a few, exalt the world acclaimed *birta* (courage) of the “*bir ko santan*” (descendants of the brave) and the martial feats of the *Khukuri* wielding Gorkha *shahid* (martyr) and *lahure* (soldier).

Impressed by the martial aptitude of the *Gurkhas* in the Anglo-Nepalese War 1814-1816, the British East India Company began to recruit Gurkhas into the imperial army. During the Battle of Nalapani (October-November 1814), the British were surprised by the "guerilla tactics" used by the Gorkhas "wielding only khukris

...and the ghunatro, crude rope slings which shot rounded stones with deadly accuracy to ambush hapless British troops, cut their heads...The British had faced many enemies but none were so fierce in close combat and unafraid of their guns and canons” (Gurung 3). More so after 1857, there was a tremendous escalation in the recruitment of soldiers from the 'martial races' of Punjab, the North West Frontier, and Nepal. The British replaced the "mutinous " and "untrustworthy" Hindu high caste sepoy with Sikh, Pathan, Rajput, and Gurkha soldiers who were "loyal" to the British. The British formulated the 'martial theory', a pseudo-ethnographic discourse that laid down a direct connection between race, ethnicity, and martial aptitude.

The Gurkhas along with the Sikhs and the Pathans were legally classified and celebrated as courageous, loyal, manly, and hence martial as opposed to the other races in British India who were considered effeminate. By the 1880s the martial theory was codified by the military press in official 'recruiting handbooks' which continued to form the basis of the recruiting policy of the British in India till the Indian independence in 1947. Military records, ethnographic writings, travelogues, and memoirs helped popularize the image of the exotic, strong, and unflinchingly brave, and loyal Gurkhas in contrast to their 'Indian alter'. The colonial discourse on the martial races was based on the idea that martial ability was inherent in some select races that lived in cold and mountainous regions.

Madhu Gurung's historical novel, *The Keeper of Memories* (2016) depicts the arrival of British commanding officers in Dehradun in search of the descendants of the brave Gurkhas who had fought against the British in Khalanga. They aimed to recruit young men from the clans or families of the brave warriors and send them away to "unknown places to fight their war". Though the discourse was not founded on scientific truth, this colonial myth was so widely circulated that the Gorkhas indoctrinated and conformed to the identity upheld by their colonizer. In *The Keeper of Memories*, generations of the Lamchhane Gurungs firmly believed that courage and martiality ran through their veins and that they “were born to be rulers and warriors”. In this novel by Gurung, generations of Lamchchane Gurungs enlist themselves in the Indian, erstwhile British Indian army. Sher Bahadur takes his younger brother Bhim to Lahore and gets him enlisted in his battalion – the 2/1 Gurkha Rifles. Greatly encouraged by family and friends especially his Dharamshila *bajai*, Ranu, the next generation of Lamchhane Gurungs joins the Indian Military Academy followed by his younger brothers Biru and Kharak.

Though the popular discourse of the *bir* Gorkha is gendered and excludes the female and the feminine, generations of Gorkha women have made substantial contributions to the perpetuation of the martial identity. In Nepali society, it is the women folk- great-grandmothers, grandmothers, mothers, and mothers -in- law who have been preservers and observers of culture, family customs, traditions, and stories. It is thus considered their responsibility to dutifully pass it on to the next generations. In *The Keeper of Memories*, Dharamshila Bajai (grandmother) is the keeper of memories, the repository of stories, customs, and rituals of the Lamchchane Gurungs from Ghandrung in western Nepal who had settled in Dehradun after the Anglo Nepalese War (1814-16). Bajai told her grandchildren stories of the heroic feats of their great grandfather Bom Bahadur, second-in-command of the Khalanga army, which had been narrated to her by her *saiji* (mother-in-law), Ran Maya the brave matriarch of the family. Nepali mothers play a significant role in conditioning young men to join the Indian military service. Debarati Sen draws a parallel between the "militarized mothering" of African American/Black mothers both before and after the civil rights age and Gorkha mothers and their attempts to navigate "the politics of respectability by upholding nationalist standards of acceptability and decorum" by conditioning young men to join the army and perform their patriotic duty towards the nation as a way of asserting their belongingness to the nation. "Militarized mothering is perhaps a dire strategy of reconstructing a community's history and its narrative in situated ways" (Sen 320). To make the innumerable told stories of their great *Chepchu Baje* (grandfather), more real and tangible to the fifth-generation Lamchchane Gurungs, *bajai* takes her grandchildren to the ruins of the Khalanga fort, the site where the Gorkha soldiers fought against the *quirays* (the British). A strong sense of awe and pride is instilled in the young hearts and minds as they tread on the hallowed battleground where their *Chepchu Baje* was killed as "six hundred men, women and children who formed the Gorkha army at Khalanga, thousands of miles from their native Nepal" (Gurung 54) offered a tough resistance to the British troops in October 1814. After their visit to Khalanga, Dharamshila Bajai is content to have achieved her "aim" of instilling a profound sense of pride in the glorious martial past of their Lamchchane family and the Gorkha community, in her grandchildren. With her tales and anecdotes, she impressed upon her posteriority that they belonged to a family "who were born to be rulers and warriors". The great Gorkha general, Bal Bhadre's blessing on the infant Jang Bahadur "Be like your father Bom Bahadur"(59) comes to pass over the years as later generations of the Lamchchane men upheld the legacy of their patriarch, Bom Bahadur a

warrior in the army of the legendary Prithvi Narayan Shah. While Ran Bahadur was still a young boy, Bajai was certain that he was fated to become a soldier. Bajai had pronounced Ran Bahadur heir to the legacy of their legendary Chepchu *Baje* and thus rightfully the inheritor of his *khukuri* with which he had slayed many enemies. The novel points at the role of women as the keeper of memories. Women are repositories of history and without their memory and story telling the *birta* of the *bir* Gorkha *yoddha* (soldier) would be totally forgotten. For generations, the martial Gorkha *lahures*, and *paltanes* have been (and are still) held high in esteem in Nepali society. “This glorification of martial identity is woven into the fabric of militarized mothering, and its result is community-level reification and value of a paltane” (Sen 322). Families covet the economic security and social mobility ensured by service in the military and desire at least one of their sons or their sons-in-law (for families without sons) to be enlisted in the army. The glory, and prestige enjoyed by a young *paltane/ lahure* and the hopes of a prosperous conjugal life with a *lahure/paltane* have caught the fancy of many young Nepali women. The practice of young men joining the military service of the Company has been greatly romanticised in popular Nepali folk songs. Master Mitrasen Thapa’s “*Lahure ko Relimai Fashionai Ramro*”, a well-known Nepali folk song eulogizes the impeccably dressed and fashionable ‘*lahure dai*’ (soldier elder brother) clad in a “*kalo coat, seto jangi, galbandi* (black coat, white vest, and a scarf)” with a *khukuri* slung from his waist “*khukuri bhireko*”(Magar 1:02). These young, gallant, and moneyed ‘*lahures*’ were sought-after as lovers and husbands. On their return home, many young maidens like ‘*Kanchi naani*’(youngest sister/daughter) dressed in their best and newest clothes would be eagerly waiting for their ‘*Laure dai*’ “*baseki thiye Kanchi naani naya luga feri/ Korkee aankha layi herchan lahure aauda*” (1:17).

Contemporary Indian Nepali writings have shifted the focus from the *bir yoddha* (brave warrior) and instead bring to light the everyday lives of the women folk-wives, lovers, and mothers left behind by the *lahure*. These narratives chronicle the memories and (her) stories of loss, death, and separation engendered by wars, migration, and exiles, and the subsequent violence both physical and psychological on women. Madhu Gurung showcases the *birta* (bravery) of the Gorkha mothers and wives who readily sacrifice their sons and men for the sake of the nation. Dharamshila represents the *birta* of a Gorkha mother as she bids farewell to Bhim before he departs for Malaya during World War II. Dharamshila blesses her only surviving son and smears his forehead with a streak of red vermillion “laced with grains of rice” at the kuldevta’s altar and exhorts him, “Be brave my

son. Know whose blood flows in your veins. Come back alive, I will be waiting for you.” (67) For military mothers and wives like Dharamshila and Godavari their *birta* lies in the stoic waiting and endurance of separation. Even when “no word from Bhim” came for an entire year, she sat knitting a stocking for Bhim saying, “I can’t see any signs that my Bhim is dead. I get no signs at all. He is somewhere I cannot reach” (68). While the men folk fought wars overseas or guarded (and still guard) borders, the women were left at home taking care of the elderly, the children, and the home front worried, wishing, and waiting for their men to return home safely. Gurung's *The Keeper of Memories* lucidly showcases the pain of mothers and wives left behind at home, by soldiers. Godavari waited hopefully, praying fervently for Ran Bahadur who was reported as lost in action in his mission to Burma, to return home safely. When Major Brown breaks the news that Ran Bahadur is "presumed dead", she refuses to accept it as true and pleads with the family to stall the funeral. She fought and pleaded with the *Bahun* (priest) and Ammaju (mother-in-law) only to be reprimanded "How can you be so selfish? My son's spirit will not find release if you don't do this"(259). Ammaju had ruthlessly wiped off the vermillion of her head as other women "mercilessly" smashed her red glass bangles with a huge stone, giving "closure" to her patient and hopeful wait for her husband.

The famed Nepali song “*Asarai Mahinama*” sheds light on the pathetic condition of mothers and wives at home, who must bear the searing pain of separation, loss, and death. The song depicts a lonely and anxious Maichyang weeping for her husband a soldier stationed in his company *shahar* (the town where the company was stationed) located nine hills away from home (*nau dara pari*). It is the grave responsibility of the care-worn Maichyang to respond to the difficult questions raised by her toddler regarding his father's whereabouts. Besides their feminine roles and, responsibilities additional responsibilities which were otherwise considered masculine also fell on their shoulders in the absence of the men in the house. Ran Maya, the matriarch of the Lamchchanes had witnessed the *quirays* spraying her husband Bom Bahadur with bullets, right before her eyes. Hit on the stomach by a bullet herself, she had fled the battleground with her infant son tied to her back wielding her dead husband's *khukuri* in her hands. The valiant Gorkha martyr's widow proves to be as brave as her husband. Besides rearing her infant single-handedly, she sets up a home in Raipur far away from her ancestral home in Ghandrung. "...Ran Maya sold her gold, bought land, and built this house facing the hills of Khalanga. She always wanted to see the hills, as it was her husband's last resting place"(7). The matriarch lived on till she was almost a

hundred, carrying out her motherly and grandmotherly responsibility of passing on stories of bravery and sacrifice of the brave Lamchchane Gurung warriors to the next generations. The focus in *The Keeper of Memories* oscillates from the battlefield to the home front and portrays *bir* mothers and wives managing households, raising children and navigating poverty and maintaining familial *ijjat* (honour) simultaneously with fortitude.

In *The Keeper of Memories*, Gurung deconstructs the dominant discourse of Gorkhali *birta* and reinforces the *birta* of women as the cornerstone of Gorkha history. The novel highlights the distinction between the martial *birta* of men with the quotidian, quiet and enduring women's *birta*. The focus of the narrative shifts from the battlefields of World War II to the rugged hills and courtyards of Dehradun and portrays how the *birta* of watching, waiting and 'keeping' is as glorious as the unflinching *birta* of the Khukuri brandishing *yoddha*. Women are the *bir* 'Keepers' of the Gorkha jati's essence and identity.

In a rapidly changing world, role of women in the act of remembering, preserving and passing down stories, rituals and values to protect the Gorkha jati from being erased, assimilated is another form of women's *birta*. Gurung's historical novel reclaims and retells (her)stories of Nepalis /Gorkhas at different points in history spanning from the migration of people from the Gorkha Kingdom to *Munglan* (British India) in the 19th century to the Gorkhaland movements of the 21st century. Gurung weaves fiction with history and highlights women as the foundation of the Gorkha legacy. *The Keeper of Memories* testifies the determination of Gorkha/ Nepali women's writers to reassesses historical facts, rewrite about the self, chronicles historical events that may or may not be by mainstream historiographers and evokes myriads of collective and personal memories. The doubly marginalised, subaltern Gorkha women refuse to remain "pressed", "unseen" and "unheard" any further. Gorkha/Indian Nepali women's writing repudiates being made a mere subject written about by the coloniser and the mainstream just as Manprasad Subba puts it in his poem, "Voices from the Margins"

Whenever I wanted

To get into the mainstream

I was pushed back into the stony bank

I have never been made to flow

A creek of ignorance in the wilderness



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.11/No.1, March, 2026

Where my endless sufferings go unseen and unheard
I have my melodies too
Which were never allowed to be
Harmonized with
The grand sound of the mainstream (55).

Works Cited

- Gurung, Madhu. The Keeper of Memories. Harper Collins, 2016.
- Mantra. "Bir Gorkhali," *YouTube*, uploaded by Roshan Giri, 27 Feb. 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNK_UEBwEd4
- Magar, Mitrasen. "Lahure ko Rellimai." *YouTube*, uploaded by Mitra Sen Thapa- Topic, 18 Dec. 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIWg_9B3Q10
- Phipon, Sakum Jemima. "'The hills are alive': The Quest for Identity in Contemporary Indian Nepali Writings." 2025. Visva Bharati, PhD dissertation
- Sen, Debarati. "Subnational Enterprise: Militarized Mothering, Women's Entrepreneurial Labour and Generational Dynamics in the Gorkhaland Struggle." *Journal of South Asian Development*, vol.15, no. 3, 2020, pp. 316-334
- Subba, Manprasad and Remika Thapa. "Voices from the Margin." *Voices from the Margin*. Sunchari Prakashan, 2009.