LITERATURE, LINGUISTICS & CRITICISM | RESEARCH ARTICLE

The politics of Gorkha martial valour: A critical introduction to modern Nepali war poetry

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Abstract: This paper presents a critical analysis of Nepali war poetry across a timeframe of about two centuries. A mapping has been made of the development of war as a theme in poetry in both East and West, followed by a passing remark on the advent of modernity in Nepali poetry. The paper underscores three identifiable shifts in the general trajectory of Nepali war poetry, which also entail three major thematic shifts. The earliest Nepali war poetry, sponsored more or less by the existing palace or royalty, depicts war as a martial vocation. This depiction has its fall-out effect in the development of the Nepali as Gorkhas, known for their alleged “bravery”, which reached its climax during the Second World War. The romanticism of such international recognition did not, however, last long, as Nepal continued to reel under poverty and underdevelopment while other countries developed. Poets, therefore, started questioning the identity of Gorkha martial valour as constructed and turned their pen towards patriotic writing instead of celebrating valour elsewhere. The recent trend in Nepali war poetry has, however, abandoned these thematic strains and stands totally in opposition to war. Instead, it has started exploring local alternatives to war, including peace based on Buddha’s messages and Nepal’s indigenous teachings.

Subjects: Asian Studies; Language & Linguistics; Literature

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

War has remained one of the dominant themes of Nepali poetry, evident in its history of about two centuries. The initial phase of Nepali poetry was dominated by poems that celebrated war as an opportunity to celebrate valour, either that of an individual, or that of a king or a kingdom. After the advent of Western colonization, Nepali soldiers started being recognized as members of a brave, martial race. Poets quickly responded, and their poems started celebrating this new identity of the Nepalis as brave and martial people. Over the time, the poets realized that such recognitions were largely discursive and did more harm to the race than benefitting, except providing jobs to a few young men. The latest phase of Nepali poetry, especially after the World Wars, shows disillusionment of erstwhile discursive agendas and poets move towards peace and denouncement of all sorts of wars.
| Keywords: disillusionment; Gorkha; identity; martial race; modernity; war poetry |

1. Introduction

War is the world in which we live in
I wonder, does war last end in heaven? (Lines 16-17)
–Jamie Newcomb, “War”

Ever since human civilization began, war has remained a fact. Azar Gat quotes John Hobbes: “For Hobbes the pre-state condition was characterized by a war of every man against every man, when in the absence of a peace-enforcing authority, life was ‘poore, nasty, brutish, and short’” (93). Even the first recorded English poem “Beowulf” is a tale of war, when Beowulf himself accounts for his progress in the battlefield: “Command the warriors famed in battle build a bright mound after my burning at the sea headland. It shall tower high on Whale Ness, a reminder to my people, so that seafarers may afterwards call it Beowulf’s barrow when they drive their ships from afar over the dark waves” (paraphrased by Andrew Sanders 21). As literature’s primary objective is “to know man” (Long 6), war, as an undeniable reality of human affairs, is a prominent issue in most literatures of the world. Many grand narratives and epics of the ancient era, including Mahabharata, Ramayana, Iliad, and Odyssey revolve around war. Peter Scheckner states, “The subject of the Iliad, the oldest extant work of Western literature, is war” (198). As this reality has lingered across ages until our own times, war is one of the most dominant themes of literature, including the literature we call “modern.” Mark Tylor argues: “The literature of war has become the literature of the triumph of impersonal, technological force” (22).

Though the West entered the era identified as “modern” in the 1890s with the writings of the “Naughty Nineties,” critics and literary historians regard the year 1936 as the beginning of the modern age in Nepali poetry. The bases for such an assumption are different from those accepted in the West. In “non-Western regions like India, Nepal and other countries, the modernity of their own kind are manifest”, and hence, scholars call for ‘alternative modernity’ to interpret the modernities spotted in these regions (Uprety 17). The idea even calls for “alternative or plural modernities”, as Dipesh Chakrabarty contends (xx). Therefore, the parameters that marked the beginning or end of modernity in the West do not pertain to Nepal, and Nepal must be judged in terms of its own unique parameters of modernity. As far as modernity in Nepali literature is concerned, Laxman Prasad Gautam (2011) has the following contention about its beginning:

The starting of Sharada monthly in 1936, its publishing of the works of new trends with priority, projection of new anti-classical approaches against the classical conventions, and Gopal Prasad Rimal’s pioneering of prose poetry in 1937 are the determining bases of modernity in Nepali poetry. To determine modernity in Nepali literature, the consideration of the Western assumptions on modernity alone is not enough, nor is it enough to consider only the local bases. Judged from the midpoint of the two, 1936/37 appears to be the most acceptable point as the time of the onset of modernity in Nepali verses. (Dancing Soul, xxxviii)

Since 1936, Nepal has been in no major war with any external opponent; so there is no exclusive category called “war poetry” in its literature. Laxman Prasad Gautam makes a brief analysis of poems written after 1979 as “poetry of conflict” in his Samakalin Nepali Kavitako Pravriti (2005). The fact that poet Agam Singh Giri had published his epic Yuddha ra Yoddha in as early as 1986 confirms the primacy of war in Nepali poetry. War has remained one of the major themes of modern Nepali poetry, and it has many reasons. The Indo-Nepal War of 1814–15 led to the loss of territory, followed by a long autocratic Rana Regime of 104 years (1846–1950) that made an anti-establishment movement enviable in its last decade. Wars of global and local magnitude hired Gorkha soldiers, whose first-hand experience in the battlefields abroad brought the realization that war is absurd, and the much-hyped bravery of the Gorkha is a mere colonial construct. Bidhan Golay states: “The ‘Gorkha’ identity as a ‘martial race’ is largely the ‘discovery’ of the
ethnographical knowledge of the colonial state. This discovery marks off the colonial state’s shift in its emphasis from the brutal modes of conquest to cultural technologies of rule—the production of colonial knowledge” (Golay 28 emphasis original).

Poetry of the earliest phase of Nepal’s poetic history before the 1880s alludes prodigally to the Indo-Nepal war and valorizes the courage of the Nepali troops in the war. The same incident also is alluded to in modern poetry, albeit with a remorseful tone, regretting the loss of territory following the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. Modern poems by Gorkha soldiers in real life and poems by civilian poets featuring soldiers and warrior persona both critique the much-hyped bravery of the Gorkha soldiers as false and fabricated. This paper examines Nepali war poetry in these categories, backed by a brief introduction of the poetry of war. The Maoist rebellion of the 1990s too has triggered a lot of war poetry, but this paper skips it because the changes the rebellion brought in the nation has not still been institutionalized, and it will be too early to pass a judgment. Moreover, there is debate among critics whether it was a case of war or mere insurgency. For discussion, this paper takes most poems from the collections Dancing Soul of Mount Everest and Samasamayik Nepali Kavitaharu, as representatives. Others are from poets’ collections and published online by some authentic publications. The Nepali poets taken up for discussion include poets Nepali by citizenship, poets representing the Nepali speaking Indian poets, and poets of the Nepali Diaspora in India, the UK and elsewhere outside Nepal. Unless cited otherwise, the poems are the researchers’ own translation from the poets’ original.

2. War poetry in Nepal and its historical background

Though modern Nepal has not been in any major war of the global magnitude, the class of people called “Nepali” is known for its bravery in war. Samachara, a newsletter of the Gorkha Welfare Trust in Britain, has published a story about Gorkha soldiers with the headline: “The Battalion of the Brave Men” on the first page of its Spring 2008 issue. Warring has always been an innate characteristic of the people of Nepal, and Gopal Prasad Rimal considers war to be the “religion” of the Nepali in his poem “Gopal Prasad Rimalle Boliraheko Khaskura”:

What is our religion? War— like the one fought by Prithvinarayan Shah like that of Bahadur Shah and Rana Bahadur Shah. (16; lines 14-17)

The fame of the Nepalis as “Gorkha warriors” is global. Eugene Byrne quotes Field Marshal Manekshaw of the British Army in colonized India as saying: “If a man says he is not afraid of dying, he is either lying or is a Gorkha” (1). The poetic tradition in Nepal has its route in the poetry of valour (veer rasha), which is, in fact, the poetry of war (Sharma & Shrestha, 2007). The first phase, that is pre-1880, has the poetry of war and valour in a large corpus (Gautam 6). The first recorded poetry in Nepali literature, titled “Prithvinarayan Shah” by Subhananda Das, written somewhere around 1770, is infused with a lot of war description, particularly those waged by King Prithvinarayan Shah of Gorkha during the expansion of his kingdom. His poetry is “warlike, with a lot of original Nepali words, alliterations, similes and metaphors” (Sharma and Shrestha 28). The following lines from the poem “Prithvinarayan Shah” are indicative of this nature:

Gokul pugyo Nuwakot Krishna Autari hai:Dhanma lagyo baan pandra sahe gida pare barha wati sati chaleghere Laamu danda hai:Nurahi turahi bajer top karnal hai:Jhina jhangar kai phada phuda larakai maathma ambar chhai (qtd. in Sharma and Shrestha 28)

[The incarnation of the Krishna of Gokul has now reached Nuwakot. In a season when each bunch of rice bore more than fifteen hundred grain seeds, the king went away with his soldiers and twelve satis. They surrounded the Laamu Hill. The battlefield resounded with trumpets, bugles and clarinets. Defeating everything on the way, the king had the whole sky upon his victorious forehead.]
Many other poems recorded during that age were also infused with the ethos of bravery and war. “Stutipadhya”,\(^5\) believed to have been composed somewhere between 1833 and 1846 by Yadunath Pokharel, contains the following lines that celebrate the power of the *khukuri*, and its performance in a war:

Phirangi hatai luti piti chhado  
Pugi aaja Ganga pakhalnu chha khado  
(“Stutipadhya” 1, 20; lines 3-4; qtd. in Baral 154)  
[By removing the white people by robbing and thrashing them without delay, we need to wash our daggers in the Ganges.]

Many poems of folk and oral tradition classified under *lok-kavita*\(^6\) are also grouped among poems of war, especially those falling under “Birata Sambhandhi Kavita”\(^7\) or poems about bravery (Sharma and Luitel 143). Under this category fall the poetic forms like the sabai, *khado* and *khara*. A typical example of *khado*\(^8\) by an anonymous poet is presented herewith; it tells an episode from Indo-Nepal War:

**Gorkha-phirangi yuddhama Hastinapurako rajai**  
Dilliko siran samudrako saandh  
kuireka thaplama khudale twakka, twakka. (qtd. in Sharma and Luitel 151)  
[In the war between the Gorkhas and the British, the latter, who ruled from Hastinapur, with their northern border in Delhi and the southern in the sea, were repeatedly hit on the heads by the Gorkhas.]

This tradition of valorizing war, however, did not continue too long in Nepal because the eras following it gave more pain to the nation on various pretexts: sometimes religious, and some other times political. Sharma and Shrestha contend that the humiliation left by the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–15) disillusioned the Nepali people of the false gratification of war. The reign of terror that ensued, following the progress of the British Army up to Kathmandu, cultivated a sense of deep fear in the Nepali, following which “poetry entered the era of devotion” (Sharma and Shrestha 33). Consequently, Nepal became a wounded nation that could only denounce war.

There are some historical backgrounds that made the first phase of Nepali poetry inevitably an age of war poetry. Prithvirayaray Shah’s expansionist move, Nepal’s war with British India in the 1810s and the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816 that remapped the frontiers of Nepal were the major moves among them. Poetry of this era revolved around the valorization of war, although a simultaneous strain of devotional poetry, invoking either God or rulers, continued (Gautam 6). However, the most dominant trend of poetry from time immemorial to 1815 is dominantly that of “veer dhara” or poetry of valour (Gautam 6). It appears that this temperament continued for four decades and concentrated on the valorization of war waged by King Prithvirayaray Shah. Besides Subhananda Das, other poets who set the foundation of war poetry in Nepali literature were Shaktibailab Ajayal, Udayananda Arjyal, Sundaranandh Bada, Radhabailab, Gumani Panta and Yadunath Pokharel (Gautam 6).

After King Prithvirayaray Shah unified two major geographical lands with different states into a single nation called Nepal in the 1770s, an age of peace dawned. As a result, the erstwhile war and valour poetry gave way to romantic and spiritual poetry. For a change, the nation had to wait until the Ranas took over and the era of dictatorial oligarchy started in the year 1846. A few poets who wrote of war valorized the Rana’s warmongering, and their works did not qualify to the rank of universal war poetry. Since the Ranas had a very strict censoring and dictating tendency, many of the words written during their age are not considered spontaneous and authentic. In the last decade of their rule, i.e. in the 1940s, deliberate anti-Rana writing started, and Nepali war poetry took a revolutionary turn, spearheaded by poets like Siddhicharan Shrestha. When the Rana oligarchy was overthrown and pro-democracy King Tribhuvan was restored to the throne of Nepal in 1950, another era of peace ushered, and consequently, Nepali poetry took a romantic turn.
In 1960, King Mahendra, who had succeeded King Tribhuvan, suspended all political parties and forced the partyless “Panchayat” system in the country. Popular dissent gave way to anti-Panchayat movement, and poetry became one of the major expressive tools. This dissent culminated into a mass movement in 1979, followed by a referendum in 1980, which reaffirmed the Panchayat system. The movement continued until 1990, when King Birendra declared the end of Panchayat and the onset of multi-party democracy with the King as the constitutional head of the state. The poetry of the period in between shows tremendous concern for anti-establishment war and revolutionary ideas. Mohanraj Sharma writes:

Looking at Nepali life and consciousness in the light of factors that resulted into the referendum of 1979, the referendum itself, its outcomes and achievements, and various other changes become apparent in the seventies. The referendum and the right to adult franchise it established are significant changes. The contemporary Nepali poetry appears to have been affected the most by the political changes of 1979 and around it. (145)

Though the period between 1979 and 1995 seems to be peaceful, the frequent change of guards and constant tussles of the political parties with the king continued. The culmination of the rift appeared in 1995, when the Maoists took up arm and launched the 12-year war. Poetry immediately showed a reaction, dividing itself into two flows: pro-democracy, anti-communist poetry, and pro-Maoist, communist and revolutionary poetry. A pure aesthetic exercise continued in the middle, with an impact that holds not much count in the history of Nepali poetry. This division continues to this day.

3. War and martyrdom: A fate of voluntary choice
Like in the war poetry of many countries, a strong sense of patriotism flows in Nepali poetry, especially in the writings of the early nineteen-century when Nepal was engaged in an external war with British India, and in the mid-twentieth century, when its people were in war with the opaque and dictatorial establishment under the Rana oligarchy. The year 2004 saw the martyrdom of four young men: Sukraraj Shashtri, Dharma Bhakta Mathema, Dasarath Chand and Ganga Lal, who became the first state-recognized martyrs of the country. This epoch, therefore, produced poems that celebrate bravery and martyrdom. Siddhicharan Shrestha was among the leading poets of this era. He inspired many youths, including Gangalal Shrestha, to go for martyrdom. Poet Shrestha’s lines: “No peace is possible without revolution” is quoted quite often in relation to the history of revolution in Nepal. The following lines from his poem “Crisis” too have similar revolutionary fervency:

Now that you have reached mid-ocean
You must not retreat in fear.
The storm may rage – let it do so,
You must not lose your nerve.
Drown or die – what choice is there?
Is this all you fear?
Millions die and millions drown
To maintain the way of the world. (qtd. in Karmacharya; lines 1-8)

High regard and reverence for martyrs and martyrdom has always remained a characteristic of Nepali poetry. Chok Bahadur Thapa, in “To Martyrs” represents the spirit of the nation toward the brave martyrs who have sacrificed their lives for the nation:

Flowing in the surge of blood
they were thorns in the enemies’ eyes;
they moved the hilt-less khukuri for the nation
the martyrs, who die with smiles. (421-22; lines 30-34)
Simultaneously with the celebration of martyrdom, high regard for soldiers and their role in the defense of the nation became themes of Nepali poetry after 1950. Dinesh Adhikari (2011) consoles a dead soldier’s wife to take pride in being the widow of a soldier because, a soldier “never dies” or “he is dead the day he is commissioned” (452). Phanindra Nepal’s (1991) “The Festivity of Victory” celebrates the determination of a soldier committed at exhibiting the utmost of his bravery in the war:

I care not if anyone accompanies.

Breaking forts and breaking walls
from beginning to apocalypse
breaking the cyclone of the storms
and flames of fire
I shall go like Abhimanyu to dismantle the labyrinth
I am going to my goal, blowing the war conch! (180; lines 40-47)

The soldiers’ readiness to become martyrs, as evident from Nepali war poetry, is two-fold. First, they are prepared to die for their own nation, fighting against the wrong establishment within the country. Siddhicharan Shrestha’s revolutionary poems that flamed war within the nation are indicative of the first type. The second type is a chosen war against international players who played “foul” with Nepal in the past and left Nepal wounded forever. One dominantly recurring allusion is that of the Indo-Nepal War of 1814–15, culminating in the Sugauli Treaty of 1816 that stripped Nepal of a large, glorious expanse of land that now forms a large part of Northern India. Yuddhabir Rana’s lines quoted below represent this spirit of dissent:

History, give back my Amar Singh and Bhanti Thapa,
return my Kalu Pandey and Balabhadra too.
Give back my Sugauli documents!
It was a blunder on my part
that I gave them to you.
(“History, Give back My Sugauli Documents” 124; lines 17-28)

Many contemporaries of Yuddhabir Rana are regretful of Nepal’s defeat and consequent conceding of land to the British. Their poetry, retrospective in approach, regrets the strategic failures on the part of Nepal and the intriguing role of the British India, leading to the loss of land from Nepal. Such retrospective poetry continues to be written even today and is characterized by a deep sense of regret and pain. The spirit that summarizes such a sense of regret can be caught from the following lines by Upendra Shrestha wherein “that dagger” and “that sword” refer to political and military intrigues, betrayals and defeats Nepal conceded in the past:

I am a manuscript
bleared by people’s blood
cut by that dagger, that sword.
(“I Am a Buddhist” 12; lines 7-9)

The poems analyzed in the section above clearly show a thematic shift: from the valorization of a soldier’s role in a war to its denouncement. The poets show an understanding of the politics behind the valorization of Gokha bravery as a discursive tool to extend the British Empire’s expansionist design. This disillusionment has historical reasons, and the same are analyzed in the sections that follow.
4. Disillusionment from alleged “Bravery”

There is no doubt that the Nepali soldiers have earned great fame in the world as world-class fighters. History is evident that they fought for the British India during the Second World War and even won the “Victoria Cross”. It too is true that they were in Subash Chandra Bose’s Aazad Hind Fauj, and in the post-Independence Indian Army, both in Gorkha Regiment and in Assam Rifles. A large number of Gorkha soldiers are still working in the British Army and are still revered for their prowess and dauntlessness in war.

However, a later realization says the bravery brought no practical benefit to the country called Nepal, as it is reeling under abject poverty and underdevelopment. Bhupi Sherchan feels the root of the alleged bravery of the Nepalis lies in the fact that they are “foolish”. He writes in his poem “Hami”9: “We are foolish/so we are brave” (209; lines 93–94). In a line further down in the same poem, he writes: “We could never have become brave, if we not foolish” (line 95). There are also poets who think the Nepali way of life in the traditional mode with a khukuri is no match to the nuclear world. Thus, disillusionment is rampant in Nepal, and poetry has taken up the cause to caution Gorkha soldiers not to fall into the trap, for the epithets “bir”10 and “martial race” are both forged, false and strategically constructed:

The problem with Gorkha history is that the very ideas and values [of martiality and valor] were appropriated by the colonial state by giving scientific sanctity to the great tradition. Thus, the narrative of the bir Gorkha quite logically conflates with the discourse of “martial race”. It creates a peculiar situation in which the bir Gorkha is self-idealized and reified into a brave soldier, but since the identity is deeply implicated in the colonial history, it remains tied to the white master with feudal loyalties. (Golay 42-43)

It appears that modern Nepali poets, both first-hand Gorkha soldiers and other civilians writing with military persona in their verses, have realized the constructedness of the Gorkha soldiers’ identity forced by the colonial designers. Here we present excerpts from poetry that declaims this utopia and appeals to the Nepali people not to go after the colonial claims.

Tirtha Shrestha alludes to the flower dahlia, known as “Lahure” in Nepal. The adjective “Lahure” comes from Lahore (now in Pakistan), where the British India had its military base with Gorkha soldiers. This flower is believed to have been imported to Nepal by Gorkha soldiers stationed at Lahore, and today it is a reminder of their military engagement away from home. “Lahure, I Want to Rename You” is a disapproval of the false sense of glory associated with war and the alleged bravery of Gorkha soldiers in the fields abroad:

I want to tear this black page of history
and throw away.
Wait! Lahure – the troop flower,
I want to rename you! (446; lines 24-27)

Khadga Bahadur Chhetri joins Tirtha Shrestha in airing a dystopia of a similar kind. He sees no charm in the power of khukuri when the world has moved into a nuclear age:

I am somewhere feeling
our khukuri has run out of power
no matter how much we brag
of its might and of blood

we are becoming escapist and cowards each day (“Khukuri” 418–19; lines 9–13)

The allegation “escapist” and “coward” showcase the aftermath of wars; the Nepalis are nowhere in the annals of bravery, judged from the praxis of the development of the land called Nepal that fed and is still feeding to the world, the meekest and the most gullible scapegoats for
“their” wars. A deep sense of regret pervades Nepali poetry, and contemporary poets no longer appear supportive of the false claims of bravery, which made Nepali soldiers a mere shield in war, and their nation one of the poorest countries of the world:

We sacrificed our lives  
for the security of others  
but what is that we got? (Hem Joshi 721; lines 5-7)

Joshi’s lines are disapproval of the tradition of martial performance, given the banality of its outcome.

Many poets feel that abetting Nepal to send its troops to wars abroad is robbing it of its most promising workforce that would bring unimagined change and development at home. Krishna Sen Icchuk’s “Aaitee” is a case, for example:

This way,  
those who go as troops  
to foreign lands and drench sweats  
if their sweats watered  
a strip of land at home in drought  
how much would it avail? (384; lines 62-67)

Scansion of poems written by poets who are or have been Gorkha soldiers themselves convinces the readers that they no longer wish for war or the false glorification of their bravery. Tanka Wanem, a poet and fighter for the British Army, makes the following sigh:

O God!  
If only this reality were a dream,  
I would not be doomed  
to live,  
by firing bullets on human chests. (“A Dream of the Battlefield” 496; lines 43-47)  
Wanem expresses his regret at passing his youthful days at a battlefield:  
Fie!  
Why did my youth bloom  
in the battlefield  
like the brazen youth  
of marigold? (“My Youth” 497; lines 1-9)

Bishwadip Tigela, another poet and soldier working for the British Army and stationed in Brunei, confesses that war does not appeal to him anymore: “Fie on my fate!/I turned a killer;/a killer for the whole of my life” (“I: A Killer” 1; lines 18-20). He considers that medals, conferred upon his ancestors as brave warriors have brought home nothing, and the wars they fought sacrificing their life has reached nowhere: “He went, never to return/plunging in a battle/that continues even today” (“Medal”; lines 16-18). The deep sense of regret and pain that pervades Tigela’s poetry summarizes the spirit of disillusionment that marks the general mentality of Gorkha soldiers today:

Those who died are gone  
but I, a killer troop  
am physically alive, dying every moment. (“I: A Killer”; lines 53-55)

Thus, there is a case of disillusionment on the part of Nepali poets as far as the construction of the identity of the Gorkhas as a martial race is concerned. Besides many domestic and regional historical shifts that led to such disillusionment, there is another reason at work: the deputation of Nepali soldiers in lands abroad. The realization that nothing formidable has happened in Nepal itself by dint of their fight when nations abroad have taken great leaps in development have dismayed these soldiers though, for various compelling reasons, they continue to serve in various
armies. The poets who address issues concerning the soldiers and wars show such shifts and conspicuous disillusionment in their poems.

5. Denouncement of war as a universal evil
Like the modern poetry of many countries of the world, Nepali poetry has aired enough dissent against wars taking place in different parts of the world. This category of poetry, which forms the largest corpus of war poetry, has two tendencies. First, there are poems that denounce the concept of “war” in general, and second, there are poems that project an alternative worldview for peace, purely from a Nepali perspective.

Denouncement of war has always been a theme in contemporary Nepali poetry. Poet Phanidra Nepal sees the present world as completely war-torn:

The bugle of war blows incessantly.

I can see
that a crowd of ghouls of people killed in fronts
is rising up (“The Festivity of Victory” 179-80; lines 36-39)

This is the representative vision of the present world beset by war, the “bugle” being a stimulating cause, and “ghouls of dead bodies” its aftermath. The grotesque imagery is indicative of the poem’s tone: negative, repulsive and critical. Similarly, Bijay Malla, in his poems “Teaching Maps to My Daughter”, expresses his hatred for the world, especially the West, smeared with blood everywhere:

This is America
the land of dollars
the maker of the atom bomb
the peace message.
Everywhere,
red blood demarcates the lines
and men are trapped within,
as are pigeons inside a cage. (24; lines 9-20)

A deliberate preoccupation appears against the West, especially for the invention of the atom bomb and making it a game-changer in the Second World War. The pigeon Malla picks up as a symbol in the last line quoted above has recurred in many other poems of war and stands as an antithesis of war. The pigeon, understood to be the symbol of peace, appears all perplexed in the following lines of Dhruva Krishna Deep from his poem “A Pigeon on the Snout of a Missile”:

an innocent, meek pigeon
sits callously
uninformed, ignorant
partly dozing,
partly napping,
silently stroking its feathers,
as tender as itself,
and looks out
from the snout of a gigantic missile
that appears as if it can blow
any moment
placed thoughtlessly on the lawn
where our children play. (49; lines 1-14)

The juxtaposition of the pigeon and the missile, an antithetical arrangement, presents the picture of the present world, beset by armament and a potential danger for another war, anywhere,
anytime. The tone of the poetry that sets in with anger against the presence of a missile in the playfield turns placid and hopeful when the poet dreams of some greenery and peace in the days to come:

This lovely bird, at the moment
is thinking of a little greenery and peace
and not of war with anyone. (Deep 49: lines 38-40)

Pigeons are not just peace images; they too are images of free, uncrupt flight in free and secure life. Encaging and potential slaughtering of pigeons is indicative of the disruption of peace in the world, and it is natural for the image to be recurrent in more poems. Hemanta Shrestha envisions the terror and feels the threat it poses to the world:

The pigeon released from here
did not return, for it has been encaged;
now, it can be slaughtered any moment
cought in the fire of a blast
it can, at any moment
turn into ash; vile ash. (“Encaged Is the Pigeon” 394-95; lines 47-52)

The recurrent imagery of arms—as atom bombs or missiles—in Bijay Malla and Dhruva Krishna Deep's poems continues with Krishna Bhakta Shrestha. Shrestha's reference is not to this arm or that arm, but arm in general, which he feels, is making man highly ambitious and bloodthirsty. He is unhappy with the race for arms human being has taken up at present. He wonders if the gift of humanity, nature has endowed man with, is not enough for humankind:

Would not it be enough
for human,
yes, for human, to be human alone!
Why is human tempted to prove itself
a great warrior
collecting ethereal, divine arms
both plentiful and rare! (“To Human” lines 121; 1-8)

The denouncement of war and the war-mongering nature of man continues in the verses of many other poets, but there also are poets who seek a position of safety on their own. For this, they call upon their legacy of peace and tradition of complacence. “Free Voice” by Hira Aakash asserts a challenge that the Nepalis, despite incessant torture and bombarding, have resisted war and have allowed peace to prevail:

No matter
how much you throw your bombs
in towns and cities
from roof to roof;
no matter how much
you fire your guns
on chests
or, crush bodies under your feet
till they are rendered flat;
our voice has never died out. (301; lines 1-10)

War, as a subject of poetry, has found a meta-poetic treatment in some writings of modern Nepali poetry, making symbolic reference to war and peace. In “My Poem”, Naresh Shakya Neeraj sends his poem out there into the world to fight. Seemingly, he is hinting at the peace message his poems bear and sets out into the world beset by warring. His poem has a tone of optimism, wherein he hopes his poem will return with victory. In other words, Neeraj visualizes the victory of
the Nepali model of peace inspired by Buddha at the end, when the world, terrorized by incessant fighting over the ages, comes to term with peace and shuns war forever:

No news came, whether
my poem set out for the battle,
died or survived.
I, an aged father
am looking forward to receiving
my son back as a winner. (“My Poem” 186; lines 1-6)

Poets are convinced that if the present trend of war or preparations for a potential war continues, children born to us in this age will be doomed. Giving a glimpse of Yeats’ “A Prayer for My Daughter,” the poet Govinda Giri Prerana in his poem “A Child's Future” expresses a universal concern that is being aired in connection with the present generation blindly moving towards a culture of war:

On the morn of Buddha's birth
peace-prayers are being chanted
at Swayambhu;
white pigeons have been released;
a powerful nuke-test has been done
in a western country in the meantime
and a child has
lain its first step on the earth
coming safely out of its mother’s womb (413; lines 1-9)

The birth of the child is, for the poet, more a matter of concern than of joy. “I am thinking of the child’s future,” he says, because he is uncertain about his continued survival or healthy growing in a nuclear world (413; line 13). Durga Dahal reproduces the fear unleashed by war that has become universally so pervasive that people see its phantom everywhere from home to fields. His poem “Bomb” underscores this fear that has moved from armories and battlefields to the cornfields:

Our farm has corns
right now!
Right now we have
rice in the field!!
But who knows
if these hands that make bombs
drop one in our field!
A bomb might grow
in our field too!
And a bomb might ripen
in our farmyard. (“Bomb” 8-9; lines 23-33)

In whichever part of the world a war might be broken, the harm it brings is, after all, to human beings, and feeling souls in all parts of the world feel the pain. A large corpus of Nepali poetry airs dissatisfaction at wars—World Wars and other regional wars, including the Vietnam War. Shivakoti “Doshi” analyses the wave of pessimism that emanated out of the Vietnam War, though Nepal had no participation, not a political concern of any kind with it. After all, it is a humanistic concern poets and writers feel beyond time and space:

With Vietnam War housed in their hearts
the Buddhas are puking speeches
‘Shanti, Shanti, Shanti!’
(“They're Puking Speeches” 351; lines 1-3)
Nanda Hangkhim, in “Do You Ask Me of War?” shows war’s brutality and heartlessness in the following compact lines that compare a war and a mother, laying bare the contrast:

War! War!!
A war has never been like mothers at home;
it’s foam of love never surges
like the white clouds in the sky. (535-37; lines 14-17)

A thorough scansion of images and allusions make Nepali war poetry quite comprehensive in range. Local wars apart, there has been an understanding of wars in lands far away, including wars like the World Wars and Cold War that have had universal implications.

Allusions to war and ammunitions apart, there also have been poets who allude to violence from episodes in literatures that also qualify to the rank of war literatures. For example, Bhabilal Lamichhane alludes to Shakespeare’s Othello, in which Desdemona is murdered in a play of men’s naked ambitiousness. He shouts, demanding the end of the play before Desdemona is killed:

Stop, o the puller of the curtain!

Let the curtain fall/let the play remain unfinished
stop it, before Desdemona is killed.
Oomph! Othello, do not kill Desdemona
Alas! Desdemona should not die/she should not die at all cost
Iago’s fire should be out, before it’s tomorrow. (“Welcome: New Year” 428; lines 9-13)

The total of the contemporary poetic temperament of Nepal in relations to war can be felt in the following lines by Subas Dhakal as well:

War gives the earth no support
War gives to the sick no place to hold
War gives the hungry no food to eat
War gives the kids no milk to drink. (“Do not Talk of War Now” 373; lines 6-9)

Thus, the tradition of Nepali poetry that started with poems of gallantry ethos by writers like Subhananda Das has ended up with an inverse tone. War no longer appears to be a matter of glory. Nepali soldiers no longer eulogize their martial tradition. There is no more charm left in the gratification of the “bir” Gorkhas in the war. A grave sense of regret and pain pervades modern Nepali poetry of war, and there are ample instances of verses that denounce war as banal, absurd and unproductive, as is evident in Gita Tripathi’s lines from “The Blood Shower”:

This terrifying color
This red color, difficult to withstand
and this reflection, too terrifying to dissolve
keep floating, upon the oil of feelings. (9; lines 18-21)

The analysis leads to the inference that Nepali poetry before the twentieth century either celebrated war as an embankment of the state for a great national cause or eulogized the entire race of the Gorkhas as a valorous race capable of handling all sorts of wars. These celebrations, however, did not last long. At the turn of the twenty-first century, it appears that the Nepali poets seem to be disillusioned with discursive constructs. Of late, they appear to be realizing the power behinds the Buddha’s message of universal peace instead of the inherently destructive nature of war. The idea of peace, modeled after the Buddha has undoubtedly developed as a Nepali model of peacemaking in the world, and many contemporary Nepali poets have championed the idea by making the same the underlying message of their poems.
6. War and Nepal's worldview

Like poets elsewhere in the world, modern Nepali poets have lined themselves up against war. Incidentally, since Nepal is the birthplace of Buddha, the apostle of peace, its worldview has always been in favor of peace. It might be recalled that based on Nepal's consistent legacy of peace, Late King Birendra had demanded the United Nations to declare it a zone of peace in 1973:

As heirs to one of the most ancient civilizations in Asia, our natural concern is to preserve our independence, a legacy handed down to us by history […] we need peace for our security, and we need peace for development. Moreover, if peace is an overriding concern for us today, it is only because our people genuinely desire peace in our country, in our region and elsewhere in the world. It is with this earnest desire to institutionalize peace that I stand to make a proposition—a proposition that my country, Nepal, be declared a Zone of Peace. […] (qtd. in Sabelle Duquesne 1).

Many poems of the modern times are expressive of this world view. K.B.Nepali is convinced that even at a time when war is offing from everywhere, Nepal holds the capacity to uphold peace for the world:

Teaching lessons of humanity
to the world beset by potential atomic blast
my nations is always ready
to release two white pigeons in the sky.

(“Flying White Pigeons in the Sky” 416; pages 12-15)

The poem reveals that poets do not see much meaning in wars of the gun in the battlefield. They feel that the war for the upcoming century should be a war against hunger, underdevelopment and poverty. Purushottam Subedi feels we need to wage war to give enduring security to a pair of innocent eyes. The war, he argues, should now be directed not against or for anyone, but against our own mistakes from the past:

In this war of continuity
and that of faith,
a pair of eyes are glowing.
For their safety,
we go for war.
And we shall fight a relentless battle
with accused dreams placed in our eyes. (“In Favor of War” 318; lines 23-29)

Tulasi Diwas agree that it is time Nepal went for a different war against the innumerable malice it is plagued by instead of fighting in battles that privilege lands far away:

No, we have no enemy right now, out there at the front
but the foes rest inside us, engaged in dewal[11]
at the cost of our poverty; in the cost of our backwardness
So, at present we are fighting not one but many wars
A war—against illiteracy and ignorance
A war—against irresoluteness and lethargy
A war—against scarcity and unemployment
A war—against unrest and imbalance
We are fighting in the midst of such wars

Yet another war, against war itself.
Best of all, Nepal should shun all wars and make attempts to bring about a permanent cease-fire in the war that is going on in the mind, as Yagyaraj Prasai opines in his poem “Village Robbed off Existence: An Infant Inside a Trench”:

War continues in the village
for, the truce of bugles doesn’t end wars
there has been no cease-fire in the mind’s war, yet. (241-44; lines 100-103)

Thus, a cursory analysis of Nepali poems over the past two centuries shows clear shifts from the valorization of war itself as an opportunity to showcase one’s bravery and skill to aggrandization of Gorkha valour and finally to disillusionment, following the realization of the constructedness and political motif behind the identification of the Gorkhas as a martial race. The latest phase of Nepali poetry, therefore, leans more towards peace.

7. Conclusion
Though Nepali poetry of the first phase, dominated by Subhananda Das and Yadunath Pokharel, celebrates war and bravery, and that during the Anglo Nepal war 1814–15 eulogizes the bravery of Nepali warriors, modern Nepali poetry is critical of wars of all kinds. The verses written in the 1940s—the last decade of the Rana’s regime—are full of patriotic fervency, inspired probably by the martyrdom of four young men in 1947 and Siddhicharan Shrestha’s revolutionary leadership. Following this era, poems show a preponderant articulation of cynicism for war. Wounds of disintegration bequeathed by the Treaty of Sugauli has triggered disillusionment with war, and poems written even after a gap of one and a half-century after the incident, have continued to regret that historical humiliation of Nepal as evident in poems of Yuddhabir Rana and others. Most modern poems by poets like Tanka Wanem and Biswasdip Tigela, who have been real Gorkha soldiers in lands away from Nepal, look at the martial tradition with regret and a pervasive sense of disillusionment at the colonial construct of the Gorkha’s identity as “bir” underscores their poetry. The worldview modern Nepali poets project in relation to war and peace is modeled after the Buddha’s peace message. They are also of the opinion that if war should continue, it should be against poverty, underdevelopment, illiteracy, and other social and national problems.

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Notes
1. Sanjeev Uprety allocates a whole chapter on “Nepali Alternative Modernity” in his Siddhantaka Kura (Akshar Creation, 2012).
2. Features of Modern Nepali Poetry. (Pairavi Prakashan, 2005).
3. War and the Warrior (Manjusha Publisher, 1986).
4. Contemporary Nepali Poetry.
5. Verses of praise.
6. Folk poetry.
7. Poetry on bravery.
8. derived from the word “khadga”, meaning “sword”.
This poetry is about war, recited by holding a sword. Its purpose is to “stimulate soldiers for warring” (Sharma and Luipet 151).
9. We.
10. Brave.
11. A ritual where all families of a particular descent gather and offer goats to their deity, one goat per family.

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