Understanding Gendered and Colonial Narratives of COVID-19 in Nepal: Perspectives of Global Media, Nurses and Local Journalists

Sadichchha Pokharel

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Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

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Abstract

This thesis examines the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal as experienced by Nepali nurses and journalists, and as reported by international news agencies. Written as a series of standalone but interconnected articles, it employs overlapping theoretical frameworks that draw on postcolonial theory, feminist postcolonial theory and/or feminist media studies. Using critical discourse analysis and feminist narrative analysis as methods, I studied news coverage by three global news agencies: Associated Press, Reuters and Agence France-Presse, as well as primary data obtained through in-depth interviews with nurses and journalists in Nepal. My findings reveal that colonial legacies of global health inequities marginalized Nepali nurses and journalists during the pandemic, and exposed them to risks of exploitation and harm, particularly women. My core argument is that gendered colonial relations of power ultimately affected the realities and perceptions of COVID-19 in Nepal. These power relations determined which lives were seen as worthy of protecting from the virus, and which were regarded as expendable. International news media played an important role in reproducing those relations of power in its coverage of the pandemic in Nepal. This thesis makes important contributions to postcolonial, feminist and media studies by bringing in perspectives from Nepal, a region that has been overlooked and undertheorized in all three disciplines. Most importantly, it disrupts and challenges the dominant discourses of COVID-19 by introducing new knowledge that centres the experiences of Nepali people, particularly Nepali women.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my Maa, who showed me what perseverance looks like.

Maa, I wholeheartedly believe that you're watching over me. I miss you.

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List of Abbreviations

AP: Associated Press

AFP: Agence France-Presse

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019

LGBTQIA+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual (plus other marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities)

SARS: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome

MERS: Middle East Respiratory Syndrome

PPE: Personal Protective Equipment

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA: United Nations Population Fund

WHO: World Health Organization

Chapter 1
Introduction

COVID-19, alongside being one of history's deadliest pandemics, was also one of the most destructive disasters in recent years (Prabhu & Gergen, 2021). While the impact of the pandemic was felt globally, poorer nations were disproportionately affected (Stiglitz, 2020). Global South countries saw their healthcare systems collapse, largely as a consequence of global wealth inequalities (Fernández, 2023; Scauso et al., 2020). Women and marginalized people in these countries were especially vulnerable to the devastation caused by the pandemic (Barlow & Grugel, 2024; L. KC & MacKenzie, 2024). It is in this context of the COVID-19 pandemic that I've pursued my doctoral research. I examine the pandemic in Nepal as experienced by frontline Nepali workers, including nurses and journalists, and as portrayed by international news media to the outside world. I am interested in the social and political aspects of COVID-19 as a disaster, rather than its epidemiological impact as a disease.

This thesis is written as a series of publishable papers that employ overlapping frameworks of analysis using postcolonial theory, feminist postcolonial theory and/or feminist media studies. While they are standalone papers, all three are located under an overarching theoretical umbrella that explores what lives were considered worthy of saving and protecting from coronavirus, and what lives were considered disposable. My research follows a feminist qualitative methodological approach. I employ critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis as methods for analyzing news articles and primary data obtained through in-depth interviews. This thesis addresses the following research questions: a) How has international media reproduced gendered and colonial relations of power in its portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal? b) What do Nepali nurses' narratives tell us about how global health inequities rendered certain vulnerable populations as disposable during the

pandemic? c) What do Nepali journalists' experiences reveal about how patriarchal and colonial power structures embedded in international journalism marginalize Global South newsworkers? My main argument is that gendered colonial power relations affected the realities and perceptions of COVID-19 in Nepal. These power relations determined which lives were seen as worthy of protection, and which lives were seen as expendable. Global media helped to perpetuate these power relations in the way they portrayed the pandemic in Nepal.

There is an abundance of South Asian feminist and postcolonial literature that has explored the impact of COVID-19 in the region (Banerjee, 2022; Basu, 2023; Chakraborty, 2021; Islam, 2023; Paul et al., 2022; Shajahan, 2021). However, these studies are overwhelmingly focused on India. This is unsurprising, as scholarship on South Asia has been dominated historically by India; smaller countries in the region like Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives are particularly understudied (Dutta, 2021; Ganesh, 2023; Mandal & Pagedar, 2024). To quote Des Chene, "Nepal has been treated as something of a backwater in South Asian studies" (2007, p. 218). My research fills an important gap in the current COVID-19 scholarship by bringing in knowledge from Nepal to the academic discourse. My study is also the first to examine the pandemic through three different perspectives—that of global media, journalists, and health workers. This provides a holistic picture of how the realities of the pandemic are experienced and narrated differently by different groups based on their social positioning.

This chapter provides an overview of the historical context of Nepal and the COVID-19 pandemic to establish the basis of my research. I identify the knowledge gaps in existing feminist and postcolonial scholarship on COVID-19, and I highlight the contributions of my research to these fields. I lay out the main objectives and research questions of my study. I briefly explain the theoretical and methodological frameworks I use, and I identify the scope

and limitations of my project. Finally, I provide an overview of my thesis chapters and identify the common theme that ties them together.

Nepal: History and Current Context

Nepal is a small land-locked country in South Asia, located between India and China. According to data from 2022, 20.1% of Nepal's population is multidimensionally poor, and an additional 20.2% is vulnerable to multidimensional poverty (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). Although Nepal was never part of the British Empire, it has always been affected by the colonial history and politics of South Asia. Between 1814 and 1816, Nepal fought the Anglo-Nepalese war against the British East India Company (Pemble, 2009). The war ended with the signing of a peace treaty, whereby Nepal ceded some of its geopolitically important territory to the British. The British Raj also saw Nepal as a "buffer state" between India and China and used Nepal's geopolitical position for its political gain (Bhattarai, 2022; Farmer, 1993; Rana, 1971). Des Chene identifies additional factors that establish Nepal as a postcolonial state even though the nation was never directly occupied:

> A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal's relationship with British India, a history of labour migration that is similarly rooted in the political economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India (2007, p. 218).

Thus, British colonialism had a profound impact on Nepal's political and economic trajectory. Even after British rule ended in South Asia, the impact of its colonial legacy has survived. For example, Nepal continues to have territorial disputes with India over borders demarcated by the British (Constantino, 2020). Nepal is also heavily dependent on international aid, which has historically been used as a means of control and policy influence

by wealthy donor nations (Schmitt, 2020). In recent years, both the US and China have clashed over exerting political influence in Nepal through aid (Sigdel & Dahal, 2022).

Until 2007, Nepal was a constitutional monarchy and officially a Hindu kingdom, with the king as the head of state (Gellner, 2022). In 1996, the Maoist Communist Party instigated an armed conflict against the government of Nepal with the ambition to abolish the monarchy. The war ended in 2006 with a signing of a peace treaty between the Maoists and the government (L. KC, 2019). Monarchy was abolished and Nepal officially became a republic and a secular state in 2007. However, Nepal remains a Hindu-majority country, and Hindu norms strongly influence the country's cultural identity.

Patriarchy is deep-rooted in Nepal and woven into the fabric of Nepali society, from legal, political and education systems, to culture and religion (Dahal et al., 2021; Kanel, 2014; P. KC, 2017; Tamang, 2000). Structural gender discrimination affects women in Nepal in multifaceted ways. For example, Nepali women do not have the same citizenship rights as men (Pradhan, 2020). Adult literacy rate in Nepal is lower among women than men (World Bank, 2019). Nepal has one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation in the world (Alaref et al., 2024). Girls in Nepal are subject to harmful practices such as son preference, menstrual exclusion (known as "chhaupadi"), and child marriage (Bobel 2019; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2023), which hamper their development from a young age. All these factors contribute to women and girl's inferior status in Nepali society. Women and girls who belong to historically marginalized caste groups, or who are poor, widowed, disabled, living in rural areas, involved in sex work, or part of the LGBTQIA+ community, face further intersecting oppressions (Hendrickson et al., 2018; Maharjan & Shrestha, 2025; Pokharel et al., 2024; Simkhada et al., 2025). Research has shown that gender-based inequalities are especially amplified during times of disasters and crises, such as earthquakes, floods and landslides (Enarson, 2012; Horton, 2012; Neumayer & Plümper,

2007; Sthapit, 2015), all of which Nepal frequently experiences. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated social inequalities in Nepal and left women particularly vulnerable.

COVID-19 pandemic: An overview

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the virus SARS Cov2 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). It was first identified in Wuhan, China, in November 2019 and soon spread to other countries (Davidson, 2020). On March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 in South Asia was identified in Nepal on January 23, 2020, from a student who had returned from Wuhan (R. Shrestha et al., 2020). In May 2021, Nepal had the highest transmission rate of COVID-19 in the world, with a daily positivity rate of nearly 50% (BBC News, 2021). The pandemic led to a severe humanitarian emergency, crashing the healthcare system and pushing thousands into extreme poverty (Neupane et al., 2021). When vaccines were made available to wealthier nations, Nepal, like other Global South countries, suffered long delays (Sijapati, 2021). By May 2022, when wealthy nations were giving booster doses to their populations, 30% of Nepal's population was still waiting to get vaccinated with their first dose (Our World in Data, 2022). This was despite Nepal having one of the highest vaccine acceptance rates in the world, with 97% of its population willing to take the vaccine when it became available to them (Sallam et al., 2022).

The pandemic worsened Nepal's hunger epidemic and exposed thousands of people to a risk of malnutrition. A survey conducted by the Government of Nepal and World Food Programme (2020) found that 16.8% of Nepali households were not eating enough during the pandemic. Thousands of street vendors in Nepal lost their livelihoods because of government-imposed lockdowns (Ojha, 2021). As the border between India and Nepal was closed to prevent the spread of the virus, hundreds of migrant workers were stranded, many of whom were forced to sleep on the streets (S. Shrestha, 2020). A study conducted by the

Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, Government of Nepal (2020) showed that the number of women in Nepal that were not engaged in paid work rose by 337% during the pandemic. The same study revealed that women's unpaid care work also increased, which took a toll on their physical and mental health.

Nepal's healthcare system was already overburdened prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baral et al. 2013; Gauchan et al., 2019). Part of the reason was the relentless exodus of skilled healthcare workers from Nepal to wealthier nations in search of better salaries and improved working conditions (Ghimire & Neupane, 2025). This brain drain has had serious implications for Nepal's healthcare system, leading to understaffed hospitals, overburdened healthcare workers, and poor quality of patient care. This already dire situation was further exacerbated by the pandemic, as health workers struggled to meet the care needs of a rapidly growing number of patients, while putting their own lives on the line (Basnet, 2020).

Journalists were another group of frontline workers that were severely affected. The journalism industry, which is an important source of public health information in Nepal, suffered a devastating blow during the pandemic (K. Aryal, 2022; Sreedharan et al., 2020). Nepali journalists faced financial hardships due to newsroom closures that left nearly 40% jobless (Manandhar, 2023). According to a report by Nepal Press Institute and Bournemouth University, over 38% of Nepali journalists suffered pay cuts during the pandemic (Sreedharan et al., 2020). The same report also found that the pandemic had a negative impact on journalists' mental and emotional well-being. Many journalists risked their lives reporting from COVID-19 hotspots to bring critical news and information to the public. There was also an increase in cases of violence and threats against journalists covering COVID news in Nepal, including incidents of arrest (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Women journalists, who have historically been marginalized in Nepal's journalism sector,

were especially vulnerable to attacks and violence, both offline and online (Sreedharan et al., 2020; Subedi, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The voices and experiences of Nepali people have been largely overlooked across academic research on South Asia generally, which has always had a strong bias towards India (Dutta, 2021; Ganesh, 2023; Mandal & Pagedar, 2024). This includes South Asian feminist literature as well as media studies scholars. This is significant, because Nepal occupies a unique position as a South Asian country that isn't a former British colony, and as a small country landlocked between two global superpowers—India and China. For these reasons, Nepal's geopolitical context is notably different from its other South Asian neighbours. Furthermore, when COVID-19 hit, Nepal was still recovering from the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake (Adhikari et al., 2020). The pandemic exacerbated the already-fragile political and economic situation of the nation. Nepal was overshadowed by India and China in the international pandemic discourse, despite having the highest rate of COVID transmission in the world at its peak (BBC News, 2021; Gurung, 2021). The lack of international attention arguably affected the support and aid allocated to the country. All these factors make the COVID context in Nepal important and worth exploring.

While there have been numerous studies on COVID-19 in Nepal, much of that literature is concentrated within medical and health sciences (Mahato et al., 2020; Neupane et al., 2021; Panthee et al., 2020; Poudel & Subedi, 2020). At the time of writing this thesis, there is still no research that explicitly employs a feminist postcolonial approach to the study of COVID-19 in Nepal. My research fills this significant knowledge gap and brings in the voices and perspectives of Nepali women to global academic discussions on COVID-19. Most importantly, my research examines the realities of the pandemic in Nepal from three diverse positions—those of international news media, nurses, and local Nepali journalists. In

doing so, it provides a more holistic picture of the realities of COVID-19 in Nepal, as narrated by these different groups. It also sheds light on how experiences and perceptions of the pandemic vary based on social positions and power relations.

Research Questions and Objectives

Through a series of three standalone but interconnected publishable papers, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions:

a) How has international media reproduced gendered and colonial relations of power in its portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal?

b) What do Nepali nurses' narratives tell us about how global health inequities rendered certain vulnerable populations disposable during the pandemic?

c) What do Nepali journalists' experiences reveal about how patriarchal and colonial power structures embedded in international journalism marginalize Global South news workers?

The following are the main objectives of this thesis:

a) To highlight the hegemonic discourses used by international media in portraying COVID-19 in Nepal.

b) To document and understand the lived realities of the pandemic in Nepal as experienced by nurses and local journalists working at the COVID frontlines.

c) To understand how gendered and colonial hierarchies and relations of power affect different perceptions and narratives of the pandemic.

Framework of Analysis

The articles in this thesis draw upon classic and contemporary works in postcolonial theory, particularly feminist postcolonial theory. In addition to postcolonial theory, Articles 2 and 3 also employ feminist media studies. While the three papers are independent of one another, at their core they are all concerned with the gendered and colonial power structures

that define what lives are seen as worthy of saving and protecting during the pandemic, and what lives are seen as disposable. For that reason, they draw on common theoretical approaches. Initially, I had also planned to incorporate feminist disaster studies and feminist disability studies under my main theoretical framework. However, upon data collection it became apparent that postcolonial theory and feminist media studies provided a more accurate and robust lens for answering my research questions. At its core, my research is concerned with how patriarchal and colonial power structures impact on media representations and lived experience narratives of the pandemic. Therefore, I decided to centre my framework of analysis on postcolonial theory and feminist media studies, while still drawing on feminist disaster scholarship (for example, Basu, 2023; Banerjee et al., 2022; Fernández, 2024; Scauso et al., 2020) and feminist disability studies (for example, Puar, 2017, 2022; Shajahan, 2021; Simkhada, 2025) more broadly.

Postcolonial theory is a field that is concerned with the ongoing legacies of European colonial rule in non-Western societies (Elam, 2019). Postcolonial theorists examine how colonial power relations continue to oppress formerly colonized people by privileging Western representative and knowledge-making practices. The Global South is an important concept in postcolonial theory. While it mostly refers to low-income countries outside Europe and North America, most of whom are former colonies, it also includes subjugated populations residing within high-income countries (Dados & Connell, 2012). Often used interchangeably with "Third World" by many postcolonial feminist scholars (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988a; Trinh, 1989), the concept of the Global South highlights unequal global power relations. This concept is particularly important for my research, which focuses on Nepal, one of the handful of countries in the world that is not a former European colony. Despite never having been colonized, Nepal has been impacted by the long history of the British rule in South Asia (Pemble, 2009). Issues rooted in colonialism, including global

wealth inequality, foreign aid dependency, border disputes, international labour exploitation, etc. continue to subjugate Nepal's population (Constantino, 2020; Frenning, 2020; Thapa, 2025). Thus, the postcolonial concept of the Global South is a valuable term that rightfully situates Nepal in the world order.

Edward Said's Orientalism is another key concept in postcolonial theory that explains how the colonial world order continues to be maintained, despite the official end of the colony. Orientalism is a way of thinking that is based on differentiating the "Orient" (the East or the Global South) from the "Occident" (the West) (Said, 1978). Said argues that the West perceives and constructs the East as a traditional, barbaric and uncivilized "Other". One way that Western institutions exert their power over the East is through representative practices, such as journalism. Postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall (1996) argues that the West uses the discourse of "the West and the Rest" to exert its superiority over the non-Western "Other". According to Hall, the differences between the West and the non-West are used as a measure by which the West determines its achievements. Contemporary postcolonial scholars (Adams, 1996; Chellaney, 2021; Mamadouh, 2021; Moyo, 2022; Ortner, 1999) build on Said and Hall's works to discuss how Western news media perpetuate Orientalist and West-centric discourses through stereotypical representations of the Global South and its people. Moreover, Global South people often internalize and reproduce the same Orientalist discourses used by the West in representing them (Alahmed, 2020; Feighery, 2012; Lau & Dwivedi, 2014; Varma, 2003; Yan & Santos, 2009). This phenomenon is known as "re-Orientalism" or "self-Orientalism". The works of Said and his contemporaries, thus, provide a framework for understanding whether and how Western news media reproduce colonial relations of power in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal. They also enable me to examine how the pandemic experiences and narratives of Nepali nurses and journalists have been influenced by their social position as Third World subjects.

I acknowledge that the West, like the East, is not a monolith, and there are important political and cultural differences between Western nations. However, I have purposefully chosen to use the term, following Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism (1988b, 1990) which, she argues, must be adopted to produce critical scholarship and resist hegemony. While Western nations differ from one another, they do share a commonality in that they have shared histories of racist colonialism and occupy a powerful position in the current global political and economic world order. Of course, not all powerful nations in the world fall under the category of "West". However, this dissertation is concerned with power relations between the West and the Global South as manifested through what Shome calls "discursive imperialism" (1996, p. 42):

> There are a number of reasons, some of course very obvious, why the focus on Western discursive imperialism–especially that of the United States and England–has been a relatively major preoccupation of postcolonial criticism. Here I will mention two. The first has to do with the historical relation of colonialism between the East and the West. While discursive imperialism is and was surely in operation in countries that have wielded considerable influence in world politics, such as Japan and the former USSR, these countries do not have the same history of centuries of global colonialism and expansion behind them as England and France, for example. The historically colonized lands of the East such as India, Africa, parts of Southeast Asia, and Latin America do not have the same relation of subjection and subordination with them as they do with Western empires.

Thus, drawing on Shome's argument, this thesis employs postcolonial scholarship to highlight the discursive power that the West exerts over the Global South. This framework is relevant for understanding the social and political context of Nepal and its relation to the former British Empire (Des Chene, 2007). Within postcolonial scholarship, feminist

postcolonial theory is particularly important to my research. As an interdisciplinary body of work, feminist postcolonial theory is concerned with the intersecting impact of patriarchy and colonialism on Global South women (Doshi, 2023). It draws attention to Western feminism's exclusion of Global South voices and experiences, while also critiquing postcolonial theory for failing to include women. Canonical works in this field, such as Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" (1988), and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988a) critique stereotypical representation and the silencing of Third World women in Western knowledge-making practices. They argue that the West perceives and depicts Third World women as a homogenous monolithic group, while forbidding them from representing their own interests and agencies. Postcolonial feminists also argue that Third World women bear the brunt of globalisation and the capitalist exploitation of Global South labour (Mohanty, 1997). For example, transnational corporations rely on cheap labour of Third World women who are overrepresented in low-level factory work (Caraway, 2007; Wright, 2006). Similarly, Western countries increasingly rely on migrant women from the Global South to perform underpaid reproductive labour such as domestic work, childcare, elder care, etc. (Gimenez, 2016). Postcolonial feminist scholars also "call attention to how (neo)imperialism and coloniality rest on the silencing or erasure of gender and sexuality in the reproduction of racist, racialized and classed orders" (Nair, 2018, p. 58). Thus, feminist postcolonial theory provides a framework for exploring how women from Global South countries like Nepal get subjugated and silenced in international news-making practices. It also sheds light on how the extraction of gendered labour from the Global South to Western nations, contributes to the exploitative and inhumane working conditions for female workers such as nurses in Nepal. While the works of canonical scholars such as Mohanty and Spivak are key to feminist postcolonial theory, I also draw on more contemporary scholars who build on and advance Mohanty and Spivak's ideas, such as Dixit and Banday (2025), Basu (2023), Fernández

(2024), Tamang (2000, 2011), and Racine et al. (2021). According to Doshi, postcolonial feminism "speaks from the spaces of those often positioned as marginalized 'Others' and resists such domination through the inversion of the hierarchies of (neo/)colonialism and patriarchy" (2023, p. 1). Postcolonial feminist scholarship advocates for knowledge creation that centres the lived experiences of Global South women. My research seeks to disrupt the current academic discourses on COVID-19 by introducing new knowledge that is centred on Nepali women's experiences and narratives. Feminist postcolonial theory provides the tools to create that disruption.

I'm also heavily influenced by Judith Butler and Jasbir Puar, who don't explicitly label themselves feminist postcolonial scholars but have made important contributions to advancing the field, especially in terms of understanding how gendered and colonial identities determine the value placed on a life during times of crises. Butler's work on grievability lies at the core of this thesis. It is the common conceptual thread that runs through all three articles and binds them together. According to Butler, grievability is a measure of the extent to which a life would be mourned if it were to be lost (2004, 2010, 2022). This concept sheds light on the unequal value placed on human lives, which is determined by power relations such as race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, etc. This PhD project is concerned with the question of "whose life matters?" as it pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic. Which lives were seen as worth protecting from coronavirus, and which lives were seen as collateral damage? Ultimately, I seek to understand how colonial legacies of global wealth inequalities rendered Nepali lives disposable during the pandemic. I explore how this was done discursively through global news coverage, and through the systemic disregard for lives of workers like Nepali nurses and journalists. Butler's work provides the guiding framework for addressing these issues.

In addition to postcolonial theory, Articles 1 and 3 also draw on feminist media studies. This body of work is concerned with the role of media in reproducing hegemony and determining social and cultural norms (Chambers et al., 2004; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Rakow & Kranich, 1991). Feminist media scholars study "how, and to whose avail, particular ideological constructs of femininity are produced in media content" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 24). They argue that not only are newsrooms male-dominated, the culture in most newsrooms is also deeply gendered (Ross & Carter, 2011). As a result, topics and events that get reported as news are based on masculine conceptions of the world, and issues important to women get sidelined. My research is concerned with gendered discourses in international media, as well as the patriarchal culture of the global journalism industry. Feminist media studies offers me a theoretical lens to examine both those concerns. It provides the tools for addressing my research questions, first by exploring how gendered discourses are perpetuated in news and second, by highlighting how gendered power relations play out in journalism practice. I draw on the works of feminist media scholars like Carter, Ross, and their collaborators, who have extensively studied how patriarchal norms are perpetuated in news media representations, as well as in newsroom cultures (Carter et al., 2019; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Ross & Carter, 2011; Ross et al., 2016). Thus, feminist media studies provides the conceptual foundation for exploring how international news media portray Nepali women in their pandemic coverage. I use it to untangle how patriarchal news culture contribute to the subjugation of Nepali women journalists within international newsrooms.

Methodology

This thesis follows a feminist methodological framework. Feminist methodologies share a "commitment to drawing attention to the deep and irreducible connections between knowledge and power (privilege), and to making problematic gender in society and social institutions in order to develop theories that advance practices of gender justice" (Burns &

Walker, 2005, p. 66). Doucet and Mauthner (2008) identify three defining features of feminist research: a) It is not just research on women, but also research for women b) It is concerned with social justice and change and c) It challenges conventional ways of gathering, analysing and presenting data. This research is not just a study of Nepali people and their gendered experiences. It explores how gender interacts with colonial relations of power to silence women's voices and experiences.

The thesis takes a feminist qualitative approach. Qualitative research methods are used "to understand a phenomenon from the perspectives of the persons experiencing it" (Ayton, 2023, p. 8). While quantitative research asks "what" questions, qualitative tends toward "why" and "how" (Lune & Berg, 2017). My research questions are concerned with the latter. Rather than numbers and statistics that are typical of quantitative research, I am interested in people's experiences and knowledge-making practices. Therefore, a qualitative approach is better for a project like mine because it is not trying to get to an objective "truth" about COVID-19. Rather, my project seeks to understand, and document lived realities of the pandemic. Qualitative research methods are often favored by feminists because they "[offer] a corrective to traditional research that either neglected women or presented a stereotypic or biased view of women" (McHugh, 2020, p. 202). They enable the researcher to challenge power differentials and highlight the perspectives of subjugated and marginalized people (Staller, 2016). A feminist qualitative approach is therefore well-suited to my research as it highlights the colonial subjugation of Nepali women while creating new knowledge that is centred on the lived experiences of those women. However, there are some limitations to doing qualitative research. Since it does not represent a wide population, qualitative research is limited in its generalizability (Lune & Berg, 2017). That being said, my project does not intend to represent the realities of Nepali people in their entirety. The goal of my research is to give in-depth insights to the realities of specific groups of people and media institutions.

The qualitative methods I use in this research are critical discourse analysis of media texts (Article 1) and feminist in-depth interviewing (Article 2 and 3). For my first article, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of news coverage of the COVID-19 in Nepal by three leading global news agencies: The Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence France Presse (AFP). Critical discourse analysis "helps link discursive practices to their ideological sources and unpack the power relations within those practices" (Shaban, 2022, p. 49). This includes discursive practices in journalism. Researchers use critical discourse analysis to study news media's "normalizing power to frame, centralize, and legitimize particular views" (Lawless & Chen, p. 185). Therefore, this method is well-suited to uncovering how Western news outlets perpetuate West-centric and Orientalist ideas in their representation of the pandemic in Nepal. It illuminates how patriarchal norms of journalism practice have arguably led to the subjugation and silencing of Nepali women's perspectives in the news.

Additionally, I used feminist in-depth interviewing for my second and third articles. Feminist interviewers are interested in "asking questions and exploring issues that are of particular concern to women's lives," including "issues of social change and social justice for women" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 114). Since the goal of my project was to create knowledge that is grounded in the experiences and perceptions of Nepali women, this method was the most useful. It sheds light on the lived realities of the nurses and journalists in Nepal, and how their gender and social status impact on their experiences and narratives of the pandemic. For both articles, I carried out semi-structured interviews, which are conducted with a specific interview guide (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Using semi-structured interviews kept me focused on the topic concerned while leaving space for asking new questions that emerged from the participants' answers.

I used narrative analysis to analyze the interview data. Narrative analysis examines "how, where, and to whom the story is told as well as what identities are at stake in the telling

of given story and how the story speaks to larger discourses at play in a given community or culture" (Parcell & Baker, 2017, p. 1069). It studies the content of the respondent's account and questions why a story is told in a particular way. I found narrative analysis to be useful for my research because it is concerned with the effect of gender relations, power, and social structures on the research participants' experience and stories of COVID-19. Oikkonen (2013) argues that narrative analysis differs from other research methods, such as discourse analysis, because it focuses on the relationship between structure and context. She understands structure as patterns that allow particular discourses to form and lead the narrative in certain directions. Similarly, she understands context as the cultural and historical conditions that influence the production and interpretation of knowledge. Oikkonen adds that those conditions cannot be detached from the methodological and theoretical aspects of the research process. Narrative analysis not only examines the structure of the storytelling or the communication process, but also looks at the wider social, political or ideological meanings behind the story (Gillespie, 2006). I paid attention to how participants told their stories, including the changes in their tone, pauses, as well as their body language. My firsthand knowledge of Nepali language and culture in the interview process provided me with an added advantage in terms of understanding the nuances in the language and storytelling, some of which gets lost when using an interpreter.

Data Collection

Data collection for this PhD project was done between December 2022 and March 2023.

My first paper examines the representation of COVID-19 in Nepal by global news media. I looked at news coverage by AP, AFP and Reuters. I chose these media outlets because they are the three largest news agencies in the world and have an extensive global reach (Jukes, 2022). They provide news to media institutions all over the world who, in turn,

repackage those news stories for their audiences (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2013). Thus, these agencies largely control and influence international news narratives. I used an international news database called Factiva to gather the news articles. I searched all English-language news under 200 words that were published by AP, AFP and Reuters in 2020 and 2021. I selected articles that contained the terms "COVID" and "Nepal" either in the lead paragraph or the headline. COVID-19 started in early 2020, and 2021 saw the largest number of deaths and devastation in Nepal. Therefore, I decided to look at these two years as they hold a great deal of significance in Nepal's COVID history. After weeding out duplicates and irrelevant articles I was left with 52 news articles in my sample.

For my second article, I conducted eight interviews of approximately an hour each, with female nurses in Kathmandu who worked with COVID patients. Through the interviews, I sought to understand how the nurses' position as women in a deeply patriarchal society, and as Global South workers, affected their experiences of the pandemic. Similarly, for my third article, I interviewed eight Nepali journalists who reported COVID stories for international news outlets. This research was inspired by Saumava Mitra's work (2020) on Afghan photojournalists working for Western news media. Mitra's paper discusses concepts of security, colonial relations, as well as editorial power dynamics involved in Western media's arguably exploitative use of local Afghan journalists to produce content for Western audiences. Through the interviews, I wanted to explore how Nepali journalists navigate their unique in-between positions as local Nepalis reporting news to a primarily Western audience.

Research participants were recruited online using a snowball method. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have become increasingly popular amongst researcher as platforms for recruiting research participants, especially post-COVID-19 (Leighton et al., 2021; Wasilewski et al., 2019). Using a snowball method to reach participants on social media eliminated the need for face-to-face interaction, which was important to consider

during a public health crisis. I utilized Twitter to connect with research participants in Nepal. I posted a call for participation seeking to interview nurses and journalists in Kathmandu on their experiences of COVID-19. I received responses from willing participants and recruited additional participants through their networks.

Due to the pandemic and resulting border restrictions, all interviews were done over Zoom videocalls, and they were video-recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were conducted using a mix of colloquial Nepali and English. They were transcribed verbatim and translated by me. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (Certificate Number S-11-22-8621). I read out the consent form approved by the ethics committee to each research participant at the beginning of the interview and took their verbal consent. Since the data collection was conducted when the pandemic was still ongoing, interviews had to be done virtually to limit chances of exposure. To protect participant's anonymity, I have used pseudonyms instead of real names in the articles. I have also omitted other identifying information, such as the names of employers.

Feminist Methodological Considerations

Feminist scholars are critical of positivist epistemologies for assuming that unbiased scientific objectivity is possible. They argue that no knowledge is neutral and that all research is subjective, so it is better to be transparent about how personal identities, experiences, and political views shape the selection of research topics as well as decisions about data collection and analysis, rather than assume these factors do not matter" (Kelly, 2020, p. 2). For this reason, feminist methodologies require the researcher to be reflexive and acknowledge and confront how their own identity factors within the process of knowledge production (Giwa, 2015). This involves attending to issues of power hierarchies and

insider/outsider dynamics, as they affect researcher-participant relations and the research as a whole (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012).

I practiced journaling to reflect on my positionality during every step of this research. As a native Nepali woman, I shared many commonalities with the participants that helped "to improve the level of trust and consequently the data collected that together lend credibility to the subject matter" (Giwa, 2015, p.318). On the other hand, I am a Brahmin woman from Kathmandu, a major city, who has attained all my formal education in Western anglophone institutions. Although the postcolonial and feminist frameworks that I employ are inherently critical, my academic approach has been heavily informed by the British, Canadian, American and Australian institutions where I have trained. These aspects of my background set me apart from many of my research participants despite our shared nationality, race and language. Thus, I did not fully fit into either insider or outsider roles. Jabiri argues for "the need to nuance our understanding of insider/outsider relations and challenge self–other dynamics" (2024, p. 79), particularly for researchers who study communities that they are a part of. She claims that seeing those categories in binary terms reinforces Western notions of objectivity and homogeneity that feminist postcolonial scholars seek to challenge. Hamilton also stresses the importance of "treating neither the researcher's positionality nor that of the participants as entirely static or fixed" (2020, p. 522) while conducting feminist research. While my caste, class and education privilege render me an outsider, I also have lived experience of growing up in Nepal, under the patriarchal norms of Nepali society. Like my participants, I have been oppressed by a system that privileges Western lives over that of people that look like me and share my nationality. In that sense, I am an insider who has shared experience of marginalization with my research subjects. Moreover, as a racialized immigrant woman from the Global South, I don't have the same access to power and privilege that white first world feminists do. Therefore, I occupy a complicated position of

"the researcher as a postcolonial subject learning to work within a Western academic space while studying postcolonial contexts and people" (Jabiri, 2024, p. 82). Rather than occupying insider or outsider roles in my research, I have embodied both at the same time, and in multifaceted ways.

Beyond power hierarchies stemming from socioeconomic status, the process of interviewing itself comes with inherent power dynamics. This is because the interviewer has the authority to set the agenda for the interview, by deciding what questions to ask and what topics to focus on (Hesse-Biber, 2014). While the embedded power imbalance is unavoidable in any interview setting, following a semi-structured format at least enabled participants to elaborate on topics that they considered important. Rather than adhering to the chronological order of the interview guide, I used a conversational approach and asked follow-up questions based on individual responses. I felt that doing this gave participants more control over their narratives. As a feminist postcolonial project, grounding my research on the voices and lived experiences of participants was crucial. Not only does giving voice empower research subjects, it also "provides a strong feminist counter to the objectivity of masculinist science" (Coddington, 2017, p. 315). That being said, simply giving voice to participants is not enough, particularly when working with marginalized populations. Ababneh warns that Western academics sometimes embody a colonial mindset where they see Global South subjects "merely as sources whose knowledge and stories can be taken" like raw gold and ivory (2024, p. 423). Similarly, Ozkazanc-Pan argues that "representations are not and should not be the products of 'information retrieval' from the 'Third World' on display in Western journals" (2012, p. 575). Doing feminist postcolonial research thus involves treating participants as active collaborators in the study instead of passive suppliers of data for the researcher. It is equally important to consider the question of who the knowledge belongs to (Zulu et al., 2025). According to Motlafi, "the dominant Western-modelled academia requires

that the scholar is able to demonstrate novelty and a mastery of his/her area of study, perpetuating the temptation to turn unrecognised knowledges into our 'discoveries'" (2021, p. 184). As a postcolonial and feminist researcher, I find it important to recognise that I am not the primary knowledge bearer, but rather a co-creator and a messenger. I am using my privilege and access to Western academia to bring attention and visibility to the perspectives of my research participants, who are the true owners of the knowledge that my research produces. Beyond acknowledging this, I also took small steps to ensure that the participants did not feel exploited and felt that they were an active part of the knowledge-making process. For example, interviews were always scheduled at a time that was the most convenient for the participant. Sometimes, it meant that interviews had to be conducted during unconventional hours for me in Ottawa, due to the time difference. Using a mix of colloquial Nepali and English also created an environment that was comfortable for the participants and enabled them to express themselves freely. Most importantly, all participants were compensated for their time through electronic money transfer. Warnock (2022) stresses the importance of paying research participants, in order to avoid further burdening them with unpaid work. This was especially important given the unfair demands of reproductive labour placed on women in most patriarchal societies (Duffy, 2011; Spronk, 2022).

Concerns of power and hierarchies are not limited to data collection. Feminist researchers have highlighted how these issues can also appear during processes of transcription and translation (Burkhard & Park, 2024; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Irshad & Yasmin, 2022). Sharp calls out the anglophone hegemony in Western academia and "the exercise of power not through explicit violence, but through linguistic norms and the naturalization of hierarchy" (2024, p. 57). This is exacerbated by digital language divide, which "refers to the gap between languages with and without a considerable representation within the worldwide digital infrastructure" (Helm, et al., 2024, p. 7). Researchers

interviewing in English are able to utilize transcription software, which are typically not inclusive of non-European languages. Despite this barrier, I found that manually transcribing the interviews allowed me to better contextualize participants' responses. This was especially significant since many participants switched between Nepali and broken English. Feminist researchers also highlight the importance of preserving "nonlexical details of talk, such as hesitation, intonation, and the like" (DeVault & Gross, 2012, p. 223) in the transcription process in order to accurately represent participants' accounts. Similarly, Standing (1998, p. 191) cautions against "tidying up" interview transcript by removing filler words, as doing so can homogenize respondent's voices. This is also important during the process of translation. Nagar talks about the significance of

> [engaging] the truths that often become muffled when words from one place are translated into more words of another language and robbed of their accents, melodies, and meanings; when the words are not accompanied by the embodied vocabularies and gestures that give them life after they are uttered (2019, p. 8).

To ensure that I did not "muffle" the participants' realities, I paid careful attention to non-verbal cues such as pauses, laughter and sighs during the transcription and translation process. Burkhard and Park (2024) claim that when a researcher-translator is familiar with the language and cultural background of the research participants, they can provide a deeper understanding of culturally situated concepts. In that sense, being a native Nepali speaker and not having to rely on someone else's translations has been advantageous to my research. However, as feminists have argued, the process of translation is not stable and objective—it is inherently messy (Sharp, 2024). My own research involved speaking with participants in Nepali, and "recasting their experiences within the cultural boundaries of the English language" (Palmary, 2014, p. 577), which risked the meaning being lost. I regularly navigate this challenge in my personal life as a Nepali speaker married to an anglophone person. Even

when there are English equivalent to Nepali words and phrases, they don't always carry the same cultural meaning or sentiment. Thus, rather than trying to achieve literal rendering, "engaging in an ethical translation process requires us to conduct our research and translations transparently while keeping in mind the communities whose words, stories, and experiences we are representing" (Burkhard & Park, 2024, p. 501). Furthermore, feminist scholars also point out that the act of translation provides avenues to express politics and decolonize research (Palmary, 2014; Sharp, 2024). I have tried to incorporate this notion in my own work, for example, through my refusal to use the term "Nepalese". "Nepali" is preferred by Nepalis and many South Asians because it "reflects local morphology (as well as heritage and identity)" (R. Aryal & Melgar, 2017) while the anglicized "Nepalese" is more popular in Western usage. According to Sharp, such an act of "[retaining] some of the 'foreign' lexicon of the source language in order to bring out rather than suppress difference" (2024, p. 61) is practiced by many feminist decolonial scholars and translators. As such, feminist acts of translation and transcription, like other aspects of feminist methodologies, prioritise transparency and social justice and are less concerned with the impossible notion of objectivity.

Overview of Thesis Articles

Article 1–Whose lives matter? A postcolonial analysis of global media coverage of COVID-19 in Nepal

This article studies the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal by three international news agencies: AP, AFP and Reuters. Drawing on postcolonial theory and feminist media studies, I discuss the findings of a discourse analysis of 52 news articles published in 2020 and 2021. The findings indicate that global news media reproduced gendered and colonial discourses in their pandemic coverage of Nepal. The news articles portray Western lives as being more worthy of saving and protection compared to Nepali

lives. Moreover, Nepali women are largely absent from the news coverage. As a result, the experiences of Nepali women and issues important to them are overlooked in the coverage. The articles also present an Orientalist portrayal of Nepal through their overwhelming focus on the Himalayas, and Hindu death rituals. Such biased representation by international media can have important implications for how the realities of the pandemic in Nepal are perceived by the rest of the world, and how those realities will be remembered by future generations. This paper also highlights how racial and colonial discourses embedded in international journalism determine which human lives are assigned value, and which lives are seen as dispensable during a global crisis.

Article 2–Essential but expendable: Nepali Nurses' Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic

This article examines the COVID experiences of Nepali nurses using a postcolonial feminist framework. I discuss the findings from in-depth interviews with eight nurses from Kathmandu. The nurses were interviewed on their experiences of working with COVID-19 patients during the pandemic. Being mindful of the public health crisis, interviews were conducted virtually over Zoom videocalls. I carried out a feminist narrative analysis of the interview data. My findings are categorized into three key thematic areas: 1) exploitation and trauma; 2) stigma and violence; 3) expendability of life. The findings suggest that colonial legacies of global health inequities led to certain marginalized groups, such as Nepali nurses, being seen as expendable and made available for harm during COVID-19. My main argument is that nurses in Nepal were seen as collateral damage in the war against COVID, and their experiences were invisibilized in the global pandemic discourse. The nurses were marginalized in multifaceted ways that render them disposable, both as care workers at the pandemic frontline, and as Global South women workers.

Article 3–Disposable messengers: Nepali journalists' narratives of covering COVID-19 for international newsrooms

This article studies the narratives of local Nepali journalists who covered COVID-19 stories for international news outlets. I discuss the findings of in-depth interviews with eight journalists in Kathmandu, Nepal. Due to the pandemic and resulting lockdown measures, the interviews were done virtually over Zoom videocalls. I carried out narrative analysis of interview data using a synthesis of postcolonial theory, feminist postcolonial theory and feminist media studies. In the paper, I explore how the journalists perceive and navigate their gendered social positions, and their in-between status as local Nepalis catering to a Western audience. My findings show that the gendered culture of journalism, and the patriarchal norms of Nepali society marginalize Nepali women journalists and keep the industry male dominated. I also discuss how Nepali journalists working for international newsrooms perpetuate Western Orientalist discourses in their work, despite being local Nepalis. Finally, my research suggests that colonial legacies of health inequities ultimately put Nepali journalists at risk of exploitation and harm during the pandemic. As Global South newsworkers, they were considered dispensable and unworthy of protection from COVID-19.

Conclusion

This doctoral project examines the realities of COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal through the perspectives of three distinct groups: international news agencies, Nepali nurses, and Nepali journalists working for international news media. Using discourse analysis and in-depth interviewing as methods, I explore how realities of the pandemic in Nepal are presented to the outside world by international media, and how those realities were experienced by frontline workers such as nurses and journalists. The narratives of these individuals and institutions are explored in three independent, but interconnected articles that

employ overlapping theoretical approaches. I draw on postcolonial theory, feminist postcolonial theory and feminist media studies; to examine how gendered and colonial relations of power determine the different value placed on human lives during the pandemic.

This research is qualitative and seeks to provide in-depth analysis of media text and lived experiences of specific groups of people. As a qualitative work, it is limited in its scope and generalizability. That being said, it is my hope that this project will provide a blueprint that inspires similar projects in other Global South contexts. As a feminist postcolonial project, this project ultimately seeks to introduce new knowledge about the pandemic that centres the lived experiences and perspectives of Nepali people, particularly Nepali women. By highlighting the Nepali context, I aim to disrupt the hegemonic discourse on global crises that are currently dominated by Western voices and perspectives.

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Chapter 2

Whose lives matter? A postcolonial analysis of global media coverage of COVID-19 in Nepal

Abstract

This paper examines the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal by three global news agencies: The Associated Press, Reuters, and Agence France Presse. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist scholarship, I carried out discourse analysis of 52 news articles published in the years 2020 and 2021. My findings indicate that international news media reproduced gendered and colonial discourses in their coverage of the pandemic in Nepal. This was evidenced by the overwhelming focus on foreign mountain climbers over local Nepali populations, and the notable absence of Nepali women's voices in the coverage. Such biases in international news have significant implications for how disasters and crises in low-income countries like Nepal get perceived internationally. It also highlights how racial and colonial discourses embedded in international journalism determine which human lives are assigned value, and which lives are seen as dispensable.

Keywords: postcolonial theory; postcolonial feminism; global media; grievability; international journalism; COVID-19

No event is inherently newsworthy. Events become news only when mass media choose to report them as news (Tukachinsky, 2013). Media inform our understanding of reality and are responsible for shaping public discourses around a particular event (Happer & Philo, 2013; Jamieson & Hardy, 2011). For example, international news media shape our understanding of global crises such as wars, disasters and pandemics (Cottle, 2014; Levina, 2015). In doing so, they also influence how those events are responded to. Several studies have examined how news media shape dominant discourses on pandemics including SARS,

Ebola, the Zika virus, MERS, and COVID-19 (Fabricio, 2019; Gabore, 2020; Joye, 2010a; Towers et al., 2015; Yang & Lee, 2020), influencing social behaviors such as risk perception and stigma. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent and the deadliest on the list, claiming over 7 million lives globally (World Health Organization, [WHO], 2025).

As a global pandemic that affected every country in the world, COVID-19 received unprecedented levels of news media coverage. The media played an important role in disseminating crucial public health information and keeping citizens informed about the novel virus (Anwar et al., 2020; Arriaga et al., 2021). However, the media was also held responsible for fearmongering and spreading misinformation (Capurro et al., 2022; Ravenelle et al., 2021). Several studies have linked racist news media coverage to the anti-Asian violence in Western societies during the height of the pandemic (Croucher et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2023). News media across the world were also criticized for the notable absence of women from pandemic coverage (Araújo et al., 2022; Mulupi & Zirugo, 2022; Wallace & Goodyear-Grant 2020). A global study commissioned by the Gates Foundation found a significant bias towards men's perspectives in media coverage of COVID-19 (Kassova, 2020). The study revealed that male voices dominated the coverage, women were rarely used as expert sources, and stories reflecting women's needs were less likely to be covered. The evidence from COVID-19 reflects the general discriminatory practices in media representation that feminist, anti-racist and postcolonial scholars have long argued is ubiquitous (Niemi & Pitkänen, 2017; Ross & Carter, 2011, Ross et al., 2016).

This paper studies the international media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal, a small landlocked South Asian country that, at one point, had the highest rate of COVID transmission in the world (BBC News, 2021). Drawing on postcolonial and feminist approaches, and using discourse analysis as method, I examined news articles published by three leading global news agencies: The Associated Press (AP), Reuters, and Agence France

Presse (AFP). The main objective of my research was to understand how Nepal and Nepali citizens were discursively constructed by global news agencies in their COVID-19 coverage. Through my research, I sought to answer the following questions: How do international news agencies portray the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal? What relations of power are communicated in the coverage? What does the media coverage tell us about how Nepal is perceived and represented by the West? The central argument of this paper is that gendered global colonial relations of power are reflected in international media coverage of the pandemic in Nepal. Additionally, international media construct Western lives in Nepal as worthy of saving, while Nepali lives are considered disposable.

There is a plethora of literature available on media coverage of COVID-19 worldwide (Araújo et al., 2022; Capurro et al., 2022; Gabore, 2020; Mulupi & Zirugo, 2022; Ravenelle et al., 2021; Wallace & Goodyear-Grant, 2020). There is also literature available on local Nepali media coverage of the pandemic (Dahal & Khatri, 2021; Regmi et al., 2022). However, I have been unable to find studies that have examined how international media covered the pandemic in Nepal. There is also a general lack of research that has examined international media representations of Nepal through feminist or postcolonial theoretical lenses. These are some of the gaps in the existing literature that my research fills. It is also important to note that academic knowledge in both feminism and media studies is dominated by the West, both in terms of authorship as well as the topic of study. Countries like Nepal are seldom the topic of discussion in global academic platforms. When they do get talked about, it is often from a perspective that is Western and white. As a Nepali woman with personal ties to the country and its people, this paper is my attempt at centring issues important to Nepal and Nepali people, and offering a Nepali perspective to postcolonial, feminist and media scholarship.

Framework of Analysis

This paper uses a synthesis of postcolonial theory and feminist media studies as the main framework of analysis. As Pillai points out, incorporating postcolonial approaches into feminist media studies enables the researcher to "investigate how 'eurocentric' discourses impinge upon the production, distribution and consumption of media texts" (1996, p. 42). I draw on these disciplines to examine how issues of gender and coloniality play out together in global media coverage of COVID-19 in Nepal.

Postcolonial theory studies the continuing social and cultural impacts of European colonial rule around the world, and how they are manifested through practices of representation and knowledge-making (Elam, 2019). A key concept in postcolonial theory is Orientalism, defined as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction" between the East, or the "Orient" and the West, the "Occident" (Said, 1978, p. 2). Said argues that the West sees the East as an inferior "Other" to itself and constructs representations based on the idea that Western identity is superior to non-Western people and their cultures. The West deals with the Orient by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, by teaching it" (1978, p. 3), which ultimately imposes a limitation on the way the East is viewed by the rest of the world. Another key concept in postcolonial theory is the discourse of "the West and the Rest" (Hall, 1996). According to Hall, this discourse is a dominant way through which Western societies have established their difference, or superiority, from the non-Western "Other". The West explains itself as developed, urbanized, industrialized and modern, in contrast with the East, which it constructs as underdeveloped, traditional and primitive. Hall argues that "the difference of these other societies and cultures from the West was the standard against which the West's achievement was measured" (1996, p. 187). Thus, postcolonial theory offers a lens for examining how COVID-19 coverage by global media construct Nepal and Nepalis as being inherently different and inferior to the

West. Alongside Said and Hall, I am also heavily informed by the works of contemporary scholars who incorporate postcolonial critiques to media studies (Chellaney, 2021; Gathara, 2020; Jayawardane, 2019; Joye, 2009, 2010b; Mamadouh, 2021) and South Asian studies (Adams, 1996; Arnold, 2021; Bayers, 2003; Ortner, 1999).

Within postcolonial theory, the works of feminist scholars are especially important to this research. Feminist postcolonial scholars are concerned with the representation of Third World women[1] and the construction of gendered difference in Western texts, including Western news media. They critique Western producers of knowledge, including Western media, for their tendencies to exoticize the Global South and see "Western culture and Western ways as the 'normative' basis of human society" (Parameswaran, 1996, p. 131). One of the main critiques coming out of feminist postcolonial theory is that Third World women are often spoken about, or spoken on behalf of, rather than being allowed to speak for themselves or represent their own interests (Spivak, 1988). The agency of Third World women, and the realities and complexities of their lives get invisibilized, undertheorized, and omitted in the production of global knowledge (Mohanty, 2003). Feminist postcolonial theory thus provides a framework for exploring how gendered difference is communicated by international media in COVID news about Nepal. It sheds light how news media representations silence Nepali women's voices and perspectives. While I rely on canonical works in feminist postcolonial theory, such as Mohanty (1988); Spivak (1988) and Trinh (1989), I am also informed by the works of contemporary feminist scholars who don't explicitly call themselves postcolonial feminists but indisputably do feminist postcolonial work, such as Dixit and Banday (2024), Fernández (2024), Tamang (2011). I am especially

[1]Although Third World is a concept associated with the Cold War, feminist postcolonial theorists have continued to use the term as it "appropriately recognizes the uneven impact of globalization on working people, depending on their and their nations' position and location in the global political economy" (Lindio-McGovern & Wallimann, 2009, p. 1). Therefore it has been my deliberate and political choice to use "Third World" interchangeably with "Global South".

influenced by feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who has made important contributions to feminist postcolonial theory. Butler's work on grievability has been particularly important to this research (2004; 2010; 2022). A grievable life is one that matters, "is mourned when lost and protected when still living" (Marrero, 2026, p. 55). On the other hand, ungrievable lives are those whose loss is not registered as a real loss because their lives are not seen as having any value to begin with (Butler, 2020). Their loss is met with silence and indifference (Marrero, 2026). According to Akampurira and Marijnen, "political and public constructs and frames determine which lives are worth living, and which ones are not" (2024, p. 4). These constructs include media discourses. Thus, using the concept of grievability, I explore the ways in which international news discursively constructed Western lives as more deserving of protection from COVID-19 contagion and possible death, over Nepali lives. Applying this concept, I unpack how, and why, the health and well-being of certain individuals and groups were reported, discussed and deliberated on, while others became no more than a statistic in total case numbers or death toll.

Feminist media studies is another critical body of work for studying gendered representations in news media, as it is concerned with mass media as a site of patriarchal ideology (Cann, 2020). It closely examines "matters of power, culture, voice, agency, hierarchy, and representation in media practices and discourses" (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 4). One of the main concepts to emerge from this discipline is the "symbolic annihilation of women in the media" (Tuchmann, 2000 as cited in Cann, 2020, p. 614). Feminist media studies argues that women are rarely used as sources by the mass media, and are often spoken for by men (Chambers et al., 2004; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Rakow & Kranich, 1991). Feminist media scholars are equally interested in what is absent or omitted from media texts, as they are in what is present (Leavy & Harris, 2019). I am not just interested in how Nepal and Nepalis are represented in the news. I am equally interested in *who* is represented, who is

invisible or omitted from the coverage, and why. Feminist media studies provides a strong framework for answering these questions.

Methods

My research follows a qualitative approach, which is concerned with "meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions" as opposed to "counts and measures of things" that characterize quantitative research (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 12). Qualitative research is carried out with the understanding that reality is socially constructed, and language plays an important role in that construction (Brennen, 2017). When applied to the study of media texts, qualitative research is less about judging the accuracy or inaccuracy of the text, and more focused on examining what social practices, assumptions and representations are revealed by that text (Brennen, 2017).

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of international news stories about COVID-19 in Nepal. Discourse analysis "requires an examination of text(s), the larger social, political and cultural context in which they emerge and are given meaning, as well as how they, in turn, shape these contexts" (Rajiva & Khoday, 2012, p. 177). Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) argue that the way we know and represent the world is not an accurate reflection of reality but a result of discourse. By using specific discourses to construct their stories, media influence our understanding of reality, including what we see and hear (Butler, 2010). Critical discourse analysis is employed to news texts "to study media discourse in ways that show the media's connection to other parts of social and cultural life" (Matheson, 2005, p. 5). It sheds light on how news language contributes to inequality, by producing and reproducing power relations (van Dijk, 2014), including those that are colonial and gendered. According to van Dijk (2015), critical discourse analysis bridges the gap between "micro" level communications (such as language use, word choices and verbal interactions) and "macro" issues (such as structures of power, inequality and dominance). Thus, this method is useful

for studying how micro level issues such as the kind of language used by global news, connects to macro-level issues of eurocentrism and Western hegemony.

I chose to study news coverage by AP, Reuters and AFP, because they are the three largest news agencies in the world and have an extensive global reach, including a large presence in Nepal. Most of the world's news comes from these institutions, known colloquially as "the big three" (Jukes, 2022). They provide news content to media across the globe, who then repackage those stories for their specific audiences (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 2013). This way, the three news agencies control and influence most global news, including news from Nepal. I used Factiva, an international news database, to access the news articles. I searched all English-language news published by AP, AFP and Reuters in 2020 and 2021, which contained the terms "COVID" and "Nepal" in the headline or the lead paragraph. I chose to look at the years 2020 and 2021 because these two years are specially significant for Nepal's COVID context. While the pandemic started in early 2020, 2021 saw the deadly second wave that ravaged Nepal. That spring, Nepal became the country with the highest COVID transmission rate in the world (BBC News, 2021).

Articles under 200 words were excluded because they contained insufficient substantive content to conduct a thorough analysis. After filtering out articles that were irrelevant or duplicates, and under 200 words, I was left with 52 articles in my sample. The articles were saved as PDF files in a password-protected computer. As a first step, I conducted a close reading of each article, looking for discursive patterns, including the choice of words used to describe Nepal and what it suggested about the intended audience; the choice of sources; whose voices and perspectives were visible and whose were marginalized. Paragraphs were coded based on the recurring themes I had identified, which were later grouped into broader discursive patterns and analysed in relation to the study's research questions. Ultimately, I was interested in how language was employed by the news writers,

and whose stories and experiences were the focus. My findings are categorized into three thematic areas: a) West-centric framing of Nepal b) centring of Western lives and c) omission of Nepali women.

Findings and Discussion

The Himalayan nation and its temple-studded valleys: Framing Nepal

Nepal is divided into three distinct topographic regions: the Himalayan ranges in the north bordering Tibet, the central hilly region, and the Indo-Gangetic plain in the south, bordering India, known as Terai (Kafle et al., 2020). However, the news articles primarily refer to Nepal as a "Himalayan nation". For example, Reuters reports, "a deadly second wave of the coronavirus hit the Himalayan nation tucked between China and India" (June 2, 2021). Similarly, an AP article says, "The Himalayan nation is experiencing a coronavirus surge, with record numbers of new infections and deaths" (May 15, 2021). Another article by AFP states, "The Himalayan nation, like its South Asian neighbours, experienced a spike in infections in April and May" (June 24, 2021).

It is important to note that only 6% of Nepal's population lives in the Himalayan region—the vast majority of the country lives in Terai (54%) and central hills (40%) (Mishra & Sijapati, 2023). Yet, the Himalayas have always been key to how Nepal has been perceived and represented globally. Describing Nepal as a "Himalayan nation" speaks to the Western Orientalist fascination with the Himalayas as a mystical Eastern paradise, or "Shangri-La" (Hansen, 1996). Nepal's Himalayan identity also has strong ties to British colonialism. Although Nepal was never a part of the British empire, the Himalayas, and more specifically, expeditions to Mount Everest, were viewed by British India as an imperial domain, and "British imperial ideologies were projected upon Nepal (and Tibet) as aesthetic extensions of the empire" (Bayers, 2003, p. 130). This suggests that the news articles

continue to explain Nepal using imperialist discourses, long after the end of British imperialism.

International media's focus on Nepal's Himalayan identity also points to the issue of Nepal's national identity being "defined from the perspective of the hill-origin people", that excludes Madheshis, a collective group of different ethnicities that reside in Nepal's Terai region, bordering India (K. Pandey, 2022, p. 62). Historically, Madheshis have been marginalized and not accepted as "true Nepalis" due to their ethnic and cultural proximity to India. As a result, Madheshis are perceived as a threat to Nepal's sovereignty and national integrity and are denied equal citizenship rights (K. Pandey, 2024). Although political movements by Madheshis over the past decade have led to improved political representation for the group, they continue to be subject to discrimination, stereotyping and state neglect. This has periodically led to violent clashes between them and the hill-dwelling elites (Chamlagai, 2021; Jnawali, 2023). Thus, Western media's reinforcement of Nepal's Himalayan identity undermines the country's geographic and ethnic diversity and ignores the ramifications that such portrayal has on the Madheshis of Terai, a group that is already marginalized in the Nepali national discourse.

Furthermore, Nepal is also often situated in relation to its bigger neighbours, India and China, as in the above Reuters article. Another Reuters report says, "The country, wedged between China and India, has been under a lockdown since March, when two cases were reported" (June 4, 2020). Similarly, AFP reports, "Nepal, India's neighbour, has been hit hard by a second wave of the epidemic, just as the Himalayan state was planning to revive its tourism this summer after a wiped-out 2020 season" (May 17, 2021). The need to explain Nepal in relation to India and China suggests the assumption of an average reader being Western and likely more familiar with India and China, but not Nepal. Such practices of "representing non-Western people based on Western notions of selfhood" are critiqued by

postcolonial feminists (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, p. 575). They argue that Western producers of knowledge, including Western media, explain the Global South by positioning Western understandings of the world as the norm (Mohanty, 1988; Parameswaran, 1996). Western news media perpetuate such "global imposition of Eurocentric patterns of organizing knowledge" (Oyěwùmí, 2016, p. 3). Reuters frequently refers to Nepal as a "nation wedged between China and India," which is reminiscent of Nepal's first imperial ruler, Prithvi Narayan Shah, who famously described the country as a "yam between two boulders" (Bhattarai, 2022, p. 17). Such imagery of Nepal as a small country located between India and China also has Western colonial roots. The British colonial government discursively constructed Nepal as a "buffer state" that was responsible for dissipating conflict between the two powerful nations, China and India (Rana, 1971, Bhattarai 2022). Reuter's continued use of descriptors that were created during the British rule is noteworthy considering its history as an "imperial news service" with strong ties to the British colonial government (Thussu, 2022, p. 1581). The news articles explaining Nepal by situating it against India and China thus speaks to the continued eurocentrism of international news media, that Pillai (1996) points out.

Nepal's Hindu-majority status is also amplified in the news coverage. Some articles directly use "Hindu" to describe Nepal, for example by calling it "the mainly Hindu nation" (Reuters, February 5, 2021) or "the predominantly Hindu nation" (AP, September 19, 2021). Others do it more indirectly, using the imagery of temples to describe places in Nepal. For example, AP (June 1, 2020) describes Bhaktapur as "a UNESCO world heritage site known as the 'city of temples'", and Reuters regularly uses the phrase "temple-studded valley" to describe Kathmandu. Hindu festivals also feature prominently in the coverage. Nepal was officially a Hindu kingdom until 2006. Hinduism in Nepal was "an essential component of national identity, involving the forced homogenization of an extremely heterogeneous

population, and leading to the domination of high-caste Hindus in economic, political, legal, and educational spheres" (Letizia, 2016, p.43). After the Hindu monarchy was abolished, Nepal was declared a secular state in 2007 (Letizia, 2012). Despite that, Hinduism has "remained symbolically dominant" and state-sponsored religious festivals and ceremonies continue to be overwhelmingly Hindu (Gellner & Letizia, 2016, p. 26). Such symbolic domination of Hinduism is reinforced by the news articles' use of "Hindu" and "temples" as identity markers for Nepal or cities in Nepal. This undermines Nepal's secular status and ignores the religious diversity of the country as well as the cities described in the articles. It is also problematic given that dominant Hindu ideologies have been used to oppress Nepal's non-Hindu populations (Sijapati, 2011). Moreover, it is important to consider Nepal's history of internal colonialism by Shah rulers, who forcefully imposed Hinduism and the Hindu caste system on Indigenous populations (Gurung, 1997). This has contributed to the continuing oppression of Indigenous communities in Nepal today. Thus, the Western framing Nepal as a primarily Hindu nation arguably perpetuates the symbolic oppression of marginalized communities.

The articles' focus on Nepal's Hindu-majority status is especially concerning in the current climate of Hindu nationalism. Also known as Hindutva, this movement is supported and influenced by India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, and it aims to re-establish Nepal as a Hindu kingdom (Thapa, 2024). This threatens the freedoms of those who practice minority religions, especially Christians and Muslims. According to Wagner (2018), the anti-Christian and anti-Muslim sentiments amongst Nepal's Hindu nationalists parallel that of India, where the Muslim "Other" is seen as a threat to national security. Thus, the news articles' use of Hindu discourses to introduce and explain Nepal is a harmful Hindu-centric practice. It not only overlooks the country's secular status but also contributes to the growing threat of religious persecution for religious minorities (S. Pandey, 2024).

Another example of the news articles' preoccupation with Hinduism is their overwhelming focus on Hindu cremation and funeral practices. One Reuters article states, "Elsewhere in a country that ranks among the world's poorest, the bodies are burned on funeral pyres and their ashes are buried, but in the capital they are brought to the crematorium in the Pashupatinath Hindu temple complex" (October 29, 2020). Other articles provide similar descriptions:

> "When we reached the morgue, there was blood spattered all over the floor and the body was also not properly wrapped. We had to repack the body in a body bag, lift it in the vehicle and drive it to the Pashupati temple for cremation," Sainju said. Even at the crematorium, the staff would not go near the body, so the team loaded it into the furnace while the family stood at a distance. (AP, June 1, 2020).

> Outside the Pashupati cremation house, wailing relatives threw marigolds and vermillion powder over an iron fence onto a white shroud covering the body of a 58-year-old man. Three other bodies, with tags bearing their names and ages pinned to the bags, laid on the ground next to a white hearse as crematory workers worked past the midnight. (Reuters, November 30, 2020).

Western media have been criticized for their overly violent representation of death by Global South scholars and writers. They argue that dehumanizing portrayals of the deceased only tend to be reserved for Third World "Others" (Jayawardane, 2019; Gathara, 2020). Grotesque expressions like "blood spattered all over the floor", like in the AP excerpt, are rarely used when reporting deaths in the West. Chellaney (2021) calls out "the lurid Orientalism of Western media" for its preoccupation with cremation and dead bodies in the COVID-19 coverage of India. He argues that despite half of all COVID occurring in Europe and United States, the Western media avoided presenting gruesome images of dead bodies from those countries. Chellaney's critique also supports Spivak's (1988) claim of how

cremation gets viewed through the discourse of the savage Hindu who is predisposed towards barbaric acts, such as wailing and throwing marigolds and vermillion onto a dead body, as described in the Reuters article. In his book "Burning the Dead" (2021), Arnold discusses the Western Orientalist fascination with Hindu funeral practices in India. He says that Hindu cremation has, historically, been a spectacle for Western travelers in India, giving examples of how photographs of the practice were made into postcards in the 19th century to amuse Europeans. Descriptions of dead bodies being loaded into a furnace, and bodies burning on funeral pyres, as in the above excerpts, are examples of what Arnold calls "grossly voyeuristic and the crudest Orientalist caricature" (2021, p. 22). He says that the perceived "horror" of the Hindu funeral pyre presents the Western viewer with a contrast to "the reverential treatment of their own honored and cherished dead" (2021, p. 45). Hindu funerals are one way that the West establishes itself as civilized in relation to the barbaric Eastern Other. Arnold (2021) also says that the practice of cremation has been central to the Western understanding and narration of Indian identity. The same can be said about Nepal and its identity as a Hindu nation as communicated by the news articles.

Finally, the news agencies' (mis)representation of Nepal using Western colonial discourses, be it as a Himalayan country, a buffer state, or a Hindu nation with exotic cremation practices, support Willem's argument that the Global South is largely framed "through the prism of a predefined relationship" to the West rather than being understood in its own terms (2014, p. 14). Instead of being explained from the vantage point of ordinary Nepalis, Nepal gets represented through a specific lens that is familiar to Western audiences.

The climbers and their Sherpas: Centring Western lives

As previously discussed, the news articles frequently refer to Nepal as a "Himalayan nation", despite the nation's majority living in central Nepal or the southern plains. An overwhelming focus on Mount Everest is another way Nepal's Himalayan identity is

amplified by the news articles. The coverage is dominated by the impact of COVID-19 on Everest and the climbing industry. In fact, one-third of the articles include the word "Everest" in the headline itself. This is noteworthy given that only 0.36% of Nepal lives in Solukhumbu district, where Mount Everest is located (National Statistics Office, 2025, p. 111). The attention given to Everest over 99.6% of Nepal suggests that international media were more interested in cashing in on Everest's popularity and appeal. They were less concerned with highlighting the public health emergency that affected millions of Nepalis. According to Joye (2010b), the severity of a disaster doesn't always correspond with high news coverage, especially when it occurs in the Global South. The event's cultural proximity to the West becomes a more important factor in determining its newsworthiness. An average Western reader is likely to be more familiar with Mount Everest over other specificities of Nepal. Therefore, it did not matter that COVID-19 was mostly concentrated in the Kathmandu valley and the Terai regions (Dawadi et al., 2022), far away from the Himalayas. For international media, Everest still took precedence due to its cultural relevance to the West.

Not only does Everest dominate the news coverage, but the stories are also more specifically focused on the pandemic's impact on mountain tourism. When Nepal decided to temporarily shut down its mountains in March 2020 to curb the spread of COVID-19, international media appeared to be more concerned with how it affected the climbing industry. They were less interested in highlighting the necessity of the public health measure. For example, one Reuters article quotes Lukas Furtenbach, an Austrian mountaineer saying, "This is disappointing news for both our expedition leaders and our clients who have trained for months for this year's climb" (March 13, 2020). Another article by AP quotes Garrett Madison, an American mountaineer:

> "This is a tough time for sure. Thankfully we've saved up a rainy day fund to weather the storm," Madison said. "With Everest canceled (our largest program of the year),

as well as all other programs in jeopardy because of travel bans, we don't know when we can resume normal operations of our programs." *(*March 24, 2020).

The above excerpts show that Western climbers being unable to carry out their expeditions is seen as a bigger concern by international media, than establishing public safety measures amidst a global pandemic. According to Mamadouh (2021), transnational news media are presumed to serve Western readers primarily. Therefore, they are more likely to select news that is seen as being of interest to that readership. Mountaineering and tourism are aspects of Nepal that are most relevant to an average Westerner, who would be less concerned with public health issues of the pandemic that would be important to local Nepalis. Compared to the 12,020 lives that were lost to COVID-19 in Nepal (Johns Hopkins University, 2023), and thousands more that suffered grief and loss, a handful of Western tourists being inconvenienced by Everest closures appears insignificant. And yet, news articles choose to highlight the latter, over thousands of Nepalis who died preventable deaths from the health system collapsing (Poudel, 2021), or faced starvation from the lockdowns (Bhetwal, 2021). According to Dixit and Banday, "the assumed inferiority of lives in the Global South, produces us as subjects of justifiable neglect" (2024, p. 144), whose deaths did not matter. The news articles frame Western tourists' right to leisure as being more important than Nepali people's lives. This isn't just tone-deaf or insensitive. It's a reflection of how international media reproduce "global hierarchies of place and human life" in the way they report global crises (Joye, 2009, p. 46).

Stories about Everest also typically quote Western climbers, as in the above excerpts. Although some articles mention the impact of the closure of Everest on local Nepali workers such as guides and porters, none of those workers are ever quoted in the news articles. Bayers discusses how colonial era writings about Mount Everest and the Himalayas employ Orientalist discourses centred on "possessive Western ambitions to climb a mountain in

Nepal, with nary a mention of the Nepalese" (2003, p. 107). The news articles' omission of Nepali staff from the Everest stories strongly suggests that this practice continues today. I also observed that the news articles report COVID-19 infections amongst foreign climbers differently than COVID-19 infections amongst local Nepalis. For example, the following excerpts are from two AFP articles published on the same day, on May 7, 2021.

> **Article 1:** The country's tourism industry suffered a devastating blow in 2020, and this year climbers at its big money-spinner Mount Everest have tested positive, raising fears the virus may ruin a hoped-for bumper season on the world's highest mountain.

> **Article 2:** Even as cases rose in neighbouring India, mass gatherings including religious festivals, political meetings and weddings continued in the country. Many Nepalis were also at India's Kumbh Mela attended by millions of Hindu devotees, including the former king Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah and his queen, who have been hospitalised after testing positive.

The contrast between the two excerpts is interesting. One talks about how the virus threatens the continuity of the climbing season that must not be ruined, while the other blames the continuity of social gatherings for spread of the virus. COVID-19 spreading amongst climbers is presented as an economic threat to the climbing industry ("fears the virus may ruin a hoped-for bumper season"). Meanwhile, local Nepalis getting COVID-19 through social gatherings is framed as a threat to the public health of the country. AFP writes about religious festivals again the following week, on May 13, 2021:

> The reasons for the surge in cases is similar to its huge neighbour -- Nepal began recording a rise in cases in early April, a month after India, but the government continued to allow, even organise, large religious festivals and political gatherings.

In the above excerpt, Nepali people partaking in gatherings is directly blamed for the surge in COVID-19 cases. It is important to note that Western adventurers climbing Mount Everest, and local Nepalis participating in religious festivals, were both non-essential activities during the pandemic. But while the news articles suggest that the festivals shouldn't have been allowed to continue, they are, meanwhile, concerned about the virus threatening the continuity of climbing activities. By applying different standards to the two cases, the articles imply that local Nepalis are expected to sacrifice their leisure activities to protect public health, while that same sacrifice is not necessary for Western climbers. This relates to Agamben's (2017) argument that power structures in society determine which lives seen as "bare lives" (lives that have no worth other than being alive in the most fundamental level), and which lives are allowed liberty and meaningful participation in society, and are therefore seen as lives worth living. In this case, Nepali lives are reduced to "bare lives" that must be controlled to protect public health, while the lives of Western climbers are seen as full lives deserving of rights and freedoms. This is an example of how "COVID-19 unearthed the othering that coloniality produced" (Fernández, 2024). Privileged populations could claim "their 'right' to be done with the pandemic and to return to lives pursued in accord with their personal liberty" (Butler, 2022, p. 108) even if it meant making others sick or spreading death.

The different discourses used for COVID-19 infection amongst Western climbers and local Nepalis are especially apparent in stories that came out in spring of 2021 when the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were found in Everest. For example, an AFP headline reads, "Virus reaches Everest as climber tests positive" (April 22, 2021). Similarly, an AP headline states, "Norwegian climber 1st to test positive on Mount Everest" (April 23, 2021). The climber, Erlend Ness, is quoted extensively in these articles, which talk about his experience of sickness and his subsequent evacuation. However, Ness was not the only person to get

COVID in Mount Everest. The AFP article mentions in passing that "a sherpa in his party had also tested positive" but does not name the person or say anything more about them. The other article by AP does not even mention the Sherpa individual. Sherpas are an Indigenous group from Northern Nepal and Tibet, who have traditionally taken up occupations as porters and climbing guides for wealthy Western climbers in their Himalayan expeditions (Marwah, 2021; Ortner, 1999). Due to their association with climbing and the Himalayas, today the term "sherpa" is used in English to refer to the occupation of Himalayan porters generally. Reducing an Indigenous group to an occupation is by itself an act of linguistic imperialism, where language is used as a "bridgehead for Western interests, permitting the continuation of marginalization and exploitation" of colonized people (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2018, p. 121). More importantly, AP and AFP's omission of the Sherpa porter who also caught COVID-19 relegates Sherpas to "nameless groups of people abandoned to death" (Butler, 2020, p. 28) whose lives are not seen as valuable enough to be mourned were they to be lost to the virus. Many scholars have written about the marginalization of Sherpas in Western discourses of Himalayas expedition, which have historically been Orientalist and racist (Adams, 1996; Hansen, 1996; Marwah, 2021; Ortner, 1999). When New Zealander Edmund Hillary, and Nepal's Tenzing Norgay Sherpa became the first men to ascent Mount Everest, Hillary was knighted by the Queen of England for his accomplishment, but Sherpa was not (Marwah, 2021). The examples from the news articles suggest that the colonial tradition of not acknowledging Sherpas for their roles in Himalayan expeditions continues today. A particularly troubling example of this can be found in the following excerpt that quotes an Austrian climber Lucas Furtenbach:

> "We ended our expedition today because of safety concerns with the given COVID outbreak," Furtenbach said in a message from base camp. "We don't want (to) send

people or Sherpas up, they (could) get sick high up there and die." (AP, May 15, 2021).

By saying "people or Sherpas" Furtenbach, quite possibly without intention, differentiates "Sherpas" from "people". In this context, people mean Western climbers. As Adams (1996, p. 21) argues, this "discourse of difference enunciates the inferiority of the Sherpa" in relation to the Western climbers. Furternbach's separation of "Sherpa" from "people" suggests a "dichotomous hierarchy between the human and the non-human" imposed by coloniality (Lugones, 2010, p. 734). It supports Bayers' argument that Sherpas have historically been perceived as "raw materials of the colonialist/imperialist Everest experience" available for European explorers to purchase and exploit (2003, p. 138). Most importantly, the invisibilization and dehumanization of Sherpas in the same news stories that centre Western climbers, suggests a stark difference in the value placed on Western and Sherpa lives. Drawing on Butler's ideas (2004, 2009, 2022), the media frames the lives of Western climbers as lives that are grievable and worthy of public acknowledgement. These are lives that are seen as worthy of protection from COVID-19 because they would be mourned if they were to be lost. Meanwhile, the lives of Sherpas are not seen as lives that are worth living, or lives that would be missed if they were to be lost to COVID-19. Therefore, they go unacknowledged, unnamed, and even separated from the category of "people".

Silenced and invisibilized: The erasure of Nepali women

The news articles' overwhelming focus on mountains and tourism marginalizes the voices and experiences of all Nepali citizens. But Nepali women, in particular, bear the brunt of this marginalization. Even the occasional news stories that highlight the experiences of regular Nepalis are primarily focused on men and seldom mention women. This is an example of Tuchman's notion of "symbolic annihilation" where women are "silenced, ignored, or erased in media representations", suggesting that their experiences and insights

are irrelevant or not valuable (Hasan, 2024, p. 256). The erasure of Nepali women in the news also supports Ross et al.'s argument that news tends to be "mostly about men and men's actions" (2016, p. 824). Studies around the world have pointed out the absence of women from COVID-19 coverage (Araújo et al., 2022; Kassova, 2020; Mulupi & Zirugo, 2022; Wallace and Goodyear-Grant, 2020). Research by the Global Media Monitoring Project (2020) finds that while women are marginalized in news, it is especially worse in international news stories. According to the study, women make up almost three in 10 subjects and sources in local news, and it is lowered to just 2 in 10 for international news stories. These facts are supported by my findings. Only eight articles in the sample of 52 mention a Nepali woman as a source, and only five Nepali women in total are used as sources in the entire coverage spanning two years. While Western women are still outnumbered by men as sources, they are more likely to be mentioned and quoted compared to Nepali women. Their experiences are more likely to be discussed. Ultimately, Nepali women are largely positioned as silent victims in the media coverage. Their experiences of the pandemic and their lived realities go undocumented. As Dogra (2011) warns, such portrayal of Third World Women as passive victims, particularly in contrast to Western women, reproduces the colonial notion of the Global South as backwards and inferior. It also risks "sidestepping the deep connected histories that shape current global inequalities" (Dogra, 2011, p. 346).

The rare times where Nepali women are mentioned in the coverage, they are almost always spoken for by other men. The following excerpt is about a Nepali woman who was sick from COVID-19:

> Laxmi Rokaya, 29, was struggling to breathe a week after she was infected in May. Her brother, Kunsang Magar, was unable to find a spare ventilator in Kathmandu until they reached Karuna. "They (Nepal Ventilator Services) rescued us. I don't know if we would have found a ventilator without them," Magar told AFP, adding that

> Rokaya was placed on a ventilator for two days and released from hospital just over a week later. (AFP, June 24, 2021).

Based on this excerpt, the story was published after Rokaya had been discharged from the hospital, and not when she was under the ventilator and, therefore, unable to be interviewed. Yet the news reporter has chosen to quote her brother and not her. Meanwhile, when a Norwegian climber Erlend Ness became sick, the same news outlet interviewed him about his experience:

> "I was evacuated to Kathmandu and was tested. My result was positive for Covid," he told AFP, becoming the first climber with an Everest permit to confirm his infection. "I think I'm not the only one... Every team at the base camp knows the risk of Covid is there and they have to be careful, they should be careful," he said. (AFP, May 6, 2021).

The AFP article highlighting Erlend Ness supports Ross and Carter's (2011) claim that journalists typically rely on sources that are white, middle-class and middle-aged males, who get regularly called upon to give their opinions. Rokaya and Ness were both victims of COVID-19. But while Ness is given a platform to narrate his experience, Rokaya is not given that opportunity. It supports claims from feminist media scholars that women are rarely mentioned in the news, and when they are, they are spoken for by men (Chambers et al., 2004; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Rakow & Kranich 1991). Consequently, Rokaya gets presented through what Tamang calls the homogenous notion of "backward, illiterate, helpless Nepali mahila" (woman) whose wants and needs have to be voiced by someone else (2011, p. 287). The different sentence structure and grammar used in the two excerpts is also noteworthy. Rokaya's story says "They (Nepal Ventilator Services) rescued us". Here, the subject performing the action is Nepal Ventilator Services. Rokaya and Magar are objects

that the action (rescue) was performed on. Meanwhile, Ness is quoted saying "I was evacuated." Here, the focus is on him, the subject. These differences may be subtle, but they are significant. Even though Ness and Rokaya are both COVID patients, Ness is positioned as an active subject, but Rokaya is positioned as a passive object. This exemplifies Rajiva's argument that Eurocentric media narratives establish white masculinity as "heroic" and South Asian femininity as "helpless and passive" (2021, p. 167). By not allowing Rokaya to speak for herself, AFP firstly continues the cycle of news media not using women as sources. Secondly, it perpetuates the gendered colonial discourses of international journalism that invisibilize Global South women. Parameswaran argues that when news media repeatedly represent Third World Women as victims, "this status of victimhood becomes the only framework for understanding Third World women" (1996, p. 129). If Global South women like Rokaya are only ever presented in the news as voiceless victims, and never as active subjects who narrate their own experiences, it solidifies their subjugated status to the news audiences.

I also found evidence of news articles exclusively quoting men even when a woman expert was present. For example, an AP news article from June 1, 2020, titled "Nepal volunteers become local heroes during virus pandemic" talks about a group of volunteers: three men and one woman, who came together to assist health workers. The story mentions that the only person in that group with medical training is a female nurse named Punam Karmacharya. However, the article does not quote Karmacharya, but quotes the other men in the group, even though Karmacharya is more qualified to speak on the subject matter as a medical professional. This example is in line with Global Media Monitoring Project's (2020) study which showed that despite women making up close to half of the world's health specialists, only a quarter of health experts quoted in global COVID-19 coverage were women. Such practice of news media deliberately excluding women experts is significant

given that media sources play an important role in setting the media's agenda. They feed stories to journalists and help them understand information that is complex and specialized (Araújo et al., 2022). When news media continue to mainly rely on male sources for COVID stories, women are denied the opportunity to present their perspectives of the pandemic. Consequently, they have little influence over the policies that governments put forward in response to the crisis (Kassova, 2020).

In my entire sample of 52, there is only one article that centres Nepali women's experiences of the pandemic. It is a Reuters article titled "Nepal's female soldiers break taboos to tackle COVID crisis", published on November 30, 2020. Two of the five Nepali women in total that are used as sources in the whole sample come from this article alone. While the article can be seen as a positive example of centring women's stories, it highlights the issue of Third World women only being given a platform to speak on topics about Third World women (Trinh 1989). Trinh calls this practice "separate development" (1989, p. 80). Even though there are other stories about regular Nepalis such as farmers, migrant workers, and volunteers, none of them include a woman as a source. For Nepali women to be featured in a story, the story has to be specifically about women breaking the glass ceiling. Nepali women are rarely, if ever, called upon to speak on issues that affect the general population. Such practice of repeatedly leaving out the perspectives of women from the news ultimately contributes to them being viewed as second-class citizens, and passive observers rather than active participants in democracy (Ross & Carter, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has explored how global news media portrayed the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal, using postcolonial and feminist approaches. I carried out a critical discourse analysis of news stories published by three major global news agencies: AP, AFP and Reuters in 2020 and 2021. My findings show that the international media have reproduced West-

centric discourses in their coverage of stories from Nepal, by prioritizing the lives and well-being of a few Western climbers at Mount Everest, over that of local Nepalis. In doing so, the media reports establish that Western lives are more worthy of saving and protecting from the virus, more grievable, than Nepali lives. Nepal and Nepalis are also portrayed using language and stereotypes rooted in British imperialism. Nepal's portrayal as a Himalayan country, as a majority Hindu nation, and as a small nation wedged between India and China are all examples of these subtle but significant discursive biases. As a result, Nepal's marginalized populations, such as the Madheshis of Terai, and religious minorities, have been erased from the pandemic narrative. Finally, the global news coverage of COVID-19 in Nepal has contributed to the persistent problem of media's omission and invisibilizing of women and their lived experiences. Nepali women in particular are left out of the coverage, perpetuating the colonial practice of marginalizing and silencing Third World women. The realities of Nepali women, and issues important to them, have been omitted from international discourses of the pandemic. This ultimately has important implications for how the pandemic gets memorialized in history and remembered by future generations.

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Chapter 3

Essential but Expendable: Nepali Nurses' Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Abstract

This paper examines Nepali nurses' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic through a postcolonial feminist framework. I carried out a feminist narrative analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with eight nurses in Kathmandu, Nepal. The nurses' narratives are categorized into three areas: 1) exploitation and trauma; 2) stigma and violence; 3) expendability of life. My findings strongly suggest that the colonial legacies of global health inequities have led certain marginalized communities, such as Nepali nurses, to be seen as disposable, and made available for harm. My main argument is that nurses in Nepal became collateral damage in the war against COVID-19. They were marginalized in multifaceted ways that rendered them disposable, both as care workers on the frontlines of the pandemic and as Global South women.

Keywords: care work; nursing; covid-19 pandemic; postcolonial feminism; Nepal; global south women; grievability

COVID-19 was one of the deadliest pandemics in history, claiming over 7 million lives globally (World Health Organization, [WHO], 2025). The social and economic impacts of the pandemic were also disastrous. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and created wider divisions within and between nations (Stiglitz, 2020). Although the virus itself does not discriminate at the individual level, issues such as wealth gap, unequal distribution of resources, vaccine inequality, etc. demonstrated that certain populations faced a higher risk of contagion and death. In particular, the realities of the pandemic were devastating for Global South countries that faced higher death tolls and saw their healthcare systems collapse (Appiah, 2021). The health crisis in these countries placed a severe burden on their health

workforce (Hoover et al., 2023). Healthcare workers across the Global South faced high rates of depression, stress and burnout from working in understaffed and underequipped workplaces during the pandemic (Ndulue et al., 2024). Female healthcare workers in the Global South particularly bore the brunt of this devastation as they were overrepresented in the pandemic frontline (Al-Ali, 2020).

This research explores how global health inequities, together with the gendered notions of care work, impacted on Nepali nurses' experiences of COVID-19. Through my study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How are global health inequities resulting from colonial power relations, reflected in Nepali nurses' experience of the pandemic?

2) How did the nurses navigate their position as workers that were considered essential yet disposable?

There is a plethora of literature available on the impact of COVID-19 on health sectors worldwide, including nursing. Many papers have also looked at the Nepali context and studied the experiences of health workers across the country (Basnet et al., 2020; Khanal et al., 2020; N. Shrestha et al., 2022). However, these studies have primarily examined the issue through medical or public health perspectives. So far, no research has examined healthcare workers' experiences of COVID-19 in Nepal through a feminist postcolonial lens. My research fills this major, politically significant gap in the existing literature. Most importantly, my research addresses a critical need for scholarship that centres the voices and experiences of Global South women in healthcare, by creating new knowledge that is based on the lived experience of nurses in Nepal. In doing so, the research enriches both feminist and nursing scholarship by amplifying the voices and perspectives of a group that has historically been subjugated.

History and context

The history of nursing in Nepal can be traced back to 1936, when Nepal sent its first cohort of girls and young women to India to train as nurses and midwives (S. Shrestha, 2022; Sigdel, 2011). After completing their training, this early group of health workers returned to start practicing at Bir Hospital, Nepal's first hospital. Nepal established its first school of nursing in 1956 (Gautam et al., 2018; Sigdel, 2011). This allowed women and girls to train locally and made nursing more accessible as a profession. More institutions in Nepal began offering nursing education in the years that followed. The numbers of nursing graduates, thus, increased exponentially.

Today, there are 115,793 registered nursing professionals in Nepal, most of whom are severely underpaid, overworked and forced to work under abusive and exploitative conditions (Budhathoki, 2024; S. Adhikari, 2023). As a result, Nepal has seen an exodus of nurses to Western countries in recent years, in search of a better life (Pattisson & Acharya, 2023; R. Adhikari, 2024). This has had a devastating impact on Nepal's already-strained healthcare system and widened the existing shortage of nurses in the country. It is estimated that Nepal has 28 nurses and midwives for every 10,000 people, compared to the UK which has 131 nurses for every 10,000 people (Haakenstad et al., 2022).

Nepal's nurses are an important part of the country's care economy. Care work, both performed both at home, and in healthcare institutions, has been linked historically with women and femininity (Folbre, 2018; Selberg et al., 2021). Female-dominated professions like nursing, often called "pink-collar" occupations (Burton, 2020, p. 266) are viewed as the paid versions of the free labour that women are expected to perform at home, such as child and elder care (Duffy, 2011). The connection to feminized labour has meant the stigmatization and devaluing of nursing globally (Gauci et al., 2022; Ray, 2016; Smith et al., 2023). Alongside being devalued for its perception as an inherently feminine profession, nursing is also closely positioned alongside a predominantly male medical profession, that of

doctors. As a result, nurses experience career discrimination due to their gender, in the form of pay inequity, sexual harassment, exploitation, and lack of respect from both patients and doctors (Smith et al., 2023).

The challenges faced by nurses in their jobs were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strain that it put on the health sector worldwide. WHO called COVID-19 "the most significant health challenge that the world has confronted" in over seven decades of the organization's existence (2022, p. 10). Health systems were pressurized and stretched beyond their capacity. Nurses and other healthcare workers had to be reshuffled urgently, and healthcare facilities had to be repurposed in response to the novel virus. It was much worse in countries with limited resources (Al-Ali, 2020; Haileamlak, 2021). Alongside the physical challenges of working in the pandemic, nurses endured fear and psychological challenges caused by the uncertainty about the disease (Chen at al., 2020; Spoorthy et al. 2020). They reported increased levels of anxiety, depression, insomnia, and high levels of stress (Lai et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2020).

Framework of Analysis

My framework of analysis draws mainly on feminist postcolonial theory. While the works of pioneering theorists like Mohanty (1997, 2003) and Spivak (1988) remain critical to this body of work, I am particularly influenced by more contemporary scholars who build on Mohanty and Spivak's ideas. Many of these scholars don't explicitly call themselves feminist postcolonial theorists, but indisputably do feminist postcolonial work, such as Blume (2022); Croft & Cash (2012); Fernández (2023); Scauso et al; (2020). Many of them also apply feminist postcolonial critiques to nursing and/or pandemic contexts (Al-Ali, 2020; Gimenez, 2016; Racine, 2003; Stake-Doucet, 2023). I especially draw on the works of interdisciplinary feminists Judith Butler (2004, 2022) and Jasbir Puar (2017, 2021). Although they are not strictly located within the realm of feminist postcolonial theory, Puar and Butler have both

made important contributions to these sub-fields. Therefore, I have found their work important and relevant to my research.

Feminist postcolonial theory "rejects universalistic and essentialist theories that often construct understandings of health and illness, instead prioritizing subjective knowledge or people's own standpoint as the starting point of the inquiry" (Lu & Racine, 2015, p. 18). It draws from intersectional feminist theorizing and postcolonial theory to create knowledge that centres the perspectives of Global South women (Doshi, 2023). Alongside studying patriarchy as a source of oppression, feminist postcolonial scholars also examine how social inequities are ingrained within social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts which ultimately influence healthcare (Al-wazedi, 2020; Luebke et al., 2021). Nursing and healthcare researchers using postcolonial feminist approaches discuss how colonial power relations perpetuate global health inequities, which in turn impact on the experiences of female health workers in the Global South (Anderson, 2008; Fernández, 2023; Racine et al., 2021). Racine (2003) argues that using a postcolonial feminist lens in nursing research helps to counteract the hegemonic practices of Western science and give voice to Global South women in healthcare.

While COVID-19 as a virus does not discriminate, the pandemic cannot be understood without understanding the social world order that it has operated within (Butler, 2022). According to Fernández (2023), the pandemic must be viewed through a feminist decolonial lens that acknowledges how intersecting oppressions are rooted in colonial histories. Feminist postcolonial theory offers a framework for understanding how global power relations and gendered social inequities have led to unique challenges for nurses in a Global South country like Nepal. In the context of healthcare research, feminist postcolonial theory advocates for knowledge creation about the pandemic that centres the lived experiences of Global South women, something that my research hopes to achieve.

Butler and Puar's work on grieveability and disposability of human life are critical to this research. According to Butler, not all lives are considered equally grievable and this unequal allocation of grief "operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death" (2004, p. xiv). Similarly, Puar (2021, 2017) discusses how capitalist systems commodify and place uneven value on human life. She argues that the precarity of certain bodies and populations are maintained by making them available for harm or injury. Applying Butler and Puar's theories to the pandemic context, we can understand how some human lives have been considered worthy of protecting from the virus (and therefore, "grievable") while others have been seen as disposable, making them available for contagion to protect and sustain the lives of others. Butler and Puar's works thus help unpack how patriarchy, colonialism, and wealth inequity worked together to relegate Nepali nurses as disposable entities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

My research follows a feminist methodological tradition. Feminist methodologies "are founded on a commitment to social justice and the eradication of gendered and intersectional inequalities based on class, race, sexuality, etc." (Katila et al., 2023, p.1). Feminist researchers critically examine the process of knowledge creation and challenge the ways that conventional research methods have overlooked the experiences of women and other underrepresented groups in society. Through my research, I sought to produce knowledge that is centred on the voices and experiences of nurses in Nepal, a group that has been traditionally silenced and subjugated in multifaceted ways.

My research is also qualitative in nature. Qualitative methods are commonly used in feminist research because they centre the voices of women and other marginalized groups and enable them "to address the questions that matter most in their lives in a manner that

respects their values, knowledge, and subjectivity" (O'Shaughnessy & Krogman, 2012, p. 495). I used feminist in-depth interviewing to gather data. Each interview was approximately one hour long. In-depth interviewing, as a feminist research strategy, focuses on understanding the lived experiences of women (McHugh, 2020). Its main goal is to allow respondents to share their thoughts, perspectives or experiences in their own words, which is what my research has sought to do. My interviews were semi-structured and conducted using an interview guide. This gave me the flexibility to adapt my questions based on the participants' answers, while generally staying on topic. I was able to ask follow-up questions and explore important issues that emerged from the nurses' narratives, while generally staying anchored to the topic. I believe this format helped keep the interviews conversational and organic and gave participants more freedom to express themselves in their own terms. The interview guide was anchored on my research questions and informed by my core framework of analysis. Questions such as *"In what ways did the pandemic affect your everyday life? At work? At home?"* and *"Do you think the experience of the pandemic was different for your male family members and colleagues? In what ways?"* helped centre the interview on the participants' experiences of the pandemic and how they navigated their vulnerable position a) as healthcare workers on the COVID frontline, and b) as women in a deeply patriarchal society.

I interviewed eight female nurses based in Kathmandu who had worked during the COVID-19 pandemic. A sample size of eight was considered sufficient given my study's emphasis on in-depth exploration of the women's lived experiences over establishing statistical generalizability. I felt that a sample of eight allowed for a rich and in-depth qualitative analysis of the participants' accounts, while still allowing me to reach data saturation.

Due to the pandemic and the resulting border closures, it was not safe for me to conduct my research in person. Therefore, everything was done virtually, including recruitment, which was done online. I posted a call for interview participants on Twitter, and received responses from several willing participants, through whom I was able to recruit additional participants using the snowball method. Participants were included if they met the following inclusion criteria: 1) They were female nurses 2) They lived and worked in the Kathmandu valley; 3) They had worked in a hospital setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were carried out through Zoom videocalls between November 2022 and March 2023, and video-recorded. The language used in the interviews was a mix of conversational Nepali and English. I transcribed the interviews verbatim. This study received ethical approval from the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (Certificate Number S-11-22-8621). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all research participants. All participants were provided with, and reviewed, the formal consent form prior to giving verbal consent. The nurses' names have been changed in this paper to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

I analyzed the interview data using a feminist approach to narrative analysis. According to Pitre et al. (2013), narrative analysis examines the stories and accounts of respondents, and how they're shaped by social and historical contexts and relations of power. This research method provides participants the opportunity to showcase reality as understood and experienced by them, and can therefore inspire social transformation (McHugh, 2020). For this reason, narrative analysis is often used by feminist researchers who want to centre the experiences of women and marginalized groups and challenge the dominant discourses in society that subjugate them (Oikkonen, 2013; Riessman, 1993; Gluck & Patai, 1991).

Using narrative analysis has enabled me to represent the realities of Nepali nurses as experienced and recalled by them. It also allowed me to examine the stories of the nurses

under specific social, political and cultural contexts of Nepali society, and view them through the lens of my analytical framework. I started by reading through the interview transcript, paying careful attention to the core issues and recurring patterns that came up in the participants' accounts. I also closely examined how the nurses structured their narratives, the choice of words they used to convey particular experiences. The identified patterns and themes were ultimately grouped into three broader categories: burnout/trauma; stigma/violence; and the expendability of nurses' lives.

Findings and Discussion

Burnout and trauma

COVID-19 did not occur in a vacuum. Some countries were less equipped than others to face the aftermath of the pandemic, because of inequalities in healthcare. These inequalities have their roots in colonialism that "left many countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with fragile healthcare systems that continue to face high rates of infectious diseases and poor access to care" (Rad, 2025, p. 2). Although Nepal wasn't formally colonized, "its buffer-state function and almost complete isolation in the days of the Raj preserved its fossil status" and hampered its development, thus placing it in a similar trajectory as the colonized princely states in India (Farmer, 1993, p. 36). This helped to consolidate Nepal's status as a "failing state" (Housden, 2009, p. 2) and as one of the poorest nations in Asia (Ventura, 2025). Thus, Nepal's healthcare system was already struggling prior to the COVID-19 pandemic due to under resourced hospitals. In July 2020, United Nations reported Nepal's healthcare system to be the second-most vulnerable in the world in its capacity to contain COVID-19 infections (Jensen & Molina, 2020). It estimated that Nepal would run out of ICU beds if only 0.017% of its population was actively infected. As cases soared during the second wave, it wreaked havoc on the medical system (Amnesty

International, 2021). Health workers bore the brunt of the devastation (Hart, 2021). This is reflected in the participants' accounts:

> Things weren't that bad during the first wave. But the second wave hit hard, and things got really hectic. Plus, there was staffing shortage at the hospital, so you were working more hours than you typically worked. A typical shift is supposed to be 12 hours. But sometimes you would wrap up your morning shift, and they would ask you to stay back and also take on an evening shift, and so you would have to work all those extra hours. That's how it was. You never knew what to expect. So it was very difficult at that time. (Rashmi)

Another participant, Sharmila, shared that during the height of the pandemic, she had to look after 93 beds that were set up on a single floor:

> What I mean to say is, that's an extremely high number. We were so shocked. 93 beds on a single floor! We had worked with a maximum of 30 to 35 beds per floor before. At 93, we wouldn't know where anything was, where each patient was, what the bed number was...It would get so difficult and overwhelming.

Rashmi and Sharmila both express frustrations with the disorganization and lack of certainty. The pre-pandemic comparator that Sharmila gives also shows the enormity of the burden that was placed on her and her coworkers. Many nurses shared that they had to take on physically demanding tasks that they didn't do prior to the pandemic, such as lifting heavy equipment. Another nurse, Pratibha, talked about having to move heavy oxygen cylinders all by herself: "Imagine, I'm five foot four. One such cylinder would be six feet tall."

Pratibha's description of a 5"4 woman pushing oxygen cylinders that were 6 feet tall provides a clear visual depiction of the impossible physical demands of her job. Pratibha said that they typically had delivery men designated to lift such heavy equipment, but due to the high demand of oxygen during the pandemic, nurses were unable to wait around to get help.

She also often had to lift patients that were heavier than her. She said that looking back, she cannot believe she managed to do all that.

The participants' narratives of burnout point to the acute shortage of nursing workforce in Nepal that put a tremendous pressure on existing staff. The shortage is a direct result of wealthy nations poaching healthcare providers from low-income countries like Nepal to address their own healthcare shortages, a practice that has been called "colonial drain" (Bhambra, 2020, p. 22) or a "new form of colonialism" (Lay, 2024). This has created a "care deficit" (Gimenez, 2016, p. 40) in poor countries, with care workers (who are predominantly women) migrating to wealthier countries to look after other populations. So, while Western nations relied on migrant Nepali nurses to care for their increasing numbers of COVID patients, nurses in Nepal's hospitals like Rashmi, Sharmila and Pratibha were overstretched and exploited.

Stake-Doucet argues that such nursing migration contributes to "the racial stratification of reproductive work in the Global North, at the expense of the Global South" (2023, p. 32). Using examples from US and Canada, she discusses how underpaid nursing positions in the Global North are increasingly filled by racialized and migrant nurses while senior positions are disproportionately occupied by white women. As such, the transnational shuffling of nursing workforce ultimately feeds into a cascading racial hierarchy where white women are at the top, and nurses in the Global South remain at the very bottom. In other words, nurses everywhere were impacted by the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic but Global South nurses fared the worst. For example, when there was a global shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) during the pandemic, exports were delivered to nations that were able to bid the highest to secure the resources (McMahon et al., 2020). Low-income countries could not compete with wealthy countries and had difficulty securing resources. Participants discussed the challenges of navigating the PPE shortage:

> We were only given one PPE change per day. You'd wear the same PPE between 7 in the morning and 7 at night. Then you would change it and wear the other one until 7 the next morning. So you stayed in your PPE all day in full gear because there is the risk of contagion. Even if we wanted to get out of PPE and take a break, we didn't have enough supply of sterile ones. So the PPE had to stay on. Bathroom breaks were a problem, let alone working an entire shift while on your period. We suffered so much. (Purnima)

> When COVID first started they had provided us PPE. By the time we got to second wave, third wave...the PPE were old and worn out. And when you work in the COVID ward you have to constantly change your PPE right? But sometimes there just wouldn't be any [laughs]. There would be no gloves. We'd need 2-3 pairs of sterile gloves and there wouldn't be any. The face shields would be so old you couldn't see anything while wearing them. We would make so many requests, so many complaints but the hospital wouldn't listen. So we would just reuse the old PPE." (Sharmila)

Sharmila and Purnima's examples of not having enough supplies, or the equipment being old to the point you couldn't see through them, reveal just how dire the situation was for healthcare workers in countries like Nepal. According to Scauso et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and amplified systemic inequalities and oppressions that were rooted in global colonial power relations. Fernández calls these multi-layered oppressions "assemblages of violence" (2023, p. 191) that led to some communities being perceived as sub-human and undeserving of resources to support and sustain their living during the pandemic. While hospitals everywhere were overburdened during COVID, nurses like Purnima and Sharmila had to work under especially inhumane conditions, without access to the most basic medical equipment required to perform their jobs.

Having to stay in their gear for hours without being able to eat, drink water or even use the bathroom took a physical and mental toll on the nurses:

> You have to work continuously for 7-8 hours at a time with no breaks. When you think about working continuously for seven hours with no water, no toilet breaks, mentally you'd wish you wouldn't have to go to work. But once you put on your PPE and enter inside, then you tell yourself, "this is what I came to do, this is my job," so you give it your all...no water, no toilet breaks. (Anita)

> It was very difficult. Extremely difficult. Even as I recall it now, I can't believe that I actually went through all that. You couldn't eat, you couldn't go to the bathroom, you had to hold it in the entire time. (Sharmila)

These narratives showcase the level of suffering and anguish that the nurses had to endure. Alongside having to work for hours without food, water and bathroom breaks, the nurses also recalled that they witnessed many preventable deaths that left them traumatized. The nurses were responsible for consoling the families of the dead, which appears to have caused what Blume calls "vicarious trauma", defined as "the trauma of others as re-experienced through the eyes of first responders and frontline care workers" (Blume, 2022, p. 111). According to Blume, racialized and Global South nurses experienced mental and psychological wounding because of the vicarious trauma, that put them in a position of requiring care themselves. This is evident in the participants' accounts:

> Sometimes we would run out of oxygen at the hospital and I'd see the patient's condition suddenly deteriorate. They would die. And I knew that the reason they died was the shortage of oxygen. It was so mentally disturbing. I would get so frustrated. But I couldn't do anything. There would be a line of patients waiting for someone to die so their person could have the bed. So I would get busy moving the deceased and

> making space for the next patient. There was no time to process what just happened. And once I ended my shift and got home, that's when the panic attacks would start. (Maya)

Maya shared that she got to a point where she was experiencing hallucinations when she tried to sleep at night: "My ears wouldn't stop ringing. I would hear monitors beeping when I closed my eyes." She added that she also frequently experienced panic attacks. Similarly, Purnima talked about not having time to process her own trauma:

> There was no time for that during the shift. Of course, I would feel bad, really bad. But amidst all that adrenaline rush, I would tell myself, "I must handle this anyhow. Me being sad or emotional is not going to change anything." Then when I got home I sat with my feelings, and talked about it with my friends. Then I would feel so much frustration.

Maya and Purnima's narratives suggest that while the nurses experienced trauma from the physical and emotional demands of their job, they were not given the care that they needed to heal from that trauma. In fact, Anita directly admitted to this, saying, "We'd go through so many traumatic experiences in the course of the day, but we usually suppressed our feelings."

It is also notable how the nurses never seemed to get a respite from the suffering, even after ending their shift. As O'Sullivan et. al. point out, "during a large-scale outbreak, there is the potential for negative stress to spillover from work to home and vice versa" (2009, p. 323). The nurses' narratives show that what they witnessed at work followed them home, and had serious impacts on their health and well-being, especially in Maya's case. It reflects what Puar calls "biopolitical population racism" that was unleashed by the pandemic, whereby certain marginalized populations were invisibilized and deemed unimportant (2022, p. xi).

People like Maya and Purnima had to provide care to others while being "left without the resources to care for themselves" (Puar, 2017, p. 80). When I asked the participants if they received any support for dealing with the mental health impact of working with COVID-19 patients and their families, they all said that no such support was offered by the hospital. Purnima saying "I must handle this anyhow" also suggests that nurses were expected to toughen up and not let their emotions get the best of them. This was echoed by other participants I spoke to. Rashmi said, "You learn to accept that this is your job, this is what you do every day and that you have to deal with it." Similarly, Pratibha said, "You'd be so focused on helping the grieving family, you didn't have the time to think about your own mental health." Sharmila also reiterated this, saying, "You have to focus on consoling the family of the deceased. You cannot waste time thinking about your own trauma, because there is so much work to be done."

What is heartbreaking about these narratives is that the nurses seem to have internalized the idea of "sacrificial citizenship[2]", which Çaglar explains as "a moralized discourse of sacrifice required for the survival and the health of the whole (the collective), beyond the value of the individual" (2024, p. 370). Such internalization is evident in how Pratibha sees "helping the grieving family" as more important than caring for herself; or in the way Sharmila sees her own trauma as a waste of time. It shows that the nurses accept the capitalist notion of themselves as essential service providers who must remain available to serve the rich and the middle classes even at the expense of their own health and well-being (Scauso et al., 2020). Sharmila considering her own trauma a waste of time also drives home the fact that the nurses saw their health and needs as unimportant during COVID. These narratives support Fernández's argument that "the inequitable opportunities and resources; the lack of institutional support; and the inconsistencies in a fundamental value for humane

[2] First coined by Brown (2016).

care—all combined to reproduce cycles of violence at multiple intersections" for marginalized populations during the COVID-19 pandemic (2023, p. 193).

Stigma and Violence

The uncertainty around COVID-19 and its impact led to a global fear of the virus, where certain individuals and groups seen as potential carriers got stigmatized. Sometimes, the stigma escalated into violence, as demonstrated by the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes in Western countries (Croucher et al., 2020; Lim et al., 2023). In Nepal, healthcare workers were ostracized as disease carriers and faced violence in several instances (Pradhan & Nepal, 2020). The public's fear of contagion was further intensified by the collapse of the healthcare system. People knew that hospitals were running out of space for new patients, and there was a shortage of oxygen, which heightened their fear of contracting the virus:

> During the pandemic, society refused to accept us hospital workers, who they saw as carriers of the virus that would bring disease into their neighbourhoods. So people kept their distance. Even our relatives feared us and stayed away, because there were no hospital beds. Our neighbours were afraid to even walk past us. All of this was so stressful. (Ashma)

Ashma added that nurses had to be careful when commuting to work because of the threat of violence. Many of her nurse friends had rocks thrown at them on their way to work. Others were confronted by mobs who blockaded streets. Ashma's narrative shows how nurses, as essential workers, were perceived as "dangerous mobile bodies spreading the virus, who needed to be isolated and confined beyond the view of the public" (Çaglar, 2024, p. 372). According to Fernández (2023), this logic of reducing certain individuals to disease-carriers has its roots in colonialism. Scauso et al. (2020) also discuss how the violence against subjugated populations during the COVID-19 pandemic mirrored the colonial-era violence against Indigenous people who were perceived as dirty and unsanitary, during disease

outbreaks of 18th and 19th centuries. Ashma's accounts of nurses being subjected to violence substantiate Fernández's and Scauso's claims.

Another nurse, Sangita, recalled an incident where her work shuttle stopped outside a colleague's home to pick her up, but found the front gate locked. The nurse's live-in landlord had locked her in the house so she couldn't go to work, afraid that she would bring back COVID:

> Her landlord said, "No need to go to the hospital. Either don't go to the hospital, or don't come back here" and he locked her in. The rest of us staff kept waiting in the shuttle, but she wouldn't come out. We went to call her but we couldn't do anything. The gate was locked. We were all late to work that day.

Maya and Sharmila also spoke of friends who were nurses that were evicted by their landlords. Maya said, "They had to find another place to stay. But where do you go in the middle of a lockdown?"

Similarly, Sharmila shared that her friend was urgently asked to vacate her place one night:

> The landlord threw her out of her house, that too in the middle of the night. She went to the hospital crying. Imagine, in the middle of the night! That's how unkind people were during that time.

What is striking about the above narratives is the power difference between the landlords—who not only had the privilege of isolating themselves inside their homes but also felt entitled to choose with whom they shared their space, even if that meant destroying livelihoods—and the nurses, who did not have that choice. It supports Mohanty's (2003) argument that in a society where capitalism and neoliberalism are naturalized, some are given the ability to make their own choices in their everyday lives and others are not. In the context of the pandemic, public health measures such as social distancing and lockdowns worked in

favour of the privileged "home-owning middle class that has the economic means to work remotely, stay at home, take time off, and/or stockpile resources" (Scauso et al., 2020, p. 85). As Butler (2022) and Al-Ali (2020) point out, social distancing is a privilege, and not everyone is afforded the luxury of maintaining physical boundaries. The nurses' jobs did not allow them the privilege of staying home and avoiding the virus. They were forced to face the risk of contagion in if they wanted to earn their livelihood.

The nurses' stories of evictions also support Puar's argument that care workers particularly bore "the weight of the paradoxical" (2022, p. xiii) during the pandemic in that they were essential for the functioning of the society and for the safety and comfort of the wealthy and the middle class; while simultaneously being feared and shunned as potential carriers of the virus. The following quote from Ashma exemplifies this paradox:

> We're there to save people's lives. If we stay home, where will you go to if you get sick? Who is going to care for you at the hospital? I have had such a hard time trying to make people understand this.

Ashma's narrative echoes O'Sullivan and Phillips' claim that "resilience of the broader community is dependent on health care workers and responders being able (and willing) to work during an outbreak; without them health and social systems would collapse and put other people at further risk of adverse outcomes" (2019, p. 104). Shunning nurses and forcing them to stay home during a pandemic would ultimately hurt the health of the society broadly, and endanger the lives of the public, including the same people who were abusive and violent to the nurses.

The nurses also shared stories of being subject to violent and aggressive behaviours from hospital visitors. When a disease is new and has serious, potentially fatal symptoms, fear, anxiety and lack of information can lead to stereotyping and discrimination against those infected or those associated with the disease, such as caregivers (Turner-Musa et al.,

2020). Banerjea et al. argue that the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a "politics of otherness" (2022, p. 8) where certain individuals and groups got blamed for the spread of the virus. The research participants revealed that the precariousness and uncertainty surrounding the virus often led to unpredictable emotional reactions from the patient's family towards nurses. Someone that appeared to be doing well one moment would suddenly deteriorate and die. Purnima shared an incident where a pregnant patient suddenly died at the COVID ICU where she was working:

> Her family members got aggressive and started breaking windows and doors. They entered the ICU carrying sticks. They beat up the security guard so he was unable to stop them. The few male doctors that were present at the ICU had to stand in a row shielding us nurses, and ask the visitors to speak directly with them.

Many nurses shared instances where the family of the deceased blamed the nurses for being careless or even go as far as accusing them of killing the patient:

> Sometimes a patient would die unexpectedly and their family would get very angry. They would say we killed their loved one. They would start screaming. We wouldn't know what to do in those situations. (Maya)

> Sometimes we would have cases where a seemingly healthy young person's conditions would get severe and they would die. In those cases it would be very difficult to explain to the family members. They would say that the patient got worse after being admitted, that it was our fault. That was the mentality. So it was very hard to deal with such people. (Rashmi)

While the above narratives confirm the stigmatization and Othering that the nurses suffered during the pandemic, they also reveal the subjugated positions they occupied. Purnima had to be literally shielded by doctors who had the power to reason with the violent

family members, which she didn't. Maya and Rashmi faced serious accusations that they struggled to respond to. These examples reveal the hierarchies in Nepal's healthcare system where nurses occupy the position of the gendered subaltern who "remain utterly muted and constrained" (Sharma and Singh, 2022, p. xii) and who have to be spoken for and protected by their more powerful masculine counterparts, the doctors.

Expendable lives

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the stark inequality in the value we place on human lives. This can be explained using Butler's concept of grievability:

> Some lives are regarded as if the prospective loss of that life would be a serious loss; they are the grievable. Others are regarded as if their loss would be no loss, or not much of a loss; they are in the category of the ungrievable (Butler, 2021, p. 185).

According to Butler, social inequalities, such as abandonment and destitution, deem a life ungrievable and disposable. This was evidenced in some of the participants' narratives, for example:

> At my hospital, dialysis patients who tested positive for COVID would be charged double for their dialysis treatment. The hospital would make them buy their own equipment. Many patients could not afford this. They would say that they would rather die than undergo the treatment they could not afford. Several patients in fact died that way. (Sangita)

What Sangita describes is perhaps one of the most harrowing examples of what Butler calls "a systemic disregard for the lives of the poor" (2020, p. 28). Witnessing such distressing realities and injustices also inevitably contributed to the nurses' own trauma, as they grappled with their own lives being ungrievable. During COVID-19, individuals working in certain sectors, including healthcare, were deemed "essential" for the functioning of the society. According to Fernández (2023), the lives of those workers were seen as

sacrificial; they were compromised, and put on the line so that the lives of others could be protected and sustained. To quote Vergès, "It is on these precarious lives, these endangered lives, these worn-out bodies, that the comfortable life of the middle class and the world of the powerful ultimately rests" (2021, p. 2). After the first cases of infections were seen in Nepal, hospitals began recruiting nurses to establish and work in COVID wards:

> When the lockdown started, there was talk about sending some nurses to Teku Hospital for COVID training. And the way they picked people was, they prioritized us single nurses over those who were married with children. The idea was to expose those of us with fewer family members first. I was living by myself at the time. My name got called, and I remember crying so badly. I was convinced that I was going to die. I was living all alone in Kathmandu. All my family were back in my hometown. (Maya)

> After the government announced that there was a pandemic, my hospital had a meeting. They decided that every ward would have a random name-draw. Those whose names got picked would have to work in the COVID ICU. So when the ward in-charge did the name-draw my name also got picked. I was sure that my name would get picked. I've always had bad luck. (Purnima).

Maya and Purnima's narratives show two different approaches that hospitals took in recruiting staff to work in COVID wards. In Maya's case, the hospital decided that the lives of nurses who were young and unmarried carried less value than their colleagues that were married and had children. In Purnima's case, recruitment was done through random name-draws, which might be perceived as more "just". But in both cases, these nurses were treated as sacrificial bodies that had to be put in harm's way to protect the general population. According to Puar (2017, p. 80), society sees care workers as "objects of disposability".

These are individuals who are made available for harm or injury in order to care for others, while being denied the means to care for themselves. Maya and Purnima's narratives reveal that the nurses were seen as unworthy of care and support despite the lifesaving work they performed. They had to navigate "the simultaneity of being essential and worthless" (Çaglar, 2024, p. 372). As nurses, they were indispensable for the functioning of the society, but as individuals, they were dispensable. Maya directly conveys this disposability when she says, "the idea was to expose those of us with fewer family members first", suggesting that the size of a person's family became a measure of their life's value. In Purnima's case, the act of using name-draw to choose which staff to sacrifice shows how the nurses were stripped of all humanity and simply seen as unavoidable collateral damage of the pandemic. To quote Fassin (2021, p. 156), "they were deemed the price required to save lives."

The rampant culture of corruption in Nepali society also put pressure on nurses to prioritize certain privileged patients' lives. Several studies (Angeles & Neanidis, 2015; Kroeze et al., 2021) have shown that corruption in Third World countries today is a direct result of colonialism and global wealth inequities. The health sector isn't immune to the pervasive culture of corruption rooted in colonial histories. Several participants shared that they would receive orders asking them to arrange a hospital bed for friends and family of a senior administrative staff, even when there were no beds available. For instance, Maya said, "You would get a phone call from above, asking you which patient is about to die, and then you would have to reserve that bed. You couldn't give it to anyone else." Similarly, Anita shared her experience caring for a senior ranking police officer who was admitted with COVID-related complications and was in critical condition:

> We knew he was suffering, but what could we do? There was no ventilator available. I called my seniors and asked for their advice. They wouldn't answer. Then the patient started threatening, saying, "will you make arrangements or shall I complain

to your director?". After that my colleague and I had to take the ventilator off another patient who appeared to be improving, and give it to him [the senior police officer]".

Purnima talked about the culture of nepotism at her hospital:

> An important politician is a shareholder at our hospital. So we'd often get calls from people with connections to him. If they needed a bed for their patient, we had to manage anyhow. And then they would want us to set aside oxygen cylinders for their patients. Even if another patient was about to die from lack of oxygen and that cylinder was sitting there unused, they didn't want us to use it.

The above narratives suggest that because of nepotism, nurses were forced to perform "passive euthanasia" on some of their patients, which means "withdrawing or withholding life-prolonging medical treatment" (Garrard & Wilkinson, 2005, p. 65). Not only were they themselves ungrievable, but their vulnerable status was also exploited by the corrupt medical system to deny others "the sustaining infrastructures of life" (Butler, 2025, p. 14). The nurses' narratives also reflect "disciplinary tactics deployed against Third World/Southern women to make them into obedient and efficient workers" (Trevenen, 2005, p. 428) by those in power, which left them helpless. This helplessness is conveyed in Anita saying, "but what could we do?", or in Purnima saying, "we had to manage anyhow". Especially in Anita's case, she faced a direct threat to her livelihood if she did not remove the ventilator from another patient and give it to the senior police officer. As such, while grappling with their own helplessness, the nurses also had to contend with the unequal value placed on their patients' lives. Ultimately, these narratives reveal the "situated structures of privilege" that render some subjects far more marginalised and disposable than others (Dixit & Bandey, 2024, p. 145). In the context of Nepal, class determined who had access to powerful connections in hospitals, which in turn determined who got to have a hospital bed and oxygen cylinders and who was left to die.

But despite not having power, the nurses did participate in small acts of resistance against a corrupt system. For example, Purnima said she and her colleagues would often use oxygen cylinders that they had been asked to set aside for "important" people:

> Who is going to come and check? We would use those oxygen cylinders for our patients. Someone is about to die from lack of oxygen. You can't just sit there and not do anything and watch them die. So we would use those oxygen cylinders.

Similarly, Pratibha said she refused requests from callers, and would tell them they could go lodge a complaint if they wished:

> They would call and tell us, "this is so-and-so's person, you need to find a bed for them". When we'd tell them we were at full capacity, they would start arguing. We would try to reason with them, but if they still didn't listen we would ask them to go complain to the Ministry of Health. Because we also needed to look after our patients.

Purnima and Pratibha resisting requests and standing up for their patients showcase the resiliency that nurses in Global South contexts are regularly required to show in their work, as discussed by Racine et al. (2021). Their examples also show the "micro-politics of change" (Parsons & Priola, 2013, p. 580) that these women practiced in their workplace through subtle acts of resistance. Kazmi talks about the importance of recognising such everyday acts of resistance, which are often motivated by "deep underlying intent of care" (2022, p. 69). The intent of care is reflected in Purnima's words: "you can't just sit there and not do anything and watch them die", or in Pratibha saying, "we also needed to look after our patients". Despite the risks to their career, Pratibha and Purnima quietly pushed back against the oppressive system of their hospitals for the sake of their patients. In doing so, they challenged the normative assumption of Nepali women as being helpless and lacking in agency (Kunz, 2017; Tamang, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at Nepali nurses' narratives of work during the COVID-19 pandemic through a postcolonial feminist lens. I carried out a narrative analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with eight nurses in Kathmandu. Three core narratives emerge from my findings. Firstly, the nurses were subject to exploitative working conditions that left them traumatized but without any support to address that trauma. Secondly, the nurses occupied a paradoxical position where they were considered essential for saving lives yet stigmatized for being potential disease carriers. Finally, the nurses' experiences reveal that they were seen as disposable entities. Their bodies were put in harm's way and made available for illness or even death, to protect the wealthy and middle classes from the virus. Ultimately, what Nepali nurses endured during the pandemic is a consequence of global health inequities resulting from colonial power relations. While Western nations extracted nurses from countries like Nepal to fill the labour shortage in their hospitals, nurses left behind in Nepal were stretched thin and left without the necessary resources to do their jobs.

My study has been an attempt to amplify the voices of Nepali nurses that have been largely silenced in the global pandemic discourse. It is my hope that the experiences of these nurses, as narrated by them, will contribute to knowledge-making of the pandemic that centres marginalized and Global South perspectives. Only then, can we begin to move towards decolonizing health research.

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Chapter 4

Disposable messengers: Nepali journalists' narratives of covering COVID-19 for international newsrooms

Abstract

This paper examines the narratives of Nepali journalists who reported COVID-19 stories for international news media. I conducted a narrative analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with eight journalists in Kathmandu. Using a synthesis of postcolonial theory and feminist media studies, this paper explores how the journalists perceive and navigate their gendered social positions, and their in-between status as local Nepalis catering to a Western audience. My findings reveal that colonial legacies of wealth inequalities and representative practices put Nepali journalists at risk of exploitation and harm, particularly women journalists. As Global South news workers, they were considered dispensable and unworthy of protection from COVID-19.

Keywords: postcolonial theory; postcolonial feminism; grievability; global south; international journalism; COVID-19; pandemic

There has been a global shift in the way international journalism is practiced today (Bunce, 2011; Sambrook, 2010). Historically, newsrooms have sent Western foreign correspondents to faraway countries to gather news stories (Silberstein-Loeb, 2014). However, due to budget cuts and shutting down of foreign bureaus, a lot of international news today is covered by "journalists who report on their home country for a global news audience" (Bunce, 2011, p. 5). Many of them are based in the Global South and work for international media outlets such as the BBC, CNN, or the New York Times, or for global news agencies such as AP, AFP and Reuters (Nothias, 2020; Palmer & Fontan, 2007; Sambrook, 2010; Seo, 2016). Racial and colonial hierarchies are often embedded in the

journalistic practice of international newsrooms hiring Global South reporters. They are paid significantly less than Western correspondents and receive less protection when reporting in dangerous environments (Nothias, 2020; Palmer, 2021; Seo, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic especially led to an increasing reliance on such reporters by international media as cross-border travel became difficult. Many of these journalists were freelancers and risked their lives to bring news to a distant audience (Oliver, 2021). The pandemic was especially hard for women freelancers, who faced gender discrimination at work, as well as an increased burden of housework and childcare responsibilities (Alcantara & Simões, 2025; Li 2025).

This paper explores how gendered and colonial power relations operate in international journalism, as understood through the lived experiences of Nepali journalists who reported COVID-19 news for international media. I conducted a narrative analysis of qualitative data obtained through in-depth interviews with eight journalists in Kathmandu. Using postcolonial theory and feminist media studies, I discuss how the journalists perceive and navigate their gendered social positions, and their in-between status as local Nepalis catering to a global audience. I also explore how discursive practices of international journalism have deemed Nepali lives as ungrievable and unworthy of protection.

While there are many studies on foreign correspondents (Bunce, 2011; Nothias, 2020; J. Palmer & Fontan, 2007; Sambrook, 2010; Seo, 2016), not many have examined the experiences of this group through a gender lens. Similarly, many studies discuss the impact of COVID-19 on Nepali journalists (K. Aryal, 2022; Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2020; Press Council Nepal, 2020), but few of them are focused on the gendered experience of women journalists. Moreover, there is no research on Nepali journalists that work for international media. These journalists occupy a unique position as local news workers serving an international readership, and it is important to document their stories. These are some gaps in the existing literature that my research fills. I address the following research questions:

1. How do Nepali journalists reporting COVID-19 news for international platforms perceive and navigate the gendered terrain of international journalism?

2. How do the journalists negotiate their position as local Nepalis against the institutional demand to cater to a primarily Western audience? How is it reflected in their journalistic practices?

My core argument is that colonial legacies of wealth inequalities and representative practices put Nepali journalists at risk of exploitation and harm, particularly women journalists. As Global South news workers, they were considered dispensable and unworthy of protection from COVID-19.

History and Context

Nepal is a South Asian country land-locked between India and China. 20.1% of Nepal lives in multidimensional poverty, making it one of the world's most impoverished nations (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2024). Although it was never formally colonized, Nepal has always been affected by the colonial history and politics of South Asia. Between 1814 and 1816, Nepal lost the Anglo-Nepalese war and had to cede some of its geopolitically important territory to British India (Pemble, 2009). Nepal continues to have disputes with India over those territories (Constantino, 2020). Nepal is also heavily dependent on aid from wealthy nations that have historically used aid as a means of controlling and influencing policies in the recipient nations (Schmitt, 2020).

Patriarchal gender norms influence all facets of Nepali society, from culture and religion to political and legal systems (Kanel, 2014; P. KC, 2017; Tamang, 2000). Nepali women's labour force participation is amongst the lowest in the world (Alaref et al., 2024). Although 73% of Nepalis agree that men and women have equal responsibility for raising children, unpaid household and care work is disproportionately done by women, which keeps them from pursuing paid work (Asia Foundation, 2019). Nepali women have been organizing

and fighting against the country's patriarchal systems for decades. The earliest example of Nepali women's political struggle is a 1941 rebellion led by a political leader named Yogmaya and her followers, who died by mass suicide as an act of protest against the oppressive Nepali government (Hutt, 2013). These women's activism paved the way for future women's movements. After Nepal became a democracy in 1950, women started exercising their right to expression (Rimal, 2022). In 1951, a group of women started a monthly magazine called *Mahila* (Woman), the first example of Nepali women's involvement in journalism (Pant, 2021; Shrestha, 2005). However, it was only in the 1990s that Nepali women started pursuing journalism professionally (Dhakal, 2025). Since then, women's representation in Nepali journalism has grown steadily (I. Aryal, 2019; P. KC, 2017).

Despite women's increasing representation, journalism in Nepal remains male-dominated. Only 18% of Nepal's journalists are women (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2020), and only 8.1% of them occupy senior positions (Sancharika Samuha, 2016). Historically, almost all editor-in-chiefs of mainstream media houses in Nepal have been men (Pant, 2021; Sancharika Samuha, 2016). Women journalists are often relegated to covering "soft" beats, such as culture, entertainment and travel, while prime news stories like politics, foreign affairs, crime, and economy get assigned to men (P. KC, 2017; Sancharika Samuha, 2016; Shrestha, 2005). Consequently, women journalists receive less visibility and career opportunities. Many quit journalism due to lack of family support and pressure to attend to their domestic duties, as families are often not accepting of an irregular work schedule and travel requirements (Shrestha, 2005).

COVID-19's devastating impact on Nepal's journalism industry further marginalized women journalists. Nationwide lockdowns and a lack of advertising revenue forced media houses to close or scale down their operation, laying off workers (K. Aryal, 2022; Press

Council Nepal, 2020). Women journalists were more likely to be freelancers and therefore more vulnerable to job losses (Federation of Nepali Journalists, 2020). During this period, Nepali women journalists reported higher levels of anxiety, depression and isolation, compared to their male colleagues (Sreedharan et al., 2020).

Framework of Analysis

This study uses postcolonial theory and feminist media studies to understand the lived experiences of Nepali journalists working for Western media during the pandemic. Postcolonial theory seeks to understand and critique the West's encounters with "externalized figures whose Otherness surfaces in relation to one's collective/group/tribal identity" (Kumar & Parameswaran, 2018, p. 351). An important concept in postcolonial theory is Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), which discusses and critiques the power relations between the West and the Global South. Said argues that the West discursively constructs itself as superior to non-Western people and cultures through knowledge-making practices, including news reporting. While Said's work has been instrumental to journalism studies, Kotišová and Deuze (2022, p. 1161) argue that the "one-directional hierarchies defined by Said" are insufficient in the current context of globalization, as the lines separating the West and the Global South get blurred. It is therefore important to draw from contemporary postcolonial theory to better understand the complexities of transnational journalism. Thus, this research is also informed by the works of more contemporary scholars who apply postcolonial critiques to media and journalism studies, such as Lindsay Palmer (L. Palmer & Melki, 2016; L. Palmer, 2021), Mamadouh (2021), Thussu (2022), Mutsvairo et al. (2021) and Moyo (2022).

Within postcolonial theory, I am particularly influenced by feminist postcolonial literature (Basu, 2023; Anukriti [A.] Dixit & Banday, 2025; Mohanty, 1997, 2003, 2025; Spivak, 1988). Feminist postcolonial theorists examine the collective impact of colonialism and patriarchy on Global South subjects (Tyagi, 2014). They attend to issues of gender

inequity in postcolonial contexts and centre non-Western feminist perspectives (Doshi, 2023). Postcolonial feminists argue that the issues women journalists face, including lack of ownership and control, power hierarchies, negative representation, and exclusion from the journalism fraternity, are all rooted in the wider patriarchal relations of the current colonial, capitalist and racial world order (Moyo, 2022). Feminist postcolonial theory is essential to this research because it provides a knowledge base for examining the gendered colonial practices in international journalism.

I also draw on the works of feminist scholars Judith Butler (2010, 2020, 2022) and Jasbir Puar (2017, 2022). Butler and Puar are interdisciplinary scholars who do not strictly label themselves as feminist postcolonial theorists. However, both have made important contributions to advancing feminist postcolonial thought. Butler's concept of grievability (2010, 2020, 2022) is especially critical to this research. Drawing on Butler, Jellicoe provides the following definition of grievability:

> It is the political recognition of an individual human existence as a life. Those recognised as a life are worthy of protection and of mourning within hegemonic political or media discourses. Unworthy lives are those that are not fully recognised by society or by the state. (2026, p.2).

According to Jellicoe (2026), lives that are seen as ungrievable are not even acknowledged as being fully human, and their suffering is invisibilized. Hegemonic political and media discourses play an important role in constructing some lives as grievable and others as ungrievable. In the context of COVID-19, global inequities, including the global distribution of vaccines, determined which lives got prioritized for protection and saving over others (Butler, 2022). Although coronavirus itself does not discriminate, we cannot separate the pandemic from the prevailing social and ecological conditions that affect people's access to healthcare and protection from contagion (Butler, 2022). Thus, Butler's work is extremely

relevant to my research, as I grapple with the reality of journalists in Nepal risking their lives to produce content for institutions located in wealthier, and arguably, safer, parts of the world.

Feminist media studies is another critical body of work that I rely on. It explores gendered discourses in news-making to disentangle "matters of power, culture, voice, agency, hierarchy, and representation in media practices and discourses" (Bachmann et al., 2018, p. 4). It examines how media practitioners perpetuate sexual inequalities, and how news culture and journalism production are gendered (Alcantara & Simões, 2025; Carter et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2016). Feminist media studies provides the tools for exploring how societal gender norms affect the perspectives and experiences of my research participants. Using a synthesis of postcolonial theory and feminist media studies, therefore, sheds light on how the journalists navigate issues of gendered coloniality.

Methodology

This research follows a feminist methodological framework, which is "grounded in critical scholarship, intersectionality, and a nonbinary understanding of gender" (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. vi). I study the gendered experiences of the research participants and explore how their gender interacts with colonial power relations to determine their experiences. My research takes a feminist qualitative approach. Qualitative research is used "to explore, describe, or explain social phenomena; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artifacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life" (Leavy, 2020, p. 2). I used feminist in-depth interviewing for gathering data and interviewed eight journalists based in Kathmandu who reported news for international media as staff or freelancers. Each interview was approximately one hour long. The pool of Nepali journalists that work for international media is extremely small, which is why a sample size

of eight was deemed sufficient to reach data saturation[3]. Given the length limitations of the paper, a sample size of eight also allowed me to provide a deeper analysis and discussion of the participants' lived experiences–especially as statistical generalizability was never the goal of my research.

Feminist interviewers are "interested in getting at the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated" (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 184). This method sheds light on how gender and social status impact on journalists' lived experiences and narratives of the pandemic. I did semi-structured interviews that were conducted with a specific interview guide (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This helped me stay within the topic, while leaving space for asking new questions that emerged from the participants' answers. The interview guide was grounded in my research questions and framework of analysis. Some of my questions included, *How much influence do you have on what gets published?,* and *In what ways is your status as a Nepali national an advantage to your work? In what ways is it a disadvantage?*. The questions centred participants' lived experiences navigating the demands of international journalism, including challenges of gender and eurocentrism. As such, they helped address the research questions.

I recruited research participants online through the snowball method, utilizing Twitter to connect with journalists in Nepal. This eliminated the need for face-to-face interaction, which was important to consider during the pandemic. To be eligible to participate in the study, the individual had to be 1) a journalist working for Western newsrooms 2) a Nepali national and 3) based in Kathmandu. Being mindful of the pandemic and possible border closures, I conducted the interviews over Zoom videocalls, between November 2022 and January 2023, and video-recorded them. While the video component allowed me to connect

[3] This was also the reason why both men and women (three men and five women) had to be included in the sample, although I had originally planned on only interviewing women.

with the participants and read their facial expressions, it limited the non-verbal cues that I could observe, such as their body language or how they interacted with their surroundings. This was a potential disadvantage of conducting the interviews virtually that I had to consider while adapting my research to the reality of the pandemic. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Ottawa Office of Research Ethics and Integrity (Certificate Number S-11-22-8621). Verbal informed consent was obtained from all research participants. All participants were provided with, and reviewed, the formal consent form prior to giving verbal consent. The participants' names have been changed in this paper to protect their privacy and confidentiality[4].

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and analyzed the data using narrative analysis. This method not only examines the structure of the storytelling or the communication process, but also looks at the wider social, political or ideological meanings behind the story (Gillespie, 2006). It "examines the informant's story and analyzes how it is put together, the linguistic and cultural resources it draws on, and how it persuades a listener of authenticity" (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). I found a feminist approach to narrative analysis useful because it is concerned with the effect of gender relations, power, and social structures on the research participants' retelling of their experience of COVID-19. It illuminates the different ways by which gendered world order is created (or disrupted) through the telling of stories (Sjolander & Trevenen, 2010) by my participants. Moreover, centring the narratives of a subjugated population is "an act of resistance, where remembering and recording become acts of subverting official narratives of COVID-19" (Basu, 2023, p. 4). By introducing new knowledge rooted in Global South perspectives, I have tried to challenge the dominant discourses of COVID-19 in Western academia.

[4] Given the extremely small pool of journalists working for international newsrooms in Nepal, any demographic information other than gender has been purposefully left out to protect the participants' identities.

To conduct my analysis, I started by reading the interview transcripts a few times to familiarise myself with the participants' accounts. I made notes of key issues that came up in the journalists' narratives, as well as any recurring patterns. I also paid close attention to how the participants constructed their stories, their choice of words, and other verbal and non-verbal narrative elements. Guided by my framework of analysis, I categorised the themes and patterns into three dominant narratives: 1) the participants' gendered experiences; 2) how they navigated their local vs global status; and 3) their sense of disposability (grievability). These are discussed in detail in the following section.

It is important to note that all research is subject to researcher interpretation, which in turn is influenced by their life experiences. My status as a Nepali woman and my familiarity with the language and cultural context has been advantageous to my research. It enabled me to establish a deeper rapport with the interviewees. However, my academic training in Western institutions has influenced my worldviews and the theoretical approaches I employ. Situating myself in my research and upholding reflexivity throughout the study has helped me maintain transparency and minimize biases.

Findings and Discussion

The Gendered Terrain of Pandemic Reporting

COVID-19 came as a blow to Nepal's journalism, forcing newsrooms to close and lay off staff, only retaining a few senior positions. This left women journalists particularly vulnerable as they were less likely to occupy senior positions. For example, Pooja, a freelance journalist shared how "even when everyone was getting sacked, the editors were being retained" and that "they all happen to be men." It confirms research from across the world that female journalists everywhere are overwhelmingly represented in the unstable freelance journalism sector while their male counterparts dominate senior editorial positions (Alcantara & Simões, 2025; Carter et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2016). Thus, even though job

losses due to the pandemic affected all journalists, women were disproportionally impacted. But despite what these facts suggest, many research participants disagreed that women journalists face barriers because of their gender. It was unsurprising that all the men interviewed held this belief. Research from feminist media scholars has shown that many men don't see gender as being relevant in contemporary newsrooms due to the increasing presence of women (Lobo et al., 2017; Rodny-Gumede, 2015; Steiner, 2009). This also has to do with newsroom cultures and values being inherently masculine, as North (2009) points out. According to North, male journalists "often don't experience a 'newsroom culture' as such. Rather, they are the 'culture'" (2009, p. 13) and therefore they don't perceive what those outside the culture, such as women and gender minorities, experience. However, interestingly, many of the *women* interviewed also believed that gender discrimination wasn't an issue in journalism, even when they talked about experiences where they had personally faced barriers because of their gender. A particularly striking example comes from Sandhya, a freelance photojournalist. Sandhya said that she does not like it when people ask her to talk about challenges she has faced in her occupation as a woman. She said, "I don't entertain questions about gender" because people are always expecting sad stories from female journalists that makes them look like victims. She doesn't believe that there is any difference between a female and a male journalist. She elaborated:

> I think women hold themselves back by believing that they aren't capable. Even if nobody is calling them weak or incapable, they themselves think, "oh I'm a woman, I can't carry a heavy load', or "I can't do this, I'm on my period"…If you hold such opinions about yourself then you are the one holding yourself back.
>
> She added, "If you don't push yourself, nobody else is going to."

Sandhya's narrative suggests that women themselves are to blame for the challenges they face in journalism, because they don't push themselves. However, elsewhere in the

interview Sandhya talked about how hard it is for women to occupy high-paying positions in photojournalism. She shared that there are currently four international news agencies (also called "wires") operating in Nepal, which pay staff four times more than what local newsrooms pay them. Presently, all photojournalist positions at these agencies are occupied by men. Sandhya added:

> I teasingly tell my male colleagues in the wires, 'You guys have it all set. You are four men at four wires. Until you leave, we [women] are not getting any opportunities. So just leave, haven't you been there long enough?

Sandhya contradicts herself by saying that women are holding themselves back, while also pointing out how lucrative positions are dominated by men that prevents women like her from getting opportunities. In their research with war correspondents, Lindsay Palmer and Jad Melki found that women journalists often "disavowed feminine difference" (2016, p. 132) and refused to talk about issues that women faced in the field. The journalists feared that they would not get sent on assignments if they talked about gender. Joseph (2004) has made similar observations at Indian newsrooms. She discusses that the culture of patriarchy and misogyny in Indian journalism put pressure on women journalists to constantly prove themselves. As a result, many women reject being called a "woman journalist" because it makes them feel inferior. Sandhya shows similar aversion to talking about gender, even though she acknowledges gendered barriers in photojournalism. This aversion seemingly comes from 1) her need to acknowledge that she is as competent as her male colleagues 2) not wanting to be perceived as weak for being a woman.

Another freelancer, Priya, shared that while it is true that Nepali media discriminate against women journalists, it isn't true for international media. She said:

> International media have given me opportunities that Nepali media did not. They have also trusted me very well. So maybe it is also that men are able to work hard and endure, but women aren't working hard and enduring?

Sandhya and Priya both used the phrase *"tikna sakdaina"* (meaning unwilling or unable to last or endure) when they talked about women in journalism. Their beliefs that women aren't trying hard or "enduring" blames individual women journalists for the lack of gender equity in journalism, while ignoring the structural issues that prevent women journalists from succeeding, regardless of individual competence. These structural issues include women's lack of access to professional networks (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024; Topić & Bruegmann, 2020; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2024), masculine culture of newsrooms that favour men (North, 2016; Topić & Bruegmann, 2020), and societal norms that put pressure on women to prioritize their family and household responsibilities (Mohanty, 1997; Miraglia & Spronk, 2014). One example of such systemic barriers is reflected in Pooja's experience. Pooja missed out on two lucrative assignments because she was pregnant and both assignments involved travel. Travelling in Nepal while pregnant would have been very risky during the pandemic so she did not have a choice but to turn down the offers:

> I felt that I was finally getting recognition after being in the industry for 10 years. People are finally noticing my work and they want to give me opportunities. But I'm having to give it all up because I'm pregnant and I can't risk going anywhere because of COVID. So yeah, it was a depressing time for me. It was very difficult to realize that I have at last reached the point in my career where I'm finally seeing the fruits of my labour but I'm unable to access those fruits.

Pooja's narrative shows that it is not about how hard a woman journalist tries, but rather it is the challenges of working "in a social and geographical environment that does not comprehend the specific needs of female bodies" (L. Palmer & Melki, 2016). This is

especially evident in Pooja's statement "I'm finally seeing the fruits of my labour but I'm unable to access those fruits." Lack of washrooms, physical safety, perceived vulnerability and patriarchal gender norms are all factors that restrict mobility and make travel difficult for women in the Global South (Ananya, 2016; Duarte et al., 2025). Additionally, pregnancy-related physical and mental health risks were exacerbated for women in low-income countries during COVID-19 due to preexisting barriers to maternal health (Manca, 2021). As limited resources were redirected to address the pandemic, it left maternal healthcare disproportionately compromised in the Global South (Ahmed et al., 2021). When Nepal's healthcare system collapsed during the pandemic, maternal mortality rate tripled in the country (Poudel, 2020). Consequently, pregnant individuals were forced to take extreme measures to limit exposure to the virus. In Pooja's case, that meant missing out on important career opportunities as an already-precarious freelance worker. This was not about how hard Pooja could fight to stay in journalism, or whether she could endure the demands of the profession the way her male colleagues could. This was about compounding structural challenges of gendered mobility and maternal health inequality that forced Pooja to choose between her survival and her career. Despite her merits and hard work, she still faced barriers.

Meanwhile, for many other women journalists, the biggest barriers to their career are patriarchal norms embedded within their own households (Carter et al., 2019; Rao & Rodny-Gumede, 2020; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2024). As Spronk points out, "a rigid gendered division of labour within the home creates a 'double burden': women's home workload does not decrease despite their work outside the home" (2022, p. 254). Working women are still expected to take on the larger proportion of domestic responsibilities, and prioritize the latter over their careers. Many participants shared that they had female colleagues who struggled with, or quit journalism entirely, because their families were not accepting of the

unconventional working hours or requirements for travel. However, none of the participants had themselves experienced restrictions from their families. Subha, a news agency reporter, shared that her family has always been very strict with her and her sisters, but has been more lenient when it comes to work:

> A lot of times, convincing them to let me travel with friends is difficult. But if I have to travel for work, that's more valued. Both my parents, especially my mum, really value that women work and have that independence. So, it is kind of easier when you say you have to go somewhere for work, or do something for work.

Priya also shared that her family has always trusted her whenever she's had to stay out late or travel for work: "They have never asked 'why did you come home late?' or 'why are you, a female, travelling so often?' No. They never questioned. They were always proud of my work."

Meanwhile, Sandhya said she initially got scolded by her father for coming home late from work, which led to an argument:

> I told him, "Your daughter wasn't out there engaging in dishonest activities. I was out doing my job. I have proof. If you're able to trust me, then do so, or I don't care." Now nobody questions me even when I come home at 12 or 1 in the morning. I simply tell them that I had to stay late at work. Over time, they have started understanding the nature of it.

Subha, Priya and Sandhya's narratives suggest that journalism provides them with some level of freedom that may not be available to them outside work contexts. When it comes to work, their families are willing to make an exception to the traditional gender norms that often restrict women's mobility in Nepali society (Adhikari & Sharma, 2022; Grossman-Thompson, 2016). This is reflected in the participants' use of words like "trust", "value" and "understanding". It is interesting that the very demands of journalism that lead to

some women quitting the profession, make it possible for others like Priya, Subha and Sandhya to access independence. Journalism enables these women to challenge the notion of the "poor helpless Nepali woman" that Kunz (2017, p. 735) and Tamang (2011) discuss. Tamang argues that colonial discourses of international development have led to Nepali women being homogenously constructed as "patriarchally bound, agency-less, Hindu Nepali women" (2011, p. 282), ignoring the diversities of their experiences based on caste, class, religion and geographical location. Priya, Subha and Sandhya's narratives complicate this idea. On the one hand, their families' acceptance of long hours and travel if it's for work suggests that they are still bound by patriarchal familial norms outside work contexts. On the other hand, their work does provide them an avenue for enjoying agency and empowerment that may otherwise be denied to them altogether. Such empowerment is especially evident in Sandhya's narrative where she boldly tells her father, "if you're able to trust me, then do so, or I don't care". Her job provides Sandhya with reinforcement through which she's able to stand up to her father, and challenge the "patriarchal notions of obedient, chaste South Asian daughters who respect their fathers' ultimate authority over them" (Rajiva 2010, p. 214).

Negotiating the global and the local

While COVID-19 had a devastating impact on journalists worldwide, it also offered unique opportunities. As international travel became difficult, global newsrooms housed in Western countries were unable to send parachute journalists on reporting assignments. They had to rely on local journalists for stories (Grant, 2020; Wallace, 2020). The research participants shared that all international news during the pandemic was covered by local journalists in Nepal, as foreign journalists[5] were unable to fly in. Pramod, a newspaper reporter, shared that the focus on COVID stories provided him with new opportunities to

[5] "Foreign journalist" in this paper specifically refers to Western parachute journalists, as foreign correspondents have historically been citizens of Western nations, where international newsrooms are housed. (See: Murrell, 2019). Some participants used the term "*khaire*" (white person) to describe foreign journalists in Nepal, suggesting that they are commonly white.

showcase his work. He said, “covering the pandemic was a way I could sell myself, sell stories about Nepal.” One of Pramod’s stories even made it to the frontpage of a reputable newspaper and received a lot of attention.

As the pandemic provided opportunities to reporters like Pramod, it also opened up possibilities for decolonizing international journalism. As Thussu (2022) points out, colonialism ended years ago but remnants of indirect and intellectual colonialism have persisted in global news and information flows, which are largely controlled by a handful of West-based institutions and actors. The increasing use of Global South journalists by international media makes it possible to challenge Western hegemony by “countering global normative practices of journalism with local news epistemologies” (Mutsvairo et al., 2021, p. 997). It diversifies and enriches international journalism by bringing in voices from the South. Most of the journalists interviewed said that their status as a Nepali national was an advantage. Many also agreed that local Nepali reporters do a better job of writing about Nepal than a foreign journalist:

> You should look at a foreigner’s reporting of Nepal and look at our reporting. They (foreign reporters) can’t even get the name of a place right. They can’t write people’s names correctly. There are so many mistakes, so many typos. But when Nepali reporters cover a story about Nepal, we hardly make those mistakes, right? So there’s the difference. They (foreigners) don’t understand the context. (Priya)

Priya added that she doesn’t understand why international media in Nepal doesn’t always use local reporters, since they have so much more knowledge about Nepal. Subha also talked about how a foreign journalist may not accurately portray the ground reality:

> You see the difference of a local person reporting the story vs a foreigner. Foreigners have a very different eye to the story. They have a very angled look. Which means that the person who reads the story gets a very different picture than what actually

> happens on the ground. So, as a local person reporting for an international publication, I think it's a big advantage that I get to make sure that that doesn't happen. And strip away this idea that people have of Nepal as just being a poor country sandwiched between India and China. It's a trope that keeps getting repeated on and on.

Priya and Subha both mention how you "see the difference" between a local and foreign journalists' reporting when you look at their work. In his research on Himalayan travel writing, Sharma argues that "Western narratives often frame Nepal as an exotic and untouched landscape ideal for adventure and personal transformation, sidelining the lived realities and perspectives of the local population" (2025, p. 4). Sharma says incorporating local perspectives in global discourses about Nepal help to bridge the gap between "Western romanticism and Nepalese realism" (2025, p. 1).

Chahana, a freelancer, shared that editors send her stories written by foreign reporters to check for accuracy: "No matter how big the story is, it doesn't get finalized without us checking it first. I think that's such a privilege." Using phrases like "a big advantage that I get" and "such a privilege" in their narratives, Subha and Chahana both convey pride in being able to fact-check foreign reporters' work and ensure Nepal gets accurately portrayed. Subha saying that she can "strip away the idea" that people have of Nepal is especially important. It shows how journalists like her can push back against the stereotypical portrayal of Nepalis as "poor, hungry, Mount Everest-climbing, uneducated people" in Western media (Abhimanyu [A.] Dixit, 2020) and help to bridge the gap between romanticism and realism that Sharma (2025) talks about.

As mentioned, most journalists claimed that Nepali reporters did a better job of covering Nepal than a foreigner, due to their knowledge of the Nepali context. Ironically,

some of them also highlighted the importance of avoiding a "local" lens in their reporting. For example:

> I always have to think of my international audience. I'm not writing for the local. I'm not working for the Kathmandu Post. I have to assume someone in, say, Brazil is reading my story. So I have to explain things. For example, I can't just say Pokhara. I have to explain that it's a resort town, 200 km west of Kathmandu. I have to do that in every story I report. (Umesh)
>
> The main disadvantage of being a Nepali reporter writing for an international platform is that we sometimes tend to be "local". As in, we try to think like a Nepali and miss the bigger picture. We might get too narrow and not provide enough context and background. (Pramod)

Even though the journalists use the word "international", it is important to note that they are employed by institutions that are housed in the major cities of Western nations and operate under Western journalistic ethics and principles. Moreover, reporting through a Western lens is seen as a "global standard" in journalism, and Global South journalists "are taught to adhere to this universal 'right way' of doing journalism" (Mutsvairo et al., 2021, p. 997). Umesh and Pramod's narratives reflect this. It is also important to note that "journalists represent themselves and write as journalists, as employees of a specific newspaper or other medium, with a specific public of recipients in mind, with a specific goal" (van Dijk, 2014, p. 160). In Umesh and Pramod's case, the imagined recipient is a foreign one. Writing about Orientalism in international news, Mamadouh (2021) discusses how the majority of global media are based in Western countries and run by Western institutions. They operate on Western values of journalism, serve an audience that is primarily Western and therefore deliver content that is most relevant to that audience. In doing so, they run the risk of downplaying or ignoring issues that are of importance to Third World subjects. According to

Moyo, Eurocentrism succeeds by making Global South journalists "think and act as if they resided in the geographic and epistemic North" (2022, p. 1571). This is reflected in Umesh's words: "I can't just say Pokhara. I have to explain", and in the way Pramod considers "thinking like a Nepali" to be a disadvantage. By assuming a default foreign audience, and by letting go of the local perspective in their reporting, both journalists arguably reproduce Western discourses about Nepal. This practice is often referred to as "self-Orientalism" or "re-Orientalism" by contemporary postcolonial scholars. Building on Said (1978), they argue that Orientalist discourses are often internalized and reproduced by people in the Global South (Alahmed, 2020; Feighery 2012; Lau & Dwivedi, 2014; Varma, 2003; Yan & Santos, 2009). The danger of re-Orientalism is that it affects diversity of thought. Umesh and Pramod's Nepali status and their knowledge of the cultural context has the potential to decolonize international journalism, by offering a unique Nepali perspective that a Western journalist would lack. However, when journalists avoid local perspectives in favour of adopting an "international" lens, news ultimately gets told from a West-centric perspective. In the context of COVID-19 in Nepal, that meant an overwhelming focus on the mountaineering industry, while pressing issues such as vaccine inequity, and the impact of the pandemic on regular Nepalis got overlooked.

Interestingly, participants said that their newsroom made an effort to avoid misrepresenting Nepal. Editors often got back to the journalist seeking clarifications on an article. Almost everyone I interviewed also said that their editors generally didn't manipulate their submissions. Despite that, all participants said that it was the news headquarters or the regional bureau that ultimately decided what stories to cover. It was common for a pitch or an entire submission from the reporter to get rejected. This supports van Dijk's claim that "one or a few editors decide what hundreds of thousands or millions of readers will know – or not – about the world" (2014, p. 157). Therefore, even when the news stories aren't manipulated,

the newsrooms ultimately control how Nepal gets portrayed to the outside world by choosing what news to publish or assign.

Western institutional norms governing journalism also meant that some journalists, like Pramod, had to perform their jobs during the time zone of the Western city where their newsroom was headquartered, even if it was the middle of the night in Kathmandu:

> It's a very tough job. When there's a disaster, or if something bad happens at Everest, then you have to work day and night, across different time zones. They come to you with the craziest demands, sometimes in the middle of the night. They don't understand that when my sources are asleep, I can't contact them for information. (Pramod).

Even though Pramod works at a global newsroom, he has to cater to the demands of editors located in a Western city. He must work impractical hours and is expected to provide stories when offices in Kathmandu would be closed and his sources would be unreachable. His experience supports Moyo's (2022) argument that global journalism, despite being global, universalizes Western approaches to journalism practice. In doing so, it reproduces the idea that the West is superior to the Global South, and that the lives and well-being of Western people matter more than that of Global South people.

Whose lives matter?

As mentioned earlier, almost all global news about COVID-19 in Nepal came from local journalists. Many of these journalists risked their lives, reporting from dangerous locations where chances of contracting the virus were high. Two of the interview participants, Roshan and Subha, said that they were on a reporting assignment at the Mount Everest Base Camp when the government announced nationwide lockdowns. When they tried to get a flight back to Kathmandu, they were refused.

> At the beginning, the government was prioritizing foreign nationals over Nepalis. They were only flying foreigners back to Kathmandu. We weren't allowed to fly. Finally, after pleading with them, telling them why we were there, and having several discussions with them, they let us fly to Kathmandu after 2-3 days. (Roshan)

While foreigners had an easy time getting rescued, Nepalis like Roshan and Subha had to undergo numerous hurdles before they could be considered. The Nepali government's decision to prioritize foreign nationals for rescue suggests that their lives were seen as more "grievable" than those of Nepalis who were equally vulnerable to COVID-19. It reflects how grievability is differentially allocated, "often according to race, sexuality, gender, nationality, or labor status" (Davis, 2020, p. 127). In Roshan and Subha's case, Nepal's low status in the global world order, rooted in colonial histories, render the lives of Nepalis like them as less grievable than citizens of wealthy nations.

Many journalists shared that their newsroom didn't provide them personal protective equipment (PPE), instructing them to work remotely. But working remotely isn't easy in Nepal due to lack of digital infrastructure. It was especially challenging for freelancers like Pooja who didn't have job security and therefore couldn't turn down an assignment. With her mobility restricted, Pooja said she struggled to do her job:

> Not being mobile during the pandemic limited your opportunities for earning income, especially at a time when so many media houses were closing down. If you were mobile, there was at least the potential of seeing things, finding stories and pitching them to the news outlet.

Anukriti Dixit and Muneeb Banday discuss the notion of "postcolonial pandemic" which they define as "the differential power relations in governing the Covid-19 pandemic shaped by coloniality" (2025, p. 143). They argue that during the pandemic, there was a systemic neglect of Global South lives, and particularly the lives of those who were

marginalized because of their age, gender, caste, disability or economic status. Pooja's case illustrates how Global South women like her suffered such systemic neglect. Pooja already faced marginalization because of her gender, since women journalists like her were less likely to be on a payroll and more likely to be freelancers. Moreover, in Nepal, workers didn't have access to forms of government support that were available to workers in wealthier nations who suffered financial hardships due to the pandemic, such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (Government of Canada, 2024), or the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (United States Government, 2021). As such, they were "left stranded and without the benefit of a welfare state" (Banerjea et al., 2022, p. 9). To earn her living, Pooja relied on observing events and pitching story ideas. Not being provided PPE and being instructed to work remotely meant that Pooja faced a difficult choice—stay home and miss out on reporting opportunities, or go out to report without PPE and risk contracting COVID-19.

Lindsay Palmer points out that international newsrooms often "pay lip service to safety in the field" while encouraging journalists to risk their lives for the story (2021, p. 80). This is especially true for Global South journalists working for international platforms. Most of the participants shared that they went out in the field despite the risks of contracting the virus. Priya travelled to the Everest region for a reporting assignment during the second wave, when cases were at an all-time high. She got COVID-19 and became seriously ill. However, she could not receive any medical attention as hospitals were over capacity. She said that it was a "miracle" that she survived:

> My condition was very critical. For 12 days I had a high fever exceeding 103 degrees. But there was nothing available. No hospital, no bed, no oxygen...you know how things were during the second wave. I got COVID on the way back to Everest base

> camp, and then I got home and my condition was critical for 15 days. But there was nothing I could do. I couldn't go to a hospital.

Priya's narrative is a reminder of how dire the health crisis was in Nepal. Her saying "you know how things were" suggests that her situation was not the exception. As hospitals all over the country ran out of beds and ventilators, Nepal's Health Ministry was forced to issue a statement saying that the country's health system was unable to cope with the crisis (Poudel, 2021). With no access to medical care, Priya, like many other Nepalis in her position, had "no safeguards, no infrastructural or social promise of continuity, no sense of a life with the supports required to live on" (Butler, 2022, p. 5). As Priya said, there was "nothing [she] could do" other than wait.

Priya's example reflects two painful realities of the pandemic. Firstly, journalists like her were forced to risk their lives while producing content for Western newsrooms and bringing stories to an audience located thousands of miles away. Secondly, global health inequities meant that Nepalis like her were likely to die of preventable causes from the health system collapsing. Ultimately, individuals like Priya became dispensable bodies "that can be in service of the 'first world', while alive, and can be assumed as 'collateral damage' in [their] deaths" (Anukriti [A.] Dixit & Banday, 2025, p. 144). Priya's life only had value as long as she could serve as a conduit of information for a Western institution.

The journalists also recalled their experience of living with uncertainty and frequently witnessing or hearing about COVID deaths. Sandhya said, "Seeing all those bodies being cremated in Pashupati [temple], I would realize that one of those bodies could easily have been me or my family. And I would get very emotional thinking about that." Similarly, Pramod talked about learning about people's deaths through social media:

> You would wake up in the morning and see "rest in peace"-type posts about people you knew, people who were friends. It was very depressing. You would know the

person, you would have met them just a couple days ago. They are suddenly dead. There was so much death all around, it would get depressing.

Sandhya and Pramod's narratives highlight the precarity of Nepali journalists' lives during the pandemic. Seeing death around them made them aware of this precarity, as individuals living in a country where supports needed to sustain life were unavailable. Their use of expressions like "would get depressing" and "would get very emotional" shows the impact this had on their mental health. According to Butler, "those who live with the sense that there is no certainty about food or shelter or health care also live with a sense of their dispensability" (2022, p. 92). Not only were the journalists at a risk of contracting COVID-19 during reporting assignments, they were further burdened by the fact that if they did get sick, they could die from lack of access to medical care. Thus, they lived with a sense of their own dispensability.

The journalists also talked about witnessing traumatic scenes while reporting stories. For example, Umesh shared what he saw in hospitals and cremation sites:

> You would see people being kept in these sheds outside the hospital where they would normally park cars, because there was no hospital bed available. You could see how severe they were. They looked like they would die any moment. It was a very bad scene. At the cremation site, you would see so many bodies being cremated. The worst part was, the family of the deceased couldn't be there. The army was doing all the cremation. These kinds of scenes were very hard to watch. It was emotionally difficult.

In discussing her own grief of losing family members to COVID-19, Basu argues that death rituals are significant because "they allow the bereaved family members to care for and claim the corporeal body of the lost family member before finally letting go of the physical body" (2023, p. 3). Being denied a proper death ritual not only robs the family of the

opportunity to say their final goodbyes, but it also dehumanizes the deceased. This is reflected in Umesh's description of mass-cremations conducted by the military with no family members present. His juxtaposition of sick patients dying at the hospital parking lot, with his description of the cremation site is especially significant. It shows that not only did those without money and power die from lack of access to basic healthcare, they also weren't allowed a dignified funeral upon their death. As a consequence of global health inequities, these populations disappeared "into the netherworlds of care, and of importance" (Puar, 2022, p. xi). They were assigned little value in life and upon death.

Chahana shared her experience interviewing the family of a young woman who had died from COVID:

> I was working on a story about an elderly couple whose daughter died of COVID, leaving behind her husband and their young daughter. I spoke to that family, including the little girl. She didn't understand what happened to her mother. I remember going through a really difficult time after talking to that family.

Umesh and Chahana's narratives show that reporters "may experience a type of indirect, secondary trauma through the victims they interview and the graphic scenes to which they must bear witness" (Seely, 2019, p. 240). Umesh shared that the "scenes were very hard to watch" and "emotionally difficult". Chahana talked about going "through a really difficult time" after speaking with the grieving family. Even though the journalists themselves were not victims in these situations, their indirect exposure to trauma from what they saw and heard had an impact on their mental health. Multiple studies show the impact of covering COVID stories on journalists, including psychological distress and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hoak, 2023; Jukes et al., 2022; Tyson & Wild, 2021). Thus, not only were the journalists at a high risk of contracting COVID, they were also highly vulnerable to the mental health impact of witnessing the horrors of the pandemic.

It is important to note that the journalists risked their lives and well-being while producing news content and thus making money for Western institutions. It is an example of "value extraction from populations that would otherwise be disposable" under global capitalism (Puar, 2017, xviii). The international journalism industry demanded their labour and their bodily capacity, while simultaneously making them available for physical and mental injury in the process.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the experiences of Nepali journalists who covered COVID stories for international newsrooms, through a feminist and postcolonial framework. I carried out a narrative analysis of data obtained through interviews with eight journalists in Kathmandu. My findings reveal that colonial discourses embedded in international journalism exposed Nepali journalists to risk of exploitation or harm during the pandemic. Women journalists were particularly vulnerable as workers in an industry and a society largely defined by patriarchal values.

There were some contradictions I observed in the journalists' narratives. For example, some women journalists stated that gender was not an issue in journalism and that individual journalists were responsible for the growth or decline of their career. They said this while also sharing examples of how they had been marginalized due to their gender. Similarly, many of the journalists perpetuated the same colonial discourses as the institutions they work for. Many emphasized the need to let go of a "local" perspective. They did so despite acknowledging the advantages of having local Nepali reporters cover news from Nepal. Consequently, the pandemic in Nepal was represented to the rest of the world through a West-centric lens that invisibilized the experiences of local Nepalis, even when news was reported by local journalists.

Finally, the colonial legacy of global health inequities, and colonial discourses of global journalism worked together to marginalize Nepali journalists. As Global South news workers, their lives only had value as long as they continued to produce content for media institutions located in Western, and arguably safer, parts of the world.

My research ultimately points to a harsh reality that COVID-19 exposed—global colonial power relations determined who were worthy of protecting from the virus, and who died preventable deaths. The Nepali journalists were part of a population that was disposable in life and ungrievable upon death.

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Chapter 5
Conclusions

This thesis examines stories and experiences of COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal as told by international news agencies, and two highly vulnerable groups of frontline workers in Nepal—nurses and journalists. Through a series of three publishable papers, I sought to answer the following research questions: : a) How has international media reproduced gendered and colonial relations of power in its portrayal of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal? b) What do Nepali nurses' narratives tell us about how global health inequities rendered certain vulnerable populations as disposable during the pandemic? c) What do Nepali journalists' experiences reveal about how patriarchal and colonial power structures of international journalism marginalize Global South news workers? Ultimately, I was interested in understanding what stories of COVID in Nepal were told to the outside world, and to what extent those stories aligned with the experiences of frontline workers on the ground.

This thesis used a feminist qualitative approach to examine news articles published in AP, AFP and Reuters, and data obtained through in-depth interviews with nurses and journalists in Nepal. Critical discourse analysis and narrative analysis were the methods used for data analysis. The three articles in this thesis, while being standalone papers, draw from a common framework of analysis using postcolonial theory, including feminist postcolonial theory, and/or feminist media studies. Drawing on Butler's concept of grieveability, the question of "whose lives matter?", has been at the core of all three papers, and the common theoretical thread that binds them together. My findings show that global colonial power relations, that are gendered, determine which lives are considered worthy of protecting from coronavirus, and which ones are seen as expendable. International media play an important

role in reproducing those power relations, and this is reflected in their news discourses as well as their journalistic practices.

This final chapter presents the core arguments of this study, synthesizing the key findings from the three papers. I also highlight the empirical and theoretical contributions of my research. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the study and the path forward.

Framework of Analysis

The articles in this thesis, while being standalone papers, employ an overlapping framework of analysis using a combination of postcolonial theory, feminist postcolonial theory, and/or feminist media studies.

Postcolonial theory is a body of work that studies how legacies of colonialism continue to oppress non-Western subjects by privileging Western ideas and knowledge-making. I draw on classic works in postcolonial theory, such as Said's Orientalism (1978) and Hall's (1996) concept of "West and the Rest", as well as more contemporary works in this field (see Chellaney, 2021; Kotišová & Deuze, 2022; Mamadouh, 2021; Moyo, 2022). Postcolonial theory sheds light on how colonial discourses are perpetuated by the news media in its coverage of Nepal. Drawing on this theory has enabled me to explore how West-centric discourses continue to be embedded in international journalism practice, as revealed in the Nepali journalists' narratives.

Within postcolonial theory, my research is particularly informed by the works of feminist postcolonial theorists. This body of work focuses on the impact of patriarchy and colonialism on Global South women (Doshi, 2023). It provides the theoretical lens for examining how Western representative practices, such as international media coverage of COVID-19, erase the experiences of Nepali women. Using this theory enabled me to explore how the gendered process of global capitalism subjugated Global South women workers, such as Nepali nurses, and made them vulnerable to harm during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with canonical feminist postcolonial scholars such as Mohanty (1988, 1997, 2003) and Spivak (1988), I draw on more contemporary scholarship (Basu, 2023; Dixit & Banday, 2025; Fernández 2023). I also rely on the works of interdisciplinary feminists like Butler (2004a, 2010, 2022) and Puar (2017, 2022) who have made important contributions to advancing feminist postcolonial thought. In particular, Butler's concept of grievability has been at the core of this thesis. According to Butler, grievability is the measure of to what extent a life is considered to be a life, and worthy of mourning were it to be lost (2004a, 2010, 2022). Butler's ideas have helped to address the critical issue of how the colonial legacies of global wealth inequalities determined which populations got to be protected from COVID, and which ones were vulnerable to death or harm. I have used this concept to explore how international media portrayed Nepali lives as ungrievable in their coverage. This concept also sheds light on how frontline workers in the Global South, such as the nurses and journalists in my study, were exposed to exploitation and ultimately rendered disposable during the pandemic.

In addition to postcolonial theory, Articles 2 and 3 also employ feminist media studies, which examines how patriarchal norms are perpetuated in news media coverage, as well as in newsroom cultures. I have drawn on the works of scholars such as Cynthia Carter, Karen Ross, and their collaborators who have extensively studied the marginalization of women in media texts, and in media institutions (Carter et al., 2019; Mendes & Carter, 2008; Ross & Carter, 2011; Ross et al., 2016). This body of work provides a framework for exploring how and why Nepali women are largely silenced and invisible in international news coverage of the pandemic. It has also enabled me to understand the gendered experiences of Nepali journalists I interviewed.

Methodology

This thesis followed a feminist methodological approach, which highlights how gendered power relations affect knowledge-making practices (Burns & Walker, 2005). Feminist scholars do research that is aimed at gender justice and social change (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). I used a qualitative approach, as it was concerned with human experiences and knowledge-making practices, rather than statistics and measurements. Qualitative approaches are favoured by many feminist researchers because they centre the perspectives and lived experiences of marginalized people (Staller, 2016). I used critical discourse analysis and feminist in-depth interviewing as my methods. For Article 1, I carried out a critical discourse analysis of global news coverage of COVID in Nepal. Using this method allowed me to examine how global news media employed Orientalist stereotypes in its portrayal of Nepal in its pandemic coverage. Meanwhile, I did feminist in-depth interviewing for Articles 2 and 3. By employing this method, I was able to explore and amplify the perspectives of Nepali people, who have traditionally been marginalized in the academic discourse. I analyzed the interview data using a feminist approach to narrative analysis. Narrative analysis examines participants' stories and the broader social, political and ideological meanings behind them (Gillespie, 2006). I used this method to shed light on how the participants' positions as gendered Third World subjects affected their narratives of the pandemic.

As a feminist postcolonial researcher, I was attentive to methodological concerns raised by feminist scholars, such as issues of reflexivity, insider/outsider dynamics, voice, and power relations (Burkhard & Park, 2024; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Giwa, 2015; Irshad & Yasmin, 2022; Jabiri, 2024; Kelly, 2020; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). Feminists argue that all knowledge is subjective, and therefore researchers must acknowledge how their own experiences, identities and politics shape their research (Giwa, 2015; Kelly, 2020). Thus, it

was important for me to consider my positionality during every step of the research process. As a racialized and immigrant woman from Nepal who has attained all my formal training in Western educational institutions, I was aware of my complicated position as both an insider and an outsider in relation to my research and research subjects. This was especially important to consider when conducting interviews, as the interviewer carries a lot of authority from being the one to set the agenda and determine the topics of focus (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Using a semi-structure interview guide helped mitigate some of the power differentials by giving participants opportunities to elaborate on topics that were important to them. I also ensured that my research was not extractive, and that my research participants were treated as collaborators and not merely sources of information (see Motlafi, 2021; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). I took certain steps to ensure that participants did not feel exploited, such as compensating them for their time, going by their schedule, and using colloquialisms and a conversational tone that was comfortable for them. I also found that sharing my own personal background (for example, talking about the neighbourhood in Kathmandu where I grew up), and enabling participants to ask me questions also helped mitigate some of the hierarchies and create a more approachable atmosphere.

It was also important to consider that power relations in research can manifest in the process of transcription and translation (see Burkhard & Park, 2024; DeVault & Gross, 2012; Irshad & Yasmin, 2022). The anglophone hegemony of academia marginalizes knowledges from other languages, especially non-European languages (see Burkhard & Park, 2024; Palmary, 2014). While I acknowledge that data interpretation is not an objective process, I have tried my best to ensure that the core meanings in the participants' narratives were preserved, and that their perspectives did not get muffled in the process of transcription and translation (see DeVault & Gross, 2012; Nagar, 2019). Thus, I made sure I recorded non-verbal cues and filler words.

I have tried my best to accurately document the participants' narratives in this dissertation and ensure that their realities have been fairly represented. At the same time, I acknowledge that my background and politics are an inseparable part of my work. I have made some deliberate choices to reject colonial rhetorics, for example by always using the word "Nepali" over "Nepalese" (see Aryal & Melgar, 2017). In retrospect, I wish I had engaged in such practices more frequently and perhaps employed more Nepali lexicon in my work, in the style of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (see Anzaldúa, 1987).

Key Findings

1) COVID, colonialism and grievability

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the inequitable value placed on different lives, which are determined in a large part by global wealth disparity and colonial power relations. Butler uses the phrase "differential allocation of grief" to (2004a, p. 37) to explain how certain lives are considered worthy of mourning in case they were to be lost, while others are not. In the case of the pandemic, those living on the margins of the society, such as Global South subjects, were seen as collateral damage of the global war against COVID, while Western lives, and lives of the rich and powerful, were considered worthy of saving and protection. This was evident in my research findings.

The exploitative, traumatic, and outright dangerous working conditions that the nurses in Kathmandu had to endure is a direct consequence of Western nations poaching nurses from Nepal, in order to care for their own residents (Adhikari, 2024; Pattisson & Acharya, 2023). This practice, rooted in global capitalism and neocolonialism (Bhambra, 2020; Lay, 2024) has left Nepal's hospitals in dire need of healthcare workers, which was further exacerbated during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the existing health workforce was stretched thin and driven to burnout, as was evident in the nurses' narratives. The nurses' stories also reveal that due to the rampant culture of corruption in Nepal's healthcare system, the lives of

the rich and powerful within the country were actively prioritized for saving. This was done through appalling practices such as reserving oxygen cylinders and hospital beds for powerful people during a critical shortage, or blackmailing nurses into choosing which patients were given lifesaving oxygen when it was in short supply. All of this suggests that the lives of the marginalized in Nepal, whether they were nurses, or patients without wealth and powerful connections, were considered ungrievable, and not worthy of mourning were they to be lost to COVID-19. The most harrowing example of the inequitable value placed on lives during the pandemic was the way nurses were initially recruited into COVID wards in Nepal, as revealed by my research participants in their interviews. Unmarried and childless nurses were the first to be picked, for the sole reason that their deaths would be mourned by fewer people.

The inequitable allocation of grievability was also seen in global news media's overwhelming focus on the lives and health of Western climbers in Nepal over that of Nepali citizens, and in their invisibilization of local Sherpa climbers. The dominant discourses in the news suggest that there was a hierarchy of value assigned to lives during the pandemic, where citizens of Western nations were placed at the top. International news media also perpetuated this inequity in their journalistic practices, where precarious journalists from Nepal were sometimes not even provided personal protective equipment and were forced to risk their lives to bring stories to Western readers.

However, interestingly, several journalists I spoke to seemed to be complicit in reproducing the idea that Western lives mattered more than Nepali lives. This was evident in the way they centred the Western audience and prioritized telling stories that appeal to a Western reader, over showcasing the reality of their fellow Nepalis. While this is partially a result of internalized Orientalism (Lau & Dwivedi, 2014; Yan & Santos, 2009), it is also important to consider the pressure that these journalists would have faced to perpetuate West-

centric values of the newsroom that employed them, especially at a time where journalists all over Nepal were losing their jobs and suffering pay cuts.

2) Gendered vulnerability and the silent Nepali woman

Alongside wealth and coloniality, gender has been an important determining factor of vulnerability to COVID-19. Even though coronavirus as a disease does not differentiate between male and female hosts, gendered power relations in society made women more vulnerable to the pandemic. This is supported by my study's findings. The global gendered division of labour means that women across the world are overrepresented in frontline professions (Al-Ali, 2020) and were therefore more vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. As Global South subjects, and as frontline workers in a highly feminized profession, Nepali nurses have borne the brunt of both patriarchy and global health inequities rooted in colonial power relations. Firstly, nurses in Nepal's hospitals had to suffer the consequence of health worker shortage resulting from Western nations poaching Nepal's care workers. Secondly, they had to endure stigma and violence from Nepali society that failed to see the critical life-saving role they played during the pandemic. Ultimately, these women were made available for harm and potential death, in order to protect the lives of the general public.

The global gendered division of labour has also affected women journalists in Nepal. The devastation felt by Nepal's journalism industry during the pandemic was particularly harsh on women journalists, who were more likely to hold precarious positions as freelancers, and less likely to be recruited into high-paying positions in international newsrooms, which were dominated by men (K. Aryal, 2022; Seshu, 2014; Sreedharan et al., 2020). My participants' narratives reveal that women journalists in Nepal had to miss out on career opportunities due to patriarchal gender norms embedded within journalism as well as the Nepali society at large. For example, the fact that almost every full-time staff position at international news bureaus in Nepal is occupied by a man, is a consequence of the patriarchal

gender norms that keeps women from excelling in their careers in journalism. Despite this reality, some women journalists believed that gender inequality is not an issue in journalism, even when they shared examples of how they had personally been disadvantaged because of their gender. This likely stems from the pressure put on women journalists to prove that they are individually competent and not weak. It is also likely that, in order to advance in their careers, women journalists are required to internalize the masculine values of their newsrooms.

Although Nepali women faced marginalization because of their gender, their voices and experiences have been largely ignored, as was evident in international news coverage of the pandemic in Nepal. The absence of Nepali women from international news reports of COVID-19 in Nepal meant that the perspectives of these women were excluded from global discourses of the pandemic. This exclusion meant that issues that were important to Nepali women were omitted from global discourses of COVID-19.

3) Conflicting truths: Media portrayal vs narratives from the frontline

This thesis has examined the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal as portrayed by international media, and as experienced by two groups of frontline workers—nurses and journalists. Each article offers a different perspective on the pandemic in Nepal. Comparing the three, it becomes clear that the version of the pandemic presented to the outside world by international news media looks very different from the reality experienced by frontline workers in Nepal. The nurses' narratives paint a bleak picture of a Global South disaster that involves a collapsed healthcare system, people dying preventable deaths, and female healthcare workers battling burnout and exploitation. The plight of a few Western climbers on Everest comes nowhere close to the scale of suffering that is revealed in the nurses' narratives. Yet, it was the former that dominated international news from Nepal during the pandemic.

What is noteworthy is that Nepali journalists reporting for international media outlets are often the ones responsible for presenting such a distorted version of reality. This is suggested by the narratives of journalists I interviewed, many of whom admitted to centring the Western audience and reporting through a primarily Western lens.

Ultimately, the dominant stories of COVID from Nepal that have been presented to the outside world are skewed towards the experiences of Western tourists and are told using West-centric discourses. In prioritizing stories about climbing and Everest, international media failed to accurately communicate the true scale of impact of COVID-19 on the general Nepali public.

Research Contributions

Scholarship on South Asia in general has historically been dominated by India (Dutta, 2021; Ganesh, 2023; Mandal & Pagedar, 2024). My research fills this important knowledge gap in South Asian scholarship by bringing in knowledge and perspectives from Nepal. While studies on COVID-19 in Nepal do exist, they are concentrated within the realm of medicine and health sciences (Mahato et al., 2020; Neupane et al., 2021; Panthee et al., 2020; Poudel & Subedi, 2020). My research examines the COVID context in Nepal through feminist and postcolonial lenses, something that has not been done before. Therefore, it makes important contributions to both feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Mine is also the first study to examine the pandemic in Nepal through three distinct angles—that of international news media, Nepali nurses, and Nepali journalists working for international news media. In doing so, it highlights how experiences and narratives of the same disaster can vary based on an individual, group or institution's social positioning and relations of power.

As feminist and postcolonial theorists have argued, voices and experiences of women and Global South subjects have been neglected in global knowledge-making (Doshi, 2023).

Creating knowledge of the COVID pandemic that is based on the lived experiences of Nepali people, especially Nepali women, is the most important contribution of my study. Alongside enriching and diversifying feminist, postcolonial, and disaster studies, my research also provides a foundation for future South Asian and Nepali postcolonial feminists to build on.

The papers in this thesis also draw attention to how capitalism and global wealth inequality ultimately lead to the exploitation of Global South workers such as nurses and journalists in Nepal. As previously mentioned, the burnout and exploitation faced by nurses in Nepal is a result of medical workforce shortage triggered largely by nursing brain drain to Western nations (Bhambra, 2020; Lay, 2024; Pattisson & Acharya, 2023; R. Adhikari, 2024). Similarly, my findings show that Nepali journalists working for international newsrooms worked in precarious conditions and were forced to risk their lives in order to bring stories to a distant audience. These cases exemplify the struggles of Global South frontline workers during the COVID pandemic. My research could inform positive policy changes in health and journalism sectors of Nepal. Activists could also use my findings to advocate for better working conditions for journalists and health workers.

Limitations

While this thesis makes important theoretical and empirical contributions, it has its limitations. As a qualitative project, my research provides rich, in-depth insights into the research participants' lived experiences of the pandemic. That said, making statistical generalisations was never the intention of this project. Although I hope that my research will inspire similar studies of other countries or regions, my findings alone cannot be used to make broad assumptions about South Asia or Nepal as a whole.

Data collection for this thesis was conducted during the pandemic, when border closures and travel policies were unpredictable, and risk of contagion was high. Therefore, I had to conduct my interviews through Zoom videocalls that were video-recorded and

transcribed. While the video component enabled me to read facial expressions of my participants, I wasn't able to study their complete body language. My interviews were also conducted in Nepali and translated to English. I have tried my best to preserve the core meanings of the participants' responses but important nuances could have been lost in the process of transcription and translation.

As is the case with any qualitative project, data analysis for this study is subject to my interpretation as a researcher, which in turn is determined by my own social positioning and life experiences. Throughout my research journey, I have been acutely aware of my privileged position as a researcher, and especially as a scholar representing a Canadian institution, whose entire scholarly training has taken place within Western academia. Therefore, it would be dishonest of me not to acknowledge that my worldview—and therefore my research—has been strongly shaped by my academic training and cultural exposure.

Finally, the findings from my research are too big to fit within the pages of this thesis. The requirements of academic writing and publishing have compelled me to be selective and concise. I hope to find other avenues to showcase the findings that I wasn't able to discuss in the chapters of this thesis.

Conclusion: Next Steps

One thing that has been important to me from the get-go is that I don't want this thesis to be sitting on a library shelf gathering dust. I want to find ways to make my findings accessible to the people that would benefit the most from it—health workers, journalists and activists in Nepal. Therefore, I eventually plan on authoring op-eds based on my findings, with the intention of publishing them in Nepali media platforms. I also want to explore opportunities to collaborate with journalists and health workers on a documentary podcast exploring the impact of colonial brain drain in Nepal. While I hope that my articles will find

homes in reputable journals, to be read by other academics and scholars, ultimately, I want my study to benefit marginalized communities in Nepal.

In terms of further research, I believe that my research could inspire similar studies in other Third World contexts, beyond Nepal; for example, comparative studies on international news media representation of COVID-19 in the West vs the Global South. I would also be interested in conducting a future study on Western journalists who covered COVID-19 news for global media, and how their narratives compare to that of the Nepali journalists I interviewed. In the Canadian context, researchers could build on and extend my work by conducting a similar study of Indigenous health workers in rural and Northern communities. These communities are also impacted by colonialism and health inequities, albeit in different ways. It would be interesting to learn about their lived experiences and compare them to my findings from Nepal.

Ultimately, my research shows that COVID-19 was not the "great equalizer" that it was initially thought to be (Mein, 2020, p. 2439). On the contrary, the crisis shone a harsh light on the current broken world order—one where wealthy Western nations are allowed to freely poach Global South labour to care for their populations, while leaving the source countries depleted and unable to care for their own. One where Western travellers' right to adventure gets prioritized over Nepalis' right to survival amidst a deadly pandemic. My findings point to an urgent need to address the systemic disregard of Global South lives, and the omission of their perspectives from the global health discourse. In an increasingly connected world, health inequities don't just threaten the future of Global South people—they also endanger Western lives by allowing diseases to spread easily across countries. As Butler reminds us, "We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (2004b, p. 19). As the climate crisis continues, it is expected that deadly pandemics such as COVID-19 are going to become more common. If we are to survive future pandemics, we

must begin the hard work of undoing legacies of colonialism, and build a more equitable world where all human lives are valued and safeguarded. This is the only path forward.

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Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval

25/11/2022

Université d'Ottawa
Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa
Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE I CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number	S-11-22-8621
Titre du projet / Project Title	Understanding gendered representations of COVID-19 in Nepal: Narratives of global media, female healthcare workers and journalists
Type de projet / Project Type	Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral thesis
Statut du projet / Project Status	Approuvé / Approved
Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	25/11/2022
Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	24/11/2023

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

Chercheur / Researcher	Affiliation	Role
Sadichchha POKHAREL	Institut d'études des femmes / Institute of Women's Studies	Chercheur Principal / Principal Investigator
Mythili RAJIVA	Institut d'études des femmes / Institute of Women's Studies	Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154
Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada

550 Cumberland Street, Room 154
Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie I www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

25/11/2022

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout évènement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completedfour weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

[redacted]
Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer
Pour/For [redacted] Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

550, rue Cumberland, pièce 154 Ottawa (Ontario) K1N 6N5 Canada
550 Cumberland Street, Room 154 Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5 Canada

613-562-5387 • 613-562-5338 • ethique@uOttawa.ca / ethics@uOttawa.ca
www.recherche.uottawa.ca/deontologie I www.recherche.uottawa.ca/ethics

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Text

Hello Nepali Twitter! I am a feminist researcher who is looking to interview women-identifying nurses, and journalists, based in Ktm valley, on their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Please comment or DM me if you're interested in participating, or would like more information!

Appendix C: Consent Form

Consent Form

Understanding gendered representations of COVID-19 in Nepal: Narratives of global media, female healthcare workers and journalists

Principal Investigator:
Sadichchha Pokharel, Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa

Supervisor:
Mythili Rajiva, Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Sadichchha Pokharel, in the context of a PhD thesis.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to understand the gendered narratives and experiences of COVID-19 in Nepal.

Participation: My participation will consist of answering interview questions over videocall for one hour, which will be recorded. During the interview, I will be asked to talk about my experience of the pandemic. I agree to keep my camera on over the duration of the interview. I also give consent to the researcher to video-record the interview. The researcher has assured me that the video recording will only be used for data analysis and writing of the thesis, and will not be used anywhere else. They have also assured me that the recording will be stored securely in a password-protected computer.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I discuss topics that might trigger emotional response and disclose personal information. The researcher has referred me to the following resources developed by Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Nepal (TPO Nepal), a leading psychosocial organization in Nepal, that provide information and guidelines on COVID-19 and mental health: http://www.tponepal.org/covid-19-resources-develop-adopted-by-tpo/#

I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks, including the option to withdraw from or reschedule the call and refuse to answer questions I am not comfortable with. The researcher has also assured me that my identity will be protected and everything I share will be kept confidential.

Faculté des sciences sociales
Institut d'études féministes et de genre

Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies

sciencessociales.uOttawa.ca
socialsciences.uOttawa.ca

120 Université / University
(11002) 11e étage / 11th floor
Ottawa ON K1N 6N5
Canada

uOttawa

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Article 2 (Nurses)

1) Background (Name/Age/Occupation/Place of work)

2) Tell me about your typical workday during the pandemic

3) In what ways did the pandemic affect your everyday life? At work? At home?

4) Have you faced discrimination at work because of your gender, caste or class?

5) Do you think the experience of the pandemic was different for your male family members and colleagues? In what ways?

6) What are some things about being a health worker during the pandemic that you believe is hidden from the public eye?

Article 3 (Journalists)

1) Background (Name/Age/Occupation/Place of work)

2) Take me through the steps of news processing (from the process of you gathering information to its eventual publication)

3) What is your role at the institution where you work?

4) How much influence do you have on what gets published?

5) In what ways is your status as a Nepali national an advantage to your work? In what ways is it a disadvantage?

6) Do you believe that international media has accurately represented the situation of COVID-19 in Nepal? What did they get right/wrong?