5.
Forest as Subaltern Testimony: A Comparative Study of Hawthorne and Tharu Oral Narratives

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Abstract

This research compares Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" with selected Tharu oral forest narratives to analyse the forest as a space of subaltern testimony. In both traditions, the forest functions as a symbolic and cultural site where silenced voices confront dominant power structures. Hawthorne's forest represents a realm of fear, spiritual crisis, and moral ambiguity. The protagonist encounters hidden truths through shadowy figures and unsettling rituals, which expose the suppressed contradictions of Puritan society. In contrast, the forest in Tharu oral narratives emerges as a nurturing archive of ancestral memory, ecological wisdom, and communal identity. These oral narratives preserve histories that dominant social groups often ignore. They empower marginalized individuals through spiritual encounters and ecological harmony. This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach, drawing on subaltern theory and oral-literature studies for close textual analysis. It examines both convergences and divergences in how the two traditions represent the forest. While both recognise the forest as a repository of unspoken truths, Hawthorne emphasizes psychological rupture, whereas Tharu's narratives foreground cultural continuity and collective resilience. This comparative study demonstrates how integrating Western literary texts with South Asian Indigenous storytelling can deepen cross-cultural, ecological, and subaltern studies.

Keywords: Ecology, forest, narrative, subaltern, testimony

Introduction

This research examines the forest as a space of subaltern testimony to explore how the forest functions as a symbolic and cultural site

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where silenced voices confront dominant power structures. This study introduces "subaltern testimony" as the expression of marginalized experiences through symbolic representation and oral-cultural transmission. It operates differently across written and oral traditions. For centuries, forests have shaped human imagination across cultures. It enters stories as a space of danger, mystery, healing, and memory. Marginal or resistant voices speak through this site. In many traditions, the forest allows stories that public spaces do not. It becomes an alternative archive. It preserves the marginalized. It stores the unsaid. It functions like a "scene of speaking" (Spivak 285) for those pushed outside official power. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" offers an example of this dynamic. In this tale, Brown leaves the comforts of Salem village and steps into the dark woods. He enters the space that unsettles the Puritan certainty. He analyses the forest as a place to expose the suppressed fears. The participants in a secret ritual in the forest, like ministers, deacons, and "goodly dames" (Hawthorne 120), reflect the social power. However, they themselves plot against puritan moral life. In this way, Brown becomes an eyewitness to explore the immorality of Puritanism. These instances demonstrate the hypocrisy that the village attempts to erase. This forest in the story no more exists today. Indigenous people of America once knew it, but it found no place in any narratives thereafter. Philip Deloria adduces, "Indians haunt the American imagination precisely through absence" (3). Thus, Hawthorne's Forest exposes double suppression: the suppression of Puritan secrets and the suppression of Indigenous histories that never enter the text.

On the other hand, Tharu oral forest narratives of Nepal carry different traditions. It speaks of the spirits, ancestors, medicinal herbs, and cultural memories at its back. Forest narratives from regions like Bardiya and Dang often portray the forest as a protector against enemies. Some narratives explore the forest as a guide for individuals toward truth, justice, etc. Kesar Lall, in his collection of Nepali folktales, postulates "the forest is not merely a place; it is a companion to the people who live near it" (14). Oral narratives like *Badghar ko Ban* (The Village Chief's Forest), *Banjhakri* (Shaman of the Forest), and stories of *Bhimsen Tharu* (a member of the Tharu Indigenous community) exemplify it. These narratives explore the

forest as a protector against oppressive landlords, wild animals, and unjust rulers. One Tharu story adduces, "The forest knows who suffers, and it does not let a good person walk alone" (qtd. in Guneratne 67). Here, the forest becomes an active agent of subaltern testimony. It carries the memory of exploitation. It provides shelter when society denies justice.

This study introduces disparities in the two forests, namely, one from the West and another from the East. Hawthorne portrays his forest as lacking morality and incapable of healing. It contains a touch of hypocrisy, with a little liberation. The protagonist finds himself in isolation. He returns to his village with distrust and anxiety. He loses faith. He discovers the unbearable truth.

In contrast, the forest in Tharu narratives becomes the voice of the voiceless. It serves as a platform for subaltern groups such as farmers, women, bonded labourers, and hunters. The Tharu forest becomes an exact space to them as Guha analyses how subaltern stories often survive "in fragments, in oral memory, and in spaces where power looks away" (27). Thus, it becomes a shelter for counter-memory.

Therefore, this comparative study explores various aspects of the forest, including political and ethical issues. Hawthorne's forest exposes what Puritan society hides. Tharu oral forest narratives preserve what dominant history forgets. Thus, both traditions explore the forest to articulate marginality, but in distinct ways.

Statement of the Problem

This research addresses gaps left unexplored by earlier studies. It examines how the forest in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" functions as a site for revealing suppressed voices and hidden moral contradictions. Similarly, it analyses how the forest in Tharu oral narratives preserves cultural memory and subaltern histories. Thus, this study places the forests in both traditions at the centre of comparative analysis to investigate their roles as spaces of subaltern testimony.

Research Questions

a) How does the forest function as a space of subaltern testimony in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and in selected Tharu oral forest narratives?

b) In what ways do the two traditions differ in representing the forest as a site of suppressed voices, cultural memory, and resistance?

Objectives

a) To analyse how the forest becomes a narrative medium for subaltern expression in "Young Goodman Brown" and in representative Tharu oral forest tales.

b) To compare the cultural, symbolic, and testimonial roles of the forest in both traditions and identify how each text articulates marginality and resistance through the forest landscape.

Review of Literature

In Hawthorne's "*Young Goodman Brown",* traditional studies focus on Puritan theology, moral psychology, and symbolic ambiguity. Richard P. Adams explores the tale as an exploration of "the inner corruption of the human heart" (78). It analyses humanity's inherent moral frailty. Such explorations treat the forest primarily as a symbol of sin and temptation. Likewise, Richard H. Fogle examines how Hawthorne's Forest "embodies the projections of the troubled self" (112). He analyses Brown's journey as less physical than spiritual. More recent interpretations, such as those of Sacvan Bercovitch, argue that Hawthorne introduces "the anxiety of a society caught between obedience and dissent" (112). He finds the cultural pressures of Puritan ideology. All these studies rarely address the forest as a narrative space where marginalized or silenced histories can speak.

Numerous scholars examine the forest in historical and colonial contexts. Kathryn Derounian-Stodola explores American literary forests that often "erase Indigenous presence while borrowing Indigenous fears" (24). This insight retains its importance, yet it remains limited because it does not fully explore the forest as a potential site of subaltern testimony. Most criticisms continue to interpret Hawthorne's woods as an internal psychological landscape rather than a place where suppressed voices might appear.

Tharu oral forest narratives demonstrate richness in their identities, culture, etc., and thus help preserve them. Arjun Guneratne studies Tharu oral forest stories that transmit "memory,

resistance, and the everyday experiences of people on the margins" (66). These stories focus on preserving the subaltern history. Kesar Lall analyses forest tales which "carry the wisdom of ordinary people whose voices seldom reach official narratives" (14). He finds such stories functioning as grassroots archives, thus helping to elevate the marginalized knowledge. Tirtha Gautam finds "anchors identity in the rhythms of the forest" (67). His study demonstrates that a bond relationship strengthens rather than defaults. Bishnu Prasad Sharma studies Tharu forest tales and analyses them as "the marginalized, the forgotten, and the culturally silenced" (91). His narratives explore the suppressed identities and voices of Tharu due to their dominant cultural discourse. Thus, these studies portray how Tharu forest stories contain collective memory and subaltern perspectives. However, they rarely find a place in comparative frameworks alongside Western texts. The existing scholarship seldom places these narratives in conversation with literary texts from outside South Asia. No study explicitly compares Hawthorne's Puritan Forest with Tharu forest cosmologies through a subaltern lens.

Numerous researchers employ a Subaltern theory to conduct further studies in this direction. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak questions whether the subaltern can truly "speak" within dominant structures. She explores how representation is often mediated and distorted by elite discourse (28). This study engages critically with her argument and suggests that subaltern expression may not always occur through direct speech but through symbolic and environmental forms. In Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," subaltern voices remain indirect and mediated, appearing through irony, ambiguity, and suppressed moral contradictions. It aligns with Spivak's concern about the impossibility of an unfiltered subaltern voice.

In contrast, Tharu oral narratives challenge this limitation by enabling more direct forms of collective expression through storytelling, memory, and ecological relationships. Similarly, this study extends Ranajit Guha's notion that subaltern history survives "in fragments, in oral stories, in rituals" (Guha 3), to include the forest itself as a site of preservation. While Guha emphasizes non-elite historical forms, this research argues that landscape functions as an active archive of subaltern testimony. Thus, this study not only

applies but also reinterprets both Spivak and Guha to accommodate ecological and cross-cultural dimensions of subaltern expression.

Nepali scholars introduce the narrative role of the forest. Mohan Raj Sharma notes that Nepali folk traditions frequently treat the forest as a site of protection and moral teaching rather than as a source of fear (59). He expresses an indigenous worldview in which the natural world nurtures ethical guidance and communal security instead of threatening human vulnerability. Similarly, Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan analyses the indigenous communities who often record their struggles and worldviews through "stories tied to land, forest, and ritual memory" (18). He finds how their cultural identity sustains through place-based narratives that encode resistance, belonging, and historical continuity outside written archives. All these studies analyse the testimonial nature of Tharu forest tales, which remain separate from transnational literary discussions.

Therefore, the reviews discussed above portray research gaps. This research does not find a study of Hawthorne's Forest until today, from subaltern testimony. Similarly, it fails to trace a comparative study of Tharu oral narratives and Hawthorne's story. Moreover, it also finds no analysis to date of the different functions of forests across traditions. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by making the forest a medium.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in examining how landscapes function as carriers of subaltern testimony. A close reading of the forest in Nathaniel Hawthorne's work and in Tharu oral narratives reveals how these spaces function as sites of suppressed voices and cultural memory. This comparative study analyses both the similarities and differences between the two traditions to highlight how marginalized communities relate to and depend on the forest. Moreover, the study demonstrates the literary and cultural richness of forest representations across Western and Indigenous traditions.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design. It interprets texts, analyses cultural contexts, and conducts a comparative reading of two forest traditions. To understand how the forest represents

different cultural systems and articulates subaltern testimony, the study adopts descriptive and analytical approaches. It employs an interpretive method that focuses on meaning, symbolism, and cultural context.

The primary sources of the study include Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and selected Tharu oral forest narratives. The selection of Tharu narratives follows specific criteria: thematic relevance to the forest as a cultural or symbolic space; representation of marginalized or subaltern voices; availability in documented forms such as folklore collections, ethnographic records, or cultural compilations; and recognition within Tharu community traditions. These criteria ensure that the selected narratives meaningfully reflect collective memory and cultural experience. Since Tharu narratives originate in oral tradition, this study treats them analytically as performative and communal texts rather than fixed written artifacts. This study approaches Hawthorne's text through close reading of its structure, imagery, and narrative voice. Similarly, it analyses Tharu oral texts with attention to their cultural function, narrative patterns, symbolic motifs, and collective authorship. The study acknowledges differences between written and oral forms and adopts a flexible comparative framework that respects these distinctions while identifying shared thematic concerns.

Secondary sources of this study include scholarly articles, book reviews, commentaries, academic journals, literary criticism, online resources, works related to subaltern studies and environmental humanities, etc. Textual and documentary analysis, close reading, and comparative literary theory serve as data collection tools. To enhance reliability, the study compares findings from both primary and secondary sources and applies thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in forests, memory, power, and subaltern expression.

Limitations of the Study

This research sets its limits within a comparative study of forest representations in two traditions. The Tharu oral narratives selected for analysis represent only a limited sample of a broader and diverse storytelling tradition. As these narratives primarily exist in oral form, the study relies on published and translated versions, which may not

fully capture their performative and cultural nuances. Similarly, the study examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" as a written literary text. The comparison between an oral tradition and a written text may create interpretive imbalance; however, the study attempts to respect each form on its own terms. Despite these limitations, the analysis seeks to offer meaningful insights into the forest as a site of subaltern testimony.

Moral Crisis in Hawthorne's Forest

Hawthorne's forest absences Puritan authority, thus, it lacks clarity and stability. Goodman Brown enters the forest as a sign of revolt, breaking the social order. He marches through "a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest" (Hawthorne 71). He finds the path gloomy, not because of the forest's darkness, but because it hints at the collapse of institutional power. His coming across of devils in the forest is a sign of a disruption in Puritan control. He adds, "I have been well acquainted with your family as with every respectable person in the village" (Hawthorne 73). This explores the hypocrisy lying beneath Puritan piety. Thus, the forest emerges as a place to demonstrate the hidden truths. This reflects Spivak's idea of a mediated subaltern voice, in which expression appears indirectly rather than through explicit articulation (28). In this way, the Puritan system's collapse in the forest exposes its moral fractures.

Hawthorne's forest fails to empower the subaltern fully. This study explores the prevalence of corruption in the Puritan system, but does not identify an authorizing agency for the subalterns. Thus, the forest appears as a place of haunting rather than a testimony. Brown returns to Salem, his village, and finds it "a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, and a distrustful man" (Hawthorne 81). He remains silent, but his silence speaks of his trauma in the form of societal moral decay. Thus, Hawthorne's Forest lacks morality; it expresses subaltern truths but forbids people from opposing the crisis directly.

Forest as a Nurturer in Tharu Oral Narratives

In contrast to Hawthorne's Forest, the forests in Tharu oral narratives provide spaces for people, offering protection, cultural safety, and a storehouse of their memories. It becomes a substitute for their home,

where they seek shelter. In this context, Tek Bahadur Tharu postulates, "the forest remembers what history forgets" (54). It analyses the forest as a storehouse of ancestral knowledge for them. In one of the oral narratives, a forest spirit advises people, as Sharma asserts, "Do not fear; the jungle is yours, and you are the jungle's child" (Sharma 92). It portrays an ecological intimacy. Thus, the forest in the oral narratives helps the seekers with their safety, security, and shelter. This idea aligns with Chakrabarty's analysis of the Indigenous, who survive in "landscapes and fragments of oral history" (103). It demonstrates how oral narratives become homes for safety, memory, and cultural protection, beyond historical records. In another context, an oral narrative portrays a woman seeking shelter in the forest to save her from the atrocities that the villagers commit. Gautam finds how trees "bend to hide her" (66). This gesture symbolizes how a forest safeguards the subaltern. All these instances portray the forest in Tharu oral narratives as a nurturer, whereas Hawthorne's woods are portrayed as psychological.

Two Dimensions of 'Resistance' in the Forest

Hawthorne and Tharu's oral narratives portray numerous roles of the forest in terms of 'resistance'. Both forests pose typical challenges for the dominant authorities. Hawthorne's forest speaks out against the corruption prevailing in the Puritan community. However, he remains passive while resisting the corruptions. Thus, its resistance is confined to the psychological level only. Brown, the protagonist of the story, encounters socially privileged people in the forest, like the minister, Deacon Gookin, and even his own wife, Faith, as part of a "communion of sinners" (78). This group represents a breakdown of the ideological authority of Puritan society. Brown opposes them through his suspicions, but not through his actions.

On the other hand, the resistance becomes communal in the forest of Tharu oral narratives. For instance, in a tale about "forced labour", the elders say, "The forest will hide us until the danger passes" (Sharma 97). Here, 'resistance' occurs within a group. They rely on knowledge and the memories they have carried for a long time. Buell analyses how the environment in literature has "political meanings" (12) in both traditions, but the functions they serve differ. Thus, the forest of Hawthorne protects the powerful, and the forest of Tharu oral narratives protects the powerless.

Comparative Insight: Two Forests, Two Epistemologies

This research explores the theory of knowledge in relation to Hawthorne's Forest and the Tharu oral narratives' forest. Brown examines heroes' flaws in relation to their spiritual beliefs and Puritan ideology. Such flaws isolate him from them. On the other hand, the forest of Tharu oral narratives imparts knowledge that endures over time. Thus, it benefits the subaltern. In this context, Gautam adduces, "Our wisdom comes from the trees and the soil" (68). Here, this epistemology unites the marginalized rather than separates them. Damrosch examines how symbols shift meaning when viewed across cultures (5). It analyses the forest using various interpretive frameworks. Cultural memory, ecology, colonial histories, and related factors shape the lived experiences of the subaltern. Both the forest traditions question the authorities, but their outcomes vary. Hawthorne's forest results in alienation, silence, crisis, etc., whereas the forest in Tharu oral narratives promotes voices, archives their memories, and resiliencies their culture.

Forest as a Protector of Silenced Histories

The two forest traditions, backed by their own histories, reveal their hidden beliefs in two different ways. Hawthorne's forest explores the sins and hypocrisy of the Puritan society. For instance, Brown encounters a devil who narrates, *"I have been well acquainted with your family with many a woman of the church"* (Hawthorne 74). This revelation exposes the long-suppressed social histories of the forest that the Puritans attempt to erase. On the other hand, the ruling elite from the forest of Tharu oral narratives ignore the long-preserved histories. One of the tribal elders adds, *"Our stories live in the sal trees; they remember battles and losses the landlords never wrote down"* (Sharma 52). All these demonstrate how the forest acts as an archive for the subaltern. Thus, both stories reveal the forest as a repository of erased histories. Hawthorne's story exposes the moral contradictions; Tharu archives embody collective suffering and resistance.

The Forest as Environmental Testimony: Chaos and Respect in Subaltern Worlds

The forest in both traditions functions as an environmental medium

through which the subaltern expresses their truths. However, each cultural context perceives it differently. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *"Young Goodman Brown,"* the forest becomes a space for emerging and destabilising the suppressed realities of the dominant authority. Brown experiences dominance and suppression while marching towards the forest. He asserts, *"This night I must need venture into the forest"* (Hawthorne 71). This marks his entry into a realm where hidden voices and moral contradictions surface. The environment itself participates in this revelation. Hawthorne adds, *"the wind tolled like a distant church bell"* (79). *Thus,* the forest communicates moral truths through natural signs, exposing what Puritan orthodoxy seeks to conceal. However, these environmental signals generate anxiety, chaos, and spiritual uncertainty.

In contrast, Tharu oral narratives portray the forest as a respectful and familiar space where subalterns not only reveal their voices but also sustain them. In one of the tales, the elder narrator asserts, *"In the forest, the spirits speak the truths that men in the village fear to hear"* (Tharu 44). *Here,* the forest becomes a trusted site for ancestral testimony and marginalized knowledge. The forest also acts as an environmental signal and, hence, a source of communication. A hunter recounts, *"The rustling leaves warned us of danger long before any man spoke"* (Tharu 55). *Hence,* environmental signals function as protective communication, guiding those who live at the margins of dominant society. Comparatively, both traditions treat the forest as a speaking environment that testifies beyond institutional authority. However, their meanings diverge. Hawthorne's forest produces chaos, fear, and moral instability, while Tharu narratives frame the forest as a respectful and protective space of guidance and continuity. Thus, environmental signals in both traditions act as vehicles of subaltern testimony, though they generate anxiety in one context and resilience in the other.

Conclusion

This research examines how forests in two traditions become sites of subaltern testimony. Both traditions demonstrate the forest as a centre for revealing hidden voices, suppressed histories, and dominant cultural systems. Hawthorne's forest exposes moral contradictions and community concealments within Puritan society.

In contrast, Tharu oral narratives portray the forest as a space for archiving memory, shaping identity, providing shelter, and guiding ancestral connections. A comparative reading of these traditions reveals clear differences. The Puritan system portrays the forest as morally ambiguous, fearful, and chaotic. The Tharu tradition presents it as familiar, nurturing, and socially integrative. However, in both cases, the forest testifies, either by exposing hypocrisy in Hawthorne or by preserving marginalized experiences in Tharu oral narratives. This study contributes to subaltern studies by expanding the idea of testimony beyond human speech. Its landscapes store histories, communicate themselves, and function as sites of subaltern expression. This shifts subaltern theory toward an ecological dimension, where nature participates in the production and preservation of marginalized knowledge. Thus, this study finds subaltern testimony as both textual and ecological, operating differently across written and oral traditions. This research contributes to comparative literature by bringing a canonical Western text into dialogue with South Asian Indigenous oral traditions. It challenges text-cantered and Eurocentric frameworks, thus validating oral narratives as equally significant sites of literary and cultural meaning. It demonstrates how comparative studies can move beyond thematic parallels and examines how cultural epistemologies shape literary symbols differently. This research opens the way for further comparative inquiry into Western literary texts and non-Western traditions. Future scholars may explore gendered testimonies like Hester Prynne with Tharu or Limbu female forest figures, land ethics and territorial belonging like Tamang or Rabha forest myths, versus *Walden*, etc. Such studies will continue to deepen interdisciplinary connections between literature, ecology, and subaltern cultural histories.

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