



ORAL TRADITION

South Asian Oral Traditions

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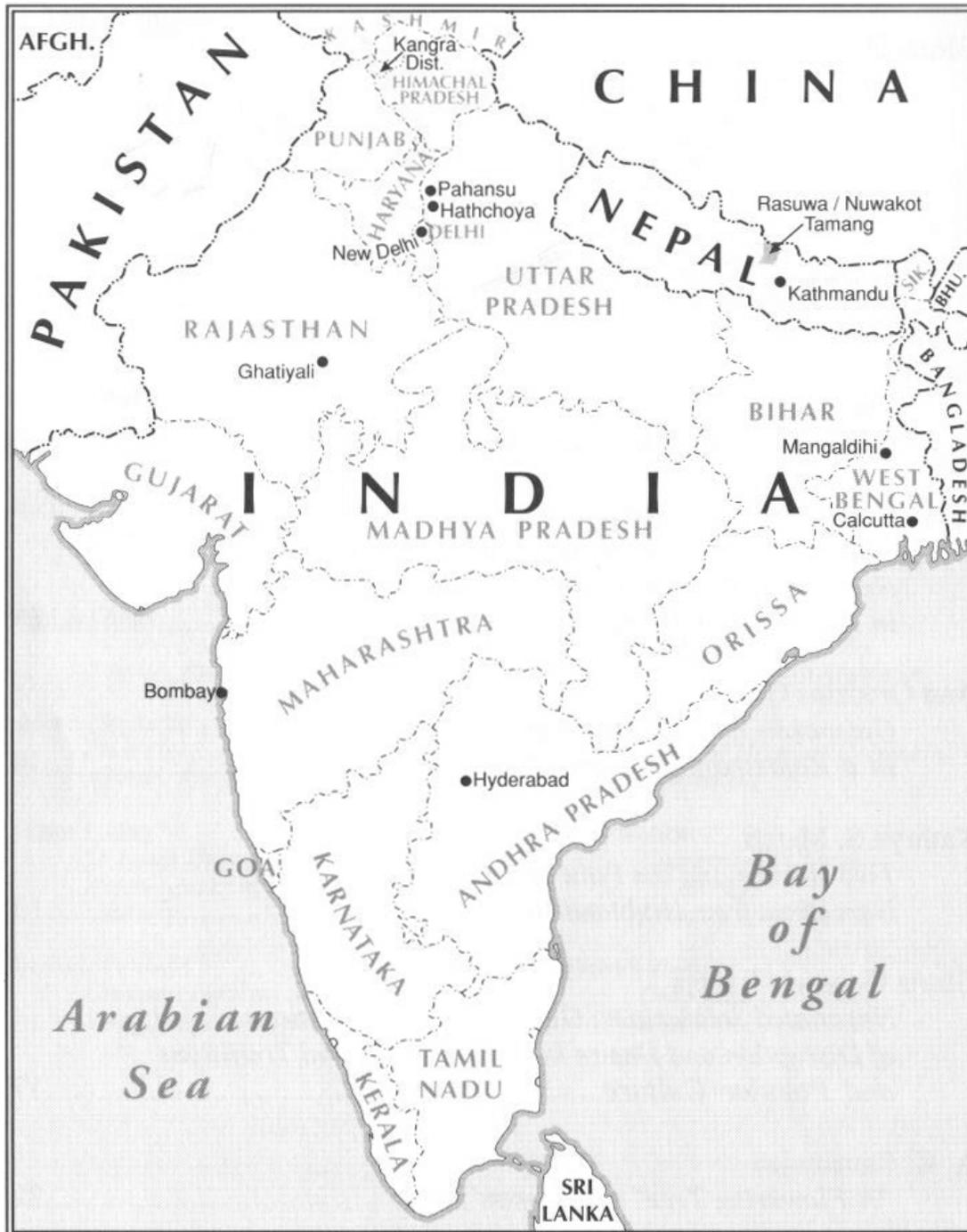
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Introduction
The Paradoxes of Power and Community:
Women's Oral Traditions and the Uses of Ethnography

Gloria Goodwin Raheja

The essays in this volume address theoretical and ethnographic issues concerning oral traditions and women's speech in diverse South Asian communities in northern and southern India and in Nepal, and situated in Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist milieus.¹ Our analyses are brought to bear upon a complex set of questions concerning the relation between women's speech and those cultural traditions and social practices that partly structure their lives. The papers are grounded, first, in an awareness of the colonial, postcolonial, and academic textualizations that so frequently have prevented women's speech from being heard or their silences understood; we are aware that our position as scholars working in the Western academy constricts and compromises our efforts at interpretation, perhaps in more ways than we can yet bring to awareness, yet we write with the conviction that ethnography is nonetheless a possible and indeed critically important undertaking. And secondly, we write with an awareness that the relationship between women's speech, on the one hand, and those more widely known, more audible, and perhaps more pervasive South Asian

¹ These essays are dedicated to McKim Marriott, who has taught so many of us so much about the paradoxes of cultural production in South Asia, and to the memory of A. K. Ramanujan. I hope that my colleagues John M. Ingham and David Lipset will recognize in this introduction (and not wish to disown) the many ways they have contributed over the years to my thinking about cultural dialogue and the possibility of community, in moments of agreement and of disagreement, theoretically and practically. Early drafts of the papers here (with the exception of Sarah Lamb's) were originally presented at a conference at the University of Minnesota, April 20-22, 1991. Other papers, which contributed much to our thinking but could not be included here, were presented by Prabhakara Jha, Frederique Marglin, Mrinalini Sinha, Margaret Trawick, Sylvia Vatuk, and Susan Wadley. The conference was made possible by support from the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota and by a College of Liberal Arts Scholarly Events Fund Grant.

social and cultural conventions that insist that women be controlled and subordinate, on the other, is seldom a simple or unambiguous one.

We might, with A. K. Ramanujan, express this differently by saying that women's oral traditions, like those of men and like South Asian expressive genres more generally, "look like single entities, like neat little tents, only from a distance" (1989:189). Ramanujan himself and the other authors of the papers presented here try to think seriously about this issue, to think through the ethnographic and theoretical difficulties of considering women's speech as critically responding to dominant conventions, without reducing "resistance" to a simple or unequivocally oppositional voice, and without lapsing into a language that would suggest a homogeneity that women's speech does not possess, or an uncrossable boundary between the speech of men and women. We suggest here only some of the possible ways that the oral traditions of South Asian men and women respond critically to one another, mirror one another, comment ironically upon one another, replicate one another, meld sympathetically with one another, or move to subsume or silence one another, while considering always the relations of power as well as community that frame each performance, each act of speaking.

Oral traditions and the possibility of ethnography

In the 1910 volume of *The Indian Antiquary* William Crooke, a well-known administrator and folklorist in colonial India, published a collection of fifty-six "Religious Songs from Northern India," with transliterated Hindi texts and English translations. Song number forty-seven, said to have been sung by a Brahman woman of the village of Chhawara Mau in District Farrukhabad, ends with the following lines:

*Dhan dhan bahuriyā kī bhāg to kokhī meñ lāl dhare.
Dwāre to āye un ke damād; Rānī sakuch rahīñ.
Ab kā, Rānī, sakuch kalī kī rītī yahī.*

Blessed is the mother who has children in her lap.
At the door sons-in-law have arrived, and the chief housewife (Rani) grows
sad (thinking that she would have to part with her daughters).
Be not sad, Rani, this is the way of Kalyug (present [degenerate] age, that
the mothers are deprived of their daughters at certain age).

However awkward we may judge Crooke's translation to be, we nonetheless can hear the poignancy of the woman's lament as daughters are sent off

with their husbands to an alien place, “this custom of a degenerate age” that looms so large in women’s everyday talk and oral traditions even today.

Justifications of the colonial project in India depended partly upon continual attempts to demonstrate that Indians unthinkingly submitted to the dictates of “tradition,” that they were reluctant “to change any custom” (Temple 1899) and were thus unfit to rule themselves. Such recourse to notions of the rigidity of custom had often to do with representations of Indian women, since this colonial legitimizing project depended upon assertions of the “barbarity” of Indian customs concerning widow-burning (Mani 1989) and widow-remarriage (Carroll 1989), of women’s unthinking submission to them, and of the confinement of women to the *zenānā*, the women’s quarter of the house, a confinement that produced, according to the administrator and folklorist R. C. Temple, “a comparatively low mental and moral condition” of Indian women (Temple 1899:21). Much of the work of nineteenth-century folklorists in South Asia was directed towards this end, of providing an authorizing narrative for colonial rule (Amin 1994; Raheja 1996, forthcoming), as they stressed Indians’ unthinking acquiescence to “custom.”

Now in the song from Farrukhabad that concludes with a lament about such a custom, we hear the voice of a woman speaking ironically of the practice of sending daughters away, while sons stay on in the parents’ place. Such a reading, a reading that allows for an ironic apperception of “custom,” would, however, go against the grain of colonial representations of Indians’ adherence to “tradition” and of women’s passive capitulation to it, and so Crooke must find a way, as he writes down this song, of taming its recalcitrance and negating its significance. As in other cases in which he must disarm Indian speech that undermines colonial views of the rigidity and inviolability of caste customs, Crooke invokes the notion of “survivals” to interpret the lines of the song.² He introduces it by saying that “this song indicates the truth of the statement that among the ancient Hindus there was no dislike to the birth of daughters, such as now exists” (338). Crooke thus dismisses the contemporary salience of the lament; since women are capable only of enacting “custom,” and since no woman (or man) could conceivably be critical of “tradition,” he must reckon the song itself to be a survival, a harmless vestige of an earlier age. No woman he saw before him could be credited with sorrow at the departure of her daughter, or of a critique of custom. Crooke erases the connection between the song and the world of Chhawara Mau, the world the singer knew, and he cannot discern in her voice any power to affect that world, or be affected by it.

² See also Raheja 1996:499-500.

Crooke's appraisal of the song also provides evidence of some of the layers of inscription and interpretation that intervene between our reading of the song and the women who sang it almost ninety years ago. He tells us that the song was recorded by the headmaster of the village school, and he writes that his characterization of the Brahman woman's song is based on a remark made by him. A woman's song that would generally not be sung in the presence of men has thus been sung or recited for the male headmaster, so that it could be presented as a piece of "folklore" to the colonial administrator. And Crooke's interpretation comes at least partly from that Indian man; Indian women were not asked to explicate their own songs and narratives.³

But despite the distance between us and the Brahman woman, and despite the colonial attempt to deform the woman's speech by removing it from the world of Chhawara Mau and speaking of it as a mere survival of an earlier time when daughters were cared for and "custom" not so entrenched, the intensity of the woman's lament and her critique of the "custom of a degenerate age" can still be apprehended, as we read the words the headmaster set down. The words *kalī kī rītī yahī* are too eloquent and too insistent to be obliterated entirely by those colonial interpretations and by our own inability to imagine the world that woman inhabited. And thus, although our apprehension of the words of contemporary Indian women may be similarly occluded, the power of those words in everyday life, and their ability to seep through the encrusted colonial and postcolonial interpretations, provides a justification for an ethnographic undertaking, that always difficult and hazardous task of listening and interpreting and writing.⁴

Although the residues of those colonial attempts to construct the South Asian woman as passive and silently submissive to the dictates of "tradition" are still with us, and although attempts were made by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian reformers to silence the often bawdy contestatory oral traditions of Indian women (Banerjee 1989; Kumar 1991), the power of contemporary South Asian women's songs and stories,

³ See Raheja and Gold 1994:14 and Raheja 1995 for further discussion of the ways that women's oral traditions were framed by colonial accounts.

⁴ Sherry Ortner has recently written that "the ethnographic stance holds that ethnography is never impossible" because, despite the powerful political and textual domination to which they are subjected, the voices and perspectives of those we write about push back against the mold of our texts (1995:188-89).

and the persistent critiques of “custom” they often contain, are by now well-documented.⁵

Our readings of the songs South Asian women sing today, of the stories they tell and of the memories they narrate to us, are of course conditioned by our own positionings, and by the distance between ourselves and the women whose speech we record. Writing down the words of others, and attempting thereby to convey something of the tenor of their lives and the power relations in which those lives are led, is a project always fraught with difficulties both epistemological and political. To whom do we choose to listen? Why do we write down some words and not others? How can we extract a “text” from the situation in which the words were uttered and not obscure the particular and perhaps shifting purposes of the speaker and thus the meaning of the words themselves? How can we relate the stories of pain and of contestation that women’s words sometimes evince without then lapsing into the colonial and postcolonial rhetorics that see Indian women as powerless “victims” of an oppressive “tradition”? Is it possible for us to listen to these words today, to interpret them in ways that are not tied, inextricably and hopelessly, to the colonial interpretations that have so shaped the histories of anthropology and of folklore? How can we understand women’s complex perspectives on such “customs,” and how can we think about their possible resistance to them without regarding the social world they inhabit as entirely fractured and splintered by those contending voices? How can we understand the differences in the speech of women and men without reifying and essentializing those differences? These have been for us the most compelling questions as we set about the task of trying to make sense of the words that women spoke to us and of the oral traditions they performed in our presence.

Oral traditions, gender, and the performance of cultural critique: beyond binarisms

Oral narratives, whether song, poetry, story, proverb, or autobiographical narrative, are always situated communicative practices that may serve to reproduce a social order, to critique and undermine it, or something in between (Bauman and Briggs 1990). Anthropological and folkloristic work on women’s oral traditions in India and elsewhere has over the past ten years or so begun to demonstrate that gender ideologies

⁵ E.g., Flueckiger 1996; Grima 1991; Holland and Skinner 1995; Narayan 1986; Raheja and Gold 1994; Oldenburg 1991; Trawick 1986, 1988, 1991.

and kinship practices are almost always subject to such performed critiques. Initially, the task seemed simply twofold: first, to discern the gendered nature of oral traditions (and of expressive possibilities more generally), to demonstrate the diversity of “tradition” and the fact that oral performances were not illustrative of a homogeneous “native mind” but instead were intimately tied to the social positionings (gender, class, caste, and so forth) of those who spoke or sung them; and second, to understand that these performances do not simply reflect a previously existing and congealed social reality, but instead constantly create or recreate, authorize or undermine the social practices and cultural forms of the everyday world of singers and speakers (Gal 1991; Sherzer 1987). We began to see then that we could not understand oral traditions without grasping the power relationships that informed the lives of the tellers and singers, and that songs and stories might either uphold or challenge the ideologies that sustained those relations of power. We could no longer accept the decontextualizing and depoliticizing of folklore that so characterized the interpretive strategies of Crooke and so many others like him.

And we began then to speak of South Asian women’s spoken and sung resistance to the ideologies of gender and kinship that circumscribed their lives. The idea of resistance has been an enticing one to anthropologists and folklorists: it provided us with one kind of language with which to think about the diversity of narrative traditions within a folklore community; it allowed us to think about relations of power and challenges posed to them in “traditional” expressive forms; it allowed us to begin to counter the colonial and postcolonial representations of the silence and the passivity of Indian women; and it provided one kind of framework for thinking about the dynamic relationship between narrative texts and social life, about the fact that such texts do not simply mirror already given social differentiations and hierarchies of power, but may in fact come to constitute or reconstitute them. Yet some difficulties present themselves when we consider how this idea has shaped interpretations of gender and community.

Some of the most influential studies of resistance were concerned with struggles between oppressed groups and more or less external sources of domination, especially the state and state capitalism (Scott 1985, 1990) and, in South Asia, colonial governments and local elites whose power had been buttressed by colonial rule.⁶ Because of the interest in understanding the peasant’s awareness of his social world, there has been in this work

⁶ See, for example, the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars, as illustrated by Bhadra 1985; Guha 1982, 1983; Hardiman 1984.

some attention paid to critical voices evident in the folklore that has been preserved from the nineteenth century.⁷ But this focus on external domination and collective responses to it has meant that there has been little attention to challenges to “community consciousness” (Hardiman 1992) from within. For example, in the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars there have been few studies of women’s challenges to the patriarchal hierarchies that were so frequently reinforced and rigidified by colonial rule,⁸ apart from Guha’s reading (1987) of the speech of women preserved in fragments of judicial records concerning a death brought about by abortion. Although Hardiman, for example, points out that there is often a tension between community-based solidarities and internal cleavages based on gender, caste, class, religion, age, and so forth, the latter most often tend to recede into the background as communal resistance to colonial rule or to landlords outside of the immediate peasant community moves to the center of the analyses.⁹ He concludes that “community-based resistance does not therefore preclude the self-assertion of subordinate groups within the community” (1992:10).

Conversely, in Guha’s reading of strategies of resistance to those patriarchal practices that were often reinforced by colonial policy, women’s muted but critical speech is read only in terms of an entirely cohesive solidarity of women, utterly opposed to a solidarity of men, a unified female voice opposed to an equally unified male voice.¹⁰ And in studies of women’s oral traditions more generally, it is those challenges to internal hierarchies and the challenges to shared discursive forms that come most often to the fore, as their always dialogic relationship with ideas of community drop out of view. Thus, while studies of resistance such as those of the Subaltern Studies scholars often lose sight of the fractures in

⁷ E.g., Arnold 1984; Guha 1983. But there has been in this work, as Ortner (1995:180-81) points out, insufficiently detailed textual analyses of the words peasants spoke and of the cultural texts that inform their world.

⁸ On the ways that colonial rule, despite its insistence on the “reform” of practices seen as oppressive to women, rigidified “custom” and worked to the disadvantage of women, see for example Chowdhry 1994.

⁹ Ann Gold has elsewhere made a related point: not only have women’s modes of resistance been given less attention than male subaltern struggles in this literature, but it seems that the rituals and expressive forms in which male subalterns enact and give voice to political struggle have been subject to far fewer dismissive gestures, in academic writing, than have women’s speech and women’s ritual (forthcoming).

¹⁰ I have discussed Guha’s argument at some length in my article in this volume.

collective identities that open up at gendered sites, feminist scholars and scholars of women's oral traditions often lose sight of the local solidarities of kinship and community without which human life is impossible. But in such internal contestations, as Hardiman himself points out (1992:10), the discursive struggle is over the definition of the nature of the community itself. Such struggles over the definition of community, and the strategies through which both resistance to internal hierarchies and the bonds of community can be maintained, need to be pulled to the center of our analyses of oral traditions.

It now seems clear that we need to move beyond dichotomous modes of analysis, and beyond that earlier twofold task of examining the gendered aspects of oral traditions and the ways in which such traditions are at least partly constitutive of the social world in which they occur. The challenge now, it seems, is to keep in simultaneous analytical and ethnographic view those two kinds of identities and two kinds of solidarities: solidarities that find their justification in reference to a community of kinship ties and local ties, and the struggles within such communities that find their justification in reference to the claims of those who discover that that larger solidarity is all too often predicated upon their own disadvantaging. How might analyses of the politics of women's speech come to terms with this tension? How might women themselves, and men as well, take a stand with respect to that tension in their songs and oral narratives? And how might we begin to interpret these multiple solidarities and overlapping ties without lapsing into a rhetoric that speaks, simplistically, only of women's complicity with the community hierarchies that seem so often to prevail?

Women's speech and women's oral traditions have often been dismissed as powerless and ineffective, partly because the critiques they pose seem so seldom to entail a thorough and unambiguous opposition to male discourse and practice and, in South Asia, because they may appear so seldom to define a solidarity of women opposed to male solidarities. But the paradox of women's critical voices coexisting with a politics among women ought not to confound us, but rather make us more aware of the multiple projects in which women must engage during their daily lives and the multiple hierarchies with which they must contend. The power of women's speech and the spoken and sung critiques that we have heard in it, and their value to South Asian women themselves, might in fact come precisely from their indeterminacy, from their ambiguities and complexities and shifting purposes. It may come from the oscillating boundaries of the collectivities that women strategically and selectively define and value in their oral traditions. What looks to some observers like inconsistency and even co-optation may in fact be strategic deployments of different

relationships that advance a woman's interests in different ways at different times of her life, or when the configurations of power around her shift from day to day.

We look therefore, in the essays that follow, not at a monolithically defined "women's perspective" that is always unambiguously opposed to a dominant or male perspective; we do not dismiss women's speech when it appears to stress mutuality rather than opposition to male kinsmen; we do not dismiss as necessarily ineffective women's speech that stresses differences among women and the politics of women's relationships with one another. We have discerned that there is no unitary South Asian female voice, because women are always positioned by caste and class and age and experience, and we do not therefore dismiss as unimportant those resistant stances that are not predicated on a solidarity of women. Given the fact that the privileges of upper-caste and economically well off women are often predicated on the labor of other low-caste women (Kapadia 1995; Wadley 1994), we recognize that "resistance" cannot everywhere be the same for South Asian women, and that their expressive forms might therefore imagine and critique gender hierarchies somewhat differently. We recognize that South Asian women, as women elsewhere, are engaged in multiple projects and that these projects may collide with one another or smoothly dovetail, and thus women's resistance may at times appear as ambivalent and ambiguous, and too complex to easily classify by the terms of Western social science.¹¹ And we recognize too that an apprehension of the realities of power does not mean that we can acknowledge only a singleminded oppositional stance on the one hand, or a capitulation to power on the other, in the words women speak to us and in our hearing (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:45). By not expecting that women either unthinkingly submit to or unambiguously oppose male projects and the ethos of patrilineal kinship (and not devaluing their always complex intentions), and by not expecting that women must speak in a single voice, we think that we are able to more adequately recognize them as authors of their own complexly multiple projects and strategic interventions, projects that are often imagined and evoked in the stories they tell and the songs they sing.

¹¹ See Ortner 1995:190-91. Pandey has made a similar observation with respect to the consciousness of low-caste Muslim weavers in nineteenth-century India (1984:269).

Alternative solidarities and dialogues across forms of local difference

As Kathryn March points out in this volume, we have had a double purpose in writing the essays presented here: “to gain knowledge of meanings generated across the profound chasms of difference between ourselves and the voices we solicit in the anthropological field, and to discern what possibilities exist for dialogue across forms of local difference” within the communities we have studied. We are interested primarily in the ways that women’s speech stakes out its encounters with authoritative representations of gender, kinship, sexuality, and authority. What then have we found to be the sources of the complexities of those encounters ?

Women speak in many voices

In “The Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale,” A. K. Ramanujan translates one of many South Asian oral narratives in which a woman’s agency is dependent upon her capacity for speech and on her ability to ensure that her words will be heard; he suggests some of the ways that women’s tales may differ from those told by and about men in their insistence on the importance of speech. But the paradox of a stress on gender and positionality, and on what Ramanujan calls the universe of women’s discourse, is that it can deprive our interlocutors of that agency so much stressed in the stories themselves. It has this effect if we come to imagine that “women’s speech” is a whole and discrete and homogeneous universe, in which individual creativity or complex and shifting and ambiguous perspectives are not to be found.

South Asian women are of course multiply positioned—by caste and class, by religious affiliation, by individual circumstances, by age, and by their multiple and shifting locations within webs of kinship connections. While we have just begun to understand how women’s expressive traditions and everyday talk in South Asia are inflected by caste and class differences (the work of Margaret Trawick and Joyce Flueckiger being perhaps the most interesting to date on this problem), we are in these essays primarily interested in the ways that oral traditions come to be nuanced and inflected by those positionings that change through one woman’s lifetime, or shift from moment to moment as she foregrounds one kinship positioning (that of wife, say, or sister or daughter) or one set of experiences or intentions over another.

In “Singing of Separation: Women’s Voices in and about Kangra Songs,” Kirin Narayan has written of the tendency to think of expressive forms as somehow providing an understanding of the subjectivity of the members of the culture in which they are found, or, if such a monolithic conceptualization has been critiqued in favor of an emphasis on performance and positionality, of the subjectivity of some given subgroup within the culture. Yet as she demonstrates, an awareness of women’s reflexive commentaries on their own oral texts reveals that although women’s songs may be collectively performed, their meanings are never fixed and uniform but rather complex, multifarious, and often ambiguous. Each song, each set of images or thematic elements, is situated “at the intersection between collective symbolic forms and individual subjectivities,” and women draw upon and interpret these meanings selectively and strategically in relation to their own unique experiences, memories, and aesthetic pleasures.

While Narayan focuses on individual experiences that cause songs to lodge differently in the hearts and minds of particular women and to have different emotional resonances for them, Raheja’s paper in this volume stresses the fact that women’s songs from northwestern Uttar Pradesh consistently critique the male-oriented solidarities so valued in local ideologies of patrilineal kinship, and that they do so not from a unified female position but from the constantly shifting and often contradictory perspectives of daughter, sister, or wife. Thus, although women’s singing groups almost always include women who have married into the village as wives, others who have returned from their marital homes to visit their natal kin, young unmarried girls, newly married brides, and older mothers-in-law alike, each song they sing together speaks of the very different and often contradictory longings of a sister or a wife. A sister hopes that her brother will not forget her as she goes away to her husband’s place and as he must attend to the demands of his wife, while a wife longs for intimacy with her husband and castigates him, and often his mother and sisters as well, if he attaches too much importance to ties to them or to his brothers. In their oral traditions women thus stake out claims to two different and often contradictory kinds of solidarities, that between brother and sister and that between husband and wife. Disparate though the two alternative solidarities may be, the valuation of either one goes against the grain of patrilineal ideology, with its stress on the unity of male patrikin and the subordination of the marital bond and women’s emotional needs to its demands. Thus women’s oral traditions articulate a critical perspective, though not necessarily in terms of a female solidarity opposed to a solidarity of men, and not in terms of a unified and homogeneous female

voice. As the paper points out, a woman may rely upon the alternative solidarities celebrated in oral traditions in moments of crisis: she may invoke the solidarity of brother and sister if she is mistreated or rejected by her husband and his kin, or she may insist upon the importance of the *joṛā*, the husband-wife “pair,” to diminish the isolation, dependency, and subordination she may experience in her conjugal place. That such strategizing must often take place in opposition to other women is indeed an unfortunate consequence of the more audible and more publicly proclaimed requirements of patrilineal kinship in the region; but the presence of this evidence of a politics among women ought not lead us to dismiss this very real struggle against the burdens imposed by such kinship conventions as wholly ineffective, wholly self-defeating.

Like Narayan, Sarah Lamb writes of the way that recurring narrative themes resonate with the ambiguities of particular women’s life experiences. She focuses her investigation on the personal narratives women told to her and to other women, in interviews and in the flow of everyday conversations, as they scrutinized and critiqued the social worlds they inhabit. “The Beggared Mother: Older Women’s Narratives in West Bengal” marks an advance in our understanding of gender and South Asian oral traditions in its focus on the voices and perspectives of older women, and on the tales of kinship reciprocities and their waning that appear over and over again in the stories they tell. In the *vratakathā* ritual narratives typically read and recited by young married women for the protection of their husbands and their children, older women are viewed as commanding respect and deference; they are said to be “like deities” and to be owed unending devotion and support in return for the loving care they had lavished on their children. But Lamb tells us that older women take little interest in these “official” religious narratives; when they tell their own stories in courtyards and village lanes, it is the realities of widowhood and isolation and the failure of just that sort of family reciprocity that come to the fore. A woman goes away from her natal kin at her marriage, her daughter goes away at her own, and a husband may shun her or die, leaving her as a widow. Only a son, who comes from a woman’s own body and does not go away, can create an enduring identity. And so when the obligations of that bond are forgotten or made subsidiary to the son’s ties to his wife, a woman feels impoverished indeed. Here too then we do not hear a generic female voice, or a voice that speaks of women’s solidarity against an oppressive and wholly male world. Yet the narratives recited by elderly Bengali women are poignantly critical of the contradictions and economic and emotional vulnerabilities most women experience as they move from

natal place to conjugal place, and from young motherhood to old age and, often, widowhood.

Thus, although the papers in this volume cannot attend to all of the many ways in which women's speech is grounded in specific rather than generically female experiences, they do suggest some ways of thinking about issues of agency and critical awareness, as women strategically invoke different interpretations of marital relations, different solidarities, and different images of kinship reciprocities in their everyday struggles for dignity and for survival.

The Indeterminacy of Meaning

How can a collectively performed song or story speak to a woman's particular predicaments, experiences, and memories? Working in Tamil Nadu, Margaret Trawick (1986, 1988) has written of individually composed songs that through eloquent poetic imagery refer explicitly to the hardships and deprivations the singer has had to bear in her own life. Such individual women's songs have seldom been documented for any other part of South Asia. Yet women respond individually to the collectively performed songs and narratives: a woman who has lost a brother may feel overwhelmed at hearing a wedding song that speaks of a brother's sadness as his sister goes away; a woman who has been abandoned or scorned by her husband may well feel a particular poignancy when she sings of a husband's "foreignness." Several of the papers in this volume address the question of how individual meaning is made from these collective oral performances or shared discursive forms, and in so doing illustrate the multiplicity of meanings that pervade each image or theme in women's oral traditions.

The older Bengali women who spoke of their own life stories with Sarah Lamb frequently used the image of the elderly impoverished beggar in their narratives. Some of these women, whose relatives could not provide for them, did indeed beg in order to eat. But many others made use of the image of beggary to speak, poetically, of other things. "Even if not literally beggared," Lamb writes, "these women narrate circumstances in their own lives that make them, in significant respects, like beggars. The theme of the mother as beggar works here . . . as a polyvalent metaphor conveying a loss of love, vulnerability to poverty, and the ephemeral character of a woman's identity over the life course." And the image of the beggared mother speaks also to the vicissitudes of a woman's life in "modern society" (*adhunik samāj*), when pursuing a job and an independent life in the city may, for a son, take precedence over obligations to his kin.

Similarly, Narayan tells us that the theme of male absence, a common one in Kangra oral traditions as well as those of north India more generally, sometimes, for the women who sing the genre called *pakharu*, refers quite literally to enforced separation from one's husband brought about by the economic necessity of migrant labor. But, she continues, the image of the absent husband does many other things as well. It can serve as a criticism of the men who stay at home and may not support their families adequately; it may serve as a commentary on the emotional distance and not just the geographical distance between men and women; and it may also serve as an indictment of the isolation and alienation a woman often experiences within her husband's extended family, an alienation that is only heightened when he goes away.¹² Or it can, according to Narayan, speak to the sorrow a woman experiences at the unfaithfulness or death of her husband. Thus the very traditional theme of separation, *virāha*, takes on many varied and often individual meanings, some of which are connected with enduring sorrows of being a woman, others with Pahari women's experiences concerning the demands of a market economy.

In Joyce Flueckiger's contribution, "There are Only Two Castes: Men and Women': Negotiating Gender as a Female Healer in South Asian Islam," we see that a woman's narratives may hold meanings for her audience that are different from her own. As the Muslim female healer called Amma constructs an account of her life and her role in the public domain, she has before her no model for female action to which she can connect her own authority and innovative practices; she thus sees her own life and accomplishments as lying outside of the boundaries and potentials of her gender. Yet as women hear her story, Flueckiger suggests, the boundaries of the existing repertoire of possible female stories expands, as the women themselves stress not Amma's uniqueness, but rather the possibility that any woman could do what she does with the proper literacy skills. A narrative that is not subversive at the outset, for the teller, takes on a different and somewhat more challenging meaning for those who listen to it. Again we see the impossibility of erecting a boundary between speech that is complicit with gender hegemonies and speech that subverts them, and we see too the ambiguities of any resistant stance.

¹² This latter is a pervasive theme in women's songs from Uttar Pradesh as well, as described in Raheja and Gold 1994:121-48.

Dialogue and disjunction: the paradoxes of gender and community in South Asian oral traditions

An awareness of disjunction and difference in oral traditions and in the politics of everyday life, as men and women evince their often distinct understanding of the worlds, ought not to blind us to the ways that human beings nonetheless also struggle to maintain some sense of the whole, some way of holding on to those often tenuous bonds of intimacy and communal life with one another, across the differences. This problem—of simultaneously holding in view both power, positionality and difference on the one hand, and culture, community and a sense of the whole on the other—seems to me to be a central theoretical dilemma across the disciplines. In the ethnographic settings here, for example, women speak not just as women, but as members of a community in which solidarities of many kinds—of husband and wife, of a mother with her children, of women, of members of one caste, and of groups of kinsmen of many and various sorts—may all come into play as songs are sung and stories told, as conversations take place, as work is done and the myriad exchange relationships in which people are involved unfold. That sense of community, of bonds of intimacy across difference, of course comes into play when communities are confronted by others who threaten their identities, their livelihoods, and their security, but they also come into play with the perception of crisscrossing bonds of loyalty, affection, and interdependence. It is just this complexity of relationship, of loyalties and affections, and all of the ambivalences and ambiguities with which they are attended, that necessitates the writing of a detailed ethnography of women's speech, if we are to understand the ways in which women's oral traditions come variously to grips with ideologies of domination. And men speak not just as men, from impermeably gendered masculine subjectivities, but from their own particular positionalities, sometimes silencing or overpowering women's speech to be sure, but sometimes seeking to create mutuality or to understand the hardships of a woman's life, as is particularly evident in March's ethnography from Nepal. Elucidating these paradoxes of disjunction and community is an ethnographic as well as a theoretical problem, since it is usually only in the micropolitics of daily life that such complex and contextually shifting subjectivities might become evident, and their traces discerned in everyday talk and in the performance of oral traditions.

To say this is not in any way to minimize the existence of relations of power, or to minimize women's resistance to them. It is, to be sure, a hallmark of much colonial and orientalist rhetoric to imagine that women in

India, Africa, and elsewhere are only victims of their men, to see the colonial project as one entailing the “saving of brown women from brown men,” as Gayatri Spivak has put it (1985:121). And so any project that sees itself as seeking to undermine orientalist representations insofar as gender is concerned may find it important to think critically about any theoretical stance that requires it to see women’s interests as always and everywhere opposed to those of men, or to regard men as always and everywhere acting only to wield power over women.

Colonial studies of oral traditions in India, involved as they were in the effort to provide a justification for the “reform” of Indian custom, often portrayed men’s interests and perspectives as altogether different from those of women. Sir Alexander Cunningham, for example, in his *Report of a Tour in the Punjab*, provided the Hindi text and English translation of a song for the deity Gugga. He had collected the song in the town of Sirsawa, just twenty miles or so from the village of Pahansu, in which I recorded most of the songs I write about in my essay for this volume. Sirsawa was said to be the birthplace of Bachal Rani, the mother of Gugga, and the song tells of his mother and the birth. It ends with a comment on those who are awake as Gugga is born in the middle of the night:

In the city of the Raja, who sleepeth, who waketh?
Awake are the women grinding the weary mill!
Awake are old women, and women labouring with child!

Cunningham then goes on to comment on the authorship of the song: “The last lines afford a most convincing proof that this song was the composition of women. No man, and certainly no Hindu man, would have thought of the weary lot of the three classes of women who alone of all the Raja’s subjects could not sleep on such a happy occasion.”

Although I see no reason to doubt that this song is indeed a woman’s song, in asserting that “no Hindu man” would be capable of imagining the hardships of women, Cunningham drew the seemingly inevitable colonial conclusion concerning Hindu men’s victimization of women and thus the necessity of colonial intervention in Indian domestic life.¹³

In Raheja’s ethnographic interpretation of men’s and women’s songs from northern India, it is indeed the disjunction between the gendered

¹³ For some representative discussions of such colonial interventions in the area of inheritance law, see Carroll 1989, Chowdhry 1994, and Viswanathan 1995; in the area of criminal law and the colonial rigidification of gender hierarchies, see Guha 1987 and Singha 1996.

perspectives that comes most to the fore. And yet even there, in a discursive universe in which women speak of the limitations placed upon them by the norms of patrilineal kinship and men's traditions do not, there is always the recognition by women that men too may harbor feelings that are at odds with official ideologies, that they must act behind the scenes to circumvent them (see also Raheja and Gold 1994:55-56, 133-35).

Kathryn March's analysis of oral performances in a Tamang community of Nepal is particularly focused on the possibility that the "pain of separation" that women endure when they move at marriage from natal to conjugal kin is indeed imaginatively recognized in men's song performances. Unlike the situation in most South Asian Hindu communities, Tamang songs are not thought of as belonging exclusively to men or to women, and the images and points of view contained within them are thus accessible to both. And like Narayan and Lamb, March also suggests that the theme of separation, a theme that is ubiquitous in South Asian oral traditions, is one that can take on many meanings and significances. In this Buddhist community, she points out, the image of women's separation from their natal kin is invoked in song and narrative not so much to challenge the gendered arrangements that produce the pain of rupture as a central fact of women's lives and not of men's as to "call to mind the shared human embeddedness in a cycle of painful rebirths." And yet the element of critique, or at least the acknowledgment of the painful consequences of kinship ideologies, is never absent from the oral traditions and everyday talk both of women and of men.

Although March comments that the growing Hindu hegemony over Tamang Buddhists in Nepali society may mean that such expressions of mutuality in oral traditions and everyday life could diminish in favor of more hierarchical ones, it also seems clear that such dialogic constitution of male and female expressive forms often surfaces in Hindu oral traditions as well. In her analyses of songs and epics from a Rajasthani folklore community, Ann Gold argues that there is a difference between attitudes exhibited in public performance contexts, in which spousal intimacy and woman's forthright speech are discouraged and men must feign indifference to the "species of women," and those often in evidence in private settings, in which intense emotional engagement is often valued and women's voices need to be heard. Women's songs, Gold suggests, often comment on the ironies and the paradoxes surrounding the existence or at least the possibility of private spousal intimacy that is at odds with more public requirements. In examining spousal dialogues as they are rehearsed in both men's and women's folklore, Gold is able to explicate some of the ambiguities surrounding representations of women's forthright speech and

demanding voices. Women's folklore genres, writes Gold, "posit the legitimacy of female desires and place a strong positive value on their fulfillment." In men's genres, on the other hand, women demand and threaten, curse and beseech, yet their desires often go unfulfilled. Gold, however, argues that in the elaborate claims and counterclaims that are made by men and women in men's folklore, both men and women in the audience experience the tension between conflicting cultural logics and come to reflect upon the emotional costs of kinship practices, gender hierarchies, and religious ideologies. And if male prerogatives more often win out in men's oral traditions, audiences are at least reminded of the burdens that women, as well as men, must bear because of it.

We have come, then, a long way from Ranajit Guha's solidarity of women opposed to a solidarity of men, and a long way from thinking of "community" as if fractures within it could somehow be ignored or held in analytical abeyance. South Asian expressive forms give evidence neither of unambiguously bounded gendered perspectives nor of an undifferentiated "folk" tradition. They give evidence neither of women's unequivocal opposition to those ideologies of gender, kinship, and hierarchy that seem so very pervasive nor of their capitulation to them. Songs and narratives seem rather to posit a complexly figured and always shifting social reality, in which women readily see that their projects and their interests may sometimes be furthered by stressing gendered solidarities and at other times by forging ties with brothers and sons or demanding and valuing marital intimacy, often in ways that undermine the authority of "custom" but often, too, in ways that value the crisscrossing and sometimes shifting ties that constitute community over against the fragmentations and absences brought about by the demands of modernity or by exclusive solidarities.

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Singing from Separation: Women's Voices in and about Kangra Folksongs

Kirin Narayan

“Women are always singing,” observed Brinda Devi Sud,¹ a middle-aged village woman in Kangra, North West India, in 1991. She had been leafing through a sheaf of Kangra women's song texts that I had transcribed, and now, speaking the local dialect, she paused to share her thoughts. “Whenever you go to a ritual gathering, women are singing,” she said. “Some songs you know, and some you just sing along with. Some songs attract you, they go sit inside your heart. That's how you learn songs.”

The relationship between songs (*gīt*) and hearts/minds (*dil*), a theme echoed by other female singers in Kangra, addresses an enduring issue in social theory. Expressive forms like folksongs and folk narratives have tended to be conceptualized as speaking unproblematically for all participants in the culture under study. Scholars have scrutinized such expressive forms, often cast as “texts” in order to discern the (singular) “native's point of view” or comprehend the mind of a (monolithic) “folk.” With the rise of a paradigm emphasizing performance, by the 1970s scholarly focus moved from texts alone to account also for the creativity of situated performers in a diversity of contexts (i.e. Bauman 1977, Finnegan 1977). However, performers have rarely been given a chance to explicate their own texts, artistry, or emotional response. Despite Alan Dundes' prescient call for “oral literary criticism” (1966), and despite the development of reader response and reception theory in literary studies, it remains rare to find scholarly texts in which singers are invited to comment on their songs (Abrahams 1970, Claus n.d., Narayan 1995).

The situation that holds generally applies also to India. In addition to the other essays in this collection, there is a vast and growing body of scholarship on women's songs from diverse regions of India now available

¹ Like all the names I use in this paper, this is a pseudonym.

in English.² Women's singing is usually associated with auspiciousness (cf. Henry 1988:110-11); particularly in rural areas, women assemble to sing for rites of passage and other occasions marking good fortune (for example the building of a new house, the acquisition of a job, and so on). Since women sing in groups, it is easy to understand why scholars might hear songs as speaking for women, collectively conceived. Indeed, scholars generally have interpreted song texts as representing the subjectivity and emotions of a generic (albeit sometimes caste-specific) Woman in a particular regional context. Songs thus become textual *objects* on which general theoretical statements about women can be based rather than the lived *practices* of reflective subjects (cf. Williams 1991:421-22). Ironically, in speaking for the collective woman's voice in songs, scholars have tended to bypass the voices of actual singers.

In Kangra, a favorite song genre among older women singers is *pakharu*, which describes the travails of married life. The separation of husband and wife is a recurrent theme in these songs. In this paper I focus on representations of absent husbands, complementing the texts of songs with commentaries from singers in whose memories the songs lodge. Methodologically, I wish to demonstrate the importance of thinking about oral traditions in terms of both text and commentary. Theoretically, I argue that the ethnographic generalizations that emerge from equating texts with collective points of view can be refined through attention to performers. Thus, male absence in Kangra songs is not just an ethnographic fact, but also a multivocal symbol on which women strategically draw in order to comment on a range of emotions and situations in their lives.

***Pakharu*: A Genre in Context**

"There are songs for all occasions," instructed Kanta Pandit, a primary school teacher in her fifties. With a long face and betel-stained teeth, she spoke Hindi as we sat out on a balcony among her female Brahman relatives whom I had been recording. "First," she said in her brisk, teacherly way, "there are *lok gīt* ('folk songs'): these are about husbands going away, and young women sing these songs to remember them."

² For some of the highlights in this growing literature on Indian women's folksongs, see Archer 1988; Bryce 1961; Claus 1991, n.d.; Henry 1988:25-113; Jacobson 1975; Karve 1939-40; Raheja and Gold 1994; Rao 1991; Sharma 1981; Tharu and Lalitha 1991:126-42; Trawick 1988, 1991.



Brahman women singing *pakharu* at a gathering for a son's birthday in Kangra

Gathering that Kanta Pandit was using this analytic category “folk song” for my benefit, I countered with my own understanding of locally defined genres: “Do you mean *pakharu*?” “This is *pakharu*,” Kanta Pandit affirmed with a roll of her head. She went on to describe what she discerned as two other broad categories of song: those obligatorily sung by women to accompany rituals, and those sung as a form of religious devotion. “Among these kinds of song, the most interesting is *pakharu*,” she continued. “In the past, men went off to work for the King. Once a man had gone, poor chap, it was uncertain as to whether he’d come back. So his wife would live by taking refuge in songs. Suppose he set off today, he might not be back for twelve years. So this is how she would be able to remember him.” As if to emphasize her preference, Kanta Pandit repeated, “*Pakharu* are the most interesting of all the different kinds of songs.”

This evaluation was one I was already familiar with from other older, upper caste women in Kangra. I had been documenting women’s songs in Kangra on and off since 1980, the year before I went to graduate school. Returning in 1990 for a year’s field research, I had intended to expand on an earlier graduate school project on wedding songs (Narayan 1986). But

when I told women of my interest in songs, they often set to filling my tapes with *pakharu*. In informal contexts, they chose to sing *pakharu* for me; also, during collective singing sessions, once the requisite genre of auspicious ritual songs were sung, they would turn to *pakharu*. As a female cousin once defined *pakharu* for the M.A.-educated daughter of Kanta Sharma who had asked what it meant, “You sing two or four songs that you’re supposed to, and then you move on to *pakharu*.”

In a locally published collection of Kangra songs, the folklorist Dr. Gautam Vyathit confirms the “filler” nature of *pakharu* as sung between sequences of songs of the genre required for a particular ritual event. He also links the word *pakharu* to *pakhari dai*, the daily worship of the doorstep, courtyard, and pathway that village women, particularly brides, perform with cow dung and sprinkled leaves. “In this context,” he writes (and I translate from Hindi) “*pakharu* as accusatory songs are like leaves that before giving birth to flowers have experienced sorrow and pain” (1973:129). *Pakharu* are about married life from a woman’s point of view, most often that of a bride who does not appear to have children. These songs tend to be set in a past era of difficult travel over long distances and strict codes of gender segregation. They describe an in-marrying bride’s longing for her family of birth; a bride’s mistreatment by in-laws in a joint family; and most centrally, a bride’s relationship with a husband who, more often than not, is absent. In this paper I selectively draw on songs that illustrate this last theme of male absence.

Indigenous genre categorizations often map onto social distinctions (Flueckiger 1991). In Kangra, the term *pakharu* borders two genres that overlap in themes even as they index social difference: *barsātī* (monsoon songs) and *ḍholru* (basket maker’s ballads). *Pakharu* is by definition a genre peculiar to upper caste women: Brahmans, Rajputs, and Mahajans or Suds. In these castes, women were traditionally restricted through practices of gender segregation and veiling (cf. Sharma 1978a, 1978b). These castes mostly forbade women’s participation in agriculture. While shifting intercaste relations have pushed some women of these castes into agriculture, upper caste women are generally from backgrounds in which women have leisure to gather together and sing. *Pakharu* are sung indoors or in enclosed courtyards apart from men, thus mirroring the conditions of gender segregation among high castes.

Barsātī, or monsoon songs, are on the other hand sung by women of lower castes, and of low-ranking high-castes (for example, some Rajputs) engaged in agricultural work. *Barsātī* are typically sung while working in groups, knee-deep in cold water, to transplant rice shoots. Also playing upon themes of marital difficulties and absent husbands, *barsātī* songs are

sung in a different style that emphasizes a prolonged final note: “oooooooo,” sang upper caste woman, caricaturing that note.

Dholru ballads are supposed to be performed by members of the basketmaker castes visiting the courtyards of upper caste patrons in the spring month of Chaitra. *Dholru* singers come in threes: two women and one man, who also serves as drummer. It is thought that by singing about this inauspicious month, citing its name in their songs, the basket makers are removing the month's inauspiciousness from upper castes. Like *pakharu* and *barsāṭī*, *ḍholru* also tell tales of women's suffering. Because of the public performance of these songs, women from castes other than basket makers also sometimes knew *ḍholru* by having heard them year after year. In addition, I taped a few *pakharu* that were clearly shorter adaptations of *ḍholru*. It was my impression during fieldwork that of all these genres, men of assorted castes were also most aware of the content of *ḍholru*.

Like most folklore forms, women's songs in Kangra are learned, shared, and transmitted within small groups, and thus are public. Both *pakharu* and *barsāṭī* are participatory genres, with no clear line between singer and audience. In performance, one or two women usually lead the singing while others who might be present blend in. Before plunging into a particular song, singers often confer in mutters and fragments of melody to plot out the words, the verse order, and the tune. Lines of text are often repeated twice, and the melody is always repetitive. This means that even a woman hearing the song for the first time is able to join in, making performance truly public. Since it is individuals who carry on and transform an oral tradition, these songs can also be viewed as private: an artifact of an individual's memory and aesthetic pleasure. It is this intersection between collective symbolic forms and individual subjectivities that most fascinated me, and which I sought to explore by talking to women about their songs.

Most women's songs are in the mountain dialect used for domestic conversations that is loosely termed Pahari, “of the mountains,” or Kangri, “of Kangra.” Kangra lies at the base of the Dhauladhar (“White Bearing”) Himalayan mountains that tower roughly twelve to fifteen thousand feet above the valley floor. Katoch kings once governed Kangra as a hill state, but these kings were brought under Mughal rule in the mid-sixteenth century, submitted to Sikh domination in 1809, and became part of the British colonial state in 1846. Kangra remained an administrative district of Punjab under British rule and for almost two decades following Indian Independence. When post-independence Indian states were rearranged on the basis of language, Kangra's local dialect, *Kangri bolī*, a subdialect of

Dogri, was politically construed as having a hill rather than plains identity. In 1966 Kangra merged with the northern hill state of Himachal Pradesh (Parry 1979:11-14). The linguistic mixture in women's songs reflects much of this history, with the local dialect mingling freely with Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu, and even smatterings of English words.

Another aspect of Kangra history that surfaces in women's songs is the region's association with Vaishnavism—the worship of Vishnu in his various incarnations, particularly as Krishna. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Kangra rulers patronized artists who painted exquisite miniatures, often featuring scenes from legends about the deity Krishna. Krishna was a ladies' man: a central theme in his mythology is the love of the cowherd maiden *gopīs* who suffer when separated from him. This emotion of *viraha*, love and longing in separation, is highly elaborated in the cult of Krishna (Hardy 1983). The taxonomy of *viraha* is also described by medieval Hindi poets whose verses formed the subject for some Kangra miniatures. The women I worked with were not familiar with this poetry or the miniatures. However, their songs appear to be informed by a wider cultural ambience that aestheticizes the anguished separation of lovers.

In 1991 the population of Kangra was roughly one million. This population was largely Hindu, dominated by the Rajput castes. All the families I worked with were in some way involved with agriculture, as land owners if not laborers. Subsistence farming in Kangra is backed by a cash economy, with the crucial part of each family's income hinging on remittances sent in from men working in the plains and beyond. While the pattern of male migration is an old one, increasing population with a fixed land base has made for a deteriorating person-to-land ratio, causing an increasing dependence on wage labor (Greenberg 1991). Currently, the state of Himachal Pradesh has among the fewest off-farm wage labor opportunities of any state in India. Men, then, must travel to the plains and even abroad in search of work.

Often it is in the early years of married life and while children are young that a husband is away, sending regular remittances home and returning for only a month or two a year to help with the farm. In a joint family of several brothers, one or more brothers may be at home at a particular time. By middle age the man has usually retired, and his sons are working outside. I observed that even as women lamented this pattern of male absence, it could also contribute to a sense of their own worth.

For example, after rereading sections about women in Jonathan Parry's *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*, I felt troubled by the misogyny of the upper caste male perspectives he describes: that having nine times as much

“heat” as men, women are sexually predatory, with a proclivity for liaisons; that daughters are an economic and social liability whose dowries strain family finances and whose hypergamous marriages threaten family honor (justifying female infanticide among the Kangra Rajput aristocracy during the last century); that married women’s quarrelsome nature disrupted the idealized unity of the joint family house; and so on (1979:146-48, 175-77, 213-15). Yet when I asked Vidhya Sharma, who was helping me with song transcriptions, about how she thought women were viewed in Kangra, she replied, eyes flashing over her hooked nose: “Women are viewed with respect here. They are seen in a good light. After all, most men are out for ten months of the year, and who takes care of everything—the farm, the house, the relatives, the guests who might come by? The woman does. The man is only here maybe two months during his leave. He *has* to respect her.”

Vidhya’s own husband was a schoolteacher who lived at home. Yet, in her comment, men’s potential absence was rhetorically manipulated to highlight the ongoing responsibilities that all married women faced, allowing her to vehemently claim women’s centrality to men’s social and economic survival. As I hope to show through an analysis of *pakharu*, men’s migration in Kangra is not just an ingrained social fact, but also a multivocal symbol through which women may comment on aspects of their lives.

Singing and Separation

In *pakharu*, a husband is usually referred to as the “employed man” (*naukar*, *chākar*), “traveler” (*musāphar*), or “soldier” (*sipāhi*). He may also be called *sumbā*, *dholā*, or *kand*, terms that women glossed as “husband” without cuing me in to the connotations surrounding a particular choice of word. Furthermore, a husband is called *Rām*, or *Shyām*, indicating that the *pativrata* construction of Husband as divine Lord spills over with embedded mythological allusions (and occasional irony) into women’s songs.

The woman protagonist in *pakharu* is usually referred to simply as *goriye*, which can be translated as “Fair One,” “Beautiful One” (Singh 1962), or, as a woman schoolteacher emphatically told me, “Wife.” The places mentioned in these songs indicate a network of migration spreading across North India and beyond. In a young girls’ song about the great Lord Shiva in his local form of Senkar, he is taking off to find work in the adjoining district of Chamba. Similarly, human men go to Jammu, Kashmir, and Delhi in the songs. Songs that obviously date to a time

before the partition of Pakistan mention Lahore, Karachi, and even Kabul. A few songs implore, “Take me with you.” (Though increasingly men may be accompanied by their wives and children, this situation of living together, as a nuclear family at a distance, is not usually economically viable and, by further isolating women, does not promote singing. To my knowledge, this situation has not been elaborated in *pakharu* texts.)

Here is a *pakharu* featuring the month of Chaitra—March and April. This is the month during which the tragic *dhholru* ballads are supposed to be sung by Dumna basket makers going from door to door. It is a favorite month within *pakharu* texts also, possibly because the spring flowers and the enhanced romantic atmosphere make the separation of lovers more difficult. In the following song, which includes many Punjabi words, a married woman tries to persuade her departing husband to stay with her as the valley explodes with the colors and fragrances of spring blossoms:

chaitre de mahīne jī
koī phūl je phūle
ajī phūlaṛe rabhānt
goriye torīye rakhe

In the month of Chaitra
flowers blossom;
a variety of flowers
that the Beautiful One plucks.

chākar musāphar
koī piṛhe ghore
ghar rahendiyā de
jivare kuch thore thore

The Employed Man, the Traveler,
saddles his horse.
Staying home,
life ebbs away.

pakari lagām
goriye pās kharōṭī
aji jhundē de andar
goriye chham chham roī

Grabbing the reins,
the Beautiful One stands nearby.
Beneath a heavy veil
she splashes tears.

chhor de lagām be
tainu rām duhāī
aji māpeyāndā dā des
tainu lāj na āī

“Let go of the reins,
I implore, by God!
Your parents’ place
does not give you honor.”

mapeyāndā des
mainu barā pyārā
aji rāj chhoṛeyā kāj
chhoreyā kāval jānā

“My parents’ place
I dearly love.
Abandon these royal duties.
Abandon going to Kabul.”

kāval de do panshi āe
karde pānī pānī
aji kand thā anjān
goriye kadar na jāni

From Kabul, two birds arrived
demanding “Water! Water!”
The husband I had is missing.
The Beautiful One knows no respect.

chature dī nār
baiṭi hār parote
aji mūrkhē dī nār
gallān suni suni rove

A clever man's woman
 relaxes, stringing garlands.
 A stupid man's woman
 listens and weeps.

chature dī nār
bole main sukh pāyā
aji mūrkhē dī nār
main dukh pāyā

A clever man's woman
 says, "I got happiness."
 A stupid man's woman
 says, "I got sorrow."

This particular rendition was led by Brinda Devi Sud at the singing session for her nephew's first birthday. The women who had gathered from adjoining households started out with songs dealing with birthday worship and the happiness of a mother. As the afternoon wore on, the songs became less focused on the ritual at hand. Devotional songs and also *pakharu* crept in. Throughout the session, the women often deferred to Brinda Devi. A woman in her fifties with hair greying softly and her *bindi* a bright spot of scarlet on her forehead, she sang through the missing teeth at the front of her mouth. Later in her home she explained to me that the wife in this song felt that her own life would ebb away with grief at her husband's absence. She tried unsuccessfully to stop him from going off to work in Kabul. When visitors came from the place where he worked, demanding hospitality and bearing news of him, two possible scenarios were at hand. "If a husband is clever (*chant*), he will work hard and send home much money," said Brinda Devi. "That is why the wife can sit stringing garlands without worry. But if he is stupid he makes a mess of everything and she weeps when she hears the tales." I noted this down, inwardly remembering the village gossip that Brinda Devi's own husband had gambled away a large property.

Orally transmitted texts, as we know, vary with performance. In the lush monsoon, I taped a variant of this song in a Brahman settlement where Kanta Pandit lived—again in the course of singing for a son's birthday. The song was identified as being "that one about the nose rings." Here the flowers that the Beautiful One plucked were affixed to the large nose ring (*bāḷu*), iconic of her married status. I should add that the wearing of a flower in the nose ring is not a cultural practice, but would seem to allude to sexual longings, particularly in light of Ramanujan's argument in this volume that flowers stand for female sexuality. The association with flowers also adds a new dimension to the fact that a clever man's woman is fulfilled, calmly stringing flower garlands.

During the monsoon, I also went with Vidhya Sharma to visit her parents' home. Here I taped another variant of the same song from Pushpa Devi, an animated woman of the Barber caste, as she reminisced about songs her grandmother used to sing. As women themselves noted, the husband's going to Kabul indicated that the song dated from a time well before India's partition from Pakistan, but Pushpa Devi's testimony of her grandmother also served to anchor the song in repertoires of bygone generations. In Pushpa Devi's variant, the Beautiful One requested specific flowers: roses for her husband's turban and fragrant jasmynes for her nose ring. Pushpa Devi's variant also shed new light on the line about the birds asking for water: Brinda Devi had said that the birds stood for guests, but in Pushpa Devi's song, no mention was made of the water (*pānī*) they demanded. Rather, it was through their speech (*vānī*), or birdsong, that these migrating birds brought news of the faraway man.

Apart from textual variation, ambiguous poetic wordings seemed to encourage differing interpretations. According to two Brahman women, Durga Pandit and Sangita Devi Sharma, it is the life of both the man and his family that ebbs away if he stays at home, since there is nothing to eat. They interpreted this line as referring to starvation rather than a tormented heart. White-haired Sangita Devi elaborated on the identity of a stupid man: "The stupid man is someone who doesn't go outside to work. He tries to find employment in the village, and can't make any money. When he tells his stories about everything that's gone wrong, his wife weeps." At this point I asked Sangita Devi whether her own husband had taken a job elsewhere. She admitted that no, he had not worked outside, but had held odd jobs such as that of village postman, for which he earned a maximum of 125 rupees (about six dollars) per month before he retired without a pension. "With four daughters to marry, things were very difficult," she said. She tried to earn money by spinning and knitting in her home, but there was not enough of a market for her handiwork. In the end it was her widowed sister, a schoolteacher, upon whom she relied for the most support.

Other songs express the fantasy of not just trying to delay a departure, but actively keeping a husband at home, maintaining him as a companion through the cycle of months. Poems describing love through the twelve months of the year were an inspiration in Kangra valley miniatures (Randhawa 1962: 27, 131-46). Throughout North India, there are Twelve Month songs in vernacular traditions (Vaudeville 1963-64; Wadley 1983; Zbavitel 1976), and in Kangra such songs accord with the natural rhythms and regional festivals of the area.

After singing the last song about attempts to defer departure, Brinda Devi Sud immediately started to sing the following one. I recognized it as a variant of a song I had taped at a wedding several months earlier.

bharyā kachharyā saurā puchhnā lagā
kai vo kharī maile bhes mein

In the crowded courthouse, Father-in-law began to inquire,
“Why do you stand here in disheveled attire?”

putra tā tere saureyā naukari chalā saureyā chākari chalā
tāin vo kharotī maile bes mein

“Your son, Father-in-law, is going off to work,
he’s going off to serve.
That’s why I stand here in disheveled attire.”

je tu hundi nue chatur sajād
jānde mahime jo horhadī

“If you’re clever, Daughter-in-law,
you’ll detain your departing husband.”

merā tā horheyā saureyā rahandā nahin
jāndā e bāi marorhadā

“When I detain him, Father-in-law, he doesn’t stay,
he takes off, twisting his arm free.”

diyā tā bali nue rakhiyā jharokhe
jānde mahime jo horheyā

“Light an oil lamp, Daughter-in-law, put it in the window,
detain your departing husband.”

chaitra na jāe piyā ban dhan phūle
bhariyo vaisākhe dākhā pakkiyā

“Don’t go in Chaitra [March/April], darling, the forests
and fields are in bloom.
In the month of Vaisakh [April/May] the grapes are ripe.”

jeṭhe na jāe piyā dhūpe paunde bhārī
hārhe ambue pakade

“Don’t go in the Jeth [May/June], darling, when strong
sun beats down.
In Adh [June/July] mangos ripen.”

sone na jāe pīyā pīnga main jhūlā

bhādon main rāti bhi niyāriyān

“Don’t go in Son [July/August], darling,
when you’ll rock me in a swing.
In Bhadon [August/September] blackness fills the nights.”

asu na jāe piyā pitar manāne

katake divāliyā āniyā

“Don’t go in Asu [September/October], darling,
the ancestors must be honored.
In Katak [October/November] comes the Festival of Lights.”

magar na jāe piyā pāle ponde bhārī

pohe leph bharāndiyā

“Don’t go in Magar [November/December], darling,
when the dew falls thick.
In Poh [December/January] we’ll fill comforters.”

māghe na jāye piyā lohṛī ghar āi

phagane holi main khelnī

“Don’t go in Magh [January/February], darling,
when the festival of Lohdi comes to the house.
In Fagan [February/March] I’ll play, tossing colors
for the festival of Holi.”

bīte ni goriye tere bārah mahīne

huṅ main naukariyā chalā

“Your twelve months have passed, Beautiful One,
now I’m going off to my job.”

bārah tā mahīne piyā horheyā raheyā ghar je raheyā

jānde di lage terī naukari

“For twelve months, darling, you were held back,
you stayed at home, may you find employment as soon as you go.”

Brinda Devi Sud explained that the father-in-law was a wealthy merchant, much like successful men of her own trading caste, and that he was in the midst of official business when he noticed the daughter-in-law standing nearby. The woman had not changed her clothes because of her grief, thinking, “Who will notice what I wear?” Like the husband who ordered the wife to let go of the reins, this husband at first dismissively twisted his arm free. But then he was lured by the oil lamp.

The oil lamp, Brinda Devi said, meant that the husband and wife would have a chance to talk, for in the old days it was only at night that a young couple was left alone together. There are strong sexual connotations to the verb “talking” (*gilānā*) among older women, and other *pakharu* also

use the image of a gentle, steady glow of the oil lamp for marital intimacy. With the authorization of her father-in-law, the male head of household, the wife in this song is indeed able to hold her husband back by apparently seducing him and then each month finding a persuasive new reason for why he should stay home. The year passes without any further reference to the wider family, echoing Sudhir Kakar's observation that the unfulfilled longing for intimacy within the joint family setting pervades women's lives in India (1989:22):

Generally fated for disappointment, the fantasy of constituting a "couple" not in opposition to the rest of the extended family but within this wider network, is a dominant theme running through women's lives, actual and fictional. Connecting the various stages of a woman's adulthood from an expectant bride to a more sober grandmother, the intense wish to create a two-person universe with the husband where each finally "recognizes" the other is never far from her consciousness.

In the song, to insure the family's survival, the husband must eventually abandon this companionship through the changing seasons. While many *bārahmāsa* songs describe the anguish of separation, this song is unusual within the genre in setting the stage for a sorrowful departure but then describing an emotional resolution. By the end of the song, the wife is resigned and fulfilled, sending the man off with her blessings. "She had him to herself for twelve months, and now she's ready to get rid of him!" joked happily married Vidhya Sharma, poking me in the ribs as she helped me transcribe this song.

Even though the man may be at a distance, most songs of separation address him as though he could hear. Here is another *pakharu* from Jamuna Devi, a Rajput woman in her fifties whose husband had been employed outside Kangra throughout most of their married life, first in the army and later in a factory. In 1991, she calculated that she had kept house and managed the fields by herself for over 25 years. I had dropped in to see Jamuna Devi before traveling off to the conference for which I was preparing a first draft of this paper. I mentioned to her that I noticed the theme of separation in many songs I had taped, and she responded with this song:

*e mere naukarān
nimbu pakke
ki rase bhariyā ḍāliyā*

"Oh my Employed Man,
lemons are ripe
and juicy on the branches.

e merī goriye

"Oh my Beautiful One,

<i>jammu kasmīr lagiyā laṛāiā</i> <i>ki chuṭṭiyān nahīn mildē</i>	there's a war in Jammu and Kashmir, I can't get a vacation."
<i>o mere naukarān</i> <i>apu tā gae pardes</i> <i>ki minjo kiliyā chhoṛi gayā</i>	"Oh my Employed Man, you have gone far away, leaving me alone."
<i>o mere naukarān</i> <i>kon bai pās mere</i> <i>phir kon mere dil bhare</i>	"Oh my Employed Man, who will sit beside me? And who will fill my heart?"
<i>e merī goriye</i> <i>naṇāna baiṭhe pās</i> <i>ki der terā dil bhariyā</i>	"Oh my Beautiful One, my sister will sit beside you, my younger brother will fill your heart."

"This is the relationship between a man and woman," Jamuna Devi said, switching to Hindi when she finished: "The man far away." I thought of the stereotype of the husband's younger brother as a potential sexual partner for a woman, and asked how he would fill the woman's heart. "Through laughing and joking," she said, disregarding the innuendo I saw, "and assuring, 'my brother will come home soon on vacation'."

Jamuna Devi told me that one could repeat this song, putting in mangos, leeches, or any other kind of fruit. I asked why fruit made the wife think of her husband, and Jamuna Devi explained, her voice sweet and patient: "Say I'm sitting alone. It's summer and the fruits are ripe. I think if he was here he'd bring me fruit to eat. Then too, I think, the one who could eat this is far away. How can I eat all by myself?"

As Owen Lynch has asserted, in India emotions "are more likely to be objectivized or substantialized" (1990:22). Jamuna Devi did not mention sexuality, but the juicy ripe fruit and the craving to enjoy it mixed with a longing for an absent husband—and the complaint that she cannot enjoy eating alone—suffuse this song with erotic overtones. Food is associated with love through many domains of Indian culture (Roy 1975:95; Trawick 1990:105-6), and sharing the pleasures of sweet food is an expression of intimacy.

A similar *pakharu* that starts with evocations of ripe fruit to be pleurably shared was sung by Kashi Devi, an 82-year-old Brahman woman with kind eyes and a bulging goiter. She had been urged by her niece (who was married into the same village) to sing songs from her times for my tape recorder. With her walking stick resting by her chair, Kashi Devi sang in a voice as soft and clear as a young girl's:

*kuthu dākhā pakkiyā ḍholā
ki kuthu tusān chakiyā
bāge dākhā pakkiyā goriye
ki othu asān chakiyā*

“Where do grapes ripen, Husband,
Where do you taste them?”
“Grapes ripen in the garden, Beautiful One,
that’s where we’ll taste them.”

*apu tusā turi chale ḍholā
yāñiyā goriya chhari chale
kiyān kari kaṭani ḍhola
yaniyā bares e*

“You have gone far away, Husband,
leaving the Beautiful One a young girl.
How are the years to be passed, Husband,
in this young life?”

sasu jo tu mā akhiyā goriye

*ki sauhre jo piyo akhiyā
dere jo akhiyā goriye*

ki ammā jāyā vīr e

“Address your mother-in-law as mother,
Beautiful One,
and your father-in-law as father.
Your younger brother-in-law,
Beautiful One,
you should address as if he’s a brother
born of your mother.”

sasu sārī mā nahīn ḍholā

*ki sauhrā sārā piyo nahīn
dere bhī ondare ḍholā
ki asala sarīkh hai*

“My mother-in-law is not my mother,
Husband,
and my father-in-law is not my father.
My younger brother-in-law, Husband,
is not true kin.”

kandā kanne pīṭh lāiyā goriye

ki charakhe kanne chitta lāiyā

*mīn mīn katanā goriye
ki miṭhṭhā miṭhṭhā bolanā
hansī hansī kaṭanī goriye
ki lambaṛī bares e*

“Keep your back to the wall, Beautiful
One,
and keep your mind on your spinning
wheel.
Spin thread finely, Beautiful One,
and speak sweet words.
Pass the years laughing, Beautiful One,
in your long life.”

*kandhā kanne pīṭh nahīn ḍholā
ki charakhe kanne chitta nahīn
mīn nahīn katana ḍholā
ki miṭhṭhā nahīn o bolanā
roī roī kaṭanī ḍholā
ki lamaṛī bares e*

“My back is not against the wall, Husband,
my mind is not on the spinning wheel.
I don’t intend to spin finely, Husband,
and I won’t speak sweetly.
I’ll pass the years weeping, Husband,
in my long life.”

“In this song,” Kashi Devi explained, “a young bride has been left behind and she is not happy. She won’t do what her husband asks her to.” Here, as in many other *pakharu* songs, the woman protagonist is outspoken and defiant. She refuses to accept her husband’s parting words that she consider his family her own, be industrious at the spinning wheel, speak sweetly, and

be happy throughout her life. The defiant tone of her replies is softened by her genuine sorrow over his departure in the last line—“I’ll spend the years weeping, Husband, in my long life.”

In a prior conversation, Kashi Devi had mentioned that she had lived with her husband when he worked in Simla. He had been a widower and she a fourth wife; even her stepson was older than she. Though married at 14, she did not have any children until she was about 30—first a son and then a daughter two years later. Soon after this, her husband died and she returned to their land in Kangra. Since she had accompanied her husband to his job, I was curious to know why she sang songs of separation.

Kashi Devi smiled at my question. “The thing is that he died when I was young,” she said. “After that, I *had* to sing songs like this.” The loss of a husband, for upper caste widows, is final. While marriage is allowed for widowers, widows must lead their lives marginalized and celibate, even if—as in the case of some women I knew—they were still teenagers at the time of their husband’s death. The separation described in *pakharu*, then, spills over into the grief of absence through death.

A husband’s absence also has resonance with the absence of the deity Krishna. His consort, Radha, is in Kangra women’s mythology portrayed as a wife rather than an illicit lover. Yet this does not stop Krishna’s notorious womanizing, which takes him off on expeditions that are not exactly job-related:

*hornā de andar dīpak baleyā
rādhā de andar andherā e
rādhā sai pucchdi parheyā je panditā
kuthu krishne dā ḍera e
jamunā kinnāre radhike
gopiyān dā kherā
uthu krishṇe dā ḍerā e
adi-adi rāti krishṇa jo sapne jo āyā*

rādhā bijogan je hoī e

*adi adi rāti krishṇe pakkā dharāte
āe riyā rādhā de pās e
lathāndi bāi krishṇe bhīt goāre
rādhā baithī pīṭh gherī e
Huṅ kajo pucchde shyām bāt mhārī*

*rādhā bijogan hoī e
ākhen guāiyān shyām roī tā roī*

Within others, oil lamps burn.
Within Radha, there is darkness.
Radha asks learned scholars,
“Where has Krishna camped?”
“On the banks of the Yamuna,
Radha, in a hamlet of milkmaids:
That’s where Krishna is camped.”
Halfway through the night,
Krishna dreamed
of Radha as a woman suffering
from separation.
In the fullness of night, Krishna
returned to Radha.
Krishna kicked the door open.
Radha sat, back turned away.
“Why do you ask after me now,
Dark One?”
Radha is suffering from separation.
I’ve lost my eyes to weeping,
Dark One,

kāyā guāi jhurī jhurī e

my body has become hunched
with sorrow.

This song was sung by Gauri Devi Dogra, who offered no explanation but immediately moved on. Many other songs about Radha and Krishna, however, expand on the same themes of his being away, sporting with his milkmaid girlfriends, and her suffering. While this separation has allegorical referents of the soul's separation from God (Hardy 1983), it was also sometimes used by women to comment on men's straying. For example, when visiting the home of the younger woman for whom her father had several decades earlier abandoned her mother, Durga Pandit began unexpectedly to sing about Radha's grief on account of Krishna's infatuations.

Apart from departures and absences, *pakharu* also deal with returns. These usually start with the formula "after twelve years husband (servant, soldier) returned home." Given this long absence, spouses in the songs tend not to recognize each other. In some songs, there is a tragic misunderstanding: a wife anxious about opening the door to a stranger claims there is a fictitious baby in her lap, leading the furious husband (who after twelve years knows the baby is not his) to rush in and kill her. Or else a jealous mother-in-law who does not want the couple reunited may poison the daughter-in-law, then incite her son to beat the prostrate woman for her sloth. A husband may also test a wife by pretending to be a stranger who asks her to elope, promising fine gifts; when she resists, he offers thanksgiving to those who arranged his marriage to such a good woman.

I was shocked at first by the prevalence of a woman's death—by murder or suicide—in songs of a husband's return. I wondered whether this return might be seen as the death of the dream of intimacy when the faraway husband, a subject of fantasy, becomes a dismissive man closeby. No women spoke directly to me about such disappointment, but Randhir Singh, an articulate male teacher of English in the army, confessed while on leave: "When you're away you do feel for her; it is only when you are around that you take her for granted. Like these beautiful mountains: so attractive, so charming from the distance, but when you go close, all gravel! Away from your wife you think how important she is, how much she has to suffer to feed you and run your house, but when you come home things sort of return to the routine."

Of all the disappointed or tragic songs of return, the most powerful I have heard is the following, sometimes referred to as "Foreigner Husband." A foreigner, *pardesi*, is one from outside the region considered home, for

des or *desh* can variously mean village, area, region, or country according to context. In wedding songs, a bride often laments, “I’m becoming a foreigner,” as she is taken to a distant village. But in this *pakharu*, it is a man who has been living at a distance who becomes the foreigner.

The version here was sung by Sona Devi of the Ironsmith, or Lohar, caste. She was a woman in her early forties: slim and quick moving, with large eyes and strong jaws that gave the impression of being perpetually clenched. She was unique among women in this village in having left her alcoholic and abusive husband to return to her parents’ home. Sona had stopped in to help with preparations for a sacred thread ceremony at a neighboring Rajput household. Women had gathered from the houses around to grind and clean spices, just as in the succeeding days they would come back to tend to rice, wheat, vegetables, or patting out yeasted bread. As they worked, they chatted, and when I came by, Sona was urged to sing. I immediately recognized this song as one I had taped as women picked through spinach greens at a Rajput wedding several months earlier; later, I taped several more elaborate variants from Kashi Devi and her female relatives of various generations.³

bārah bariye
kand ghare āyā
mangdā soyān dā sāg
kand pardesiyā

After twelve years,
Husband returned home
asking for fennel greens.
Foreigner husband.

sasu te chori hun
nanānā diye sōgi
chalī gai mālie de bāg
kand pardesiyā

Stealing away from mother-in-law
along with sister-in-law,
I went to the gardener’s garden.
Foreigner husband.

mālie dā larkā
puchhnā jo lagā
tu kajo āi mere bāg
kand pardesiyā

The gardener’s son
began to ask
“Why have you come to my garden?”
Foreigner husband.

bārah bariye
kand ghare āyā
mangdā soyān dā sāg
kand pardesiyā

After twelve years,
Husband returned home
asking for fennel greens.
Foreigner husband.

pūriyā pakāndi jī
thāliyā pāndī

I fried breads,
placing them on a plate

³ For a fuller discussion of this song and its variants, see Narayan 1994.

<i>upar soyān dā sāg</i> <i>kand pardesiyā</i>	topped with fennel greens. Foreigner husband.
<i>latāndī bāī</i> <i>kande thālī saṭāī</i> <i>o piyā soyān sāg</i> <i>kand pardesiyā</i>	With a kick of his foot husband upset the plate, there spilled the fennel greens. Foreigner husband.
<i>na sukh saureyā jī</i> <i>na sukh māpeyā</i> <i>phuṭ gae mere bhāg</i> <i>kand pardesiyā</i>	Without happiness with my in-laws, without happiness with my parents, my destiny splintered. Foreigner husband.
<i>bhariyā kaṭorā gorie</i> <i>jaire dā pītā jī</i> <i>sai gai hai bakhīyān de bāhar</i> <i>kand pardesiyā</i>	Filling a bowl, the Beautiful One sipped poison. She's off beyond the limits. Foreigner husband.

“Finished,” Sona Devi said when done.

“So in this, a man comes after twelve years,” I began. “And then?”

“Then,” Sona Devi said with an air of resignation, “then she says, ‘How can I serve him?’ This is what she must have thought. She went to the garden to fetch some sweet fennel. She brought it, and she began to serve her husband. Anger rose up in him because she had gone out. She went out. She had gone in his service, but he misinterpreted it, ‘I just came home and she went out’.”

I nodded, reflecting on married women's lives around me as a constant stream of service, from early rising to make tea and fetch water through a day filled with activities from kitchen tasks, farm work, tending livestock, washing clothes, and looking after children to the late-night massaging of household elders' feet. Service, after all, is a central, merit-inducing component to the ideology of *pativrata* that shapes married women's lives (Dhruvarajan 1989). Yet as this song points out, men may neither acknowledge nor appreciate it. Further, as another woman pointed out in regard to this song, a husband may become suspicious of his wife going off outside the house, even if she has done so only in his service. The husband, it seems, suspected an affair between the woman and the gardener. Sona Devi continued:

She made the puris, she made greens, and she took it to her husband.
“Don't want! I don't want it!” OK then, he didn't want it though she brought it with such respect. So she felt pain, right? She said, “No

happiness at my in-law's place, no happiness at my parents' place, so my *karma* has splintered." So this is what she did, she ate poison and slept. With pleasure! [Sona Devi's laugh was loaded with irony. She was already standing up and halfway across the balcony.] OK, I'm going now. There's work at home.

The theme of fennel greens being prepared also occurs in a song that Brinda Devi and her sisters sing. Commenting on that song, which they title "Sumba"—"husband" (see Narayan 1995), Brinda Devi said: "Even now women are really attentive, but men, there's some real pride in them. They don't give a damn (*nahīn mārde prabhāv*). Then the irritation burns inside a woman as rage. But what else can she do? She can't do anything about it." One thing that women can do within the framework of auspicious and necessary action is sing about their sorrows.

Testimonies about Singing

"It's women's duty to perform actions for the well-being of men," explained a Brahman Pandit when I asked why women's songs were required at rites of passage. When I continued to ask this question of other people, I was sometimes told that this was "custom" (*rivāj*) or that since women had done this in the paradigmatic, primordial age of Sat Yuga, it is still done. But by far the most common answer I regularly received, from men and women alike, is that women sang "out of happiness" (*khushī se*).

Yet apart from songs chorused to a groom during marriage rituals (particular *sahere*, "crown" and *ghorī*, "mare" songs at his own home, and *gāliyān* abuses at the bride's place), men are rarely present when women sing. All the *pakharu* I taped from groups of women singers were performed in segregated gatherings where only women and children were present. Men actually appeared to be largely in the dark as to the content of women's songs. Certainly, the Kangra folklorist Dr. Gautam Sharma Vyathit's publications of women's songs (recorded mostly from his wife and mother) could be bought by any man at local bookstores, but this was not an arena that most men were even interested in. It seemed to me that this emphasis on songs being sung from duty and from happiness could be a form of "feminist coding" (Radner and Lanser 1987), making for a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1991) or "veiled sentiments" (Abu-Lughod 1986) whereby women could exchange subversive messages.

Songs like *pakharu* in the local dialect were often referred to as "old women's songs" (*jhabrī di gīt*), emphasizing their link to the past. This association with the past was reinforced by the content of such songs:

spinning wheels rather than mill cloth, oil lamps rather than electricity, horses rather than buses, geographically proximate destinations like Kabul that more recent political boundaries had made unnegotiably distant. Indeed, describing *pakharu*, women often spoke in terms of a bygone era (*pichleyā jamānā*). In this sense, the songs could be seen as a form of collective memory. Yet how such collective memory was mobilized by women, and how they reacted emotionally to the songs, could not be subsumed by a single theme.

It was understood that some women were more drawn to singing than others. Sangita Devi explained singing in terms of personal predilections. “It’s like this, Kirin,” she said. “Those who drink liquor will drink. Those who must have tea will have tea. Those who sing will sing. It’s a form of addiction. The more you sing, the more you have to sing. One song comes out after another song.”

At every singing occasion, Sangita Devi’s words were proven accurate: some women were indefatigable performers, belting out song after song. Others, however, would listlessly join in for the repeated lines, then return to the catching up on news that so often occurred between women at singing sessions. Having understood that songs were not equally shared by all, I was also curious as to whether singing carried over from collective settings into the lives of the singers. “Of course,” assured Sangita Devi. “Those who know songs won’t hesitate to sing. Like you, now you’re learning. When you know songs, you’ll be singing these even when you’re alone. Cooking, washing, walking, whatever you’re doing, you’ll be singing some song.” Similarly, Brinda Devi’s teenaged daughter complained with fierce embarrassment that wandering through the village or sitting on a bus, her mother might just burst into song. Along the same lines, Jamuna Devi, an energetic Rajput woman who gleefully filled three tapes of her favorite *pakharu* as soon as she met me, announced:

I’m always singing. I love songs. Even when I’m working, I keep singing something or the other. People passing by always say, “That’s Rashmi’s mother singing.” Rashmi is my eldest daughter. I’m interested in all sorts of songs. I listen everywhere I go. If I hear Chamar women sing something in the fields, I go sit there and make them repeat it so I can listen. I’ve learned all the *dholru* songs too, by sitting down with the Dumnas and listening to their songs. I can hear a song once, and it goes and sits inside me. I remember all the words and the tune. Yes, I have a real love (*sukinnī*) for singing.

It was also understood that different songs expressed—and evoked—different emotions. As Sangita Devi said: “If you sing a *sehrā*, or

you sing a *hansnu khelnu*, or a *janeo* song [all celebrating male rites of passage], what's there in that? Nothing! They are all songs of happiness. But other songs are filled with pain. Those who don't have troubles will sing, but they won't know what they're singing about. Those who do have troubles will recognize the pain. Everyone will sing, but it's only when you know pain that you really understand the song." Singing about painful issues was also seen as a form of catharsis. Jamuna Devi said that with sadness, "the song just begins by itself. When you're absolutely quiet, the weight grows heavier in the heart. By speaking, it lightens a little." Similarly, Sangita Devi observed, "However sad we are, whatever has happened in life, then sitting to sing, we're happy again. Those who don't sing don't know how this is."

Two middle-aged Brahman women related to Kashi Devi through marriage held the floor for collective singing during a wedding in 1991. Later, they took me aside to hold forth like a two-headed person. In response to my question about why women sang songs, and what they might feel when singing, Nirmala Upadhyay reflected for a minute, then said, "Songs divert the mind." Her neighbor, Narmada, added, "They make you happy." "Make you happy," repeated Nirmala. "This is what it is, these are my thoughts." She paused, then continued, "Some are filled with devotion," and reminded me of a devotional song she had promised to sing the following morning. This mention of devotion inspired Narmada to rephrase her assertion in terms of religion. "What it is is that we're sinners," she said. "We do all kinds of things we like, and God's name remains far away. Sinners can take God's name. One is trapped by all these ties, and sometimes one's mind is filled with sorrow. Then when one sings a beautiful song it brings happiness to the mind. All the sorrows go far away. That's all it is."

Nirmala had been musing, and now she interrupted, "Some songs are like this, that the time you want to sing them, you sing and the thoughts in your mind." "Happy," asserted Narmada. Nirmala shook her head, "Some of these thoughts come out in tears from your eyes, some come out in the form of the song. This is how it is." "How it is," echoed Narmada. "Some come out as tears, some come out as a song," repeated Nirmala. "Depending on the kind of emotion (*bhāv*) you have, that's the kind of song you sing."

Apart from being a form of catharsis, songs were also seen as a means of solace, connecting present experience to the experience of others in the past. Tayi, or "Aunty," a woman who had been widowed at 14, once commented that when she could not sleep at night, she lay thinking about songs from the old times: "When one sings a song like this [a sad one she

had just sung], you weep too. You sing about the pain in your heart. Then you get some solace in your heart that there have been times like this for others in the past.” Similarly, Brinda Devi Sud observed that singing together about difficulties reminded women in stereotypically hostile kinship roles to be more sympathetic towards each other: for example, that mothers-in-law be kinder to daughters-in-law, that husband’s sisters be more compassionate to their sisters-in-law, and so on.

Apart from expressing or relieving sadness, it seemed that songs could also evoke sorrow. Sometimes, when women were singing in a group, or when I played back a song over a tape recorder, someone present would begin to weep. Later, the reaction was explained to me by the weeping woman herself or her close relatives. For example, on one occasion, a song celebrating a mother’s love was sung. Durga Pandit and her sister, whose mother’s abandonment had led to lifelong emotional problems, burst into tears. On another occasion, a song about Bhatrihari, who abandoned his wives, caused tears to pour down the face of a woman listening in. The women who rushed to comfort her later told me that the woman’s sister had just been left by a husband who modeled himself on Bhatrihari.

I conclude this section with an interchange that connects emotion, singing, and separation from husbands. I had been transcribing the tape in which Nirmala and Narbada Upadhyia spoke as I sat in the sun at Vidhya Sharma’s house. I wanted to be sure I got the line about thoughts coming out as both tears and songs right, and asked Vidhya to listen through headphones. The postmistress, a widow from the next village, had stopped for a cup of tea on her long walk home. A thin woman with close-set eyes and a permanently puzzled look, she listened in, elaborating on Nirmala’s comment.

“When someone sings,” explained the postmistress, “Then you remember your own story. You can’t tell someone else what’s in your heart. But if there’s some pain, then it comes right out of your mouth in the form of a song.” Vidhya, always ironic, looked over at me with mischief on her face. “Haven’t you seen it in the Hindi films?” she asked, “A feeling, and then, just like that, a song?!” “When you’re separated you want to sing,” said the postmistress. “What do you mean?” I asked. “When you’re separated,” said Vidhya, enunciating clearly, “then you want to sing.” “Separated from whom?” I asked, aware that I was playing the dolt but hoping for elaboration. “Why would this make you sing?” “Get married and then you’ll know,” advised the postmistress.

Conclusion

The standard scholarly approach to folksongs in the Indian context has been to present song texts, and then to extrapolate from them truths about the condition of a collective Woman in that particular regional context. Certainly, the character of “the Beautiful One” in songs suggests that women are also constructing a generalized woman through their oral traditions. However, they do so with full knowledge that songs are not straightforward reflections of social conditions, a point that is sometimes lost on scholars. Looking for cultural truths in songs, scholars are in danger of reducing texts to ethnographic artifacts, overlooking the subjectivity and agency of performers.

Women’s “voice” refers not just to the spoken word, but also to perspectives on social relations that frequently go against the grain of representations stemming from dominant (male) groups (Gal 1991:178). In songs that are collectively sung, women join together in a common voice. As research elsewhere in India has also shown, women’s songs tend to express social distance: not just the distance between a woman and her husband, but also between kin groups linked through marriage, and between men and women generally (Jacobson 1975:46). Further, women’s songs—like women’s oral traditions generally—stake out an arena of cultural representation from gendered, female perspectives (Raheja and Gold 1994). In Kangra songs, women are presented as hardworking, headstrong, opinionated, and resourceful. They are separated from their families of birth, estranged from their in-laws, and literally or emotionally abandoned by husbands.

Women sing together, but they cannot be reduced to a fixed or monolithic “folk.” In Kangra, some women are singers; among singers, each is different, with her own tastes and repertoire; in one singer’s life, her favorite songs may change. Looking at gender representations in women’s songs, it is useful to think of them as collective representations overlaid through cultural practice on the lives of individual women, and also as self-representations through which individual women might speak about their life concerns. A slippage may well occur between collective and personal meanings, so that due to various factors (caste, class, age, life-stage, education) certain women may not be drawn to folksongs in their regional language, and so choose other media, like film songs, to describe their lives and emotions (Narayan 1996).

To what extent, then, does the genre actually mirror enforced separation through migrant labor that the political economy has tied into women’s lives, and what else is being commented on? As we can see from

the texts of particular songs as well as women's commentaries about them, men's expected absence is a charged, multivocal symbol. It can be used to indict the lack of worldly success of men who stay home, as a bereft counterpoint to the joys of being together and as an index of in-marrying women's alienation within the joint family. It can dramatize the emotional distance between men and women, where men simply do not sympathize with women's concerns. It can speak to the pain of a man's preoccupation with other women. Also, it can evoke the sorrow of abiding separation through death.

These songs lie on a continuum with other cultural productions from diverse parts of India that dramatize the emotion *virāha*, or separation, that is especially associated with Radha and Krishna. As Tharu and Lalitha (1991:127) observe in regard to songs from various regions, "The traditional motif of the longing of Radha for the absent Krishna is more recently infused in some of the songs we have translated with the new suggestion that the man might have had to leave the family and the village to seek a living in the town." As expressed through Kangra miniatures, *virāha* is also a complex emotion, with its own typology elaborated by medieval Hindi poets: the separation experienced in a fresh infatuation (*purvānurāg*), the separation of misunderstanding through pride or jealousy (*mān*), the separation of absence in a distant land (*pravās*), and also the separation caused by death (*karuṇā*) (Randhawa 1954:10-12, 1962:84-120). While Kangra women did not make reference to this more classical typology, their songs seemed to echo some of the same shades of complexity. That women are not singing *just* about migrant labor but rather using this reality as a multivocal symbol for relations between the genders is corroborated by the fact that in other parts of India where there is not such massive migration, women also sing such songs of separation.⁴

Drawing on Donald Tuzin's work in Melanesia, Alice Schlegel has recently argued with regard to the Hopi (1990:26): "When any single sex group is in operation, the other sex will be the "other". . . . Whether or not the 'other' is treated within that context in a demeaning manner may have less to do with the way that members of that action group actually perceive them to be than with the character of the group itself. In *pakharu*, husbands are clearly the male "other." If the "other" is far away, it follows that the "self" is close by. The distance described in this genre of songs comments not only on relations with husbands but also on the relations among women who sing together—as fellow performers and as fellow sufferers. Singing

⁴ Personal communication from Ann Gold for Rajasthan and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, Sylvia Vatuk, and Susan Wadley for Uttar Pradesh.

together would seem potentially to foster women's solidarity and sympathy across differences. This is similar to the situation observed in Greece by Anna Caraveli, who points out that the singing of a women's lament genre expresses protest in a "poetic voice that recognizes a 'sisterhood of pain' among women, a sense of communal victimization inflicted by either social or natural forces" (1986:181-82). Interestingly enough, the pooling of grievances about women's plight is akin to the Western feminist practice of "consciousness raising" that Chris Weedon has described as allowing women "the possibility of interpreting difficulties, problems, and inadequacies not as an effect of individual, personal failings, but as a result of socially produced structures" (1987:85). The practice of collective singing differs from consciousness raising though, in that instead of instigating change through gender solidarity, it appears to help women adapt to the constraints placed on their lives.

Women can sing together in this outspoken way because of two aspects of gendered distance: women's segregation and male absence due to migrant labor. Having a social space set apart from male surveillance appears to have fostered an arena in which women create and sustain self-representations that privilege women's points of view (cf. Sanday 1990:17). So women's segregation among high castes in Kangra can be viewed as a "symbolic shelter" not only in Hannah Papanek's (1982) terms of the culturally constructed evils from which segregation purports to shield women, but also in terms of providing a shelter for women's symbolic creations. Male absence is an extension of this principle. This may be one reason, I believe, that male absence is so elaborated in a genre that bluntly describes women's suffering.

All the women singers I have cited here are middle-aged or older; some younger women did not even know that a genre such as *pakharu* existed. Yet the theme of emotional distance between the genders may prove more enduring than any particular song genre, as is suggested by a rollicking dance song (*nāch gīt*) with which I end. Dance songs, which are accompanied by drums and clapping, are uproariously performed by women at mass celebrations. Not all dance songs dramatize separation, but some, like the following, do. Among the lead performers of this song were the Brahman daughters and nieces of a few of the *pakharu* singers cited in this paper. This song does not point towards the poetic past in which most *pakharu* are set. Instead, it uses English words like "coat" and "pen," refers to the metropolis Delhi, playfully invokes women's education, and speaks to the emerging possibility that women may accompany their migrant men:

Kālā koṭ tangāyā kiliyā

A black coat is hanging from a nail,

<i>tangāyā kiliyā</i> <i>apu chhoru rahendā Dilliyā</i>	hanging from a nail. My fellow lives in Delhi.
<i>minjo chhoṛi diyā ghar akiliyā</i> <i>ghar akiliyā</i> <i>merā man lage o Dilliyā</i>	He's left me alone at home, alone at home. My mind is fixed on Delhi.
<i>chiṭṭi likhnā jo pen dei jā</i> <i>pen dei jā</i> <i>nahin tā chhoru nāl lei jā</i>	Leave me a pen to write a letter, leave me a pen. Else, fellow, take me along. ⁵

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⁵ My personal ties to Kangra stretch back to 1974, and my interest in songs to 1980. This phase of research took place between September 1990 and September 1991 thanks to support from the University of Wisconsin Graduate School, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the National Endowment for Humanities. I am also grateful to the School for American Research, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and the Social Science Research Council for granting me the time to think through and write about this research. I am grateful to Gloria Goodwin Raheja for organizing the stimulating conference that elicited the papers in this volume. This paper was first submitted in 1992, and I regret that for this revision I have not been able to more fully engage with more recent publications on women's songs. My enduring thanks to the singers mentioned here in pseudonym and to Didi Contractor for her encouragement. Also, many thanks to Eytan Bercovitch, John Foley, Don Handelman, Maria Lepowsky, Jonathan Parry, and Sabina Magliocco for reading and critiquing earlier drafts of this paper.

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The Beggared Mother: Older Women's Narratives in West Bengal

Sarah Lamb

“Let me tell you a story,” one white-clad and white-haired widow and mother of eight said to me on my first visit to her rambling family home crowded with descendants and the smoke of several cooking fires, “about the way it is to be a mother these days. Mothers raise their children with such effort and pain. But when they grow up, the children don't even recognize them.” And she proceeded to tell me a story—which I will repeat shortly—of an old and devoted mother who comes to be forgotten and turned into a beggar by her only and beloved son.¹

Studies of South Asian women's expressive traditions have largely left out the voices and perspectives of older women. Where older women do appear, they are most often characters (such as mothers or mothers-in-law) in narratives told from the viewpoint of a younger woman (a daughter, daughter-in-law, or young wife), not the central protagonists of the tales themselves.²

It is perhaps because the images of older women in the literature on South Asian women's oral traditions have come largely from younger women's tales that these images are generally of powerful, fortunate matrons: the revered older mother or the domineering mother-in-law. Daughters, for instance, tell of how they love and revere their mothers. Margaret Trawick (1986; 1990:163-70) describes women's folk songs in Tamil Nadu in which daughters (the protagonists of the songs) yearn for

¹ Research in West Bengal during 1989-90 was generously funded by the Fulbright-Hays Foundation, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. My deepest gratitude is reserved for the people of West Bengal, especially the residents of Mangaldihi, who enabled me to live among them. For their valuable comments on earlier versions of the paper, I wish also to thank Edward Black, McKim Marriott, Diane Mines, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, Sylvia Vatuk, and the anonymous reviewers for *Oral Tradition*.

² For an exception, see Ramanujan's story of a poor, old widow (1991:42-43). Gold 1994 also examines the storytelling of a “widow in her sixties,” Shobhag Kanvar. Even this widow's story, however, has as its central protagonist a young girl.

continuity with their mothers, while it is their mothers who cut them away. Ramanujan's tale from Karnataka, "A Flowering Tree" (elsewhere in this volume), opens with two daughters devoted to their elderly mother. They turn into a flowering tree for her sake, to make money to relieve her from the menial tasks she must perform to feed and clothe them. In her study of social dyads in a vast number of South Asian folktales, Brenda Beck likewise observes that "a son's sentiments toward his mother are uniformly depicted in positive terms," as are those of a daughter for her mother (1986:96-97).

There is also the familiar image in studies of South Asian women's oral traditions of the domineering mother-in-law, who oppresses her sons' wives by trying to prevent the establishment of conjugal intimacy, keeping the wives away from their own natal kin, and forcing their daughters-in-law to overwork. Raheja and Gold provide rich examples of songs and narratives in this vein. In one song, a young bride speaks to her husband: "How can I come, how can I come near you? Husband, your grandmother is very cunning. She fights with me and then puts her own cot down next to our bed" (1994:127).

The images of older women in such tales and songs are consistent in many ways with the portrait of the powerful, post-menopausal Indian mother-in-law commonly found in other studies of South Asian women's lives. This picture of the mother-in-law playing the role of matriarch to a large extended family of sons, sons' wives, and grandchildren is a familiar one in the literature, although—as Vatuk points out (1995:295)—it has not been subjected to close analytical scrutiny, or examined critically from the perspective of the older woman herself.

In this article I wish to concentrate on the less often heard voices of older South Asian women by looking at the stories they tell about motherhood. Stories told by older women in West Bengal, from a mother's perspective, tend not to focus on the power of mothers and mothers-in-law, but on their powerlessness; not on the revered mother, but on the beggared and displaced one. I suggest that it is through such oral narratives that many Bengali women scrutinize and critique the social worlds they experience, giving voice to their experiences through the language of story. Many women come to believe, as they grow up and listen to the more dominant oral traditions and much of everyday talk, that becoming a mother-in-law and a mother of grown sons will lead to unparalleled freedoms, unquestioned authority, and devoted affection; but they encounter instead plaguing disappointments and troubling ambiguities. Their narratives form, then, a kind of subaltern voice, through which they present alternate visions of motherhood and a woman's old age, visions that

contrast with the more official ones.

I will concentrate here on three tales. The first is a traditional story about a revered mother, told from a daughter-in-law's perspective. It is included here as counterpoint. The latter two, a folk tale and a personal narrative, concern beggared mothers and the compelling ambiguities of a woman's old age.

It was while living in a large village called Mangaldihi in 1989 and 1990 that I heard these stories and met the women who tell them. Mangaldihi is located in the gently undulating red earthen terrain of the Birbhum District of West Bengal, about 150 kilometers northwest of Calcutta, about five hours by train and bus. In 1990 it was home to about 1,700 residents, including seventeen Hindu caste groups, a neighborhood of Muslims, and a neighborhood of tribal Santals. When writing of "older" or "old" women here, I will be using the indigenous sense of the term *burī*, which basically means women whose children are married, who tend to be widowed, and who are largely white-haired and white-clad.

The Revered Mother: A *Vratakathā* Story

First, let me tell you a story told from a young woman's perspective. It portrays the cultural ideal of the older woman as revered mother and mother-in-law. This is a domestic ritual story, or *vratakathā*, one of the more popular women's narrative genres in West Bengal. *Vratakathās* are stories told mostly by upper caste women to accompany the performance of domestic rituals or vows called *vratās*.³ They are largely happy stories, emphasizing the powers of women to bring about domestic well-being through correct moral action and ritual attention to deities. In Mangaldihi, these stories are performed mostly by young, upper caste daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law who gather together in groups of five to twenty-five in the courtyards of their homes, where they tell and listen to the stories just before breaking their ritual fasts. The *vratakathā* stories, once only orally transmitted, are now usually read from small paperback pamphlets compiled by Brahman priests and available inexpensively at local markets.

The protagonist in such ritual stories is usually a young wife or daughter-in-law (*boumā*) who lives in a household headed by her mother-in-law (*śāśurī*). The young wife's husband is generally more loyal to his

³ Women's *vratakathā* storytelling traditions are also popular elsewhere in North India. See, for example, Wadley 1975:61-90; 1986.

mother than to his wife, and it is the primary duty of the young wife to serve and honor her husband's mother. Ultimately, such respectful devotion toward the elder mother brings about material and spiritual well-being for the family and society as a whole.

One dawn, soon after I had moved into Mangaldihi, a group of neighborhood girls arrived breathlessly at my door to invite me to come hear a *vratakathā* story. Their mothers had sent them, knowing that I was a young wife and thinking that the story would be personally edifying for me. I picked up my notebook and tape recorder and went off. Women and children were meandering into the earthen-walled courtyard of a modest Brahman home. They were wrapped in light shawls in the early morning sun. Some were knitting; others were attending to children. There was an underlying hum of gossip. The women and many of the daughters had been fasting since the previous day in honor of the goddess Mangalcandi, as they did whenever a Tuesday fell on the final day of the lunar month. The reading of the story would mark the end of the ritual fast. It went like this:⁴

There was once a very poor Brahman man. His household included himself, his wife, and his mother; other than that, they had no one at all. Their days passed with difficulty. One day the Brahman said to his wife, "Look, you can't run a household without money. So I've been thinking that I'll go to the king's palace to try to earn a few things to bring home. You look after Ma with care. See that she doesn't suffer at all."

After saying all this to his wife, the Brahman decided on a good day and took off on his journey. At home, the wife began to look after her mother-in-law (*śāśurī*) with great effort (*khub jatna karte lāglo*). But to what effect? Day by day the mother-in-law began to dry up like a piece of burnt wood.⁵ The wife's life-breath (*prān*) floated away with fear. She thought, "What's this? I'm feeding her milk and ghee with such care. Why is she still drying up like a piece of burnt wood?"

Three or four months went by like this. With each passing day, the Brahman wife's fear increased. "What will my husband say when he returns? That I had a scheme to kill his mother by not feeding her and drying her out? If you care for someone, do they dry out like this?" Thinking and worrying in this way, the Brahman wife couldn't sleep any more at night. She would toss and turn all night long, thinking all sorts of

⁴ See *Meyeder Vratakathā* (Bhattacharjya n.d.: 52-57). The story is called the "*Mangal-Sangkrānti Vratakathā*," the "Tuesday-on-the-last-day-of-the-month ritual tale." As it is a long story, I translate the most relevant portions of the narrative verbatim and summarize others, as indicated by brackets.

⁵ Bengalis commonly associate becoming "dry" with aging and sickness.

troubled thoughts. . . .

[One morning,] as soon as it began to get light, the wife got up and swept the house. Then she washed the dishes and took her bath. A little later the Brahman appeared. He brought with him two porters bearing rice, dal, oil, flour, ghee, clothes, towels, and so much more! The Brahman had also brought back a lot of money. The wife quickly took all the things into their home. The Brahman washed his hands and feet, and entered the house to call his mother. But when he saw his mother's appearance, the Brahman fell back ten steps in fear. His wife pleaded, "I wasn't lax at all in serving Ma. But I too have been so worried seeing Ma somehow dry out day by day like this. I've been worrying and worrying now for several months."

[The Brahman then took a bath, ate a little bit, and went to his mother.] "Oh, Ma!" he asked, "Did your daughter-in-law (*boumā*) look after you well?" The mother answered, "Yes, dear! My *boumā* looked after me with great care. She cooked all kinds of food for me, and she gave me a big bowl of milk twice a day. Why, dear, why are you asking this?" The Brahman replied, "Well, she is the daughter of another (*parer meye*).⁶ You look like you haven't eaten for days. Have you been sick at all?" The mother answered, "No, dear! I haven't noticed anything." The Brahman then went to his wife and said, "Look, I'm going away again. If I can find some medicine to make Ma better, I'll come back. If not, I won't come home again." Saying this, the Brahman left the house.

He went on his way, and at noontime as he was going along, the Brahman came upon an old *sannyāsi* woman meditating under a banyan tree. He folded his hands and sat down beside her. At dusk, the *sannyāsi* woman broke off her meditation. The Brahman bowed down to her and said, "Ma, you are all-knowing. But I have no idea what kind of illness has befallen my mother," . . . and he one by one recounted to her everything that had happened. The *sannyāsi* woman listened and responded, "This sickness occurs when someone [i.e., your wife] touches a copper worship dish, Brahman man, conch shell, or cow [all sacred items] while in an impure [*asuci*, i.e. menstrual] condition. But if one performs the *Mangal-sangkrānti vratā* [Tuesday-on-the-last-day-of-the-month ritual for the goddess Mangalcandi], then this sickness will be cured." [The *sannyāsi* woman then instructed the Brahman as to how he must travel to a certain queen, where he could acquire all the necessary items and knowledge for performing the special ritual.]

[When the Brahman had learned all he needed to know,] he made the trip back to his home. When he arrived, he told his wife everything. [He gave her the ritual ingredients, and she immediately went to work performing the ritual very carefully. When she was finished, she offered her mother-in-law the ritual water to drink.] Four or five days later, after

⁶ The phrase *parer meye* means literally an "other's girl," that is, the daughter of strangers. It is a phrase often used to highlight the common feeling that inmarrying wives are not a real part of their conjugal families.

drinking the water, the mother-in-law was completely cured!

All of the other village housewives came to listen to the Brahman wife's story, and they all began to perform the *Mangal-sangkrānti* ritual.

And if you do this ritual, then even if you touch things while in an impure condition, no harm will occur. This ritual is one that every woman should perform.

This story contains interesting elements regarding the management of menstrual impurity, but I must leave that topic aside here to focus on the story's mother. Several of this story's themes are common in *vratākathā* narratives and in other traditional tales about family relations that focus on the duties of young wives. First, the daughter-in-law's primary duty is to serve and honor her husband's mother. If any ill befalls the mother, it is the young wife who is held culpable. The wife tosses and turns at night worrying about how her husband will blame her for his mother's illness, and he does return home to do just that. In fact, it turns out that it really is the wife who is to blame, for it is the ill effects of her actions (here, the improper management of menstrual impurity) that flow up to harm the elderly mother.

Second, the son's devotion to his mother overrides that to his wife. The Brahman tells his wife, "I'm going. If I can find some medicine to make Ma better, I'll come back. If not, I won't come home again." The family line or *baṃśa*, represented in the form of the mother-son bond, is stressed here over conjugal ties—and the son's reference to his wife as a *parer meye* ("other's girl," or "daughter of strangers") highlights this emphasis. The son is more attached to his mother than he is to his wife; if his mother cannot reside harmoniously with them, he no longer wishes to be a part of the household.

Finally, the mother in the tale is presented as a venerable being. Note how the ill effects of the wife's menstrual impurity flow up to harm her mother-in-law, who is associated with other sacred objects—the copper plate (*tāmār ṭāṭ*) and conch shells (*śāṅkh*) used in daily worship, the sacred thread (*paitā*) that Brahman men wear, and the sacred cow—that the wife unknowingly touches in her state of menstrual impurity, causing the mother to become ill. Women listening to the story in Mangaldihi noted, in fact, that this is one of the main morals of the tale: one should treat one's mother-in-law and mother with respectful devotion (*bhaktī*), as one would other sacred things.

Such *vratākathā* stories, according to Ramanujan's classification of narrative genres, are "interior, domestic" stories, told by women in the inner courtyards of their homes, and told mostly about women's domestic

relationships (Ramanujan 1986; see also Wadley 1986:200). I suggest, however, that compared to many other women's narrative genres in Mangaldihi, such as the folktales and personal narratives favored by older women that I will get to shortly, the *vratakathā* stories are actually relatively public. First, they are performed, although in inner courtyards, by relatively large groups of women in conjunction with popular rituals, and they are also now printed in publicly accessible paperback pamphlets (which have been compiled, furthermore, by male Brahman priests).

Second and even more importantly, *vratakathā* stories express widely held cultural beliefs and values, forming part of a dominant discourse about the way things ought to be. People in Mangaldihi frequently described to me moral values and family relations similar to those portrayed in the *vratakathā* narratives: mothers and mothers-in-law are “like deities”—as are other elders—because of their “senior” or “grown” status. Mothers are also revered, Bengalis say, because of their reproductive powers. A mother is like the earth (*prthibī*) or land (*bhūmi*), as is the earth like a mother, for in the wombs or “fields” (*kshetra*) of both, “seeds” (*bīj*, of semen or of food) are nourished and brought to life. The sacred Hindu cow is also compared to a mother, for both bring forth milk, the food that has the power to nourish and sustain human life. Some of Bengal's most popular deities, such as Durga, Kali, and Sitala, are also mothers (Nicholas 1982), and devotees call out to them in moments of devotional fervor, “O Ma!,” like children calling their own moms.

But women's oral narratives in Bengal contain multiple voices and perspectives. Once older women have taught their daughters and daughters-in-law the *vratakathā* stories, they rarely take any more interest in either performing or listening to them. The stories they tell, from a mother's perspective and traditionally in even more interior and private settings, paint a very different image of motherhood and a woman's old age.

See what happens, now, in an old woman's story about a mother who becomes a beggar.

The Beggared Mother: Older Women's Folktales

There was once a mother who raised her only son with much effort and suffering. She sold all of her wealth to feed him when he was young and to give him a good education; but in the end he gave nothing back to her. When he grew up and she gave his marriage, he and his wife left her alone and went to spend all of their time traveling around here and there. So what could the mother do? She ended up as a beggar. After a while she

made her way to Bakresbar [a local Saivite pilgrimage spot] and there she lined up every day with all of the other old beggars and her begging bowl in front of her.

One day it happened that her son and his wife went on a trip to Bakresbar. There the son's mother was sitting as usual in a line with all of the other beggars along the path to the bathing area. Can a mother ever forget her son? Never. But the son did not recognize his mother. He dropped a coin into her begging dish, and at this moment, his mother called him by his name, the name she had called him when he was a child. He was startled; he knew that no one knew this name but his mother. He was about to stop and say something to her, but his wife would not let him stand there. She pulled on his arm and said, "You don't have to talk to that old woman," and she led him away.

"So, you see," the old woman storyteller closed with a sigh, "mothers raise their sons with such tremendous effort and pain, but the sons forget" (*mārā cheleder bahut kaṣṭa kare mānus kare, kintu chelerā mane rākhe nā*).

This story was told to me by a high caste (*Kāyastha*) widow in her nineties from the neighboring village of Batikar, on a late fall morning as I visited with her in a spacious mud-walled room with two of her great-granddaughters. The old widow, called Debu's Ma, was herself proud to live in a large ancestral home crowded with four generations of descendants still eating rice from the same pot. But she also enjoyed telling stories about the problems of old mothers.

Like other older women, she told stories primarily to friends or to grandchildren, in back rooms, in inner courtyards, or on the cool platforms of temples, in the middle of the day while other people were busy doing work. Their stories did not constitute part of special ritual performances, nor were they formally performed before large groups of friends. Rather, they were told as parts of everyday conversations, as a means of scrutinizing and commenting upon the social worlds they experience. Before opening her story, Debu's Ma had been telling me about the lamentable ways of mothers and sons:

Mothers raise their children with such effort and pain. But the children don't even recognize them when they grow up (*ār cinte pāre nā*). Children . . . come from their mother's deepest insides within the womb (*nārī*). The mother feeds them her breast milk and cleans up their urine and excrement. But does the son now remember those days? No.

In her story a mother yearns for intimacy with her son, while her son abandons and forgets her. It follows a sequence of events familiar in stories told by and about old mothers: a mother sacrifices everything for her son,



Debu's Ma, teller of the story of the beggared mother, 1990.

but ultimately there is a failure of reciprocity. When the son grows up, he gives nothing back to her. The son turns from his mother to his wife, and in the end he forgets her altogether. Being abandoned and forgotten by her son in this way, the mother is stripped not only of material support but also of her identity. She can do nothing else but become one in an indistinguishable line of old beggars, waiting silently with her tin bowl in front of her. The blame in this story, furthermore, falls mostly on the son's

wife rather than on the son. For although the son abandons and forgets his mother, it is the son's wife who plays the active role in leading him away.

In another story, told by an eighty-year-old Brahman woman known as Choto Ma (or "Little Mother"), a son leaves his mother not for his wife but to go off to work in a faraway city. Choto Ma told this story to me while chatting with several of her friends, as they often did, to illustrate the particularly degenerate nature of "modern society" (*ādhunīk samāj*) and the ways old mothers get especially short shrift in these times.

There was a mother, as Choto Ma told it,⁷ who lived with her only son and his wife. One day the son decided to take a job in a far-off city, and he left his mother behind with his wife, promising to come home as soon as he could make some money. Several days went by, but they received no word from him. Then one day, without saying anything, the daughter-in-law began to dress up to go out, putting on a fine sari and powder on her face. She didn't even ask her mother-in-law's permission or tell her where she was going! She simply caught the noon bus and left the mother there all alone.

"You see," Choto Ma said, "it is no longer the age of mothers (*māyer jug*); it is the age of daughters-in-law (*bouer jug*). Daughters-in-law want their independence (*svādhīnatā*). They say, 'I married your son, not you'." Choto Ma's friend and sister-in-law, Mejo Ma, added knowingly with concern, "And now everyone is going to cities to work. Who will serve the mothers?"

This story, although much more spartan in detail, has a parallel structure to the *vratakathā* story that I opened with above. In both narratives a son goes away from his mother in order to make money, and he leaves his mother behind with his wife. But while in the *vratakathā* story the son parts from his mother reluctantly, carefully entrusting her to his wife's care, and finally returns home eager for reunion, here the son seems to leave indifferently and we never hear of him again. Furthermore, while the *vratakathā* story revolves around the wife's devoted care for her husband's mother, in this old woman's story the son's wife just casually takes off.

Before adding any further commentary on these tales, let us turn to a personal narrative told by another elderly widow, Billo's Ma, that echoes many of the same themes.

⁷ I did not record this story. The account here is reconstructed from notes I took several hours later. I include it here, then, not to examine the specific language of Choto Ma's narrative, but to illustrate the kinds of themes older women convey in their own daily lives.

The Life Story of Billo's Ma

Stories older women in Mangaldihi told me about their own lives mimicked in many ways the same themes—of being forgotten and becoming beggars—found in their folktales. I was the primary elicitor of and audience for the personal narratives I collected, but the narrators readily took to the practice, calling their narrations their “life’s stories” (*jībaner galpa*). In fact, such personal narratives also became a kind of public narrative performance as I stayed on in the village, as visitors would come to the large courtyard of my landlord’s home in the evenings (where many people also often congregated around the television) and ask to hear such and such a Ma’s taped life story. Several white-clad and white-haired women also sought me out, climbing the three flights of stairs to my high



Older women gather in the late morning to gossip or tell stories (*galpa kara*), 1990.

room and veranda, lining up to say, "You haven't taped my life story yet," and demanding that their stories also be recorded and listened to publicly on tape.⁸

Older women in Mangaldihi tended to divide their life stories into a strikingly uniform sequence of events and life phases. The narratives would begin with a brief but glowing account of the happy years of childhood. In this period a girl lives in her father's house (*bāper bāri*) and receives, as women describe it, unlimited supplies of food and love. Next come the years in a father-in-law's house (*śvaśur bāri*) as a young wife or *bou*. Women tell here of being painfully torn away from their natal homes, and of their relationships with their mothers-in-law (*śāśurī*), who were often kind and loving but who were also usually strict, watchful, and demanding. The third life phase is that of a mother of young children. Women describe becoming gradually a part of their marital homes, with long years of sacrifice and work raising children, pouring out endless quantities of love, breast milk, food, and material wealth to them. The final life phase is the current one: that of an elderly or "increased" (*briddha, burī*) mother of sons who have brought in wives.

I will focus here on the story of Billo's Ma. Her story is a little different than some, for she had a difficult early childhood: she was orphaned as an infant, although raised with love by her mother's brother. It is a story that became popular in the village and contains one of the more dramatic and moving narratives of motherhood. Billo's Ma was an elderly *Bagdi* (low caste) widow, with four married sons and two married daughters, called by most, as is typical, by reference to her eldest son. She was a small, worn woman with a strong, independent spirit and thin gray-black hair pulled back into a scant knot. She lived in a compound with three of her sons and their wives but considered herself to be living "alone" (*ekā*), for she maintained a small mud hut and cooking stove of her own, obtaining food by making cow dung patties for fuel for wealthier Brahman families. She told me her life story one afternoon as her daughters-in-law were off at the local video hall and she sat tending a fire, boiling some rice for her evening meal. She told her story with a great deal of emotion, at times breaking into tears. Several neighborhood children listened as she spoke. Following are lengthy excerpts from my recording, including some of my questions and comments, which clearly influenced the unfolding of her story:

⁸ For more on personal narratives as an oral performance genre, see Dolby-Stahl 1983, 1985; Robinson 1981; and Carlin 1992. See also The Personal Narratives Group 1989 for more on using personal narratives to study gender and women's lives.

I [Interviewer]: What all has happened in your life since childhood?

B [Billo's Ma]: . . . In my childhood my mother and father weren't there. I have no parents. My mother and father died in bed. My mother, father, and older sister—they all died in the same bed in one day and one night, from cholera. I was in the bed with my dead parents, lying on top of a dead mother and dead father. And then Ma Manasa [the snake goddess] picked me up and gave me to my *māmā* [mother's brother]. And my *māmā* raised me. . . .

I: Do you remember that?

B: How would I remember it? I don't even remember my parents. They died when I was ten months old. My aunt and uncle brought me up. They kept me in their house. They gave my wedding when I was seven. My husband was then eighteen. Because I was so young, they didn't take me. I mean, just the wedding happened [but the marriage wasn't consummated at that time]. But they were saying that if they waited until I was older, then my wedding wouldn't happen because I would be too old. Back then it was like that. So I was kept at home [for several years]. It's not good for a young girl to stay in her father-in-law's house (*śvaśur ghar*). I lived very well with my parents. I couldn't call my aunt an aunt; I called her mother.

And then after staying [in my father-in-law's house] for five years, my oldest son was born. And then all the rest happened—I had eight children—six sons and two daughters. . . . My father, that is, my uncle, died before my wedding. . . . He died, and my family (*saṃsār*) happened. I began to make a household with my kids. . . .

I brought up my children with great difficulty (*khub kaṣṭa kare*). And their father was sick for two years. He would walk a little and then he couldn't walk any more. All my kids were still very young when their father died. Not one of them was old enough to work. So I had to bring them all up. During the time when their father was sick I had to sell one and a half *bighās* [about a half acre] of land. I sold a house. Water jugs, plates, dishes, I had to sell everything. There was nothing left. Ankle bracelets, a waistband, three pairs of gold earrings, silver and conch shell bracelets, a necklace and pendant—all these I had to sell. But even with selling all this, nothing happened. We took him to the doctor . . . , and we took him to an astrologer (*ganak*) who said he had a stone in his stomach. But no one could stop the illness. And then he began to emit a foul odor when he breathed. And his urine was as red as the *āltā* [red dye] you wear on your feet. And he never had any bowel movements—the tiny bit that happened was as black as coal tar. And he was in a lot of pain.

But even though we sold all of our things, nothing could be done. We had a broken house then where we would stay. I would work all day long, then come home and cook a bit of rice. There was no room to sleep in

our house, so the kids would go to sleep in the courtyard of Babu's house [a nearby Brahman household]. And two of us would stay in the broken house. There was no room for more than that to sleep. I used to tell him [my husband] before he died, "You'll die, and how will we live?"

I suffered a lot raising those children. We didn't even have clothes to wear. At that time one sari cost about six or ten rupees. I would buy one of those, cut it into two, and I would wear one part and my oldest daughter would wear the other. I would give my daughter the better part. . . .

So I raised my children with so much difficulty. I cooked for some, washed clothes for others. I did whatever anyone told me to do. A neighbor Borgi man, Golap Das, used to look after us a lot. Every day on his way to the office in the morning he would ask the kids, "What did you eat?" I would answer, "We had tea." He'd say, "You did have tea?" And I'd say, "Yes." He'd say, "Good." And then on his way home every day he would ask if we had eaten rice. On the days that we had eaten, I'd say, "Yes, we ate." [Then she began to cry, and continued through her tears:] And on the days we hadn't eaten, I would say, "No, we didn't eat today." [She stopped crying and paused for a moment.] Then his mother would send us rice, or a bit of flour. One day she gave three fish to feed to the kids. They sometimes gave a few clothes to the kids as well. And during festival time I would work in Khudi Thakrun's [a wealthy Brahman woman's] house. I did all kinds of work. And I would take what people would give me. It won't do to slander anyone. Whoever gives, gives; whoever doesn't give, doesn't give. . . .

I: Then what happened? Your children grew up, and then?

B: My sons all grew up, and I gave all their weddings. All of their own families have happened, and now whose am I? Now whose am I (*ei bār āmi kothākār ke*)? I am no longer anyone (*ār to āmi keu nay*). Now someone [one son] is saying, "I came from a hole in the ground." Another is saying, "I fell from the sky." Another is saying, "I came from God," and yet another is saying, "My hands and feet came on their own; I grew up on my own." Who am I now (*ei bār āmi ke*)? I'm speaking the truth. What kind of thing is a mother *mā ābār ki eman jinis?* . . .

Listen. I have four sons. If they had all lived in one place, that would have been good, wouldn't it? If they would all come to eat [together]. If they would take the money they earned, put it into my hand and say, "Ma, will you handle this for me"? Then my heart would have been happy. But now, whatever your brothers [i.e., her sons] bring home, whom do they give it to? Their mother? Or their wives? Huh?

I: You mean your sons give everything to their wives?

B: Yes. They have their own families and their own work. How will I take anything from them? . . .

I ate as many days as there was food in my fate. I don't depend on

anyone—only God. God is my support. Now it's time for me to die. I could just close my eyes and it would happen.

Her story was interrupted when a neighboring wife arrived and asked Billo's Ma, "Where did they [i.e., her daughters-in-law] all go?" Billo's Ma answered in a sarcastic tone, "All of those well educated girls went to watch the video. What intelligence and education they'll bring back, understanding it all and laughing about it! And how much work I've done since they've been gone! I collected firewood, came home, swept the courtyard, made tea, and now am cooking rice."

Billo's Ma, like the beggared mother in the *Kāyastha* widow's folktale, yearns for intimacy with her sons, but her sons and daughters-in-law turn away from her. She sacrifices all of her wealth to raise her children, but in the end—as she tells it—she receives nothing in return.

Mothers, Beggars, and Women's Stories

At this point I must note that very few of the women in Mangaldihi who told stories of beggared mothers were impoverished themselves, at least by village standards, nor were most (not even Billo's Ma) neglected, in any blatant way at least, by their sons. Then why is it that so many of the older women I knew told stories of beggared and forgotten mothers, in contrast to much of the public discourse and popular ritual tales (*vratakathā*) about loved, revered, and even divine mothers?

I suggest in this article's final section that telling such stories provides women a forum for presenting an alternate way of looking at things, a way that resonates more soundly with the ambiguities of their own life experiences. Even if not literally beggared, these women narrate circumstances in their own lives that make them, in significant respects, like beggars. The theme of the mother as beggar works here, I suggest, as a polyvalent metaphor conveying a loss of love, a vulnerability to poverty, and the ephemeral character of a woman's identity over the life course.

Let us turn now to some of the themes in Billo's Ma's narrative, themes that recur in other life stories and tales I heard told by older Bengali women. First is the theme of the failure of reciprocity. Bengalis say that a mother's sacrifices for her children are immense. She provides them the tremendous gifts of birth, breast milk, food, material wealth, and love. But these gifts do not form merely a one-way transaction. In giving to her children, a mother creates in them an immense debt (*ṛn*), a debt that the children are expected to strive to repay their mother in her late life. The

relationship between a mother (or a father) and children, then, is thought to be a long-term reciprocal one, in which children—particularly sons—care for their parents in old age in exchange for the tremendous gifts previously bestowed upon the children.⁹ This kind of intergenerational reciprocity is portrayed in many of the *vratakathā* ritual tales, such as the one I told above. That whole story revolves, in fact, around the unfailing devoted care the son and his wife provide for their elderly mother.

In the stories that older women tell, however, there is almost always a breakdown in mother-child reciprocity. A recurrent theme in the narratives of older women is that of mothers who have given everything they have to their sons—birth, breast milk, food, and material wealth—but who ultimately receive nothing in return. The sons in these stories grow up; not only do they begin to give to their wives instead of to their mothers, but they do not even recognize their mothers anymore. Even worse, they deny that their mothers ever gave them birth. Billo's Ma reports her sons as saying, "I came from a hole in the ground," "I fell from the sky," "I came from God," "My hands and feet came on their own; I grew up on my own." This is very important, because if a son forgets his mother's previous sacrifices, he does not owe her anything. In this way the mothers in the stories are pushed out of the family body, no longer partners in reciprocal family exchanges. They become beggars *par excellence*—persons who receive scattered handouts but who are not recognized as having given anything themselves. Such scenarios convey a pervasive sentiment of older women—that even if they are not blatantly rejected by their sons, their previous sacrifices are never sufficiently appreciated or rewarded. Beggary here works as a metaphor for the loss of love. Sons grow up and turn to their wives and their own children. Mothers will always love and give to their children more than they are loved and given in return.

A second recurrent theme in older women's narratives is that of poverty. In the *vratakathā* ritual tale I told here, although the old mother does not control property in her own right, she is well cared for in her son's home. The son returns from the king's palace laden with household goods and money to support not only his wife but also his mother.

In older women's tales, however, the mothers most commonly not only have no property of their own—having sacrificed it all previously to raise their children—but they also are not provided for by their sons. The

⁹ See also Vatuk 1990 and Lamb 1993:98-136 for more on intergenerational reciprocity in Indian families. Note that since daughters usually move to their husbands' homes upon marriage, it is the sons (with their inmarrying wives) who are primarily responsible for caring for the parents in old age.

son in the mother-as-beggar tale abandons his mother without leaving behind any food or money, so she has no other recourse but to become a beggar. Billo's Ma tells of how her sons give money and food to their wives and not to their mother, forcing her to labor, making cow dung patties for food and clothing through her last days. This image of the poverty-stricken, even beggared mother was one that continued to crop up in older women's life narratives. Another white-haired woman, a widow referred to by many as "Khudi Thakrun's daughter" (after the proud, most senior woman in the village), related in the same vein:

I have given everything that I had to my daughter. Now I have nothing at all. I am now sitting dressed as a beggar. I have nothing at all. . . . But now they no longer love me as they did. I gave everything to them and now they don't really care about what's left. . . . This is my life of sadness (*ei āmār dukher jiban*). This is my history (*ei āmār itihās*).

Indeed, the image of the beggared mother speaks to a real vulnerability of older women *vis à vis* property. Women in Bengal rarely own or control property in their own right. Although Bengal has widow inheritance laws requiring that widows inherit a portion of their husbands' property, very few observe these laws in practice. Older widows almost uniformly turn over any property, either by verbal agreement or legal transfer, to their sons upon their husbands' deaths. It is significant, too, that the majority of women do become widows during the last stage of their lives, for Bengali women commonly outlive their husbands and still only rarely practice widow remarriage, especially if widowed in late life (Lamb 1993:365-99, Chen and Dreze 1993). Women, then, more often than not become entirely dependent on their sons in late life not only for emotional but also for material support, and thus are threatened with beggary should their sons desert them.

Significantly, images of beggary do not surface as commonly in narratives by and about older men. True, I heard several fathers express anxiety lest their sons abandon them in late life; but the threat of becoming a beggar is not one voiced often by old men. In one folktale told to me, in fact, a son does abandon his elderly father, but the father is not thereby forced to beg. Instead, it is the son who loses his inheritance.

In fact, there are more destitute, homeless, and beggared old women in West Bengal than men. Pilgrimage spots such as Bakresbar in the mother-as-beggar folktale attract flocks of elderly female beggars dressed in tattered white saris; and the new old-age homes in Calcutta are filled almost

exclusively with women.¹⁰ So the old mother as beggar is a reality for many older women, if not literally for those who tell stories while surrounded by sons in Mangaldihi, at least as an image that enters their perceptions of what could be and of the poverty and vulnerability of older women.

Finally, a third recurrent theme in older women's narratives is that of a loss of identity. A woman's identity in Mangaldihi and throughout West Bengal is at any rate shifting and ephemeral compared to a man's. As a girl, she is defined primarily as the daughter of her father; after marriage, she is a daughter-in-law and wife (*boumā*) in her father-in-law's and husband's family line. Finally, as she grows older, a woman comes to be identified increasingly as the mother of her sons, and she is addressed by community members as so-and-so's Ma, such as Debu's Ma and Billo's Ma, as I have done here. In the midst of such shifting identities and relations, Bengali women say that it is the mother's bond with her son that is potentially stronger, longer-lasting, and more difficult to sever than any other of a woman's bonds. This is because a son comes from the mother's deepest insides within her womb and does not move away from her when he marries as a daughter does. The old woman in the *vratakathā* story told above has no identity except as a mother, but this is an identity that is enduring and strong, one that makes her loved and revered.

In the stories that older women often tell, however, the mothers lose their identities as their sons grow up to abandon and forget them. For without their defining relationships to sons, the old women literally become no one. Billo's Ma queries bitterly: "Whose am I now? I am no longer anyone. . . . What kind of a thing is a mother?" If a woman is not anyone's (note the possessive), then she is no longer anyone. If a woman is defined largely via her relations with others (fathers, husbands, sons), then if these relationships wane her identity fades as well. She becomes, at least metaphorically, like the old woman in the mother-as-beggar tale, one in a long line of nameless persons whom no one recognizes or wishes to heed.

Through such tales of being forgotten and becoming "no one," women express a common sentiment that was conveyed to me in other settings as well: even if women produce sons, they can never become a full part of their marital families, just as they were never allowed to remain a full part of their natal homes. Women's relational ties must be broken and

¹⁰ In 1990 when I visited Navanir Homes for the Aged, two new old-age homes for Bengalis in Calcutta, they housed 113 women and only 7 men. Many fewer Bengali men need the services of such facilities, since men tend to have both property and family to depend on, while women are much more often left without either.

then remade as they move from family to family; they are thus always partly “other” (*parer*) as well as partly “own” (*nijer*).¹¹ This ambiguous, shifting identity is highlighted for women in late life by the fact that they cannot look forward to becoming ancestors as fathers can. After the initial funeral ceremonies are performed for women, food and water are never offered directly to them again, nor are their names recited during the many ritual occasions when male ancestors are nourished and remembered (Lamb 1993:360-64). Mothers thus face, if not in old age, then at least after death, a dissolution of the mother-son bond, and a gradual process of being forgotten and becoming no one.

These themes of the self-sacrifice of women as mothers, coupled with the failure of reciprocity and betrayal by sons, surface powerfully as well in a popular Bengali short story called “Stanadayini” (or “Breast-Giver”) by Mahasweta Devi (1988). In this story, Jashoda, a poor rural Brahman woman, mother of twenty and nursemaid of thirty more, spends her life pouring out her body’s milk to nourish her own and her master’s children. But in the end she is abandoned by them all. When she becomes old and can no longer reproduce or nurse, her almost fifty sons all forget her, and her breasts—the distinguishing organ of the woman as mother—become the site of ugly, festering, cancerous sores. Jashoda cries, “Must I finally sit by the roadside with a tin cup?” (234), and then moans spiritlessly, “If you suckle you’re a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal [two of her sons] don’t look at me, and the Master’s boys don’t spare a peek to ask how I’m doing.” The author adds: “The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes” (236). In the end, Jashoda dies alone and without identity, except for a tag marking her as “Hindu female,” and she is cremated by an untouchable.

To this story’s author, Mahasweta Devi, the narrative is a parable of India—as a mother-by-hire—after decolonization. If nothing is given back to India as mother, then she will die like Jashoda of a consuming cancer (Spivak 1988:244). But I also hear in this story of the breast-giver the voices of older mothers in Bengal, who lament in their own more private oral tales: How fickle and short-lived are the joys of motherhood! How women as mothers give of themselves their whole lives and receive nothing in return!

¹¹ See also Raheja and Gold 1994:73-120, Sax 1991:77-126, Dube 1988.

Conclusion

The stories of older women in Mangaldihi thus challenge dominant representations of motherhood and family roles found in more public folklore genres and much of everyday talk. The alternative worlds of these tales speak of what the more official worlds (which are also real and important to these women) cannot: of doubts and imperfections, disappointments and loss. Both together make up part of what Ramanujan (1991:53) calls the “indissolubly plural” nature of India’s oral traditions, and the multiplicity of women’s (and men’s) perspectives encoded within.

I close by noting that although the older women in Mangaldihi protest in their narratives about waning domestic powers and being pushed aside by their sons’ wives, they now have more overt freedoms to display themselves orally, to complain publicly, to narrate their life stories on tape, and to be teased and applauded by listeners than they ever would have had as young wives or *bous*. With all of its difficulties, the position of being senior or “increased” as an old mother or mother-in-law also entails tangible liberties that, due to the demands of modesty, younger women do not ordinarily have. And indeed the older women I knew in Mangaldihi seemed to take great pleasure in telling their private tales, even if (or especially because) their stories were most often those of pain and chagrin.

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**“There Are Only Two Castes: Men and Women”:
Negotiating Gender as a Female Healer
in South Asian Islam**

Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger

From a distance, a green flag flying above the rooftops of a residential neighborhood on a major university campus in the south Indian city of Hyderabad signals the site of Islamic ritual activity.¹ Below the flag is an open courtyard whose walls are decorated with murals of a roaring tiger, a winged horse with the head of a woman (the *burāq* that carried the Prophet on his night-journey ascent to heaven), and a second horse carrying an open hand (symbolic of the Prophet’s family)—all images common to popular Islam in South Asia. Small groups of women (many of whom wear a black *burqā*, the veil worn by Muslim women in South Asia), children, and a few men are seated in the courtyard; others are crowded around a doorway, pressing to get in, leaning over each other to hear the voice inside.

The voice is that of Amma, a sixty-year-old female Muslim healer. Her voice is frequently loud and authoritative as she declares that a child’s fever *will* dissipate, a husband *will* return home, or an antagonist’s voice *will* be silenced. Other times it is almost inaudible as she recites Qur’anic

¹ The research upon which this paper is based was initiated in January 1989, when I conducted a three-week workshop with Margaret Mills on “Women and Folklore Fieldwork” in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, sponsored by the Ford Foundation. The workshop participants were all women and all Hindu. We chose to conduct fieldwork in the Muslim community in order to give the Hindu participants experience in working outside of their own religious and linguistic communities. As we were looking for Muslim women with whom to work, the green flag above Amma’s courtyard quite literally called us to her.

I returned to Hyderabad to work intensively with Amma for seven weeks from December 1990 through January 1991 and again for nine months in 1994-95. I gratefully acknowledge the support given for this research by the American Institute of Indian Studies and the Fulbright Scholars Award Program, respectively.

verses; it is completely silent as she blows prayers (*duā*) on a patient. Amma meets patients in her healing room six days a week, eight to ten hours a day. She says her calling is to “serve the ‘public’² during the day and to serve Allah at night.” Her commanding presence and articulate voice break commonly held stereotypes of the Muslim woman in Indian society—the veiled woman in purdah (seclusion), the woman without a public voice, the woman without authority.



Amma blowing *duā* (prayer) on a patient at the end of the consultation.

In this essay, I examine how Amma perceives and negotiates this seemingly unorthodox position for “woman” in a pluralistic Muslim/Hindu society in which the public domain continues to be dominated by the male voice. Does she draw gender boundaries for the Muslim woman to include a woman such as herself, or does she see herself as unique, operating

² Words in single quotations indicate that the English word has been used by the speaker in an otherwise Urdu or Telugu conversation or narrative. Amma speaks Urdu to her Muslim patients and Telugu to her Hindu patients. She and I communicate in Urdu.

outside the female domain? I have listened carefully to Amma's healing rhetoric, personal narrative performances, and conversations for indications that she embraced and gave expression to an alternative model for the construction of female potentiality, a model her own position of authority would strengthen. I found myself hoping that she would view her position as one fulfilling the potential of her gender, not as an exception to it. Yet what I heard Amma most clearly articulate was a strong assertion of gender boundaries, and at the same time that her unique healing role is positioned outside the boundaries of her own gender.

In *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), Carolyn Heilbrun writes of the difficulty women in the West have historically experienced in writing authentically about their own or other women's lives since, until quite recently, the models for literary biographies or autobiographies had been male. She cites Peter Ackroyd's biography of T. S. Eliot, where he recounts the difficulty Eliot experienced with his experimentation in *Samson Agonistes*. Ackroyd writes that there was "no literary context for such writing from which to draw energy or inspiration He always needed [such a] safety net, as it were, before he indulged in his own acrobatics" (1984:147). Heilbrun asserts, "It is precisely such a safety net that is absent from women's lives, let alone their writings. How are they to imagine forms and language they have never heard? How are they to live to write, and to write that other women may live?" (1988:39)

Amma's life narratives and informal conversations suggest that she too lacks such a "safety net," a previously articulated "story" or model for female action in the public domain upon which she can base, or to which she can connect, her own innovative story and practice. Amma either did not or could not tell me of other *pirānimā* (women married to Sufi religious teachers) who had become healers like herself. Female figures of authority acting in the public domain are absent from both her life narratives and tales used in religious teaching. In her own family, three brothers had become religious teachers (*murśid*), but none of her aunts or sisters were *pirānimā*. Two of her brothers-in-law are also *murśid*; her gurus were both male.

Although on many levels Amma readily identifies with her gender, she views her own actions as a healer to be outside the bounds and possibilities of her gender. On the other hand, when I asked Amma's neighbors and patients whether other women could do what she was doing, the answer was almost always a variant of, "Any woman can do this, provided she can read Arabic"—a striking difference to Amma's own perception. I suggest that such a vision of potentiality is possible because Amma's own life and action as a healer are themselves articulating a new

possibility or model. Although this story may not be directly available to most of Amma's patients, it expands their existing repertoire of *possible* female stories. This essay examines the construction of this story, and how Amma has achieved, maintained, and continues to negotiate her position of public authority.

Gender as Indigenous Category

In a healing context in which both Hindu and Muslim, male and female, patients and disciples participate, representing a wide spectrum of economic, educational, and social classes, gender distinction and identity are frequently voiced as a unifying category. I first met Amma when I entered her neighborhood accompanied by two Hindu female university students, and we rather unexpectedly "happened upon" her busy courtyard. Perhaps sensing our initial hesitation as to whether or not we were welcome, Amma emphasized our commonality as women, asserting, "There are only two castes [*jati*]: men and women. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, they're all one. The only real differences are men and women. Don't all mothers cry when their sons are killed?"

I heard this assertion by Muslim women in several other contexts. In January of 1991, during a discussion among several of Amma's Muslim and Hindu female patients about the looming Gulf War, a female patient repeated the formulaic phrasing, made particularly poignant after the recent weeks of city curfew imposed after a period of communal unrest in Hyderabad itself: "All of us are mothers trying to feed our children; there are only two castes: men and women." Another woman assured my Hindu female fieldwork associate, "We say 'Rahim' [Merciful One, name for Allah]; you say 'Ram, Ram' [name of a Hindu deity]. There are no differences, just men and women."³

In the setting of Amma's healing room, gender often undercuts or crosscuts the rhetorically solidified differentiation of class and religion

³ This particular articulation of the equivalence of "Rahim" and "Ram," and thus the common path to God shared by Hindus and Muslims, is frequently heard in Indian contexts, but, in my experience, is voiced more commonly by Hindus than by Muslims. Indigenous local understandings of religious boundaries and identities are explored in the larger work I am writing on Amma and her practice.

articulated in political and media contexts.⁴ It has been observed that one of the impacts of purdah has been the reduced access to women that it has imposed on other women (Lateef 1990:135). Amma's healing room suggests women in purdah find "legitimate" ways to circumvent their isolation. A visit to Amma often necessitates an outing for an entire morning or afternoon. Women come to her from all over the city and exchange news and personal narratives.

Amma characterizes the "caste of women" of which she is a part and whose members meet in her room as one that experiences continual suffering and trouble. The personal narratives told by female patients sitting around Amma's healing table are mostly stories of pain, suffering, and general "trouble"—and Amma identifies with the pain as her own. In a conversation with Muslim agemates, outside of the healing context over which Amma exerts seemingly total control, Amma told about her own daughter's unhappy marriage. One of the women listening expressed her surprise that Amma, as a *pirānimā*, would face the same problems they did. Amma responded by bemoaning the lack of control and power that women, including herself, have over dowry, husbands, and marriages, concluding that, "The life of a woman is useless (*bekār*)."

In a moment of reflection on a Friday afternoon, her day "off," Amma told me that when she was a girl, she had always wondered how women sustained such severe hardships, what it would be like to lose a parent, child, or husband. "But now," she continued, "I know. All these troubles have visited me. I've been a strong woman, but my life has been one of trouble." She then enumerated all her sons, one by one, and the disappointment they have been to her in one way or another and how she has been forced to support *them* economically rather than herself depending on their support (as the ideal South Asian extended-family model would have it). She ended her narrative with a sigh, "And so, Jo-ice, that's my life. It would make a good movie, wouldn't it?"

Soon after I first met Amma, still hoping she would see herself as a model for female action and authority, I asked her if she was teaching her healing skill and knowledge to her daughters or daughter-in-law, as she was two of her sons. In a tone of voice suggesting surprise that I would even

⁴ Shahida Lateef observes that "the status and role of Muslim women in India before Independence could not be significantly differentiated from the status and role of women in other communities [based on her research]; the difference was one of region, class, and caste, more than of religion" (1990:75). See Smith-Rosenberg 1986 for a discussion of ways in which gender undercuts the solidity of class identity in the nineteenth-century American middle class.

consider such a thing, she answered, “No, they don’t have the heart (*dil*) for it. If a possessed patient came in front of my daughter-in-law, she would faint from fear. She has no strength/courage (*himmat*).”⁵

Juxtaposing statements such as these and her own personal narratives of suffering against Amma’s public life of action, authority, and economic independence suggests that she and other women in her community must continually negotiate the contradictions they experience between the explicit cultural models they are given to live by, the stories they hear and see enacted, and the lives they lead. Amma straddles what she perceives to be the boundaries constructed for her gender: she experiences and identifies with the troubles (*pareśānī*) of “woman,” but at the same time has developed a power and authority to heal that are traditionally positioned beyond the options available to her gender.

The Healing Setting

Amma is most often dressed in a simple nylon sari and long-sleeved white, loose blouse. She puts on a pair of horn-rimmed glasses whenever she writes, a continual activity upon which both her healing diagnoses and prescriptions are based. Her rounded face carries a jovial expression; her laugh is frequent and vigorous. At least once an hour, Amma stops all healing activity, relaxes, and pulls out a motley assortment of small tin boxes, whose contents she uses to make herself *pān* (betel leaf), to which she admits an addiction.⁶ Amma’s graying hair is covered by the end of her sari only when she is praying over a patient; her *burqā* hangs in another room and is worn only when she leaves the neighborhood. Amma’s presence and practice without the *burqā* suggest that the healing room is conceptualized as an extension, on some level, of female or (perhaps more

⁵ When I asked this same daughter-in-law about her interest in learning the skills of Amma’s healing practice, she told me that perhaps one day she would, but that now her youth and preoccupation with her four children prevented her from doing so: “I’m too young to have the authority. No one would listen to me.”

⁶ Her *pān*-chewing addiction is a source of seemingly jovial contention between her husband and herself. He insists that she chews too much and spends too much money on the habit, up to 400 rupees per month. Her answer to this accusation was, “Allah provides,” to which he retorted, “If He provides, why do you ask me for money?” Abba frequently reprimanded her for taking time out to make *pān* when the room was filled with waiting patients.

accurately) familial/domestic space, even though she treats non-familial men, both Muslim and Hindu.

The room in which Amma sits is small and crowded with patients. When the number of patients grows beyond five or six, they are given small squares of cardboard upon which are written numbers to indicate their positions in the queue. Amma sits on a large chair behind a folding table, around which are set up five folding chairs occupied by the patients whose turns are upcoming. The table is covered with slips of paper filled with Arabic writing, held down by glass paper weights: a pile of slips for general *tāvīz* (amulets), one for fever *tāvīz*, one for morning *falītā* (slips rolled up to use as wicks, soaked in oil and burned), and one for evening *falītā*. Her voice often competes with that of a screeching parrot sitting in a cage hanging above the courtyard or with the whirring of two electric floor fans.



Amma writing on a *capātī* that the patient will feed to a dog. In the same way a dog is faithful to whomever feeds it, the patient's errant husband will be faithful to her.

One-third of the healing room is taken up by a small "provisions" store. The storekeeper is Amma's husband, called "Abba," a retired university office assistant.⁷ Abba is a distinguished seventy-five-year-old,

⁷ Amma and Abba literally mean "mother" and "father," respectively.

with hair down to his shoulders, a long beard, eyes subtly rimmed with kohl, black-framed glasses, wearing a long, loose shirt and long cloth wrapped around his waist (*kurtā* and *luṅṅī*). Seated on the ground, he is barely visible behind the veil of bags of cheap candy, snacks, and biscuits hanging from the ceiling. Soap, matches, incense, and cigarettes line the shelves on the wall behind him. Clay pots, whose lids hold lemons and eggs, and small wooden drawers filled with spices surround him.⁸ Although his physical presence in the healing room is obscured, Abba's voice is commanding and frequently interjects into or supplements Amma's healing rhetoric.

Amma's Qualifications and Techniques as Healer

"*Pirānimā*" is a title of respect given to any woman married to a *murśid*, or Sufi teacher/guide. Amma's access to the healing profession is directly dependent upon her husband's ritual/religious position as a *murśid*, although few *pirānimā* become healers. Amma told me that she would not be able to meet the 'public' in the way in which she does were she not a *pirānimā*. Abba, too, asserted that he had given Amma his permission to heal; if he took that permission away, she would have to stop.

Early in my fieldwork, I asked Amma if the young man sitting across the table from her was her disciple. She seemed hesitant to respond, but finally said, "No, not really." The young man interjected, "No, I am a disciple of both Amma *and* Abba." Amma seemed to have difficulty initially acknowledging to me as an outsider that she had her own disciples, since this is not part of the role of *pirānimā*, but of *murśid*. However, by the end of the months I spent with her, talk of her own disciples came easily; and on one of the last days I spent with Amma in 1991, she asked me if I would like to become her disciple.⁹ This relationship was, however, only informally ritualized by the gifting of prayer beads, as well as rhetorically. Only during a longer fieldwork period three years later did I witness a full ritual of the initiation of Abba's disciples, and I realized why

⁸ Interestingly, two of Abba's daughters substitute for him in the store, while two of his sons are learning Amma's healing skills. The position of gender between the generations is inverted.

⁹ The conceptual and physical space of Amma's disciples in her healing room, whose role it is to sit with their guru and observe and learn from her, also created a culturally acceptable space in Amma's room for a fieldworker, whose role is also to observe and learn.

it was difficult for Amma to answer directly whether or not she had disciples. I gradually learned that most of Abba's "core" disciples have come to him through Amma's healing practice, and thus they often identify themselves informally as "hers."

Most *murśid* are themselves healers or incorporate healing into their teaching lives, using similar healing diagnoses and treatments as those of Amma. Based on my own experience in Hyderabad and the available literature on popular Islam in India, the position of healer in South Asian Islam is traditionally limited to men (see Eaton 1984; Ewing 1984; Jeffrey 1979). However, in this case, Amma's *murśid* husband does not and cannot fill the role of healer/*murśid* because he is not literate in the Arabic script—a primary qualification for a healing practice based on the written word of the Qur'an.¹⁰ He told me he simply had had no interest in learning Arabic when he was young; rather, he said, he had learned 'Roman' while serving in the British Army.¹¹ Amma's knowledge of the script is not unique for Muslim women of her generation; many were given a traditional education at home (a few in secular schools) so that they could read the Qur'an. However, her ability to *write* does set her apart from her age mates. Another female religious specialist whom I met in Hyderabad, whose power is to communicate directly with *jinn*, told me her guru had specifically forbidden her to write amulets, although it was part of his own practice.

Amma's practice is literally and figuratively based on the Qur'an. She asserts that everything she needs for her practice is found in "the Book." Abba calls the Qur'an "powerful magic" (*barā jādū*).¹² There are, however, several other books to which Amma refers for specific treatments and from which she copies sample diagrams for use in amulets. She was hesitant to discuss the use and contents of these books when I periodically raised the subject; there seemed to be a tension between her assertion that

¹⁰ The requirement of this level of literacy stands in stark contrast to that required of the Hindu healers (*baigā*) with whom I have had contact in central India. The authority for their tradition is derived from possession by the goddess and has no orientation towards a written text.

¹¹ Abba is able to recite some Qur'anic passages and is an authority in his own mystical tradition. Literacy is not, however, a requisite in mystical traditions such as the Sufi order to which Abba belongs; spiritual authority lies in following the teachings of one's *murśid*, the immediate mystical experience, and in remembrance of God.

¹² *Jādū* in the Hindu context generally has the negative connotations of black magic; however, used here by Abba, the word connotes "power" in a more generalized sense.

the Qur'an was all one needed and her use of other specialized books. She once showed me two of the printed books (others were notebooks filled with handwritten diagrams) and told me their names: *Bangāl aur Cīn ke Jādū* (*The Magic of Bengal and China*) and *Mohinī Tantra* (*A Collection of Charms/Incantations*). She did not, however, want to reveal the specific contents of these books at that time. She told me, "First practice and fully embrace what I have taught you [primarily the recitation of *zīkr*, or names of god]; then read the books."¹³

Amma and Abba made clear that her healing power and use of the Qur'an are effective only against those illnesses and problems caused by the evil eye (*asrat*) or the devil (*śaitān*), which frequently manifest themselves in the imbalance of the four elements from which the human body is made (earth, water, air, fire) and thus result in illness. Amma identified cancer, typhoid, and polio as examples of illnesses that are beyond her control. Many patients, especially babies and young children with fevers, come or are brought to Amma only after they have already received treatment by a doctor and that treatment has failed; and I heard frequent, bitter complaints about the money wasted on such treatments.¹⁴ In a discussion of the differences between the illnesses that doctors could cure and those that Amma could cure, Abba stated the latter were all "troubles for which doctors' medicines are useless. The medicine for these are this [pointing to Amma's table full of slips of paper]. We could say that they're killed by the letters of Arabi."

The primary method of diagnosis and treatment in Amma's practice is dependent upon a knowledge and active use of the Arabic script. Amma once said, "the whole world is dependent on ink and paper." Letters of and numerical symbols for Qur'anic verses are written on slips of paper that are folded into amulets or rolled and burned as wicks—to provide protection against the evil eye or to carry away its effects. Arabic letters and numbers are written on saucers from which a patient drinks; they are written on unleavened bread (*capātī*) fed to dogs, on gourds that serve as substitutes

¹³ The discussion was occasioned by the arrival by mail of one of the above-mentioned books. It had been ordered by one of Amma's disciples. When I asked if I could see it, he handed me the wrapping paper and said I could jot down the Delhi address and go get one myself. Amma objected strongly, saying that I might be harmed if I read the wrong thing without appropriate training.

¹⁴ Members of Amma's own family frequently went to modern medical practitioners for general flu symptoms that others brought to Amma for treatment, such as fevers, coughs, and colds. Amma's eldest daughter was awaiting heart surgery when I was in Hyderabad in January of 1991; at the age of thirty-five, she succumbed to heart disease.

for the weakened body of a child, and on bits of animal skin burned in the fire.

Amma's standard diagnostic procedure is based upon *abjad kā phāl kholnā*, literally, "opening the mystery of the numbers." She asks for the patient's name and that of his or her mother.¹⁵ She writes out the name of each in the Arabic script. Each letter of the Arabic alphabet has been assigned by the tradition a numerical value; Amma adds up the values for each name and that assigned to the day of that particular lunar month. She then divides the total by three or four (for the three layers of the universe and four directions, respectively) until the remainder is a single digit. The remainder one, two, three, or zero signifies the diagnosis of one of several possible disruptions in the spiritual world of the patient, such as evil eye or interference of *šaitān*.

This part of the healing practice appears to be relatively objective, although it still requires specialized training with a guru. As Amma says, however, "Anyone can read, even a parrot. It's understanding [that's difficult]." What places Amma in a position of authority as healer (versus, for example, her disciples who may be able to make the calculations¹⁶) is the authority with which she names the problem, is able to perceive its "weight,"¹⁷ and pronounces the efficacy of its treatment. Speaking to a woman who had had several miscarriages and two stillbirths, Amma told her that the treatment would of course be expensive, but that it was 'guaranteed.' Amma frequently assures patients, "Once you come to me, it *will* be cured. There is no question of 'failure'."

When I first asked Abba if he also healed, or could heal if he wanted to, he did not give his lack of literacy in the Arabic script as the reason he did not do so. Rather, he responded that he *could* heal, and does heal

¹⁵ The technique is minimally described in Sharif 1921. The author states that the numerical value ascertained by adding the values of the letters in the names is divided by twelve. The resulting number indicates which astrological sign will dominate the life of the patient. Nowhere in his descriptions of what his translator has rendered "magicians" is mention made of female practitioners.

¹⁶ Two of Amma's male disciples frequently assist her in making the initial numerical calculations, but then they hand over to Amma the slips of paper with the calculated totals for her to declare the diagnosis and prescription.

¹⁷ That is, whether it is a particularly heavy evil eye, or a light one.

children; but since most of the patients are women, it is better that Amma, as a woman, touch their heads.¹⁸ He continued:

I can do children. But if you're sitting over there saying, "I have trouble here; I have trouble there," I can't put my hands on you, right? More women come here. They can't tell me things about the night; women can't tell me certain things— "It's like this, my husband's done this; he's done that." Mostly it's women's matters that go on here. There's some benefit in that.

In actuality, at least one-third of Amma's patients are men. Furthermore, Abba is always in the room when female patients are "confiding female problems" to Amma.

Abba continued that Amma was better suited to the position because she was more patient and loving than he:

My rule [*rāj*] is one thing and hers is another. If you come to Hazur [Abba], I get angry and you say, "Don't go to Hazur." If you go to Amma, she speaks with great love. [She says,] "Today your illness will go away" [patients listening laugh and agree]. What did I tell you earlier? Love. Love is the greatest thing. Her love is greater. What do I have? One, two; I do the work and tell them to go. What does she do? [She says], "No, my son, it's like this; it's not like that." They come crying and go away laughing.

In this commentary, Abba identifies two more qualities of a successful healer: love (*muhabbat*) and patience. When I asked a highly educated Hindu engineer why he had brought his wife to Amma rather than to a Hindu healer, after having already gone to a hospital doctor, he responded that he had heard about Amma's great "*muhabbat* and *śakti*" (love and spiritual power). While Abba seemed to feel that these qualities may have been enhanced by Amma's gender, it was clear that not all women had them. He had told me earlier that many women had come to Amma's guru, but that he had not taught them all since many did not have the necessary quality of love. *Murśid* may also lack the quality of love; perhaps more accurately, for persons of their spiritual achievement the word should be "accessibility." *Murśid* or *pir* are often characterized as being either *jamālī* or *jalālī*—cool and passive versus heated and active. Abba

¹⁸ After hearing this, I asked Amma whether her son, who is a *murśid* and actively assists her in her practice, can touch women's heads. She said, "Of course he can; he's a *murśid*." And I did witness him blessing women in this manner.

identifies himself as *jalālī* and, with a twinkle in his eye, often seems to take great delight in filling the expectations of that role. He told me that *jalālī murśid* often do not make good healers because people are afraid of them. Recognizing this, he is willing to “sit in the service” of Amma and fold *tāvīz* and *falītā* for her.

Positions of Authority Negotiated

Abba does not sit in Amma’s service passively, however. The healing room is charged with a low-level, albeit usually good-humored, tension. Abba, too, is a religious authority, whose role as a *murśid* is to teach his disciples. Amma has taken over the part of the role of *murśid* that Abba is unable to fill—the healer. Her position is directly dependent upon his according to the traditional hierarchy of *murśid-pirānimā*. But the fact that he does not have the qualifications to heal puts Amma in a superior position, at least within the setting of the healing room as well as economically. To share authority in this way is an unusual situation for which there exists no traditional “story” that has been told and retold for generations. It is a model under construction, one bound to create tension. The unique nature of the relationship between Abba and Amma—one of dialogue, argument, and mutual respect—plays an important part in that story.

Abba periodically reminded me of the interdependence characteristic of the relationship between himself and Amma. When I once asked if he also had the knowledge to heal, he responded, “If I didn’t learn, how did she learn? After becoming a guru, I gave her my *bhakti* [devotion].” Another time, he asserted, “She sits with great devotion (*barā bhakti*). If I get angry, her *bhakti* decreases.”

One dramatization of the continual negotiation of authority between the two of them took place in a seemingly insignificant incident: my presentation to Amma of two pairs of orange-handled Friskar scissors, one large and one small (she continually uses scissors in her practice, to cut apart *tāvīz* and *falītā*):

Abba: What?! You’re only one woman and you need them both?!

Joyce: If you sat in the big chair, you’d get the big ones.

[Amma and Abba humorously tease back and forth about who will get which pair of scissors, an interchange concluded by Abba’s proclamation.]

Abba: The small ones are for her and the big ones for me; otherwise, there will be a big fight.

Amma: O.K. I'll let him decide. I'll let him decide.

Abba frequently verbalizes a concern over the financial aspect of Amma's practice. He keeps track of the number of patients that are waiting and reprimands Amma for slowing down her pace (by making *pān*, for example) if the crowd is growing too big. One morning, Amma started healing much later than usual because her married daughter had just arrived for a visit, and Amma was talking and drinking tea with her. Patients were lining up, making Abba nervous. He kept calling to Amma, reprimanding her, "How long are you going to keep talking?! Look at everyone waiting." Amma did not verbally respond to him and came in her own time—a pattern repeated in many such similar interactions. She lets him talk, as appropriate to his position, and she decides how she will act. Another wonderful interchange took place late one afternoon, when the line of patients was long. Abba angrily told Amma to hurry up: "Is the only thing you have to do is eat *pān*?" The patient sitting in front of Amma at the time boldly retorted, "She *is* doing something! She's listening to me!" And, in fact, Amma's success is often attributed to what is perceived to be her gendered difference in style, to her qualities of love and patience. Amma's own *murśid* son frequently sits in the healing room with her after his work hours and meets patients along with her. His presence at the table dramatically alters the pace of activity and mood in the room. He is all efficiency, snapping his fingers at patients to hurry up and give their names and mothers' names so he can begin the diagnosis, never giving time for a story.

Amma and Abba's differentiated roles are reflected in their differentiated speech forms. As a *murśid*, someone who "shows the way—how one should live," Abba takes his role as a teacher seriously. As storekeeper, he has time to give frequent philosophical teachings, illustrated with religious and folk tales, to those congregated in the room. A standard opening for the teachings I heard was: "How should we live? First we should do 'research' on ourselves: what should we do?" Many teachings concern the necessity for humans to control their lower nature (*nafs*) and anger; others proclaim the most important thing in life to be love, or honesty, or hard work. As part of his role as teacher, Abba would often take it upon himself to answer the questions I was asking directly to Amma, a role she seemed content to let him assume.

Amma, on the other hand, has little time for speech unrelated to the healing situation at hand, although she does give short teachings periodically and assured me she could perform the tales in Abba's repertoire. Amma's speech genres consist of healing rhetoric such as prayers, Qur'anic recitation, explanations of treatments, and conversational interaction with patients, as well as personal life narratives and "testimonials" to her authority and power (discussed later in the essay).

Other Female Healers and Specialists

Although Amma's life narratives and testimonials stress her unique power, there is little in these performed words to suggest that the rest of the caste of women is *unable* to do these things, except perhaps their lack of courage. Being a woman does not exclude one from possessing the other above-mentioned qualities of a successful healer—literacy, love, and spiritual power. In fact, according to both Abba and most of her patients, her gender actually contributes to Amma's success. Why then are there not more female healers like Amma in the public arena?

Whenever I had an opportunity, I asked both Hindu and Muslim patients and neighbors whether they knew other female healers or *pirānimā* who practiced like Amma. Most answered affirmatively, but, when pressed, could not name or direct me to any others. One of Amma's young male disciples told me that he had gone all around the city to all types of healers (looking for a cure for his chronic weakness) before he found Amma, but that he had not met any other women healers—they were all *murśid*. He offered to direct me to numerous male healers, but knew of no women.

One rather obvious reason for the dearth of women healers (gleaned from conversations with Amma, Abba, and other Muslim women in the neighborhood) is the set of time constraints on a woman's life imposed by childrearing and taking care of the household. If a woman takes up the position of public healer, she will have to have someone else in the house willing to take on these duties. One Muslim agemate in the neighborhood told me that she had once gone with Amma to her guru, but had not stayed long enough to receive the full teaching (which required days, not hours) because she had had to come home and take care of her family and house. When I once asked Abba if his own guru's wife was involved in such a healing practice, he answered, "No, she didn't do the work of our *pirānimā*. She was busy raising children, cooking, and washing clothes. [Amma] switched from the service of children to the service of Allah. She started

doing the work of distancing people's troubles." The roles of homemaker and healer are perceived as mutually exclusive by many in the community.

Amma herself wrestled with the conflicting roles. When I first met her in 1989, she told me that she had begun her healing career as a new mother in her late teens and that she had not taken care of her children: "Allah raised my children." During my recent visit, the story she told had shifted slightly; she had begun healing at age thirty or so, and had given birth to only one of her eleven children after she had started to heal publicly.¹⁹ By that time her oldest daughters were able to help in the house, and she soon had a daughter-in-law. At the same time, Amma also talked about the difficulties a female healer experiences if she is premenopausal. She herself had had to take off seven days every time she had her period. She told me that she had prayed daily to Allah to stop her period; and, finally, when she reached fifty, he had.

I did meet four other Muslim female religious specialists and healers during my most recent fieldwork, two of whom did not begin their practice until they had become widows at age fifty and sixty, respectively. The third was slightly younger than Amma and also a *pirānimā*; the fourth had begun her practice before she got married, a practice built around the prescription of herbs rather than the written word. All four women address problems similar to those brought to Amma: marriage proposals or lack thereof, infertility, misbehaving children, errant or abusive husbands, and general "trouble" in the house. The first three women differ, however, from Amma in two primary ways: they do not accept direct (or fixed) payment for their services, and they operate within a female sphere, treating only female patients/clients. The scope of Amma's practice also encompasses a wider spectrum of ailments than do those of the other healers—from fevers to spirit possession. I met the fourth specialist only two days before I left India in the summer of 1995 and therefore have little detailed information about her clientele and practice.

The previously mentioned *pirānimā* is married to a *murśid* who is caretaker of a small *dargāh* (shrine of a Muslim saint). Although the primary tomb is that of a male saint, the shrine is called a "women's *dargāh*" because women, in particular, go there in order to have various

¹⁹ This contradiction in the telling reminds us that all life histories and experiential accounts are constructions whose shapes shift according to the context of the performance.

problems solved.²⁰ They take their complaints to the *pirānimā*, who “prescribes” that they spend a certain number of nights at the *dargāh*. Her prescriptive authority depends upon her own dreams. When I asked the friend who first took me to the shrine how women decide whether to go to a healer such as Amma or to the *dargāh*, she said that they go to Amma when they don’t have time or money to spend nights at the *dargāh*.²¹ (At the time, approximately ten women were staying at the *dargāh* when I visited; they had been there between two weeks and seven months, several with babies or young children staying with them). The *pirānimā* does not take direct payment for her services, but benefits indirectly from offerings made at the shrine.

A second female specialist is the evening attendant at a relatively minor tomb of a female saint within the compound of one of the largest *dargāh* (Dargāh Yusefayn) in Hyderabad. Here, she accepts rose petal offerings from visitors, spreading the petals over the tomb and blessing the supplicants by gently hitting them on their head, shoulders, and back with a peacock-feather “broom.” During the day, she told me she “takes care of the house” and frequently carries out a ritual called *dastarkhān* (reciting the 99 names of God by counting out seeds into piles on a large cloth) in her home. Women who have neither the resources, the community, nor the physical space to conduct the ritual themselves ask her to initiate *dastarkhān* on their behalf when they are experiencing a particular problem. She then invites other women in her community to participate and assist her by counting out the piles of seeds; she receives no direct payment for this service.

A third example of female ritual authority is found in the informal practice of a widow in her late sixties, living with her only son and his wife. Her particular skill is the ability to communicate directly with the *jinn* and from them to receive answers to questions that a client may pose. She performs this service on an irregular basis in her son’s home or the home of a client for family, friends, and friends of friends. She said she had always been interested in spiritual things, and this skill in particular,

²⁰ Because women so dominate the space, they are free to take off their *burqā* once inside; the space approximates the inside of their homes. A friend told me she preferred this *dargāh* to others she could go to because of this freedom and the community of women found there.

²¹ The *pirānimā* prescribed a single night at the *dargāh* to this friend for a simple worry she had about her son’s employment; but my friend shrugged her shoulders as we left and exclaimed, “How could I do that! The vegetables are waiting to be cut; who would do that?”

because her father and uncle were such specialists. She went to a guru only seven years ago to learn how to communicate with the *jinn*, through reciting the name of God and particular Qur'anic verses and then gazing into a special small black stone balanced on her thumb until the *jinn* appears in the stone's reflection. Her guru is a *murśid* who writes *tāvīz* (amulets) and practices other healing techniques similar to those of Amma, but he has specifically forbidden this woman from "writing."

In contrast to the exclusively female clientele of these specialists, approximately one-third of Amma's patients are male (many of them Hindu). She sees them without restriction, without wearing her *burqā*. She has both male and female disciples, who help her in her practice by folding slips of paper for *tāvīz* and *falltā* or by explaining the intricacies of various treatments to patients. Amma also has standard monetary fees for specific services she provides,²² and her economic independence sets her apart from the majority of female patients she meets.²³ In 1994-95, Amma's monthly healing income was close to 7-8,000 rupees per month, while Abba's retirement benefits were only 1,500.²⁴ Amma and Abba seem to keep their "healing" and shop accounts separate. When Amma periodically wanted to offer a friend or visitor (fieldworker included) a snack from the shop, she took money from her "healing" coffer and gave it to Abba to purchase the snack. Amma's mixed-gender clientele and the direct economic relationship she establishes with them place Amma in the public domain—a traditionally male domain.

Amma views herself as distinct from and superior to the female religious specialists or healers described above, whose domains are more restricted than hers. She expressed disdain for the *pirānimā* associated with

²² In 1994, Amma charged approximately 5 rupees for each *tāvīz* she wrote, each set of *falltā* she gave, or each *utārā* she prescribed. House exorcisms (*bandīs*), one or two of which she performed every Friday (her "day off"), cost between 200 and 500 rupees each. Long-term treatments for infertility cost up to 500 rupees.

²³ Jeffrey points to the economic powerlessness of the *pirzāde* women with whom she worked as one of the keystones to the maintenance of the rather extreme degree of purdah practiced in their community (1979:165). Lateef found in her survey study of Muslim women in India that "wage earners . . . [are] unlikely to observe purdah or if they did, to do so flexibly, to have no formal education and to participate in family decision-making, reflecting their monetary contribution . . ." (1990:111).

²⁴ Amma has also invested in the purchase of three auto-rickshaws that she rents out to drivers and is constantly thinking of other small money-making schemes, necessitated by the burden she feels of supporting her large family (all grown and married now, but not all economically independent).

the “women’s *dargāh*,” seeing her as someone whose service was not of the same quality as her own. She referred to her as a “food eater,” that is, someone who serves only for remuneration. After reporting one of my visits to the *dargāh*, Amma asked me directly, “What does she give? Does she write *tāvīz*? No! Does she write *falīṭā*? She gives nothing.”

The question remains: why are there so few female healers practicing in the public domain? I refer back to Amma’s comment about why her daughter-in-law would not make a good healer—she lacks “heart” and “courage” (*dil* and *himmat*). Amma’s definition of what it means “to have heart” and her perception of her own uniqueness in this regard are given concrete form in her life narratives and the testimonials discussed below.

Amma’s Life Narratives

One of my early goals in fieldwork was to elicit Amma’s life history. I soon realized, however, that in the course of Amma’s healing day, there was little time for extended reminiscing; and her time before and after the long healing day was rarely available to me, since she was either bathing, eating, or dealing with family matters. Thus, I think of the narratives and commentary I taped regarding her life as narrative *segments*, which were either answers to what were intended to be open-ended questions to elicit life narratives or responses to more direct questions about her life and experience.

Nevertheless, the segments begin to build up a shape and quality quite distinct from that of the life narratives told to me by the mother of Amma’s daughter-in-law. The mother’s narratives were filled with personally drawn vignettes of her everyday life: the fear and dread of early marriage experienced when visitors came to “look at her” as a young girl; the embarrassment of breast-feeding when her breasts were overflowing with milk and drenching her sari, a situation that resulted in her hiding under a mosquito net while feeding her baby; the story of an old deaf grandmother-in-law being teased by her grandchildren; the grief experienced in the death of a teenaged son and the pilgrimages to *dargāh* that followed.

Amma’s life narratives were often not as descriptive as those told by her agemate. Most segments were carefully constructed to provide a context for her life as a healer, many of them highlighting her uniqueness. For example, when I asked her about her childhood memories, she told me she had followed “Allah’s *bhakti*” (devotion) from a young age; she would often sit for long periods of time and “remember Allah.” In the context of

meeting my own son and daughter in the winter of 1996, Amma remembered those early years in a lighter, but still significant frame. She said, “I could do anything when I was a young girl: climb a tree, ride a bicycle. My father never called me daughter (*beṭī*), he always called me son (*beṭā*).” *Beṭā* is often a term of endearment used by relatives for young girls,²⁵ but Amma was now interpreting it in a very specific way as situating her outside her gender, freeing her to engage in activities in which little girls presumably did not normally take part, and raising her in her father’s esteem and love.

According to Amma’s personal narratives, the first external recognition of her singular qualities came from a Hindu teacher at the government school she attended until sixth grade, when her parents withdrew her from school. He looked at her and said, “This girl will become famous.” She got married at thirteen, and the first of her eleven living children was born by the time she was fifteen. Even while raising a family, she said, “I remembered Allah. I had to take care of the house, the store, the children. I had to run everything. The children grew up. Then I took up this work. After taking this up, one more daughter was born.”

When Amma spoke with me in 1989 about her early life, she told me she had had a vision (*nazar*) soon after she was married in which she saw words, “like the credits on the screen at the end of a movie,” and that this experience had propelled her to her eventual healing practice. When I asked her about the words of that vision on my 1991 visit to Hyderabad, she said she had had many visions, but “my mouth is shut.” In other conversations, however, she was willing to reveal the contents of other visions. An example follows:

Do you know what happened once? When I was playing with my breath [meditating], I had a vision of my guru, a vision of light (*rośanī*). From this, love was born. Love comes from light (*bijalī*). When I’m talking to you, it’s not me talking, but my light. Everything is light (*rośanī*); without light, I wouldn’t exist, you wouldn’t exist. Allah is light (*bijalī*); He is radiance (*nūr*).

Whether or not she revealed their contents, it became clear that visions are an important construct of Amma’s life story to which she attributes much of her healing authority (Flueckiger 1995).

Amma first went to a guru when she was about thirty years old, when she secretly visited and obtained teaching from a guru in Nizambad, Andhra

²⁵ See Minault 1994 for a discussion of Muslim women’s language in the *zenānā* (women’s quarters), including this intimate use of the term *beṭā*.

Pradesh.²⁶ She said she had had a dream in which she had seen the guru and he had told her various things. When she woke up the guru was gone, but she remembered what he had said.²⁷ After visiting him, she returned to Abba and told her husband that she had made a great mistake by visiting a guru (that is, by going without his knowledge). Instead of being angry as she expected, he said, “Take me to him. I, too, will learn.” This guru initiated Abba first as a disciple and, at age forty, as a *murśid*. When Amma expressed her interest in learning the specific “mantras” necessary for healing, the guru referred her to his own guru; it is through the latter that Amma learned the specifics necessary to become a “public” healer. Amma laughed when she thought about the implications of her receiving teaching from her guru’s guru, “My guru is my *pīr bhaiyā* (*pīr* brother).”

Amma first practiced her healing among extended family and friends. It has only been within the last ten to fifteen years that as a healer she has met the ‘public’ as she does now. Her practice and renown have grown considerably even within the last two years, along with the financial remuneration that accompanies such success. In the last two years success has taken the form of a shift from Amma sitting on the floor in front of a low wooden table to “moving up” to a folding table and chairs. Her reputation has spread all the way to Dubai, according to Amma: “Patients come by auto, foot, and bus—from villages, Bombay, and Pune. *Falītā* are even taken to Dubai; everything’s taken to Dubai.” Amma told me her success had greatly angered the guru who taught her the healing practice, and that he had sent the evil eye (*kartūt*) towards her. She had, however, successfully deflected and returned it to him. She has no contact with him anymore, and considers her first guru her real guru.²⁸

An example of how Amma has constructed her life story as a context for her position as healer is found in the following “life summary,” given

²⁶ Both Amma and Abba specifically used the word “guru” for this teacher; however, when I asked if he were a *murśid* or *pīr*, they answered affirmatively.

²⁷ See Ewing 1980 for an extended discussion of “Dreams as a Mode of Communication Between the *Pīr* and His Disciple” (chapter 4).

²⁸ The relationship between the two gurus was difficult to ascertain initially. On the wall behind the spot where Amma sits to heal, there are several framed pictures, among which are two of the first guru, who died six to eight years ago. I asked Amma, Abba, and various disciples if the pictured guru was the one from whom Amma had learned. The answer was always yes. There was, however, periodic mention of a living guru from whom she also had learned. It was only after many months of sitting with Amma that the entire story became clear: there were two gurus—the second of whom she had now repudiated.

when I was trying to clarify exactly when she had begun her public healing, that is, at what stage of childrearing:

I've followed Allah's *bhakti* ever since I was small. Then I got married. Even after I got married, I kept on praying [literally, "reading"] continually. When I had children, I sat out for forty days; then I'd start up again. Then I started the store; since I started it, I've never left it. I worked in the house and raised the children—it's a forty-year-old store. Then I met a guru and became a disciple. I became a disciple, then I, too, became a guru. I'm also making disciples. And I'm continuing on.

Amma's Testimonial Tales

Amma "broke through into performance"²⁹ more naturally when she told what I have called "testimonials"—stories that recount her success as a healer. I distinguish these stories from "life narratives" because they are a more natural and frequent part of Amma's healing narrative than the analytical genre of expression that Western scholars have called "life histories." She told these testimonial stories as illustrations of her unique healing power and authority in order to establish her credibility among her patients, particularly first-time patients.

One testimonial I heard numerous times recounts Amma's power as manifested through her induction of labor in her sister, whose baby had died at term in utero. Through repeated tellings, this testimonial had been standardized and given artistic form. I provide one variant below:

My sister's labor wasn't starting. Her child had died in her womb. It died in the womb; the child had died. So what did they say? "The child has died, so you will have to have an operation." My brother-in-law told this to my sister.

So I went [to the hospital]. I went there, and what had happened? My brother-in-law had already signed for the operation. He signed and then I arrived. I took the paper and went to Shankar Amma [the female doctor]. I took it and tore it up. "What are you doing?!" she asked. I said, "Give me until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon; do the operation then" [i.e., if labor hasn't started by then]. They took a T.V. x-ray and the baby was dead.

²⁹ See Hymes 1975 for his discussion of these "breakthroughs into performance" in the course of "normal" conversation.

I quickly went home, bathed, took my Book, and went back and sat there [in the hospital room]. The baby had been dead in the womb for seven days... [indiscernible on tape]. I went in and sat down. I put water in a bucket and sat down.

[Joyce: The Book is the Qur'an, right? Amma: Yes.]

I took it [the Book], read it, and sat down. Then, do you know what kind of vision came to me? [It was] Of those who had caused it to happen, who had killed the baby [presumably a devil or human who had cast the evil eye]. And of Malamat and Amma Jan [a form of Satan and a female Muslim saint, presumably battling over the case]. She was wearing a black blouse and sari. [The vision was of] Malamat-Amma Jan, Malamat-Amma Jan, Malamat-Amma Jan, Malamat-Amma Jan, trees, stones. I saw them as I was reading, and they saw me.

They came and sat down. She sat down like a tiger. "Bring some water," she said. "It's a beautiful child." I saw all this while I was reading. I saw the whole 'scene,' like the 'cinema.' So I brought the water and drank it [not clear if she drank it or caused her sister to drink it]. She said, "The child's hand was causing it; now it's clean."

The Book was finished, and Malamat went and fell under a tree, and Amma Jan went over here, and the three of them [who had caused the death] went over there, and my reading was finished.

... [her voice is competing with that of the screeching parrot outside, and a sentence is lost here]

[Patient to whom Amma is telling the story: So did she have the operation?]

No. Do you know what happened after that? My brother-in-law came in, bringing the Book. It was two o'clock [in the morning of the day of the scheduled operation]. I told him, "Go to sleep." And I sat there eating *pān*, spitting, eating *pān*, spitting. I just sat there.

Al-lah, Al-lah. The pains started. My sister's pains started. They took her to the "theatre." At twelve o'clock she delivered. 'Normal,' not in bits and pieces (*na ṭākā, na ṭūkā*). Like her other two children, not in bits and pieces. The delivery happened. The child was blue, blue, blue. The hand was so white; you've never seen one so white. The face was like this [she puffs out her cheeks]. The smell was terrible.

The doctor called me, "Look," she said. "Yes, I saw it. And you said an operation would be necessary, and now the delivery has happened [naturally]."

There was no fever, nothing, and she was ‘discharged’ in three days.

When I went back [to the hospital] for my second daughter’s delivery, she [the doctor] said, “Amma, you go out and I’ll come in [into the room]. If I come in, what will the baby do? I’ll stay outside.” I said, “No, come in Shankar Amma.” She said, “No, Amma, you come out and then I’ll come in. If you stay in there, I won’t come in.” [Amma laughs vigorously.]

Other testimonials are only a few sentences, such as one in which Amma recounts her power to “close a dog’s mouth.” She had been walking along when she encountered a barking dog. She said some words to close its mouth and it was silenced. The worried owner of the dog came out of the house to see what had caused the sudden change, but Amma told him not to worry—the dog was not harmed, only silenced. The owner remarked, “You are full of Allah’s *bhakti* (devotion),” and Amma continued on her way.

Amma is not alone in her performance of testimonial tales; her patients also recount such stories as they sit in the courtyard awaiting their turn to see Amma or at her healing table as they hear problems of other patients. Amma sometimes elicits these stories from them by asking patients to come back when their problem is cured so that she and other patients can see and hear about the results of her treatment. An example is the young Muslim mother who brought in a pudgy, healthy two-month old baby girl, whom she said had been conceived and lived until term as the result of intense treatment given by Amma (at a cost of 500 rupees). Another dramatized testimonial involved a young Hindu mother whose husband had been drinking too much, had mistreated her, and had quit going to work. She returned to Amma’s healing room with her own mother to testify to the success of Amma’s treatment. She was dressed in a new, brightly colored sari and new bangles, and her face was beaming as she told her story numerous times to various patients both in the courtyard and in the room. She and her mother had brought sweets to offer as *fātihā* (religious offering) at the flag pole, the offering of which was officiated over by Abba. The sweets were then distributed to Amma’s family, the two fieldworkers present, and several other patients.

One of Amma’s male disciples was particularly fond of performing testimonial tales with high drama. He is thirty-five to forty years old, a railway worker who comes to sit across the table from Amma and assist her whenever he is not traveling for his work. One of his tales is an example of what might be called a “negative testimonial.” A patient had come in to ask Amma to diagnosis why her baby had died. Amma used the name-number technique of diagnosis and proclaimed that the cause of death had been the

evil eye (*asrat*). The disciple immediately reprimanded the mother for not having come in sooner and then told the testimonial of his own brother's child who had died a similar death. The brother had brought the child to the disciple and asked for advice, and the disciple had told him to bring the baby to Amma. His advice was ignored, and the baby died.

Negative testimonials about Amma's own treatment are rarely heard in her presence. Out of all the patients whom I observed in Amma's room over a period of a year, I heard the story of failed treatment only three times. Once was in the case of a Hindu man with a trembling hand who came back to Amma after three weeks of treatment had produced no signs of improvement. On this visit, he came back with his rather skeptical father. Amma told them that the failure meant stronger, more expensive treatment would be required. Another man returned to say that he had been three-quarters healed and was coming back for the last quarter. The last case was one of a young woman whose husband had run off with another woman. She complained to Amma that even after burning all the *falītā* she had been given he had not come back. Amma defended her treatment by saying that it had failed because she had not known the other woman's name the first time. She wrote out another set of *falītā* with the name written on it. The patient complained, "How long am I going to have to keep doing this?" to which Amma replied emphatically, "He *will* return!"

The form and content of these testimonials is similar to tales told at the tombs of Muslim saints. When visiting various *dargāh*, I always tried to elicit the "story of the saint" from visitors to or caretakers of the tomb. I was rarely given the story of the saint's *life* (a hagiography), but rather a story of his or her miracles (*karāmat*)—the deeds of the saint.³⁰ Amma

³⁰ Abba described the following as the process by which *dargāh* come into existence: someone dies; people offer *fātihā* (offerings to the dead) at the gravesite and experience miracles; more and more people begin to come and experience similar miracles; finally a *dargāh* is built.

Between 1980 and 1987, in Raipur, M.P., I witnessed this process. An unknown man appeared in the city and took up residence on the steps of a store. He wore little, rarely spoke, and never moved from the steps. His power was said to be that he ate little and never urinated or defecated. People thought he might have come from Afghanistan because the few words he spoke were unintelligible. Gradually, more and more people began to visit the site where he sat and offer him burning cigarettes. He would often get angry at those standing around, but people stayed because they believed they experienced miracles in his presence. When he died, there was a heated debate as to whether he was Hindu or Muslim, and thus whether he should be buried or cremated. The Muslim community finally won their claim to his body and buried him, and soon thereafter an elaborate *dargāh* was built around his tomb. His reputation was based totally on his miracles rather than on his life.

structures her own story on a similar model. In the healing room, she prefers to tell about her deeds, her “miracles,” rather than the details of her personal life.

Amma’s healing room is a context in which many stories of the “caste of woman” are told—generally stories of suffering and trouble—and their telling helps to strengthen the identity of that caste. Amma’s performance of life narratives, testimonials, and healing rhetoric articulate quite a different story, standing in dramatic contrast to those articulated by her patients. And Amma herself tells this lived story—of “acts” of authority in the public sphere—as one positioned outside the boundaries of her gender. This disclaimer may help Amma herself to bridge the contradiction between her own life story and the models for gender laid out before her. It may also help to give the appearance of a story that does not challenge the model articulated by the patriarchal culture in which she lives. I suggest, however, that for the women listening to Amma’s story, its very telling extends the boundaries of gender.

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Outspoken Women: Representations of Female Voices in a Rajasthani Folklore Community

Ann Grodzins Gold

Gender Roles in Oral Performances

The most superficial hearing of women's speech in Rajasthani oral performance traditions counters some prevailing gender stereotypes.¹ In these traditions we find neither the modesty and "embarrassment" (*lāj, śarm*) prescribed as appropriate, ornamental female behavior within the culture, nor the voicelessness and submissiveness depicted in many outsider views of South Asian women from orientalist to feminist.²

I lived in a single village in Rajasthan, North India, for almost two years, and I recorded Rajasthani women's songs on many and varied

¹ Many heartfelt thanks to Joyce Flueckiger, Peter Hook, and Jyotsna Kapur for especially helpful and thoughtful readings of this essay in earlier drafts. Once again I must express my substantial debts and enormous gratitude to Joseph C. Miller, Jr., Bhoju Ram Gujar, and the women of Ghatiyali for generousities beyond reckoning.

² See Chandra Mohanty's original, acute critique of Western feminist authors who construct "third world women" as a "homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socioeconomic systems" (Mohanty 1991:57). See also Stephens 1989 and Visweswaran 1994 for further insights into problems and limitations within the prevailing scholarship on Indian women's powers and voices. For testimony to South Asian women's expressive oral performances as commentary, subversion, and resistance, see, among others: Narayana Rao 1991; Ramanujan 1991; Mukta 1994; Raheja and Gold 1994; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994; Raheja 1995; Holland and Skinner 1995; Narayan 1996. Substantial work exists on women's perspectives in oral traditions outside of South Asia; see especially Jordan and Kalčik, who suggest in their introduction to an anthology on women's folklore that "a thoughtful examination of women's culture" disproves the assumption that "women are necessarily powerless." They go on: "Despite male domination of one sort or another, many of the women studied here are very much in control of themselves and their worlds, and a sense of real power is communicated by their folklore" (1985:xii). See also Abu-Lughod 1986, 1990; Caraveli 1986; and Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993.

occasions of combined worship, celebration, and pleasure.³ These songs are inhabited by outspoken females who commonly address males directly, often making explicit demands upon them. Other folk performance genres from the same community, including women's stories and men's epic tales, contain frequent examples of bold female voices. The relationship between women's vocalicity in their daily intercourse and the ways in which oral traditions portray this vocalicity is a complex one—evidently neither pure reflection nor fantasy reversal. Under some circumstances of everyday life, the Rajasthani women I knew were as vocal and uninhibited as they were in songs; under others, they played their parts as icons of subordination. Trawick perfectly captures the baffled response of a Western observer: “The notion of the repressed and submissive Indian woman simply did not apply to the people among whom I lived—and yet in some ways it did” (1991:5).

This essay is about the meaning of women's bold speech in North Indian oral performances, and how this performed meaning reflects upon and contributes to the ways gender identities are constructed and negotiated in “real life.” I shall focus on depictions of wife-husband encounters for several reasons. First, there are plenty of them;⁴ second, the undertaking of a cross-genre and cross-gender comparison is more effective when focused on a single relationship; third, the husband-wife relationship is arguably surrounded with the most intensely ambivalent emotions and contested control. Finally and most importantly, it is with spousal relationships that performance and behavior appear to diverge most radically.

While most of the examples I present include representations of male speech, my focus will be on women's voices. Women's songs sometimes allow husbands to respond and object to women's expressed desires; women's stories tend to show husbands as “yes-men” carrying out female commands. By contrast, epics performed by men show men as independent speakers—especially in domains that do not belong to women (the yogi's

³ Twenty-one months of research in Rajasthan in 1979-81 were supported by the American Institute of Indian Studies and the Social Science Research Council, and an additional six weeks in 1987 again by the AIIS. During both periods I was most pleasantly affiliated with Rupayan Sansthan (the Rajasthan Institute of Folklore) and benefited enormously from the wisdom of its director Komal Kothari.

⁴ Although I have not attempted a statistical analysis, evidence from ample song collections—my own and that of Joseph Miller, who worked in the same village—indicates that husbands are the males most frequently addressed by female voices in oral traditions, followed—in no particular order—by brothers, in-laws, and deities.

retreat, the battle expedition). In relation to wives, however, although men usually win the arguments, female speeches often evoke emotional sympathies, and men's rhetoric is well matched by women's.



Dancing and singing together, women and girls freely express themselves in movements as well as words.

In rural North India relations between husband and wife are publicly restrained by prescribed attitudes of shame and modesty for the woman and a less formally enjoined but nonetheless stylized act of detachment or demonstrative authority for men. Women, especially young wives, affect postures of modesty that include silence or extreme reticence in speech, lowered eyes, and covered face. If a woman speaks to her husband at all, she may employ one or more modes of self-effacement: turning her head away, whispering, speaking obliquely in the third person, or pointedly addressing someone else in the room with a message intended for him.

Yet both male and female folklore traditions portray women addressing their husbands in ways that are nothing if not bold, forthright, direct. The communications they thus brazenly deliver may range from material demands to personal criticism, and may include thinly veiled invitations to sexual intimacy and severe threats.⁵ Why, in a society that prescribes and values wifely modesty, should cultural performances present so much wifely boldness? How shall we reconcile the tongue-tied submissive brides of “reality” with the articulate, demanding brides of folklore?

At this preliminary moment I wish to suggest a few partial answers. I then exemplify the verbal boldness of folkloric wives in particular contexts, exploring both the desires expressed and results obtained by their commands. I compare, contrast, and elaborate motifs as they vary from genre to genre. Eventually I return to, and speculate briefly on, some further implications of these materials in relation to gender hierarchy in theory and practice.

There is one obvious point of contrast between imagined spousal dialogues in folklore and actual, observable husband-wife relations. All I have said about the latter—concerning women’s reticence before their spouses—applies to public encounters. Private encounters, everyone knows, are different. And of course, by definition, they are unknown to anyone other than the couple themselves.

In private relationships between spouses, moreover, rural South Asian culture allows and imagines intimacy. Despite the near universality of arranged marriages between strangers—and in rural Rajasthan these strangers are even today often children—the private marital relationship is surrounded by romantic ideals. Rajasthani women and men are far from indifferent to the possibility of intense personal love between spouses.

⁵For women’s oral power as cursers, see Wadley 1994:56.

During my fieldwork, daily confidences from young wives as much as oral traditions provided a constant flow of evidence for the importance placed by women upon this love and the various signs and testimonies of its existence. A few males with whom I became intimate enough to talk about such things, significantly enough, seemed to share these ideals.

Women's songs often comment obliquely on the ironies of the prescribed formalities between husband and wife. Many songs linger around the fuzzy borders—for women, between modesty and coyness, or shame and allurement (A. Gold 1994); and for men as portrayed by women, between lordly detachment and blatant adoration. Many women's songs thus deliberately juxtapose the total intimacy (having much to do with sexual intercourse) that constitutes relationships between spouses with the public aloofness that is normative behavior for young married couples.

All of this might be taken to confirm the suggestion that folklore opens up (imagined) private spaces, where beloved women do freely speak to loving men. Yet private dyadic encounters do not account for all the demanding female voices heard in songs, stories, and epics. Some women's songs explicitly take place in intimate, boudoir settings, but this is by no means the case for all. Others are evidently public in that other persons' presences are assumed, acknowledged, even voiced. Moreover, performances themselves are always public, a fact that would, it seems to me, call into question the whole issue of expressions rooted in the truths of a private arena. Within the performance context itself the shifting poses of modesty and boldness are also enacted and sustained. Bold words emerge from heavily veiled mouths; the stranger-husband poetically evoked may be seated with his back turned, well within hearing range.

Another possible explanation for the vigor of female demands in folklore would be that they constitute safe releases of resistant energy that neither expresses nor affects actual domestic circumstances. Veena Das seems to propose something subtly analogous to this in her suggestive chapter on "Femininity and Orientations to the Body." She explains (1988:201): "Women seem to live their lives on the double register of law and language which emphasises their roles as wives, and poetry and metalanguage which emphasises their roles as standing outside of language and law. . . ." She goes on to suggest that "as the lawful wives of men" women subscribe to the "entire male discourse on female sexuality" but as "outsiders" they are perfectly willing to subvert it. Circularly, their subversions are nevertheless, Das suggests, put to the service of patriarchy.

Part of the male-dominated law and language code is, of course, the imposition of modesty and silence upon women. Folk performances would, in Das's terms, belong to poetry and stand outside the male order of law and language. Thus their consistent shattering of the codes of modesty and reticence would be explicable. Yet Das seems to suggest that the register of poetry is ultimately a trap, or at least that it fails as resistance because the only real impact it makes is co-opted by the dominant register of law and language. If, for Das, the female as subaltern can speak, even her subversive speech is ultimately without independent power. Her example is the case of a woman covertly advising another through verbal play to get a lover—but only in order to get a son and thus fulfill a patriarchal requirement.⁶

Any scheme of law versus poetry seems to me to separate falsely the demands boldly spoken in folklore from the social universe that produces them year-round and also values them. In our co-authored volume, Gloria Raheja and I argue that alternative cultural realities accessible through women's folklore coexist with dominant male views and are contextually deployed (1994). Both of us at times juxtapose male genres to female ones,⁷ but the interrelationships that emerge are less disjunctive than dialectical. The worlds created in women's lore are less mirror worlds than worlds where, to borrow A.K. Ramanujan's lovely phrase, "mirrors are windows" (1989).

James Taggart's study of gender relations in Spanish folktales stresses their dialogic constitution (1990:13):⁸

Men and women carry out a dialogue in storytelling through which they share their different perspectives on love, family life, and gender relations. They tell the same stories but change them in subtle but clear ways according to their different male and female points of view.

⁶ For more on songs praising adultery if it produces progeny for barren women, see A. Gold 1994:58-60.

⁷ See A. Gold 1995a for a contrast between male views of bad women magicians and women's portrayals of good women falsely accused of black magic. See Raheja 1994 for women's acceptance of cowives in folk theater performed by males and non-acceptance in women's songs.

⁸ See also Dwyer 1978 (on Morocco); Caraveli 1986 and Dubisch 1986 (on Greece).

While I am not able, as Taggart is, to present examples of male and female versions of the same stories, the bold, commanding, authoritative female speeches found in both women's and men's performance traditions from Rajasthan will certainly reveal many signs of ongoing intertextualities that are the dynamic substance and soul of a folklore community.⁹

One thing we might hope to learn by looking at demands in female voices is what women lack, what they are missing in their lives, who has the power to give them these things, and what their relationships are with those who hold that power. I shall begin, then, with these related questions. What kinds of demands do women portray themselves as making in their own performance genres? What are the social contexts and what are the emotional overtones in which these demands are made? Do they get what they want? In short, what do demands placed in the mouths of women by women, and by men, tell us about women's status, women's wishes, women's identities?

These are the obvious questions, the meanings that float on the lyric surface of songs or rise to the top of stories' plot summaries. Beneath them lie other problems less easily explored. Any interpretation of women's demanding voices clearly requires an understanding of broader patterns of transactions that go well beyond gender. Apparently, the meaning of boldness and particularly of requests or demands is not necessarily an expression of superior power. Sometimes such voices are linked with intimacy, sometimes with dependency; they transmit emotional as often as material claims.

Wadley discusses asking and giving in the context of North India's caste patronage (*jajmānī*) system's merged economic and moral hierarchy. This system "defines the poor as beggars, because the payments . . . are given only when asked for 'with folded hands'" (Wadley 1994:152-53). Such implied degradation immediately transfers to gender hierarchy. A cotton carder told Wadley, "to beg is to make oneself like a woman, namely, powerless" (153). Perhaps women's assertive demands in folklore are just another modality of abjection.¹⁰ Other social situations, however,

⁹ For the useful concept of folklore community, see Flueckiger 1987.

¹⁰ Yet a third side of this coin is suggested by Wadley (1994) in her analysis of a song sung by men in Karimpur that puts into the mouth of a woman protests against poverty and an unjust social hierarchy. Maybe the doubly subaltern female voice is the appropriate and safe (because actually powerless) vehicle for protests. Maybe men co-opt women's subaltern status to vent grievances about their own without admitting complicity

define the receiver of gifts as honored, worshipable, loved.¹¹ I shall return to these issues, if briefly, in concluding.

Of Presents, Presence, and Prescience

In women's songs addressed to husbands, the central demands are for demonstrations and tokens of love—readily summed up as presence and presents. Women claim power over their husbands by summoning them to their sides—and their rivals are only occasionally other women. More often they must recall their men from the company of male companions, city jobs, war, and other distractions that seem to represent the whole cultural system of sex-role segregation that conspires to separate husbands from wives and make husbands pretend indifference to the “species of women.” Songs also portray goddesses making demands upon their divine spouses for company and gifts.

In most songs the woman's yearning for private intimacy with her husband is fully mingled with her desires for gifts. Gifts breach, or bridge, the private/public distinction. Gifts of adornment to wear or food to share are at once tokens of the most intimate love and public signs of a devoted husband. It seems women desire these signs as much as they desire their man, for in some songs the coy bride resists her husband's amorous advances by sending him off to get her new clothing (A. Gold 1994:51-52).

Configurations of love and power represented in stories told on occasions of women's worship are somewhat different from those portrayed in song. In songs, women make demands on their husbands; in stories, they command them. The stories show women possessing knowledge, skill, foresight, and divine blessings. They still act in relation to husbands, but it is not so much that they want things for themselves from men, as that they know what is needed for everyone and can tell men how to proceed in getting it. In the stories it appears that female demands are based on

in the complaint. Although I will not pursue this third flip here, it demands attention.

¹¹ For ways that receiving gifts may be valued, and the status of receiver as a “high” one, see Raheja 1995 on the dowry complex and its meanings for women; see also Inden 1976.

genuine prescience. Women speak with authority; if men accept and act on their wives' council, all goes well.¹²

I shall first consider two songs addressed to absent spouses, one mortal and one divine. Many women's songs begin with a situation of absence: the desired man is far away. Moreover, husbands are often addressed as "strangers" or "foreigners" or "honored guests."¹³ This is due in part to the village exogamy practiced throughout most of North Indian—marriage patterns prescribing that a husband be "foreign." It is due in part to women's long visits to their natal homes, where they may, despite the value placed on such visits, wish for their husbands to come fetch them. It was also due in the eighties, I would hazard, to the economic conditions that were sending more and more men to work in the cities.¹⁴ These absent bread-winners return home for major holidays, occasions that then become reinvested with the ambiance of romantic reunion. Both of the songs that follow here offer similarly combined demands for presence and presents.

The first example belongs to the festival of Gangaur—mythically a celebration of divine marriage bonds. At Gangaur virgin girls pray for a handsome, long-lived husband and married women yearn for their absent spouses. The husband must be persuaded to come home bringing gifts for his bride, and then further persuasions are exerted to keep him lingering a while by her side:

mārā māthā na mānmand lyāy mārā anjān mārūn
yāñī revo sā
yāñī ro pardeśī chel yāñī revo sā
yāñī ro gorī kā chel yāñī revo sā

Bring a pendant for my forehead, O my stranger-spouse,
 Please stay right here, sir,

¹² The inverse is also true: men who ignore their wives make mistakes with disastrous results.

¹³ As I went to work translating songs addressed to spouses, it began to appear to me that husbands are to Rajasthani women as snowflakes are to Eskimos, or cows to the Nuer (proverbially, if not in reality). There are countless terms in the song texts that my helpers in the village told me referred to the singer's husband—and none of these are part of daily speech. Each has a separate and subtle meaning, and I have attempted to capture some of this in my translations.

¹⁴ See Narayan's essay in this volume.

Stay here, foreign gorgeous man, stay right here, sir,
 Stay here, fair woman's gorgeous man, stay right here, sir!

As its verses progress, the same song unites the woman's proffered enticements of sweets and intimacy with her demands for ornaments and attention:

*thān perā khavāvañ Gaṅgor mārā āchhyā mārūñ
 yāñī revo jī . . . etc.*

I will feed you milk sweets at Gangaur, O my good spouse,
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

*mārā pagalyāñ na pāyaḷ lyāy mārā anjāñ mārūñ
 yāñī revo jī . . . etc*

Bring bracelets for my ankles, O my stranger-spouse,
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

*thāña sejāñ malai lī Gaṅgor mārā anjāñ mārūñ
 yāñī revo sā . . . etc.*

I'll meet you in the bridal chamber at Gangaur,
 O my stranger-spouse
 Please stay right here, sir, . . . etc.

[recorded March 18, 1980]

The second example is a dialogue between the deities Radha and Krishna recorded on the morning of the Day of Cow Worship (A. Gold 1988:123-30). It begins with the identical combination of a demand for a forehead pendant and a complaint of absence.¹⁵ The interwoven desires for jewelry, attentive love, and auspicious wifeness are apparently experienced by goddesses as much as by ordinary women.

*sāñvariya jī mātā na māñmand lyāy
 rakharī to tolā tīs kī jī bhagvāñ
 sāñvariya jī khāñ ra giyā chā māñjhal rāt*

¹⁵ The forehead pendants—called *māñmand*—are worn in Ghatiyali by Rajput women with living husbands. Although most other castes do not wear them, they are sung about by women of all communities.

mailā me ḍarpūn ekalī vo bhagvān

Dark lord,¹⁶ bring a pendant for my forehead.
The head-and-ear-piece should weigh thirty *tolās*,¹⁷ O God.
Dark lord, where have you gone
in the middle of the night?
I'm afraid all alone in the castle, O God.

ye rādhā ye giyā giyā sāthīrān rī lār
phūlarān re chālai lāgaryā vo bhagvān

Radha, I went along with my friends,
We were playing with flowers, O God.¹⁸

sānvariya jī thānkā mukharā me āvai bās
apuṭhā phar bolasyā vo bhagvān

Dark Lord, from your mouth comes a stink,¹⁹
So I'll speak with my back turned, O God.

[recorded September 6, 1980]

While both songs begin in the same way, they progress differently. The first moves from longing to reunion and reconciliation in the bridal chamber; the second moves from longing to disjunction. Krishna is not an

¹⁶ “Dark lord” (*sānvariya*) is actually a name of Krishna, but it appears in other women's songs to refer more generally to a “Divine Husband.”

¹⁷ A *tolā* is a measure of weight used for gold and silver; according to Chaturvedi and Tiwari (1979), it equals one-eightieth of a *seer*.

¹⁸ I had difficulty construing this line, although the meaning is clear enough: Krishna's admission to “playing with flowers” is a confession of adultery. Peter Hook, a linguist who has worked extensively on North Indian languages including Rajasthani, suggested that *phūlarān* was a genitive plural—a common form in Rajasthani (personal communication).

¹⁹ Note the connection between Radha's imputing bad breath to her unfaithful lover and Sadu's warning to Nevo from the Bagaravat Brother's epic cited below—to the effect that “enjoying another man's wife is like eating garlic; after eating it the smell spreads” (thanks to Peter Hook for calling this to my attention). The fifteenth-century devotional poet Kabir has a similar maxim: “Carrying on with another man's wife / is just like eating garlic: / You can hide in a corner to eat it / but finally can't keep it a secret” (D. Gold 1988:140).

absent husband but an unfaithful lover. In both songs, however, female voices are uninhibited, female wishes directly stated.

Turning from these songs associated with annual festivals to a life cycle song—from the genre called “Songs of the New Mother Queen”—a third example reveals the mingled pride and power of the new mother with an acknowledgment of the husband’s separate domain of power: the outside world with its markets and doctors.²⁰ An auspicious yellow wrap is worn by the new mother at the postpartum ritual of Sun Worship, generally nine days after a birth, when she sits at the center of attention holding her baby in her lap. Songs of the New Mother Queen are sung outside her room every night before this ritual.

In this song, the new mother’s moment of anticipated glory is shadowed by the threat of the evil eye:

jaipar śayar kos..., ānnātā, pīlo mangādyo
jaipar śayar kos..., ānnātā, pīlo mangādyo
pīlo mangādyo manañvā mārūñ sā
pīlo meñ oṛhūñ

Order a yellow wrap from Jaipur city, Grain-giver
 Order a yellow wrap from Jaipur city, Grain-giver,
 Order a yellow wrap, my Heart’s Desire.
 I’ll put on the yellow wrap.

hāthāñ ṭkkīśāñ sā annātā gajāñ ṭ paccīśāñ
hāthā ṭkkīśāñ sā annātā gajāñ ṭ paccīśāñ
to jaipar syūñ pīlo mangādyo manañvā mārūñ sā
pīlo mangādyo

Twenty-one hands, Grain-giver, twenty-five yards,
 Twenty-one hands, Grain-giver, twenty-five yards.
 So order a yellow wrap from Jaipur, my Heart’s Desire,
 Order a yellow wrap.

pīlo mangādyo pīlo to oṛh
mārī jacyā cauk barājyā
to khuṇ savāgaṇ najar lagāī?
manañvā mārūñ jī, pīlo mangādyo

²⁰ The husband’s greater power to travel and to shop is of course implied in the preceding examples as well, and stresses not only his greater mobility but also his control over economic resources.

The yellow wrap was ordered, and wrapped round her;
my New Mother Queen well seated in the courtyard.
So what evil eye struck her auspicious wifhood?
My Heart's Desire, order a yellow wrap.

[recorded September 1979]

The rest of this almost narrative song, which I will not cite in full detail, suggests that, the evil eye having struck, the baby becomes fretful and its eyes will not open. The power of the birthgiver is diminished, but she continues to command her husband, as her link to outside power: go and get the doctor. Thus ordered by his wife, the gallant, concerned husband brings a doctor from Udaipur city who takes the baby's pulse and prescribes a remedy; the child recovers and the yellow wrap is once more requested, along with a horse for the Barber and a flowered sari for the Barber's wife.



Women dress a baby boy in new clothes at a celebration ritual they perform to ensure his well-being.

Both these figures are important to the Sun Worship rite. The Barber's wife may, moreover, have acted as midwife and is also present in the company of singers. The husband's gifts to this couple will again be signs of his appreciation of his wife as birthgiver.²¹

This song seems to vibrate between the realm of intimacy, love, and beauty, and the realm of ritual and social form: the yellow wrap is a love gift whose necessity is ritually determined and which can thus stand for both dimensions. Basing her right to command on her status as "new mother queen"—and these childbirth songs always assume the birth of a son—the wife in her childbirth bed could certainly be seen as subsumed within the patriarchal domain with its respect for male progeny. However, sung by women gathered around an unwashed mother and child before their purification from birth pollution, songs of the New Mother Queen suggest at the performative level a firm rejection of the negativity surrounding women's bodily processes in the "law and language" register, and a proud claim to unique knowledge of and control over valued reproduction.²²

Returning to festivals, I excerpt a song of *Tij*, recorded from a mixed-caste group of neighbors that included high-ranking brahmins and washerwomen, as my final example. *Tij* involves a difficult fast undertaken by wives for their husbands' well-being, and is, like Gangaur, a time to summon absent spouses home to their lonely brides.²³ Here the wife's voice is firmly authoritative. Her authority derives both from her outspoken love of the absent husband, and from the holiday's enduring traditions. Summoning these conjoined authorities, the female voice devalues external considerations of money or the prestige of city employment. Here women's domestic power actually extends outward to

²¹ See Raheja 1988 on the necessity to remove inauspiciousness after birth through proper gifts and rituals. This necessity could explain the epithet "treasure-and-grain-giver" as well as the importance of the Barber and his wife as receivers of munificence. The *nārī* caste, whose traditional occupation is that of barber, also perform numerous ritual functions in North India, particularly in connection with life-cycle rites such as birth and marriage.

²² The two non-Rajput male scribes who worked on the three tapes I made of Rajput women's "Songs of the New Mother Queen" often expressed their appreciation of these songs' fullness and narrative coherence.

²³ Note that *Tij* takes place in the rainy season; according to Vaudeville (1986:28), "almost all folk-poetry in India" connects this season with "sexual frustration." For *Tij* songs as songs of resistance, see also Raheja 1994:131-32, 142-45; Holland and Skinner 1995; and Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994.

city domains via the love that binds husband to wife. Some selected verses follow:

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh chākarī ḍholā sāyabā jī
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your work's in Kishan Garh or Mukan Garh,
husband-lord,
Having heard [of] Tij, come home.

*thānn to piyārī lāge naukarī ḍholā sābā jī
mānn to piyārā lāgo āp*

Your job is beloved to you, husband-lord,
Lord, you are beloved to me.

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your job's in Kishan Garh, or Mukan Garh,
husband-lord,
Having heard Tij, come home!

*pharī to choryā vo thānkī naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī
āyā āyā tīj thañvār*

Leave your job at once, husband-lord,
For the festival of Tij has come.

[Refrain]

*kīśan gaṛh ho sā mukan gaṛh naukarī ḍholā sāyabā jī
tīj sunyān ghar āy*

Whether your job's in Kishan Garh or Mukan Garh,
husband-lord,
Having heard Tij, come home!

[recorded August 28, 1980]

With its insistence on women's authority deriving from their participation in important festivals involving vows and fasts, this song makes a nice transition to the storytelling genre, where female voices speak

yet more coherently and authoritatively. In women's ritual storytelling traditions, there are many stories where women frankly and forthrightly tell men what to do. These stories—often called *vrat kathā* (“fast day tales”), although in Ghatiyali they are labeled *kahaniyān* (“stories”)—regularly feature imperious women and males who are at best passive and compliant, at worst deluded and stubborn.

I will give only two examples. The first is from the set of stories told for the goddess known as Dasa Mata, the Mother of Well Being (A. Gold 1995b). A young woman, wished ill by her stepmother, is married to one of five brothers—into a household with no women. The “five bachelors” (*pañch dhīngā*), as they are called even after one is married, live in a state of paradigmatic, amoral disorder. They have separated their hearths; they send their old father out to beg; they do not even make bread, but subsist on parched grain.

The bride's first day in her new home is spent destroying the separate hearths and restoring proper unity to the household. She forbids the old man to go begging but assigns him the easier chore of gathering firewood for her to cook with. She obtains rudimentary ingredients for a meal from her indulgent or compassionate female neighbors. When the bachelors return in the evening, dying of hunger, she orders them to bathe and worship in the temple; then they may eat. Note the rhythmic repetition of the imperative verbs she uses:²⁴

*the to talāv jāvo saphāi karo āpkā dīl kī ar pachai āp pāchā ātā thakān
mandar jājyo jyo thākur jī ka dhok detā ājyo thākur jī . . . ar pachai āp
roṭyā khājyo.*

Then go to the tank and bathe. After you have cleaned your bodies and washed your clothes, on the way back, go to the temple and bow in front of Thakurji . . . and then come home and eat bread (A. Gold 1995b:440-41).

The bachelors attempt to comply with her commands, stumbling around comically. So out of practice are they at bathing and worship that they do not know how to wet themselves or exactly to what they should make prostrations.

²⁴ Peter Hook tells me that in Rajasthani *lyo* would refer to an action in the more distant future than *lo*, just as in Hindi the ultra-cordial *lījīyegā* implies a more distant future than *lījīye*. The time element works to soften the imperative by reducing its immediacy (personal communication).

Built into the narrative structure is a meta-commentary on the bride's demanding manner. The storyteller first portrays some villagers observing the five men's out-of-character behavior and gossiping about them as henpecked: "Ah, who has put a nose-ring on the bachelors today?" The term used for nose-ring—*nath*—refers to iron hoops installed in the nostrils of (castrated) oxen and thus implies emasculation. However, the gossips' disapproval of a bossy woman is but a superficial reading of the situation and an expression of ignorance on their parts. The storyteller continues: "But persons in the know said, 'Ah, today Lakshmi has come into their house'." The commanding female voice is the manifestation of a goddess—for those who have eyes to see or ears to hear.

The men benefit substantially from having a woman tell them what to do. Immediately, their reward is a homecooked dinner and they stuff themselves. In the long run the clever bride—after issuing many more orders still, including orders directly addressed to her father-in-law—brings the grace of the goddess to dwell with them, so that they will enjoy every kind of prosperity and well-being for generations to come.

This story would nicely fit into a model in which women's fasts and devotion, and the stories they tell of their commanding powers, are understood as for the well-being of males (although certainly also simultaneously ensuring that of their spouses). Let me turn, however, to another tale from another fast-and-festival day, one that portrays a wife issuing imperatives that do not seem to benefit anyone but herself. The heroine of the story of Tij, as I recorded it in Ghatiyali, is one of seven daughters-in-law.²⁵ On the holiday of Tij, she alone does not receive any of the sweets called *sātū* that women's natal families traditionally send to their daughters' marital homes. *Sātū* is the special food with which the daughters should break their fasts. The other six daughters-in-law do receive *sātū* and taunt the unlucky one. Disconsolate, the heroine declares her intention not to break her fast at all, but rather to go to bed hungry.²⁶

Her evidently doting husband hears her resolve in alarm, fearing for her delicate life should she go to bed without eating. "What do you want?" he asks her. She answers, "So bring some, even if you have to go steal, bring *sātū* made of chickpea flour." He fulfills her demands to the letter, breaking into a merchant's kitchen, assembling the ingredients for the sweet

²⁵ A translation appears in A. Gold 1981:70-73.

²⁶ Normally women break the fast of Tij at moonrise.

cakes, and cooking them himself. When caught red-handed by the police, the excuse he gives is that his wife was going to die of hunger. Certainly a bit of fun is poked here at the figure of this man so engrossed in his young wife's well-being, nor would I deny an element of wishful fantasy on the part of wives. But there is more to it.

If it was easy to see the wife who straightened out the five bachelors as a consort—a *śakti* or Lakshmi—what are we to make of the young wife here who puts her husband in danger for her own selfish ends? The fast of Tij is ultimately a fast, like many others, intended to sustain the condition of auspicious wifedom. But the story might also be read as an ironic commentary on the many tales of self-sacrificing women who suppress their own needs and desires for the sake of their male kin. Why, it seems to ask in all simplicity, should men not sacrifice themselves too? In the context of rainy-season sexual longings, this tale together with the song of Tij—which also seems to place the wife's needs above the family's—hints at a complex of cultural motifs that approve the fulfillment of women's desires.

The happy ending vindicates the husband's devotion: the robbery victim not only drops the charges but adopts the daughter-in-law and personally sends her not only sweets but new clothes every year. All of these fine outcomes are swept under the umbrella blessing of the mother goddess of Tij. In both stories, and in most women's worship tales, the wife is prescient and the demands she makes result in well-being.

Before turning to look at women's demanding voices in male genres, let me briefly summarize those persuasions thus far encountered in women's songs and stories. Women's performances portray female voices asking for love, attention, gifts, and even self-sacrifice on the part of men. These requests may vary in emotional pitch, and the responses from males vary as well. But I may generalize this much: female genres posit the legitimacy of female desires and place a strong positive value on their fulfillment—a value divinely sanctioned in the songs by parallel demands of goddesses, and in the stories by the worshipful context of their telling and by subsuming all good results into the category of blessings from deities.

Co-opted Commands and Resistant Refrains

In turning to look at male performance traditions, we find once again articulate women speaking boldly to their husbands. Their speeches include

demands for attention and love—like those in women's songs—and commands to behave properly—like those in women's stories. In a number of male-female encounters in male epic traditions, the gist of women's messages to men boils down nicely to two little words: "Don't go!" While inviting a man to come home and begging him not to leave are both variants of a desired presence motif, differences emerge when the ways in which male traditions portray gender interactions are examined more closely.

Predictably, male genres allow men to speak with eloquence equal to women's in ways that women's genres do not. The husband does not so readily acquiesce to the goddess incarnate in his home, but answers back. Most tellingly, at the conclusion of a "don't go" encounter the men depart despite their women's attempts to stop them. In male epic genres, however, women's speeches also exhibit more rhetorical variety, often including warnings, threats, and curses as well as beseechings. Women's genres tend to portray domestic exchanges; male genres involve public oratory (Ramanujan 1986). The protracted process of cross-gender argument in male performance traditions is a meaningful one. That women lose these arguments is more than a statement of ultimate female powerlessness. It by no means implies that their verbal fireworks are but wasted energies. For one thing, audiences cherish these struggles.

In the two related Nath yogi epics that I have translated in their entirety (A. Gold 1992), exceptionally articulate women oppose their husbands (and brothers), becoming world-renouncers with elaborate counterclaims based on duty as well as love, on the logic of responsible behavior as well as emotional pull.

I shall give just a brief example from one of the best loved moments in the tale of King Bharthari. This segment is referred to by the local audience as Queen Pingala's lament (*vilāp*); it is a favorite request piece.²⁷ Briefly, the context is that King Bharthari is already an initiated yogi. The first time he left his palace he sneaked out in the night while the queen was asleep, fully aware, as he forthrightly declares, that she would never have allowed him to go. But the implacable guru has set Bharthari the task of calling his wife Pingala "Mother" and bringing back alms from her hand.

²⁷ For a video recorded by Joseph C. Miller in 1991, Madhu Nath—from whom I had previously tape-recorded all of Bharthari in 1988—spontaneously chose to perform "Pingala's Lament" to present to foreign audiences. Cassettes of Bharthari's tale by professional singers also highlight this exchange.

Their dialogue, in both the sung and prose accounts, is very extensive. A fragment from the prose goes like this (A. Gold 1992:153-54):

Jadai yā balāp karya, “He rājājī khālyo pīlyo māyā māṅlyo karlyo jīvara kā lād. Ar manakh jamārā sarī moj pher nahīn āyegī.

Then she lamented, “Hey Honored King, eat and drink and accept wealth, and treat your soul with love. The pleasures of a human birth will not come again.

“Rājājī khuṅt par to mūn pherūn ṭoṭī jhūmarā ar khuṅ khuṅ bājūbandh kī lūm? ar annātā jī yā kāi karai ke thūn julam?”

“Honored king, for whom shall I wear these dangling earrings, and for whom my tasseled armband?²⁸ And grain-giver, what is this outrage you’ve committed?”

Jadyān khiyo, “Kai thārai tumārā devar, khuṅ? Vīr Vakaramādīt ar ye rāj talak iske kar giyā ar iske ūpar nai khūb moj kar ke.”

Then he said, “You have your young brother-in-law,²⁹ who? Hero Vikramaditya. The auspicious mark of rule was given to him and you can live with him in bliss.”

“Rājā, ke āmān kī thas āmalyānū na jāvai. Rājā Bhartharī, ar the to jogī ar mai thānkī jogaṅ ar manai lārān le chālo jyo halamalar donī jogapanoṅ sād hān.”

“King, a craving for mangoes isn’t satisfied by tamarinds. King Bharthari, if you must be a yogi, then take me with you. I’ll be your yogini, and we’ll cooperate in yogic practices, we’ll both live in the condition of yoga.”

This exchange continues at length. Pingala confronts Bharthari with many truths about his obligations to her, lamenting that she did not remain in her father’s house forever a virgin and regretting every step of the marriage ritual. Another portion of their argument reveals women’s verbal power to curse. Pingala curses the ritual specialists who helped to bring her

²⁸ Note the familiar association here of adornment with the auspicious and intimate married state.

²⁹ *Devar*: husband’s younger brother, with whom sexual joking is permitted and a marriage after widowhood might be approved.

to the married state now ending so bitterly. I translate here from the sung text (A. Gold 1992:156):

Rājājī. . . .
khuṇṭ ne bāndyā re haḷdyā ḍoraṛā
mairā khānvan, ḍoraṛa?
khuṇ re bāndyo re śar par mor
samajho Bhartharī
kuṇ bāndyo re śar par mor
samajho Bhartharī
samajho Bhartar he Panvār Dhārā ī Nangarī kā
the to mārī joṛī kā re sirdār
nirdhan mel cālyā jī

Honored King . . .
 Who tied the yellow wedding bracelets,
 my husband, the wedding bracelets?
 Who tied the wedding crest on your head?
 You must realize, Bharthari,
 Who tied the wedding crest on your head?
 You must realize, Bharthari,
 You must realize, Bharthari Panvar of Dhara Nagar,
 You're the master of my union but you've gone and left me destitute.

Rānījī
bāmaṇ ne bāndyā ye haḷdyā ḍoraṛā, rānī mārī, ab ḍoraṛā
nāī kā ne bāndyo re śar par mor
samjho tariyā kī
samjho tariyā kī ye jāī
khiyo māro mān jāvo jī

Honored Queen . . .
 The Brahmin tied the yellow wedding bracelets,
 my queen, the bracelets.
 The Barber's son tied the wedding crest on my head,
 You must realize, female,
 You must realize, female species,
 and accept what I say.

Rājājī
bāmaṇ par paṛjyo jī ābā bījī mairā khānvan bījaḷī
nāī kā nai khājyo re kāḷo ab nāg
samajho Bhartharī
nāī kā nai khājyo re kāḷo ab nāg

samajho Bharthari
samajho Bhartar he Panvār Dhārā ī Nangarī kā
the to mārī joṛī kā jī śirdār
nirdhan mel cālyā jī

Honored King . . .
 Let lightning strike the Brahman, my husband,
 lightning,
 Let a black snake bite the Barber's son,
 You must realize, Bharthari,
 Let a black snake bite the Barber's son,
 You must realize, Bharthari.
 You must realize, Bharthari Panvar of Dhara Nagar,
 you're the master of my union but you've gone and left me destitute.

When finally Pingala acquiesces to Bharthari's fate, and her own, she nevertheless continues to speak in the imperative, commanding him to complete the very process she has so eloquently protested and resisted (A. Gold 1992:157):

Rājāji
bhojan jīmo mārā hāth kā
mairā khānvan, hāth kā
garū jī ke le jāvo re panvāro rājā vo Bharthari
pherūn mānai darśan dījyo bhoḷā nāth samjho Bharthari

Honored King . . .
 Feast on food from my hand,
 my husband, from my hand.
 Take the guru's portion, O King Bharthari,
 Then give me *darśan* once again, Innocent Nath.
 [The refrain continues as above with "You must realize, Bharthari."]

In fact, the refrain of Pingala's lament runs throughout the entire epic, always in the same blunt request form: the *o*-imperative, *samajho*. By constant repetition even when totally disconnected from the action, the refrain seems to suggest that ultimately Bharthari's behavior is eternally unacceptable.

Elsewhere I have discussed at length the unresolved tensions in these exoteric yogic texts between the world-renunciation they seek to glorify and the householder's life of attachment with which they intensely sympathize

(1989). In another essay I have explored at length the particular part women play in these configurations (1991). Here let me just note that if the greater power of the guru sovereign ultimately prevails over women's pleas and commands, it does not and cannot fully silence them. And as the tales construe it, the immortality gained by renunciation may seem a poor prize when set against the gleaming castles and loving families lost in attaining it.

The position of women in yogic teachings might suggest both special power (as manifestations of *śakti*) and special disadvantage (as the embodiment of worldly entanglements). Not trusting yogis' texts as my sole example of women's voices in male productions but wishing to retain my footing in Ghatiyali's folklore community, I sought commanding women's voices in another epic text recorded in the same village by folklorist Joseph C. Miller: "The Twenty-Four Bagarāvāt Brothers and Lord Devnārāyaṇ" (1994). In this epic—easily five times the length of the two Nath epics put together—are several scenes that present perfect parallels to the "don't go" scenes in the yogi epics: scenes where articulate women attempt to prevent the departure of stubborn men. The only difference is that these men were not going off to become renouncers, but rather to get drunk or to fetch a dangerous co-wife or to fight bloody battles. Additionally, the dialogues are longer and more complex, as is everything else about the Devnārāyaṇ epic.

In the interests of space, I cite here from Miller's unpublished plot summary. Each paragraph represents a discrete segment—ranging from 11 to 30 lines—of the *arthāv* or prose "explanation" that the performing priest uses to clarify and elaborate on the sung text (Miller 1991):³⁰

After completing her sixteen adornments Sāḍū [wife of the hero Bhoj, later mother of the divine Devnārāyaṇ] came to the gateway and sweetly asked her *devar* [husband's younger brother] Nevo where he was going.

Nevo told her that he was going to Rāṇ to enjoy drinking songs with his "brother" Rāvajī, to get liquor from Pātū and to feast with Rāvajī. Sāḍū said it was wrong to feast someone in their house. She bid him to stay so she could prepare a feast.

Sāḍū forbade him to go to Rāṇ. She promised to order a camel caravan full of liquor from her father's village so he and Rāvajī could drink right in the hamlets.

....

³⁰ See Miller 1994:486-516 for the complete translation and transliteration.

She warned that Rāṇ is filled with man eaters, temptresses and magicians who will seduce and capture Nevo.

Nevo replied that he was determined to go and protect his brother Bhoj. He would return with Jaimatī and make her Sāḍū's co-wife.

Sāḍū replied that it is bad to take a co-wife. . . . She forbid Nevo to go to Rāṇ.

[She promises him other women but he has elaborate and scathing criticisms of them all.]

Sāḍū explained that keeping the wife of a brother in your house is as bad as cutting an auspicious pīpaḷ tree down to make a roof.

She told Nevo that another's wife is like a sweet dagger. She spoils wealth, reduces youth and kills respect. Enjoying another's wife is like eating garlic, after eating it the smell spreads.

. . . .

Sāḍū told him that death lurks around you. It is inescapable. Accept the advice of the womenfolk.

. . . .

Sāḍū described her terrible dream to Nevo. She saw the Brothers fighting on the bank of the River Khārī. Heads were rolling, dead bodies were stacked. She saw twenty-four funeral pyres and the wives blazing in them. She saw . . . the Goddess in her terrible form. She asked Nevo not to go to Rāṇ.

Many stanzas later Sadu asks Nevo how beautiful this queen is, and he launches into an elaborate toe-to-head description of her fine qualities. This apparently sells Sadu on the idea of a co-wife:

After hearing this Sāḍū advised Nevo to bring her as soon as possible. Sāḍū promised Nevo that she would welcome such an elegant Queen and share Bhoj with her. She told Nevo to bring Queen Jaimatī.

Note how despite many differences in style this situation is structurally similar to the one in which we observed Bharthari and Pingala. Sadu is not Nevo's wife, but as *devar* he is in a husband-like relationship to her. He goes not to be a yogi but to have a good time and bring home a new woman for his elder brother, Sadu's husband. This woman will destroy the Bagaravats' family happiness, just as Bharthari being a yogi destroys Pingala's. And, just as Pingala continues to speak to Bharthari in commands even when she has lost the argument, so Sadu—after hearing the lengthy description of Jaimti's beauty—acquiesces and actually commands Nevo to bring this woman: the very thing she has just been arguing against at such length.

Both male epics, then, involve turnarounds in female imperatives. The women in the end are persuaded to add their voices and power to male enterprises rather than simply desist from refusing them. We could interpret this pattern as meaning that male epics fully co-opt female power. But an alternative and perhaps equally valid way of looking at it would be to note that even when women give into men, folklore continues to perceive them as articulate and commanding presences. Moreover, definitively in the case of Sadu, and arguably in the case of Pingala, they were right the first time! Bringing Jaimti was definitely a mistake. Abandoning home and wife for a yogi's begging life, as most who listen to Bharthari's tale agree, is a desperate course of action leading to misery.

Acknowledged Mutualities

I have offered examples of forthright female voices in women's songs and stories and in two male oral epics—all from the same small Rajasthani community. Certain factors are common to all the genres I have considered. Women are not portrayed as shy or ashamed. Rather they speak boldly and present articulate demands. In all the genres these demands include demands for love—in the form of fidelity, gifts, services, and perhaps above all physical proximity: “come home,” “stay here,” “don't go.” When women send men out on missions, to “bring me a yellow wrap” or “get me the sweets even if you must steal them,” these are always errands with a “go and come back” plan to them.³¹

These commonalities contradict the visual images of veiled women in rural Rajasthan and the muffled or whispered voices such women affect in the actual presences of spouses. In oral performances women not only address their husbands but command them. Das's (1988) double register of law and language where women have no voice of their own, versus poetry where they may partially subvert male dominance, does not seem an adequate model. Cultural performances including women's songs are neither whispered nor debased, but rather loud and valued. At rural Rajasthani weddings in recent decades, celebrants commonly hire a loudspeaker system. Men control the microphone; from time to time,

³¹ Marglin 1995 comes to similar conclusions on gender interdependence and mutualities.

between cassette recordings of popular hits, they turn the microphone toward the singing women, thus magnifying their voices across the entire community. Although this is a recent electronic innovation, I hope I have demonstrated here that folkloric performances regularly dismantle the spatial and conceptual sexual segregation of Rajasthani society. With both sense and sound, Rajasthani expressive traditions seem to voice a will for gender togetherness and to acknowledge the true interdependence of couples.

Contrasts have certainly emerged between female voices as portrayed in male and as portrayed in female genres. In the male genres women may not only lose the argument in the end, but join their voices to the other side, taking the male view and relinquishing their own demands. Let the guru's will be obeyed; let the beautiful rival come into the house. But by thus acquiescing are they as good as silenced? I suggest that the co-option of women's demands in the epics is less a squelching of female power than a necessary incorporation of it into male projects. That the domesticity-despising guru requires Bharthari to bring alms from his wife may be a recognition that women's consent is required even for the enterprise of abandoning women. This might seem an insignificant manipulation of power, but the refrain of Bharthari's epic suggests in Pingala's commanding voice that women's objections are never totally submerged.

Let me finally return to the point that in South Asia demands themselves are demeaning. As I read through my collection of women's songs, plucking out the many demanding voices, I was struck by a single example in which women portray males as demanders and in doing so gently seem to mock the whole enterprise. The context in which I recorded this song was the celebration of a first son's first haircut dedicated to the deity responsible for the child's birth. Songs of the bridegroom-prince (*banā*) are regularly performed on such occasions, and the same songs that are sung for weddings are sung for haircuts. However, I never came across this song in a wedding context. Perhaps it is a deliberately babyish bridegroom prince who is portrayed here.

banōñ ūbo sarak par, nār māñge
unkā bābūjī syūñ rapayā hajār māñge
vāñkā nāññījī syūñ anguṭhī rūmāl māñge
vāñkā dādyāñ syūñ bīṭī rūmāl māñge
dholā kāch kā gilās me ṭhañḍāt māñge
hariyā hariyā dūñdā me jalebī māñge

O Bridegroom prince who stands on the street,
 for a woman he asks.
 From his father a thousand rupees he asks;
 from his Grannie a ring and a hankie he asks;
 from his Grandma a ring and a hankie he asks;
 a clear glass of almond milk he asks;
 sweet twists in the greenest leaf cups he asks.

[recorded May 30, 1980]

If women perform charming but condescending songs about a baby bridegroom prince's crude or precious demands for intoxicants, money, sweets, and a woman, it might well be a meta-metacommentary on their own roles as petitioners that they recognize as a partially assumed posture of dependency. I can only wonder if these singers are mocking their own perpetual demands by imagining how a "bridegroom-prince" would sound making them: infantilized in his concern with self-gratification and his unabashed dependency?³² It is also true that the demanding baby has a lot of actual power in its babbling voice, as well as evoking boundless adoration. Perhaps this song suggests not only a merging of adult with childish, but of male with female dependencies—and thus of male with female identities. Perhaps it thereby acknowledges the mutuality and interdependency between the sexes that is after all one given condition of human life.

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³² Jyotsna Kapur (personal communication) amended my interpretation of this song with the following illuminating suggestion: "Could it be that folk songs by recognizing women's boldness are more honest in recognizing that the power struggle between men and women is not so easily reconciled—that there are always ways in which women assert themselves—unlike what Das suggests, that the victory of men is not a foregone conclusion? Possibly, women's folk songs depict this contested terrain because women control this arena—folk songs? I don't see this as contradicting your argument of mutuality, but only as supplementing it—love and war together!"

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Two Houses and the Pain of Separation in Tamang Narratives from Highland Nepal

Kathryn S. March

Sites for the expression of sex difference

At the heart of the anthropological endeavor lies a desire to understand other peoples. This effort has varied across a broad spectrum: from the exploitative if not baldly extorted accounts put in the service of colonial, missionary, national, or commercial interests, through the sincere if not always successful attempts at collaboration, to the eccentric, even romantic or egoistic, chronicles of personal encounters. What is at stake in the most recent anthropological critiques of our own enterprise is nothing less than our ability to represent others' identities, especially those forged in colonial and postcolonial encounters.

O'Hanlon's 1988 review of *Subaltern studies*, in particular, invites us to reconsider relationships of power and resistance, of hegemony and autonomy, and of women and men, suggesting that there are certain important parallels among all these relationships and the contemporary critiques of them. This paper looks at men's and women's verbal constructions of their identities; then, at the continuities and discontinuities in their expressions of sex-specific experience; and finally, at both women's and men's evocation of gender imagery to depict aspects of their lives as painful.

Gender and domination

At stake in my presentation are two central reflections. First is the question of whether or not power and resistance, hegemony and autonomy, interact in the same way between women and men, and more specifically between contemporary Tamang men and women from central highland

Nepal, as has been described between colonial authorities and local peoples in wider South Asia. To the extent that gendered and other forms of domination are *not* isomorphic, of course, an important subsidiary question arises: if present understandings of colonialism and postcoloniality are inadequate to disassemble gender, then, is this more because gender is different, or more because subaltern studies are inadequate?

The growing field of feminist epistemology takes as its central terrain the social construction of knowledge and its consolidation into the discourses of science, the treachery of their complicity with forms of material domination, and the need for a more determinedly perspectival understanding of both the subject and the world. In many ways this resonates clearly with poststructural literary theory and postcolonial social theory, but with some additional twists. Dimen's (1989) circuit of "Power, sexuality and intimacy," for example, also suggests that when dominance operates on and through desire it has different intrinsic implications for identity, ambiguity, and intimate intersubjectivity.

The bounteous harvest of studies on pre- and postcolonial western Africa holds an invigorating promise for work to be generated from throughout the world.¹ Those studies chart new arrangements of power, sex, belief, and practice: they document different ways of organizing sexual politics in which the sexes exercised dominion in separate but interdependent spheres and in which biological sex and reproduction were divorced from, and subsequently remarried to, social and cultural gender in what were to Eurocentric scholarship startling ways; and they demonstrate how colonial encounters ignored and dismantled these systems. Finally, and mercifully just before the prospect for humane mutual understanding evaporated in the heat of such critiques, Narayan reminds us that "our commitment to the contextual nature of knowledge does not require us to claim that those who do not inhabit these contexts can never have any knowledge of them" (1989:264). Thus, our project is doubly ambitious: to gain knowledge of meanings generated across the profound chasms of difference between ourselves and the voices we solicit in the anthropological field, and to discern what possibilities exist for dialogue across forms of local difference, in this case between Tamang women and men.

¹ See especially Van Allen 1972, 1976; Ifeka-Moller 1975; Okonjo 1986; Amadiume 1987.

Verbal genre and resistance

The second overarching concern in this article is to explore the potentially different roles played by different verbal genres in creating or contesting authoritative or independent points of view. I quite agree with O'Hanlon (1988) and Comaroff (1985) that the validity of resistance should not be measured either in its flamboyance or in its material efficacy. Clearly, even some dramatic and manifestly political rebellions fail. But, more importantly, the vaster number of rebellious acts are smaller (even personal), ineffectual (even unnoticed), experimental (not instrumental), and quieter (even silent)—but for all that not, I would argue, pointless. The boundaries between dissonance and dissidence are undoubtedly more troubling to the analyst than they are to those who play in their fields.

In Tamang fields of dissent/discord, words are the commonest action. If anything is imaginable, but few things are realizable (in the structuralists' sense of myth, imagination, and realities); so, too, many more things are utterable than are actionable. Tamang words take many forms; some can be classed into definite genres, such as talk, song, and gossip. In the present study, I will explore how different kinds of words and the contexts that produce them represent different degrees of collective construction and personal innovation. They voice different subjects—in the senses of both topic and agent.

In this way, they bespeak not singular, more authentic alternate "I's," but an array of positions in which identities are formed and from which they are articulated. Some of these announced identities speak simultaneously *of* and *from* a particular experiential position, for instance of a young married woman or a dying man; but nothing prevents a dying man from trying to imagine his mother's experiences at his birth, speaking in other words *of* experiences *from* his perspective. The question asked of verbal form here, then, is whether different genres speak from different presumptions of experience and hence provide entirely different scope for the expression not only of sympathy or empathy, but also of convention, critique, or resistance.

Tamang identities

The peoples today called Tamang live in the central Nepal highlands in and surrounding the Kathmandu valley. The Tamang community with whose assistance the materials for this article were assembled and interpreted lies in the districts of Rasuwa and Nuwakot about two days'

walk to the north and west of Kathmandu toward the Tibetan Chinese border; other Tamang communities lie in the Helambu region directly north of Kathmandu; still others lie as far east as Dankuta and as far south as the border with India. Typically and traditionally, Tamang are described as a Tibeto-speaking people of Tibetan origin, organized into clans (not castes), who marry their cross-cousins (mother's brother's children or father's sister's children), and whose most respected religious practitioners are Buddhist lamas. But they are not a historically, politically, socially, or linguistically unified people: they speak profoundly divergent dialects; they were not part of a single polity; and they migrated into Nepal severally. Instead, theirs has been a patchwork history. What unifies their experience is above all the way that they have become incorporated into the state of Nepal, which codified its peoples and especially their land and labor obligations as the state formed.

Tamang peoples were the inhabitants of the lands conquered by the founding Nepali monarch, Prithvi Narayan Shah, as he initially blockaded and overtook the Malla kingdoms of the Kathmandu valley during the late eighteenth century. As he consolidated his reign, Prithvi Narayan Shah did so literally on the backs of the people who lived along his path of conquest: they provisioned and portered for his armies in the early years of the Shah monarchy and continued to pay rents in both cash and kind as well as provide *corvée* labor of many sorts throughout the first two centuries of Nepali national history. To be Tamang was to experience the fullest brunt of the social, economic, and political machinery of Nepali national state formation.

As that history unfolded, being Tamang became ever more, as Holmberg (1989) has called it, involuted: even as the demands made upon Tamang by the state increasingly impoverished and demeaned Tamang peoples with pressures imposed from outside, internally Tamang society and culture flourished by turning in upon itself, proliferating and enriching its own forms, but always within the refracted encompassment of the Nepali nation. Many forms of opportunity and expression were denied: political self-rule, economic autonomy, military opportunity, and social mobility were all precluded. Other forms proliferated, such as religious dance, drama festivals, pilgrimage, shamanism, personal story, and song. Although it would be naive to neglect the historical role that the state, the caste-based social and legal system, and the marked privileges of central elites all played in creating and policing the framework—legal, economic, political, and military—within which Tamang identities were formed in Nepal to serve others' purposes, it would be equally naive to disavow the

energy and originality with which Tamang peoples reacted to their situation to interpret and reformulate their identities for themselves.

This study looks, then, at the personal narratives and song compositions of northwestern Tamang to explore the construction of women's identities. These songs and stories display the central tension in women's lives: girls are born into one family line and home, but must move at marriage to live with their husbands. Initially, this movement from one home to another may be understood as the transformation—and a difficult one at that—of one identity into another; that is certainly, at least partially, how women describe it.

Descent and marriage define a woman's two houses

Patrilineal descent and patrilocal post-marital residence mean that a Tamang woman must leave her natal family and move to live with her husband's family when she marries. Although in some parts of South Asia this movement is abrupt and the distance—both social and geographical—between natal and marital families is great, in Tamang communities in north central Nepal marriages occur between cross-cousins. Marrying someone you call your mother's brother's child or your father's sister's child (real or classificatory) greatly reduces the distance between affines at the same time that it introduces new complexity into marriage negotiations. Whether through arrangement or courtship, since marriage is possible only with (real or classificatory) cross-cousins and everyone of your own generation is either a sibling (real or classificatory) or a cross-cousin, the first order of Tamang marriage negotiation depends upon identifying whether the prospective candidate is a cross-cousin or not.

At the heart of Tamang courtship songs like the one called *Sai Khola*, with which I will begin this analysis, there inevitably lies a riddle. In some ways, it is the most universal of all riddles: "Who am I?" But these songs also give voice to distinctively Tamang riddles, for the "I" is, of course, a Tamang "I"; specifically in these songs leading to marriage, it is a cross-cousin marrying "I." In these songs women and men query one another about their identities through long, raucous nights of dancing and complex rhyming *repartées*. They begin with general inquiries, laden with potential romance and marriage.

These songs are challenging to translate, though not primarily because they are poetic and romantic; indeed, the romance is perhaps what makes this poetry most readily accessible across the miles and differences that separate their experiences from ours. Although many details of the

Tamang imagery in such songs require annotation, most of us will find immediate resonances in lines like the following, which are sung by both men and women early in the evening and open one version of a *Sai Khola*:²

*Sai kholé!*³

Take the herding station up onto [place-name] Hill.⁴
Hai!

Playful-songs three-songs in this [our] time of youth.⁵

² To preserve the integrity of the original songs, I have translated all the verses, although the phrases most central to the analysis here are underlined.

³ Every line begins with the song name, *Sai khola* or (more emphatically) *Sai kholé*, which literally means “One hundred streams.” Line-ends are marked by an exclaimed *Hai!* In these translations I have not repeated this phrase with every line.

⁴ The opening lines are well known to all; they are an invitation to get involved in the song competition. Just to give an example of the types of rhymes common throughout: line 1 says *godé / borpa / goDa / gang-ri*; literally, herding station / do or would carry, take, or move / specific place name / hill, mountain, or ridge-on top of; line 2 *wara wara / tschi / som / klangpa / chudé / gang-ri*; literally, genre of playful and dancing song / words, phrases, or song verses / three / do would play / this (proximate) / age of life-in. Although my translation as “Take the herding station up onto the [place name] Hill; playful-songs three-songs in this [our] time of youth!” cannot replicate the rhyming and punning in these songs, I will try to indicate where the important plays with words occur. Groups of lines separated in these translations by a blank line constitute verses of two possible sorts: the first is that each “verse” indicated this way shares a single basic rhyming scheme, but these clusters also anticipate the actual singing exchanges that take place as the singers sing a verse and then wait to hear their counterparts’ reply. [Brackets] indicate untranslatable or missing phrases: these might be (a) place-names or specific tree species names, or (b) other phrases, especially pronouns, that are not specified in the Tamang but are understood—with some necessary ambiguity, as, for example, when the “love” being sung about might be [yours], [mine], or [ours].

⁵ *Wara wara tschi som* or “playful-songs three-songs” refers to the kind of song that was popular some years before *Sai Khola* came into fashion. These song trends each seem to last only about five years. *Sai Khola* has since given way to *Mendolesyo*, which in its turn has given way to others.

Tuck the paper-like petals of flowers into [your] hair.
Has love arrived yet, or not, from all the directions?⁶

Wherever [you] are from, please come up [to us].
Come here to sing [kind of song] and
/[kind of song] [with us].

The temples of the very gods are in Khasyor.⁷
 Searching for nice love⁸ [our] heads spun more.

In a rifle muzzle is a lead bullet round.
 Where will [we] go and hear love's sound?

The stew with rice [special varietal name] is sweet.
 The sound of nice love is sweet.⁹

[I'll] go pick wild banana leaves
 /[to make] a plate [for you].
 If [I] don't find nice love, what will I do?

To eat a half measure of salt.
 How strange it would be if [we] didn't find love.

The corn itself ripens right on the ears.
 We ourselves are virgins pure, pure, pure enough.¹⁰

⁶ The rhyme (with reduplication) here is between *syo syo la* (of paper paper) and *tscho tscho la* (of all the cardinal directions directions). Note that there are six “cardinal” directions in Tamang Buddhist logic: north, south, east, and west, plus up-in-the-center and down-in-the-center.

⁷ This is a major Buddhist monument and *stupa* in the Kathmandu valley. It is an important pilgrimage point for Tamang, who credit the semimythical Tamang woman Gang Jyungmo with its construction.

⁸ Here and below, “nice” love is *gyapi* love, meaning “nice, good, pretty, desirable.”

⁹ “Sweet” in both cases here is *rongpa*, referring to edibles.

¹⁰ The “virgin” here is a Nepali loanword *kanya* (for an unmarried virgin, especially in ideals of marriage); this sex- and caste-based value on virginity is quite well known to, but largely irrelevant for, local Tamang. They know, however, that caste Hindu think that these song-fests, and the relations that can obtain between women and men singers, are titillatingly licentious. The play on “pure, pure, pure enough” juxtaposes different kinds of words for purity—*sang* from Tamang and *choko* from Nepali—and undoubtedly highlights the tensions surrounding conflicts between Tamang and non-Tamang ideas about “purity.”

The incendier is for burning incense.
For love, there are couples, or aren't there?

The pipestem is there for smoking tobacco.
The time is now¹¹ to go looking for . . . *wa rai ra!*¹²

The call to romance in these verses can be heard even in translation. But the central riposted verses, in which the singers pursue each other's identities, are less apparently accessible because they probe, conceal, and finally reveal a version of personal identity not immediately meaningful to non-Tamang. In these other verses, each singer or group of singers must attempt to obscure their own identities while tricking their opponents into divulging theirs.

Of course, what is critical to these songs of Tamang courtship is marriageability, and marriageability hinges upon whether the person with whom you are competing is a (real or classificatory) cross-cousin or not. With the former, sex, love, and marriage are both possible and positively desired, but any sexualized liaison with the latter is prohibited, incestuous, and shocking. These riddling song verses of love, tryst, and marriage, then, dally in personal identity in specifically Tamang terms. In the following verses both women and men root their self-descriptions in the lineage and locale of their birth:

Young men:

Some chicken's chicks are too young to lay eggs yet.¹³
Where [are you] from? From what village, beloved women?

If the chick, if the hen is yellow,
if you intend to make love enough,

¹¹ Literally, "age is right," as in the number of years old a person is.

¹² The rhyme ends here before the thought is completed, although the implication understood by all hearers was that the singers were looking for opponent-partners with whom to exchange verses that evening. Groups of singers indicate that they are done with their round of singing and are waiting for their opponent-partners to reply via the terminal challenge *wa ra rai* or *wa rai ra*.

¹³ And too young, presumably, to be able to compose adequate song *ripostes*.

give the chaff a whirl in the winnowing tray.
Toss back these three-songs playful-songs.¹⁴

Wa rai ra!

Young women:

Do weave the proper pattern in the *barku*-overgarment.¹⁵
Will it be with us? Or will it be for another?

To eat some potatoes, well, you chew-chew so.
If you sing [with us], speak clearly-clearly so.

To plant corn in the month of *Chait*.¹⁶
Is it for us, perhaps? Who knows?

Young men:

Millet has dried on the drying mat.
[We] have spoken singing to you.

To gamble [you] have to name [your] [suit].¹⁷
It seems our meeting, however, was not by chance.

Take the corn from the earth and put it in the rafters
/[to store and dry it].
Speak truly and sing [type of song] with
/[your] mouths to us.

Young women:

[I'll] eat a snack of green chili peppers.
If [I] sing that way, it will be proper.

Like the goat's kid and the cow's calf, newborn.
What kind and how [are we] come to be kin relations?

¹⁴ Actually proper names for two kinds of “playful” festival competition songs, both of which preceded *Sai Khola* in popularity in this region.

¹⁵ *Barku* and *gya* are the two styles of plaid shawl or overgarment Tamang women traditionally tied over their shoulders.

¹⁶ The month when it must be planted.

¹⁷ Referring to a card game in which each player has to call out names of cards (e.g., “aces,” “deuces,” etc.) depending upon how they are going to play. This announcing of the card numbers is what I have called “naming a suit.”

Divinity is not in the house yard.
We children don't know
/[how or if you are our] kin relations?

Young men:

A ball of red thread. A skein of black thread.
Whose daughter [are you]? Whose daughter-in-law [are you]?

Let's husk the fresh-picked corn and see.
Let's turn around, face each other this way, and see.

Young women:

We eat the salt of Rasuwa.
We're just from Earthshole Dasuwa.¹⁸

The pivot of the rice pounder is
 /[made] from the [species name] tree;
 the pounder is [made] from the [species name] tree.

[Clan name] clan daughter am I;
/and the shaman's daughter-in-law am I.
The lama has his music; the shaman has his drum.¹⁹

[Clan name] father's daughter am I.
[Clan name] mother's daughter am I.²⁰

Young men:

Looking for a rock, [we] found divinity.
Now that [you've] spoken, we find that we know [you].

¹⁸ Two place names made to rhyme.

¹⁹ This line echoes many proverbs about the ritual specializations of Buddhist lamas and shamans among Tamang, but also adds another kind of rhyme between “I and “drum,” both of which are *nga*, differentiated only by tone.

²⁰ These lines were sung as examples, to try to teach me how to sing *Sai Khola*, but it is worth noting that they were played out by a group of young (and not so young) men, who reported that these would be appropriate replies for a young woman to make. In fact, the lines they attribute to the young women fulfill all the requirements of rhyme and other kinds of puns (see, for example, the lines about men going around poking their “walking sticks” into other people’s roofs), but they answer the hypothetical young men’s questions about their identities without trickery; the lines attributed here to the young men, however, display the kind of evasiveness and punning about identity that are most highly admired.

To gamble [you] have to name [your] [suit].
 Let's make love in the best way.²¹

Young women:

To go poking [your] walking stick into [someone's] roof.
Where is [your] village, [you] great kings?

Red lentils are a snack for beer, too.²²
Whose child [are you]? Whose husband [are you]?

Clear [your] throat before singing [your] song.
 Tell it well and give it back to us now.

Young men:

To go poking flowers [in your hair] [species name] flowers.
We are from Five Hundred Streams.

We kill the fish in the weir.
Our village is called [place name].²³

Our grandfather's grandchild, our father's son.
A young woman's young man and some wife's husband.

Young women:

It seems the moon rose silver on the hill.
 It seems [this] meeting has been to share love with us.

The adze is for stripping bark off [the wood for a] yoke.
 Let's just play. We'll all laugh.

A golden charm, a silver chain.
 Why worry to make love?

A piebald deer is on the cliff across the river.
 How will [your] kings' hearts remember [us]?

²¹ "Best" here is the loanword and concept *pakka*, meaning a thing properly made, finished well, polished.

²² This strain of red lentils is said to be so powerful that even rocks accidentally cooked in them will soften.

²³ The name of their home village rhymes, of course, with "weir," but the boast is also evident.

Young men:

Frog's thigh, [place name] river.
Howsoever rememberingly heart of love.

The bitter gourd hangs supported on the trellis.
We children are so brave.

There is liquor in the big drinking bowl.
We're of a heart-and-mind to make love.

Young women:

The three-sided *rudraksha* nut²⁴ is not medicine.
The marriage exchange arranged by Father
/is not meant to be.

To eat the food on the plate, there is a proper time.
Millers put [their] flour inside a wooden container.
Let us make love, at the peak of the proper time.

Young men:

Do cut fodder, well, from the [best fodder species] tree.
Is this just deceit? Or is it the truth?

In this particular exchange, re-created for me by a group of young men from "Five Hundred Streams" in 1977, the young men represent themselves as the more skillful singers. The young women, although presenting themselves as no longer "yellow" chicks, and ready enough to cast aside the "marriage exchange arranged by Father" to eat the young men's "snack of green peppers," give themselves away completely. When the young men ask, "Whose daughter [are you]? Whose daughter-in-law [are you]?" the young women obligingly provide both their father's and mother's clan/lineage name and identify their father-in-law. But the men, when the women complain that "we children don't know [how or if you are our] kin relations," answer only that they are "our grandfather's grandchild, our father's son; a young woman's young man and some wife's husband."

In such song exchanges, as well as exploring each other's clan identities, the women and men ask and eventually tell where the other comes from. "Where [are you] from? From what village, beloved women?" ask the men at the outset of their rhyming inquest. And the women, even after they realize they have given their "suit" away to the

²⁴ A seed commonly used as a bead in religious rosaries.

men, nevertheless challenge them “to go poking [your] walking stick into [someone’s] roof. Where is [your] village, [you] great kings?” The men can now boast, “We are from Five Hundred Streams,” for the riddle has been solved. The singers are marriageable; they are “brave” and “of a heart-and-mind to make love.”

Most of these song contests end either in this way or with the contestants realizing that they are (real or classificatory) brothers and sisters, at which point a different kind of love is all that is possible. The very act of singing—especially about love and liaison—is by Tamang social definitions either a solicitation of sexual possibilities or an incestuous impossibility. To err and court in song the wrong category is deeply embarrassing. In either case the immediate outcome is largely the same: song partners who have engaged in a satisfyingly long and rewarding set of exchanges subsequently exchange snacks, liquor, and tokens. “Brother” and “sister” singers may then team up to instruct one another in further song subtleties on through the night. “Marriageable” singers may elope or at least tryst.

Brothers and sisters, husband and wives, women and men

In these songs it is not men’s and women’s identities *qua* “men” or “women” that is at stake, but their relative positioning as either “brothers and sisters” or “marriageable partners.” As such, the possibilities for contestation and negotiation are distinctly circumscribed. They certainly toss challenges back and forth about each other, but these challenges are rooted less in their respective maleness or femaleness than in their respective kin positions.

Throughout their lives, both men and women are vitally involved in their own patrilineages. Anthropologically, we expect this of the men, as sons and subsequently fathers. But Tamang women are important as daughters and sisters, too. Daughters’ rights in their parents’ houses are recognized in *dzo*, property settlements made by a natal house on its daughters. In wealthy houses, women’s *dzo* can be substantial, including numbers of water buffalo, cattle, and goats, as well as copper cauldrons, water jugs, bronze dishes, and other major household items, and of course gold and silver jewelry and even grain or money. Even in the poorest households a ritually minimal *dzo* must be given, since it marks a daughter’s obligations in her parents’ house: a sickle (*wari*) for cutting the grass at familial cremations, a hoe (*tow*) for scraping a circle on the ground

to demarcate the cremation ground, and a bronze drinking bowl (*khore*) for holding the water to wash her parents' faces at their deaths.

As sisters and clansisters, Tamang women also play important lifelong roles. In childhood, sisters and brothers are each other's caretakers and confederates, a history that establishes lasting close emotional bonds (cf. Wolf 1972). Tamang song, myth, and everyday conversation all emphasize the obligations and love a brother has for his sisters and clan sisters, whom he calls collectively his *busing*; sisters and clansisters, too, have special obligations to one another and form a social group of their own, calling themselves *anonyinchon*. The ties between a brother and his *busing*-sisters or among *anonyinchon*-sisters themselves are particularly important at various points in each other's lives, among which are a brother's first haircutting, each other's weddings, the birth of each other's children, each other's children's marriages, and ultimately each other's deaths. At least once a year sisters and brothers ritually exchange food and gifts to mark their continuing commitment to one another.

The commitment between brothers and sisters is, however, not without contradictions. Sisters and brothers are not just united eternally by the ties of their birth; they are also rivals. Brothers have primary rights over certain kinds of patrilineally held property, especially houses and lands, but sisters may also make substantial claims against that property, whether in the form of *dzo*, in loans, or in refuge.²⁵ When the ancestral house is rich, the needs of both daughters and sons can be fulfilled; but when the house is poor, the requirements of sons take precedence. "Ours," said Tschirto, "is a tale of daughters not getting anything only because father was so very poor. Everything Mother had was given to her sons." To daughters it is, as Tasyi told it, often "a tale of giving later . . . later, if I can" Tamang construe the claims of sisters and the obligations of fathers or brothers to give to daughters or sisters in terms of affection, not right.

It is also not surprising, then, that sisters and brothers sometimes view their situation differently. Women, when they attempt to press demands as daughters or sisters upon their fathers and brothers, often find they are less welcome than the rhetoric of patrilineal solidarity would suggest. Sukumaya was a young woman, newly married, when she mused what would happen if she never went to live in her husband's house:

²⁵ See Fricke 1986 for a more extended discussion of the interplay of men's and women's rights in inheritance and household formation.

Sukumaya: . . . after Father and Mother are grown old, and, say they die, it's not that my younger brothers and sisters will care for me. Then where will I go? I think about that in one half of my mind; the other half thinks only about wanting to stay here.

KSM: You couldn't stay with your brothers?

Sukumaya: You stay with your brothers and then, well, they'll talk harshly to you. They'll scold you a lot. When your own father and mother are there, it's one thing; on your own . . . [Pause].

KSM: On your own, what? What do they say if you stay with your brothers?

Sukumaya: Our kind can only go to husbands. If you stay on like this without going to a husband, they'll talk and talk harshly.

KSM: They're contemptuous.

Sukumaya: Contemptuous. Your brothers are contemptuous. They'll tell you, "Go wherever you want to go, but just go. Do whatever you want to do, but just do it," they'll just say. They'll give lots of work, no food. After you're an old woman.



Jyomo weaving a woman's skirt. (photo credit: D. Holmberg and K. March)

Nhanu, a much older woman, fully established in her own house with her husband and grown children, remembered how she used to think toward her brothers and how it had become: “it would please me to weave a turban and give it to one of my brothers. I’d weave for them because it was my nature; I liked weaving for them. They never had to ask me. I’d say, ‘Take and wear this! You should look good, like fortune has smiled upon you!’ That’s the way I am; that’s the way my heart and mind work. I never once said to any of my younger brothers, ‘Where and when will I get mine?’ . . . Now, each is alone. Each of us is set up separately, one here, the other there; each has hardened toward the other.”

Nhanu, in effect, looks back over the interpersonal tensions over brothers’ and sisters’ respective familial rights within an idiom of the passage of time, as if they “used to” care for one another but “now” do not. But such strains arise all the time, and in general sisters emphasize the unity of cross-sex siblings while brothers emphasize their differences. In one of the common exchanges of the *Sai Khola* songs, the young women sing as sisters:

Sai kholé!

Together the pillars of the house stand. Hai!

The memory is in the hearts-and-minds of two small children!

and again:

How can you of our own natal home forget us?

We, your clansisters?

But the young men answer, like brothers whose tolerance—in Tamang terms “affection”—has been tested too much:

Sai kholé! Why has your natal charm wilted? Hai!

The structural tension between sisters and brothers is recognized most symmetrically and classically in a *namtar* or “origin” song about the beginnings of weaving and writing. This particular song is said to have originated between a brother and a sister. She was sitting weaving; he was learning to read and write in order to become a lama. Both of these images—of men as lamas writing and of women weaving—reverberate throughout Tamang life (March 1984). This song highlights the rivalry between brother and sister as each acquired the symbolic skills and tools of his/her gender. The brother tries to tease his sister, making fun of her weaving so as to glorify his writing. But each time he names a piece of his

paraphernalia with pride, she retorts, singing about her loom in all its pieces and about the antiquity of women's weaving knowledge.²⁶

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,²⁷
the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee,
pushing against the footboard of her loom.
This is the work that anchors women.²⁸
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee,
 pushing at the backstrap of her loom.
 This is the work that anchors women.
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman straightened out the hollow behind her knee
 and used the shuttle (*kyurusying*) of her loom.
 The lama has his thighbone trumpet (*kangling*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her weaving beater (*graama*).
 The lama has his sword (*patang*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her device for wetting her weaving
 /*chhupi chhusying*).²⁹
 The lama has his bamboo pen (*yugu*).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

²⁶ Here again, although I am reproducing the entire song, I have underlined the significant references.

²⁷ In the beginning of time, when things were first coming to their respective rebirths and being defined by them.

²⁸ The work that “ties women down,” that “keeps them from going anywhere,” but that also “secures their place for them” just as it “secures them in their place.”

²⁹ Often nothing more than a dried corn cob dipped in water and drawn across the weaving before beating new threads in, this device helps to make the weaving tight.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had her device for keeping her weaving/
*/a consistent width (phapi phasying).*³⁰
 The lama has his printing of books with woodblocks
/(chhappré).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

When the cycle of rebirths was beginning,
 the woman had all the lease and hettle rods
/(phépi phésying) of her loom.
 The lama has his walking stick (béra).
 This is the one work that anchors them alike.

What originates in this song, of course, and is attributed to the rivalry of cross-sex siblings, is ultimately the complementarity of Tamang gender in weaving and writing. But in this mythic song and in courtship songs, as in common talk, what is at stake in these versions of cross-sex disputation lies deeper.

Self and locality

Locality provides another anchor for both women's and men's identities. It is manifest in the boundedness of named locales and the markedness of actual or imaginative gates into the community from each of the directions. Local territorial divinities are regularly honored both at these gateways and at the sacred sites they inhabit within the community. Community members are obliged to these divinities and can be directly affected by them, even when they are away from the village. This is clearest in an annual sacrifice and feast at which all the out-married women and the fewer men who go outside the community for adventure or work must nevertheless continue to propitiate their natal local divinities. For most of the men, the overlaps between lineal and local identities, duties, and vulnerabilities are not contradictory, since they are born, live, and work their entire lives in the same locale. It is women, who carry bits of these ties with them when they marry, who highlight the partial independence of local from lineal identity.

³⁰ A length of bamboo sharpened at both ends (and sometimes strung like a bow); poked into both selvages of the emerging fabric, it helps to keep it the same width across the entire length.

In songs like these, as well as in the many more prosaic responses to questions about “who are you?” men and women share an initial language to describe who they are, and it is less a language of sexed identity than that of the place and line of their birth. From the oldest woman who spoke with me, who said, “I’m a *Yema* clanswoman from God’s pasturage,” to the youngest, from both women and men, all identified themselves at the outset of almost any inquiry by noting, more or less in this order: first their patriclan, then their village of birth. If more information were volunteered, they typically progressed to identifying their mother’s patriclan, then their father’s locally known (nick)name. Thus, a standard brief self-introduction would say, “I’m a man (or woman) of such-and-such a clan and such-and-such a village;” a longer variant might run something like, “I’m a woman (or man) of such-and-such a clan-father and such-and-such a clan-mother, born in the village of thus-and-so, the son/daughter of so-and-so [father’s name].”

Self and house

At their outermost reaches, then, birthlines are located in the named patrilineal clans to which both Tamang men and women belong from the moment of their birth until death, and perhaps beyond. These patriclans have their ultimate origins in mythic time and events; in the present, they circumscribe the largest orbits of birth relationships, linking people together within the extended idiom of descent, affection, and obligation as (grand)parents, siblings, and (grand)children.

Within these named clans, the knowable lines of nameable grandfathers, mothers, and fathers are loosely nested. These aspects of social identity intersect at their core with the smallest unit of spatial identity, in the natal “house” or “home”—(*Dim*), a word that encompasses both the place and the personnel of a unified kernel of identity. Houses are built in clusters of closely related agnates, in villages with larger lineage and clan (if multi-clan) identities.

Tamang “houses” are vital social, economic, political, and ritual units. In this centrality and imaginative power to evoke both people and habitation, the idea of the Tamang “house” is not unlike the rural Tawainese house described by Wolf (1968), with one important proviso: Tamang houses are less ideologically and explicitly patriarchal. The Tamang house has both “female” and “male” regions in it, and while the seats of greater apparent outsider prestige are in the male sections, women and men are typically seated in separate but parallel hierarchies, each in their own

sections (Holmberg and March 1985). Each house as well is simultaneously headed by a man (*Dim ki apa*, “the father of the house”) and a woman (*Dim ki ama*, “the mother of the house”) whose authorities, again, are separate but largely parallel.³¹

A woman has two houses

But because Tamang women, unlike Tamang men, move to marry into another patriline and another patrilineally extended residence, they acquire a second “house” in adulthood. And they acquire new language—(1) *hro’i ja*, “someone else’s place;” (2) *apa-ama’i ja*, “father-mother’s place;” (3) *phamyung* and *apa maiti*, “natal home [married woman speaking]”—to talk about these new social and physical loci. Married women’s introductions, then, need to specify not only the place and people of her birth, but also those of her marriage. The oldest woman with whom I worked on life history materials, for example, virtually opened her personal account with “when I was a person of eleven, I reached Foddertree in marriage . . . to [marry] a Gongpo clansman.” Tamang women’s life accounts revolve closely around the very different jural and emotive constellations of their “own birth place,” “someone else’s place,” and their present “house.”

During the early years of her marriage, a woman often spends considerable periods of time in her natal home. As the years pass, she will come to spend more and more of her time in her marital home, but as long as she works in her natal home, even if only occasionally, she retains rights to a named share of the produce there (*khala phyapa*). Only after many years of marriage, the full transfer of her own property (*dzo*), and (usually) the birth of children will a Tamang woman come once again to refer to her marital residence as her “house” (*Dim*). Tamang women are very conscious of their rights in their natal homes: they divide their time between natal and marital homes carefully; they visit regularly and make and claim gifts on all the proper occasions; and, ultimately, they lament the loosening of their ties there as first their parents and then their brothers die.

Men, on the other hand, are born, marry, become fathers, live, and die on the social and spatial terrain of a singular house/home. For men, life is more socially and physically continuous. Although multiple brothers will

³¹ The sexual symmetry of men’s and women’s roles in some (even highly political) rituals suggests there might have been a more West African-like parallelism to gendered authority among the Tamang prior to Hindu and Shah conquest.

eventually move out of the ancestral homestead to build their own houses, they will build them close by, often constituting hamlets of closely related men's houses in a single village. Fathers, brothers, and fathers' brothers interact throughout their lives in all aspects of those lives.

The pain of separation

Although Tamang men and women experience it quite differently, both describe women's move at marriage as painful. Even though Tamang women do not marry strangers (but rather cross-cousins), and even though they almost never marry more than a few hours' walk away, and even though they are not expected to move quickly or exclusively into their husbands' houses, and even though they continue to have important social allies in both their natal and marital homes, and even though they bring considerable property of their own into their marriages, Tamang women speak of great hardship in the move into their husbands' houses.

Women's pains

In their life history narratives, every married woman counterpoised natal and marital homes. All women spoke of their birth home as a place of comfort, freedom, affection, and tranquility; they found their marital homes hard, constrained, and argumentative. Said Jyomo, even as a middle-aged woman well established with a married son:

Hardship, well how can one even speak of it now? My hardship, even more so, more in the house (*Dim*) of those Firestone people,³² then even more here. In Father's and Mother's house, I was carefree. If once you go stay with someone else's own Father and Mother, it's never again carefree. No matter how long it lasts, you know, wisdom never arises when you're young.³³ Then as soon as you're grown up a little, you suddenly become a person living in someone else's house. Where's the freedom from cares?

Different women commented at different lengths on various aspects of this contrast. Sukumaya, for example, was well-known as a very hard worker

³² Where she was first married and subsequently divorced.

³³ Literally, "wisdom never arises in one's young childhood."

in both her own parents' house and in her husband's, but she was outspoken about the obligatory nature of work in her husband's house:

In your own house, if it rains, you get to stay in the house. If you say so, you can stay. Yourself, you can say, "Today, I'm going to go to such-and-such a place," and after saying that, you can go. If you say, "Today, I'm not even going to do any work; I'm just going to sit around," you can stay sitting there. In your own place, in Father and Mother's place. In someone else's house, it isn't possible to talk like that.



Nhanu (tallest in center), with Setar (facing camera), and friends singing. (photo credit: D. Holmberg and K. March)

Mhojyo objected most to the sense that she was under constant scrutiny in her husband's house, saying, "In someone else's house, you're so afraid of what might be said to you, of what you might be asked to do,

of how you're supposed to do things, that you actually shake with fear sometimes." Other women focused on the strictures that they keep more compliantly quiet in their husbands' houses, or that they could not decide for themselves when or what to eat, or that they were subjected to sharper criticism there. But each one called upon this common theme—contrasting birth and natal homes—to organize past and present, birth and marriage, nice and nasty over the course of their lives.

Men's pains

It is the central hardship to women's lives, then, as they speak and sing about them, that they cannot stay forever in their original homes. But men also recognize this rupture in women's lives: they hear their own wives talk about it, and they see their sisters and daughters go through it. In this study I do not wish to explore this rupture per se. My earlier work on both Tamang and Sherpa symbols of intermediacy (1979), especially Tamang uses of weaving and writing (1984), shows not only the strong cultural and religious associations between ideas of femaleness and this movement of women from natal to marital homes, and the imaging of this move as difficult, but also the relevance of these images to both women and men. Holmberg has written in other contexts, too, about the essential femaleness of this kind of suffering in the Tamang ritual complex of the *Tsen* and the shamanic (1983). Here I want to focus more upon the other circumstances in which such suffering is thought to arise.

When Tamang talk or sing about their separate, and, especially for women, separated ties to their joint natal home, they usually do so together and in mixed-sex groups, and more to declare cross-sex solidarity than to assert difference or challenge authority. Both women and men sing similar songs, both listen to each other's singing, and both say they are (and to my observer's eye seem) deeply moved by women's plight. In this activity the distinctive representation of women's experience as painful is not by or for women alone; although based in the sex-specific dislocation of women at marriage, it becomes much more than a symbol of sex difference.

And human pain

Tamang identify the particular pain that women experience in the move out of their natal homes at marriage as *gyurba* or *warba*, "to suffer from separation." This "pain of separation" is regarded as a distinct category of suffering. It can arise from a number of different events,

ranging from the selling off of goods or losing jewelry to parting from friends. But the events most significantly and commonly described as *gyurba* or *warba* are: when a woman moves to marry in her husband's house, when a child is separated from its mother, and when a loved one dies. This Tamang "pain of separation" represents the double realization that one has lost something irretrievably and that one failed adequately to value what was lost before it was gone. It is, of course, about loss, but it is also about increased "wisdom": knowing now enough to remember and desire what was lost; knowing, too, enough to realize that it cannot be retrieved.

In addition to women's separation at marriage, the differentiation of fetus/child from its mother at birth is seen as a quintessential pain of separation. Women who became mothers, as we might expect, spoke and sang of the difficulties they found in bearing and caring for their children. What is more intriguing about Tamang representations is that men also referred to women's maternal pains, and made reference to illustrate their own sufferings. One particularly elegant set of verses from a man's lament, for example, describes his birth and his mother's pain as a very explicit inauguration of his treatment of his own hardships.

A small larva,
 a week or month after the small larva was born,
 My Own Mother was not yet aware of it.
 [next verse incomprehensible]
 After six months that little larva was going to be
 born
 /in My Own Mother's body.
After nine months, it came out;
it was born from My Own Mother!
It emerged, its birthing time was after nine
 months.
As it emerged, during its birthing time,
 oh, My Own Mother,
 a 100-1000 thoughts came to My Own Mother's heart-and-
 mind!
 When those 100-1000 thoughts heated up
 /in My Own Mother's heart-and-mind,/br/>
 /she felt the pain of separation.
 Her heart-and-mind boiled and bubbled.
 Boiling and bubbling like that,/br/>
 /she was the Bubble-Bubble Queen!

Here and in many other more prosaic contexts Tamang men use birth imagery much in the way women do, to describe these particular pains at separation.

Gendered pain, unsexed songs

To explore the workings in Tamang speech and song of these images of painful separation as female, regardless of the sex of the speaker/singer, I want to present the final verses of a *bomsang* composed and sung by the senior village lama's sixthborn older brother. *Bomsang* are a category of Tamang song that I have called "personal laments": they are thought of as individual creations, describing a particular person's life and composed as that person contemplated his or her own death; they are supposed to make the listener cry. Although everyone recognized the special beauty of this *bomsang*, the themes, and even many of the refrains, could be heard in many such songs. Since *bomsang* are sung in large measure as meditations on the sorrows and impermanence of life, the pain of separation is a central theme. It is not the centrality of that theme that I want to explore here, but rather its precise imagery, its gender, and its place in locating sexed experience within human life experience as constructed by Tamang.³⁴

In his *bomsang* the sixthborn elder brother sings:

The reason my strength is no longer is because of/
/all this tripping and tumbling after jewelry.
 I suffered the unendurable pain of separation.
 It seems an unbearable burden.
 It seems I was born to unendurable suffering.
 Oh, My Own Mother!
 Please sit down and listen with your ears.³⁵
 Please sit down and listen with your heart-and-mind,
 oh, my sons and daughters!

³⁴ Critical portions are again underlined.

³⁵ Literally, "after ears, sit down."

Thus, drawing round our family circle
 /of mother-and-children,³⁶
 /please sit down and listen.
 My heart-and-mind has suffered
 /the pain of separation all along this long trail.
 Oh! My Own Mother!

In the time of my tenderly sprouting flesh and blood,³⁷
splitting from my brothers, we divided the estate.
I felt the pain of partition.
 I might have been born only to suffer
 /the greatest pains of separation.
 In the time of my birthing, it seems I suffered the pain/
 /of being orphaned from both above and below.³⁸
 In the time of my being cut off from both above and below,/
 /a great sorrow was born in my heart-and-mind.
 Did I come to rest in a conscious lifeform?

No matter what food is eaten, no matter what is drunk,/
 /no matter the lifeform,
 all lifeforms that come to birth suffer the pain of death.
 All suffer the pain of decrepit bodies.
 No matter what is drunk, no matter what food is eaten,/
 /no matter the clothing that is worn,
 it seems there will be the unendurably
 /hard burdensome pain of separation.
 When enduring such burdensome suffering, is human life
 /a hell of great pain and separation or not?
 When will my time for separating
 /from this lifeform be fulfilled?
 To die is a cruel cutting off; to live, still surviving,/
 /

³⁶ Here *khor khor-ché nyhang mhémé* is potentially ambiguous. Two important contemporary Stupahill Tamang words—*mhémé* and *mémé*—are differentiated by only tone and a bit of breathiness, which my effort to write in Roman characters only partially (and perhaps incorrectly) captures. The first refers to a mother-and-her-children (as a family unit), and is often combined with *khor* (“circle”) to describe these intimate uterine family circles. The latter, *mémé*, means “grandfather,” either in address, in reference, or in the common phrase *mémé-phépé*, which describes the extended patrilineage as a kin group and is more literally lineal than encompassing in its usual imagery.

³⁷ A common poetic reference, literally “flesh-tendrils blood-tendrils,” to the physical fleshy robustness of a human body in its youth.

³⁸ Including the prosaic “up the mountain and down the valleys,” that is, all alone, but also meaning to be cut off from both heaven and hell.

/can I ever cut off the great hardships
/of this lifeform?

Buddhist suffering

The imagery here is, first, indisputably Buddhist. Tamang practice what Holmberg has called an “amonastic” Buddhism, without the esoteric and institutional trappings of the high Tibetan orthodoxy (1989). Nevertheless, the idea that attachment is the root of all suffering is universally meaningful to Tamang. In songs like these, as in many other presentations, Tamang understand life as suffering, and suffering as originating in worldly attachment. The “pain of decrepit bodies” stems from the endless “tripping and tumbling after” bodily wants like food, drink, clothing, and jewels. The pain of social bodies arises in personal attachments—all children’s early-lost attachment to their mother, orphans’ pain at being “left behind,” brothers’ pain when the joint household breaks up.

The pain a person feels at being separated from these things in life is seen as specific evidence of a more general rule: they presage imaginings of a terminal loss of them all in death. And yet in these imaginings the great irony of Tamang death is that it, too, gives rise to other rebirths; this death is not an ending, but the greatest in a many-life-long string—the proper image is, of course, of cycles—of attachments and losses.

The ultimate object is necessarily to obtain release from all attachments, including those that constitute the pain of death. Few, even those most proximately contemplating their own deaths in poetic *bomsang*, can accomplish this. For the longer run of humanity, these pains of separation are not a meditation on impermanence, but a continuing hurt. The language of *gyurba* and *warba* highlights the pain not of the dying but of the surviving. Thus, the language in which women lament the loss of their natal homes is virtually identical to that in which either women or men would sing or speak about becoming orphaned.

The pain of being left behind

To be orphaned is spoken of as an extremely poignant “pain of separation.” In the life history accounts with which I have been working, many people spoke of themselves being orphaned; many worried about leaving orphaned children behind. Indeed, the theme was so recurrent that

village friends, discussing the project with me, suggested it be called “A Tale of Orphans.” “The orphaned bird hears the crying of the world,” sang one man’s *bomsang*, “but is anyone aware when I, an orphan, too, cry?”

Of these tales, Mlangdzom’s is the most relentless: her mother died when she was an infant, so she was taken in fosterage by her father’s sister; that aunt also died, but by then her father had remarried. Although her “younger mother” (her father’s new wife) tried to be kind to her, the family’s poverty sent Mlangdzom out into indentured service in the houses of their many creditors. At fourteen, she was married into one of those houses, and there, where she had already demonstrated her energy as a worker, she bore three sons, one of whom died, before her husband married another woman more to his liking. She tells how she nearly died as a child for want of parental care, how she was not able to accumulate any property of her own, how her husband and his family are contemptuous of her and call her “a wife without even the smallest little chick,” how she has no other place to go, and, hence how “I’ll work, and after doing my work, I’ll eat. I’ll manage.”

It is typical of the complex web of lives and stories found in this community that Mlangdzom’s “younger mother” or stepmother was Tschirto’s widowed mother, who, remarrying, became Mlangdzom’s stepmother. Tschirto’s father died when Tschirto—the youngest—was about six. Her mother, Tikiri, struggled to keep her family of seven children going, but eventually she remarried and moved to live with Mlangdzom’s widowed father when Tschirto was nine or ten. Thus, the arrival of a mother for Mlangdzom meant the loss of a mother to Tschirto, who lamented, “‘Even so, just for a moment, let me live with Mother.’ I’d say to myself, ‘I’ll never know Mother’s warmth; I’ll never get to taste her.’ I was left behind when I was still so little.” Mlangdzom’s words were blunter, but Tschirto’s would amply apply to them both:

I’m a poor orphan, a ragged orphan. Others find themselves with fathers and mothers until they are old men and women. Myself, this time, I didn’t get that. Just like that, everyone keeps on being contemptuous. Even when someone else speaks with contempt, it wouldn’t do for me to leave. Whether in hardship or whether in comfort, each person has to pass the time of their own life.

Tikiri’s own words bring the tales of her two daughters full circle, since she also described herself as orphaned. Although her parents died only after she was grown, her first marriage had been in poverty and ended

in widowhood. She laments, first, the loss of her parents and the support they might have provided her:

And then, well, where was I to go, you know? There was no trail going to my own fathers' birthhome.³⁹ If I said to myself, "Go to your own fathers' birthhome," I had no father, no mother. Crying like that, I suffered, Daughter.⁴⁰ No matter where I went.

And then she described the pain of separation from her children:

All those children were way down there; their mother⁴¹ was here, and the children were still down there. After that happened, I cried. I'd think about those children and I'd cry. I'd say, "I've begun to forget," and then I'd remember those children again, and as soon as the memory would arise, I couldn't even eat. I couldn't work. I lived like that: I'd cry; I'd stay; I'd cry; I'd stay on.

Again, Tamang talk and song seem somewhat distinctive in the facility with which men identify with these womans' pains. Men, of course, could be orphaned themselves, and undoubtedly were in roughly the same numbers that women were. Boys too are left behind by their mothers' remarriages, just as their sisters are. They also lament their plight; they also lament it using the language and the vantage of not only boy-orphans, but sundered mothers as well, as can be heard in this fragment of a man's *bomsang*:

The reason⁴² my orphan's eyes cannot see is because of/
/my unendurable burden of greatest sorrow
/arising from the pain of separation
My heart-and-mind imagines 100-1000 thoughts:
it seems the pain of separation came
/from uphill and from down below.
Why was I born in this my own lifeform?
Why, oh, My Own Mother, for what reason was I born/
/in this unbearably suffering sundered lifeform?

³⁹ Meaning that there was no easy way for her to go and live there after her parents died.

⁴⁰ Referring to the author.

⁴¹ Herself.

⁴² Literally, the "trail by which"

The pain of separation and memory

There are many images of the “pain of separation” in Tamang talk and song: a woman’s separation from her parents’ house at marriage; a child’s separation from parents at death, divorce, or remarriage; or so much “tripping and tumbling” after worldly desires. All evoke a clear, if complex, chain of reflections on the nature of human existence, both women’s and men’s, and especially about the place of memory, desire, and worldly attachment. In Tamang narrative and song, those things for which one might feel the pain of separation when they are gone are *mhemba*, or “recalled to mind with desire,” that is, simultaneously to “want,” “need,” and have something “come to mind.” Foremost among these remembered desires are sensory pleasures: food; clothing; parents’, friends’, and lovers’ affection; and ultimately the remembered warmth of early childhood security.

Underlying the opposing textures of a woman’s two houses, as women represent them, is the remembered warmth of their original home. Each time a verbal stone is cast against the house into which they were married, they simultaneously savor and “remember/desire” their first home. “In the hearts-and-minds of two small children” (as in the *Sai Kholā* cited above), the memory of togetherness, of house pillars standing together, is undoubtedly stronger than the factual nature of past events and rivalries. The “taste” of a mother (in Tschirto’s phrase) clearly becomes sweeter as time passes. Indeed, it is probably the basis for one of the commonest of Tamang food-images in love songs, that of “milk-sweet love.” The Tamang song expression “love sweet love” uses a term for “sweetness” that is properly only applied to milk, the sweetest of which is mother’s milk. These images of remembered love and milk-sweet love recur in one of my favorite Tamang songs, “The popcorn song”:⁴³

Popcorn, popped, oh! Hey-ho!⁴⁴
Memories linger in my mind
of the affection we two shared;

⁴³ Again I am including the entire song here but have highlighted only the most pertinent verses.

⁴⁴ When people go off to festivals or on pilgrimage, they must take food with them. Popped corn is a particularly popular snackfood. Although popcorn is also eaten as a snack in more mundane contexts, like village workparties, it is associated in the imagery of this song with the more festive courtship songfests.

Echoes ring here in my ears
of the affection we two shared.
 Love happily chosen is sweet
 like wild red-vine berries;
 Love courteously given is gentle
 like Acacia-tree seeds.⁴⁵
 The echoes ring here in my ears.
 Oh! my very own love!
 Popcorn, popping, eating! Hey-ho!

Let the memories stay in our minds
of the affection we two shared!
Let the echoes ring in our ears
of the affection we two shared!
Remember! Listen!
 Let's enjoy what our minds would recall.
 Beer fills the drinking bowl
 the way love is gathered in our minds and hearts.
 Lo! Hey-ho! Let's make love,
 the way love is gathered by our hearts and minds.
 Beer fills the drinking bowl
 the way love is gathered in our minds and hearts.

We made love where none had been made before;
 we found love where none had been found before.
 Where will I find such a love again?
 Where will I find such kindness again?
 The mustard field on the hillside is barren,⁴⁶
 But I won't relinquish even a handful of our bygone love.
Love once made can't depart just like this;
love once found can't be lost just like this.
Let us remember!
 We, too, let us enjoy our love!

Just as my father spoke, I, too, will speak out;
 just as my mother spoke, I, too, will speak out.
 Just as my father went roving, I, too, will roam;
 just as my mother went roving, I, too, will roam.
 Just as the machete is girded on at the waistband,

⁴⁵ This metaphor is somewhat unclear. Perhaps the song is referring to the reported Tibetan women's practice of making their faces up with a powder made from the Acacia tree when going courting, but this is not, to my knowledge, Tamang practice.

⁴⁶ Metaphor uncertain.

Just as a father enjoys his sons and daughters,
 in our hearts-and-minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!⁴⁷
Let the memories linger on! milk-sweet love!
Let the echoes ring on! milk-sweet love!

In a literal sense, milk may be offered in place of beer or liquor if the latter are not available or if people have had enough alcohol to drink already (or if they do not drink alcohol). But it is surely not just the literal substitutability of milk for beer that is evoked here. One site of the earliest Tamang memories of love is at the mother's breast and in the *mhémé khor*, the "circle of a mother and her child(ren)." This circle, this mother-and-child unit, is purely affectionate: it has no jural basis for specific authority in Tamang society; yet it is, like the "uterine family" about which Margery Wolf (1972) has written, a zone of intense emotion and identification.

People use the idea of the *mhémé* conversationally to tell, for example, that a particular woman-and-her-child have gone to such-and-such a place in constructions like: [name of mother]-*mhémé* [name of place] *yarji*; [named] *mhémé* went to [named place]. It is from the mother, and these *mhémé*-units, that the Tamang idea of a maternal side to one's background, a *nghyé gyam* or "milk trail," emerges and is marked in various important rituals, especially those of death.⁴⁸ "Milk-sweet love," then, is first the love between mother and child in intimate family units.

"Milk-sweet love," however, is also bittersweet; it is inevitably left behind. Just as these Tamang women's narratives and songs worry about whether their mothers might have "forgotten" them, courtship songs fear abandonment by lovers. The sorrow of not being allowed to drink one's mother's milk stands as a powerful image of total abandonment. Like Tschirto's grievance that she never got to "taste" her mother, the "Calf's Lament" is a song about being deprived a primal opportunity for this maternal love:

La-ha-i-lo!
 Incenses please and suit the mountain-gods.

⁴⁷ A line omitted from the original recorded version was later added by assistants and other listeners as we worked on translations/meanings, to wit: "just as a mother enjoys her sons and daughters, in our hearts and minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!"

⁴⁸ *Mhémé* and the *nghyé gyam* are specifically contrasted with *phépé* ("father-and-children") and *pot gyam* or *ruigyam* ("bone trail").

Milk pleases and suits the serpent-gods.⁴⁹
 You eat cheese and even golden butter,
 but you don't give even a little bit to me.
When you didn't give me any milk,
tears rolled down from my eyes.
 After tears rolled down from my eyes,
 downstream a river came into being.

In that song, as Phurko interpreted it for me, a selfish herder drank up all a calf's mother's milk, so that, (in the calf's voice) "when you didn't give me any milk, tears rolled down from my eyes." So many tears, in fact, that the Marsyandi ("Butter Churn") river came into being. According to Phurko,

He [the herder] drank the milk in one gulp. It's said he'd drink the milk in one gulp; it's said he wouldn't give the poor calf even the tiniest little bit. When that happened, the calf sang this song that way, they say. It was someone else's mother's milk, though, wasn't it!? He should have given it at least a little bit.⁵⁰ Doesn't it have to eat, too? After all, it was someone else's mother's milk! A little . . . it has to eat just a little bit, doesn't it? But he would drink every last bit, he would! That's what they say he'd do. So when he was doing like that, just after the calf sang its song, the Marsyandi River sprang up, in the beginning then, in the time of the gods, from the calf's tears, they say.

Singing gender in the balance

Comparing the use of same- and cross-sex imagery in women's and men's everyday speech and song compositions invites us not only to consider how the sexes construct and engender their worlds, but also to ponder the relation between verbal genres and the negotiation of realities.

Whereas the prose of the life history materials with which I have been working arises in specific interpersonal exchanges that are presumptively intimate and dialogic, Tamang song is public and shared in a very different way. The former can only be produced for and circulated among familiars, an individual discourse on events and people largely

⁴⁹ Incense is the proper offering for ("pleases and suits") the category of divinity known as *lha* ("gods"); milk is appropriate to the divinities of the lakes and underground sources of water, the *lu*, who are often glossed with reference to Hindu *naga* or serpent-divinities.

⁵⁰ In the usual herding practice, half the milk goes to the calf and half to the herder.

known to the hearers; it provides a personalized perspective, interpretation, and emphasis. The latter can be produced—and here the word “performed” becomes more appropriate—for a larger public; it circulates, affirms, and creates shared images. Although each sweeps into the other, life stories are traced at the personal end of the Tamang oral pendulum, songs at the cultural. In the tellings reproduced here, both forms were self-consciously and imaginatively deployed: but the dialogic life tales were generated in and of the personal moment; the momentum of song carries its signification farther and beyond the individual.

Songs, in this context, provide a way for tellers to situate their personally garnered words in a more palatial symbolic edifice. Invoking songs in the *sotto voce* of personal storytelling embeds self in culture, or at least a contingently produced self in a partially represented cultural frame. It also, then, provides a means for us, as reader-hearers, to understand how person and culture might be linked—a venerable objective in life history work. In particular, it lets us look at some special questions about woman-persons and cultural constructions.

Several logical possibilities offer themselves, depending upon the relations of sex, authorship, and gender. Women (as persons) might also share distinctively female cultural constructions, arising within and informing their world as they know it and creating both separate stories and songs.⁵¹ Under such circumstances, we would expect people who were men to experience, interpret, and represent a different male reality—parallel, opposed, ascendant, or impoverished. Such divergently engendered cultures would presumably coincide with sharply sexually dichotomous societies. Under some circumstances, as the cultural presentation of one sex or the other became more widely ramifying—as it resonated with, say, nationalist, militarist, colonial, or international forces—the other might well become submerged; expressions of female culture would then, like Gold’s Rajasthani women’s songs (1997) or Trawick’s work on Tamil women’s song (1986), sound discordant with a dominant public culture that is male in origin and privilege.

Neither of these appears to be the case among Tamang. Tamang women and men certainly do not represent the world identically, nor do they live in it in the same ways. Indeed, the deep and definite signs of their different perspectives constitute the symbols of Tamang gender. The future may well bring increased Hindu caste hegemony into the region and, along with it, increasingly segregated and hierarchical gender. But for the

⁵¹ Such as appear to be the case in Ardener’s now-classic *liengu* spirits (1972) and some of Harrison’s more recent Quechua songs (1989).

moment of these stories and songs, the different personal vistas of men and women did not culminate in noncommunicable (sub)cultures.

Instead, Tamang women and men are quintessentially *ngyen brelba*—“marriageable kin exchanging”⁵²—not just because they become husband and wife, but more importantly because they are both members of households, lineages, and localities that exchange in cross-cousin marriage. Cross-cousin marriage for Tamang means that brothers and sisters become parents-in-law to each other’s children, children who find spouses “along the trail” of one parent or the other. The maleness of men and women comes from their identification as sons and daughters of a patriline and locale, with the “bone trail” of their fathers along which there can be none but incestuous traffic in marriage. Femaleness is culturally possible for both women and men when they identify with the “milk trail” of their mothers, mothers’ brothers, and all those with whom marriage-partners can be exchanged.

Likewise, songs are not the provenance of one sex or the other. Both women and men were noted song specialists in Stupahill.⁵³ Some songs were circumscribed by ritual constraints, such as the song for beer and fertility (March 1987), but to my knowledge none were thought of as belonging to women or to men alone. None were known, attributed to, or could be sung by only one sex, even though many were sung, quite literally, between the sexes in the exuberant song exchanges of Tamang festivals and courtship. But, even in these most imaginatively erotic songs, the images, the point of view, and the cultural frame they provided was explicitly accessible to both sexes. Sometimes the symmetry was striking, as in the lines from the dancing song cited above:

Just as my father spoke, I, too, will speak out;

⁵² Literally *ngyen*, “marriage(able)-partners,” “a married couple,” “affinal kin,” and *brelba*, “to exchange with.” Note some peculiar links to modern Tibetan, especially its orthography: the Tibetan *gnyen*, pronounced as in Tamang, is given (Goldstein 1984:457) as “relative, kinsman; friend” and *brelba* also translates (804) as “to have connections/relations/links, to associate with” but is pronounced (with the retroflex “T”) as “Teba.” In the absence of many sources on contemporary Tamang, I sometimes found myself curiously perusing Tibetan dictionaries and was repeatedly startled to find conventional Tibetan orthography a more accurate representation of Tamang than Tibetan pronunciation.

⁵³ With the possible exception of the *gurpa*, singer-chanters in the lamaic textual tradition, who came to Stupahill from a nearby community when their expertise was required.

just as my mother spoke, I, too, will speak out.
 Just as my father went roving, I, too, will roam;
 just as my mother went roving, I, too, will roam.
 Just as the machete is girded on at the waistband,
 just as a father enjoys his sons and daughters,
 in our hearts and minds, we will seem to have enjoyed!⁵⁴
 Let the memories linger on! milk-sweet love!
 Let the echoes ring on! milk-sweet love!

Even songs about birth, orphanhood, mother-love, and child-loss were cast in terms readily invoked by both sexes—of calves and herders, budding larvae, and orphaned birds. Indeed, the idea that men and women should work to understand one another was at times the very theme of song itself, as in the lines from Setar's *bomsang*:

If a beloved man is on one side of the river,
 /hill, or mountain,
 and if a woman is on the other,
 their affection, their love, is called
 /great, ancient, and most senior, if,
 after tucking flowers in their hair,
each comes halfway.

The inevitable course of human life, as Tamang know it, means that everyone will lose the emotional and interpersonal unity they desire—remember of their earliest days. Some will lose this integral sense of harmonious well-being by being orphaned; more, by being left behind with a mother's remarriage; most, eventually, by surviving their parents' deaths. These are individually specific memory-desires; marriage is the more conceptually ubiquitous experience. Although marriage is experienced as rupture only by women, and the suffering women endure is imaginatively a distinctive female pain, the idea of their pain of separation is recognizable by both men and women.

The overriding theoretical conclusions of these Tamang images are essential, but simple: sex is not gender, and all expressions of difference are not conflictual. As sexed individuals engaged in securing their worlds, women and men may contest each other's authority and envy each other's comforts. In contemporary Nepal, Tamang authorities are increasingly men, but their authority is precarious and women's counter-arguments continue to be both vociferous and effective. But the collective

⁵⁴ Again, assistants and later listeners added a line here because they felt it had been omitted in the original singing: (to wit) "just as a mother enjoys her sons and daughters...."

constructions of dialogue and song work to negotiate shared spaces. Gender, in these constructions, takes statements about sex-specific experience as much to call to mind the shared human embeddedness in a cycle of painful rebirths as to dispute whose pain is greater, women's or men's.

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Negotiated Solidarities: Gendered Representations of Disruption and Desire in North Indian Oral Traditions and Popular Culture

Gloria Goodwin Raheja

Introduction¹

Kalī kī rītī yahī, “this custom of a degenerate age”: thus did North Indian women describe, in a song written down in 1910, the plight of women who must move from natal place to conjugal place to be controlled there by their husband’s kin.² And thus do rural women still today critique the ideology of patrilineal kinship that circumscribes their lives, as a “custom” of the age and not as an invariant consequence of the nature of women and men.

That women’s oral traditions and personal narratives often speak critically of the solidarities of patrilineal kinship is by now a fairly commonplace observation in anthropological and folklore literature.³ In

¹ The research in northern India upon which this paper is based was carried out in 1977-79, 1988, and 1990, with support from the Social Science Research Council, the American Institute of Indian Studies, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and a McKnight-Land Grant Professorship from the University of Minnesota. I am grateful to the other contributors to this volume and to Frédérique Marglin for their suggestions, and to John M. Ingham for helpful readings of this paper and of much of what I have written over the past eight years. Audiences at the University of Minnesota, the University of Washington, and the University of Chicago heard earlier and quite different versions of this paper; I thank members of those audiences for their comments and questions.

² The song from which the quoted line is taken was sung by a Brahman woman in Farrukhabad district. William Crooke published the Hindi text and a translation in 1910 (338).

³ See especially Abu-Lughod 1986, 1993; Briggs 1992; March 1984; Narayan 1986; Narayana Rao 1991; Oldenburg 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994; Seremetakis 1991; Wolf 1972.

this essay I want to ask a further set of questions about some of the more complicated issues concerning kinship, gender, folklore, and resistance. If women's songs and stories and memories are often critical of what Ranajit Guha (1987) has termed "the rounded unitary world of kinship," what are the alternative solidarities they propose? Can we say, as Guha seems to suggest, that resistance can only be located in a struggle in which a solidarity of women opposes itself to a kinship solidarity upheld by men? Or are there in fact multiple and shifting and negotiated and sometimes ambiguous solidarities that women may propose as they encounter that seemingly rounded unitary world? In order to tell a more complicated and ethnographically nuanced story of the ambiguities of resistance and of women's ability to deploy different strategies of critique in different kinds of situations, I want to ask several questions about the songs that are sung by women and by men in rural north India. How for example do women's songs construe disruptions in kinship solidarities? What are the alternative solidarities they set against the solidarities valorized in the official rhetorics of patrilineal kinship? How do women understand the desires that threaten to undermine those official rhetorics? And how do the perspectives on disruption and desire in women's oral traditions differ from those in the songs and stories performed by men for male audiences?

To speak of "women's perspectives" on kinship solidarities is not an easy or straightforward task. What does it mean to say that women's oral traditions are often critical of prevailing ideologies of kinship and gender? As I have written elsewhere, women's songs are sung not in a unified "women's voice" but in the different and sometimes contradictory voices of sisters, daughters, and wives (Raheja 1994, 1995; Raheja and Gold 1994). As Sarah Lamb points out in this volume, women speaking as older mothers have distinct perspectives on kinship relations and the duties of kinsmen to one another. As Margaret Trawick has suggested (1986, 1991), women in different caste and class positions might sing differently of kinship relations, and of ritual values like auspiciousness and hierarchy. And as Kirin Narayan tells us in this volume, individual women have their own repertoires and their own interpretations of songs and song performances. Speaking of a unified female voice is problematic for all of these reasons. Is it possible then to describe women's resistance to the practices, the constraints, and the ideologies of patrilineal kinship simply in terms of a female solidarity that might be opposed to the solidarities defined by men?

To speak of the ways that women's speech critiques prevailing kinship ideologies is indeed to speak somehow of forms of power and varieties of resistance. In South Asian studies, the most effective theorization of resistance has come from the work of the Subaltern Studies

collective. Although they have paid some attention to popular song, proverbs, and other cultural forms through which critiques are spoken (e.g., Arnold 1984, Guha 1983, Hardiman 1984), they have often failed, as Ortner points out (1995:180-81), to analyze these forms as complex cultural productions, as they frequently ignore the texts or relegate extracts of them to appendices. Partly because of this inattention to both the texts and the situations and the ambiguities of their production, assumptions concerning the homogeneity of peasant consciousness, religiosity, and custom sometimes remain unquestioned.⁴ While Hardiman (1992) acknowledges that there is a “tension” between the idea of community-based peasant solidarities on the one hand and caste, class, and gender struggles within it on the other, and while much of his own work does indeed demonstrate the existence of tensions within particular caste communities (e.g., 1984), representations of the politics of folklore in the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars continue to focus primarily on resistance to those outside the immediate peasant community and to pay far less attention to the challenges to “custom” that originate within, or to an ethnographic interpretation of the words that peasants speak.

So far, for example, only one essay in the Subaltern Studies series has substantively focused upon the question of gendered subaltern perspectives. In “Chandra’s Death” (1987), Ranajit Guha incisively illuminates an “untamed fragment” of history, an archival document from 1849 containing the depositions made in the course of an official investigation of an abortion that led to the death of Chandra, a low caste Bengali woman. The depositions were made by three defendants in the case, Chandra’s sister Brinda, her mother Bhagaboti Chashini, and Kalicharan Bagdi, an herbalist who provided medicines to effect the abortion. The events that led to the death of Chandra had been set into motion when Magaram Chasha, Chandra’s deceased husband’s sister’s husband, went to the village of Chandra’s mother and announced that he had been involved in an illicit relationship with Chandra, as a result of which she became pregnant. He demanded that they arrange for an abortion, failing which he would “put her into *bhek*,” that is, force her into a life of Vaisnavite renunciation in which she would effectively remain an outcast, isolated from her family and community.

⁴ David Arnold’s essay (1984) on peasant “customary” responses to the Madras famine of 1876-78 is one of the clearest examples of this tendency to homogenize and reify “tradition.” I have elsewhere discussed Arnold’s views of famine in peasant consciousness at greater length (Raheja n.d.). Gupta 1985 also provides an effective critique of some of the structuralist assumptions of the Subaltern Studies project.

Guha explicates these depositions to illustrate the degree to which the disciplinary thrust of the colonial government had penetrated into rural society by the mid-nineteenth century, but, more importantly, to construct a commentary on gender and kinship relations in rural nineteenth-century Bengal. In the face of the crisis precipitated by Magaram's threat, the herbs for Chandra's abortion were obtained through the combined efforts of a number of kin, particularly Brinda, Bhagaboti Chashani, Bhagaboti's sister's daughter, and her son's father-in-law. Chandra's mother-in-law and Magaram himself contributed toward the payment for the drug. When Chandra died as a result of consuming the herbal paste, she was buried by her brother Gayaram, his wife's brother, and her own mother's brother. In examining the cohesion of this kinship network that prompted mobilization of a web of relationships in the face of crisis, Guha suggests that two sorts of solidarities were activated following Magaram's ultimatum. The first was a solidarity brought about through fear of the shame and the caste sanctions that would follow a discovery of Chandra's sexual transgression, a solidarity rooted, according to Guha, in patriarchy and male dominance. A different and contradictory solidarity, of empathy rather than fear, was evinced by the women who came to Chandra's aid in arranging for the abortion. The desire of the men to terminate the pregnancy was motivated, Guha argues, by "a patriarchal society's concern to protect itself from the consequences of female sexual transgression" (1987:154). He suggests that the decision taken by the women, on the other hand, was "an act of resistance against a patriarchal tradition that was about to claim yet another woman as its victim; and their resistance took that characteristic form often adopted by the oppressed to subvert the designs of their oppressors in the guise of conforming to them" (162). I quote Guha at some length on the nature of these divergent solidarities (164-65):

To explain this resistance merely in terms of the obligations of kin and *kutum* is to ignore what is distinctive about it and sets it apart from kinship solidarity. It is a fundamental condition of such solidarity that the relation between the genders within the group, whatever its structure, should remain cohesive and non-antagonistic. For without such cohesion there can be no reproduction of species, hence no kinship. But that relation turns antagonistic whenever a termination of pregnancy is enforced by patriarchy. On such occasions man's authority stands so clearly opposed to woman's interest that no subterfuge, theological or sociological, can hide the truth of their relationship as one of dominance and subordination. No experience, other than that of rape, elucidates sexual politics more forcefully for the woman. Betrayed and bleeding, she sees a core of coercion in what she believed was mutual consent and an abstract masculinity in the person she

thought was her lover. . . .

It is this knowledge of man's bad faith that makes woman wiser about the limits of a solidarity that pretends to be neutral to gender. The rounded, unitary world of kinship can never be the same for her again. Soiled and humiliated, she has recourse to an *alternative solidarity*—a solidarity of women. Not an “open revolt” armed with trumpet and banner, it is still a visible and loud enough protest in a society where initiative and voice are given to man alone. For when a victim, however timid, comes to regard herself as an object of injustice, she already steps into the role of a critic of the system that victimizes her. And any action that follows from that critique contains the elements of a practice of resistance.

Guha's reading of this fragmentary archival record of Chandra's pregnancy and death is a brilliant one, a compelling commentary on a “patriarchal” discourse on sexuality in which Magaram, the male lover, escapes opprobrium, while Chandra, the woman, must face a forcibly imposed choice between abortion and *bhek*.

Yet several critical issues may be raised concerning this positing of a patriarchal kinship solidarity on the one hand and a solidarity of women on the other. First, although the analysis highlights for us the possibility that women may often come to resist cultural discourses of gender and sexuality, Guha, in speaking of “woman's interest,” “woman's consciousness” and a solidarity of women, seems to assume the existence of an invariant homogeneous category, “woman,” that exists prior to and outside of the system of kinship relationships. As Chandra Mohanty has pointed out (1984:339-42), however, women cannot be assumed to be undifferentiated subjects prior to their entry into kinship systems; women may in many ways resist the cultural discourses associated with these systems, but they are nonetheless produced as sisters, wives, and mothers within these relations, and women's perspectives on kinship systems may shift in relation to these varied positionings.⁵ Thus, while women do interrogate discourses on kinship and gender, women's perspectives may not coalesce into a closed and unified totality.⁶

Second, without denying the possibility that a solidarity among

⁵ I provide numerous examples of such shifting perspectives in Raheja and Gold 1994.

⁶ See Das 1989 and O'Hanlon 1988 for similar caveats concerning the tendency of the Subaltern scholars to posit a link between a subaltern perspective and concrete and invariable categories of persons, and for observations on the possible disunity and heterogeneity of subaltern subjectivity.

women may be forged in particular contexts of everyday life, it is problematic to speak of women's solidarity as the only alternative to "patriarchal" solidarity. Might women's strategies of resistance include not only the forging of a solidarity among women, but also the stressing of conjugality in the face of a kinship ideology that says that a wife's intimacy with her husband must be contained lest it pose a threat to the solidarity of the men of the husband's patriline?⁷ Or, in other situations, women's resistance may take the form of an insistence on the importance of the brother-sister relationship, since a brother may sometimes be expected to keep his sister's interests at heart, even if this means opposing the interests of her husband and his male kin. And might not women exhibit an ironic awareness of the tensions between these two strategies? It may thus be less appropriate to think of men's interests opposing women's interests in rural North India than to think in a somewhat more nuanced fashion of varying perspectives on kinship ties, kinship solidarities, and male-female relationships that may be strategically invoked in different contexts both by women and by men. Men, as well as women, may often see official kinship conventions as oppressive, and might privately subvert them while publicly conforming to them (Raheja 1994:64-66). There is not, then, one avenue of resistance to the rounded unitary world of patrilineal kinship, but many shifting and intersecting solidarities that run counter to it. The words of women's songs that I heard in rural North India speak eloquently of those negotiated solidarities and of varied struggles against a wholeness that is often achieved only at their expense.

If a solidarity of women is not the only alternative to a solidarity of male kinsmen, can we say with Guha that it is an awareness of "man's bad faith" that prompts a woman to see the limits of the solidarity that pretends to be neutral to gender? We could ask this question another way. Are women's critiques directed towards the individual intentions of their kinsmen and man's bad faith, or towards the contradictions in the kinship system they confront? Rosalind O'Hanlon (1994) has raised some analogous questions in her analyses of an 1882 commentary on gender relations entitled *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, written by Tarabai Shinde, a woman from a small provincial town in Maharashtra. The pamphlet is a critique of nineteenth-century debates about "women's nature," female sexuality, and widow remarriage. From her reading of the

⁷ Ashis Nandy (1990:42-43) has suggested that struggles to redefine women's identity in the West have involved a defiance of the limits imposed by conjugality, while in India such a struggle may necessitate an underscoring of conjugality, in opposition to the prevailing valuation of relationships among men.

text, O'Hanlon argues that while some aspects of Tarabai's critique can be counted as resistance, the gesture is ultimately flawed, because in her view Tarabai takes negative characterizations of female nature, inverts them, and says that they are really applicable to men. O'Hanlon writes that Tarabai "saw women's sufferings in general as the result of men's deliberate viciousness rather than as a product of complex structures of power that transcend individual intention" (1991:102).

Indian women's everyday resistance more generally, according to O'Hanlon, is often hampered by these "essentializing" tendencies she claims to see in the writings of Tarabai Shinde and also in the social practices of the courtesans of Lucknow, in whose songs and skits Veena Oldenburg (1991) has discerned a critical stance towards a kinship ideology the courtesans find oppressive, and in whose words and everyday lives she finds a struggle for material needs as well as a struggle against patriarchal values. But from O'Hanlon's point of view, an underlying essentialism in such critiques serves to reproduce rather than undermine patriarchal ideology.

As I consider the words spoken by women I know in rural North India, I want to question some of the assumptions made by Guha and by O'Hanlon concerning women's resistance to kinship and gender ideologies. In contrast to the picture painted by Guha, women's songs from the villages of Pahansu and Hathchoya are diverse and heterogeneous; women do not necessarily speak in a single "female" voice when they challenge prevailing North Indian assumptions about women, kinship, and sexuality, and the alternative solidarities they posit are far more various and more complicated than those he envisions. In contrast to the picture painted by O'Hanlon, these same women's songs challenge essentializing depictions of female nature not by reversing them and essentializing male nature, but by critiquing, sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly, the very structures of kinship and power that oppress women and sometimes men as well, and by discerning that the world of kinship is not rounded and unitary, but always and inherently liable to fracture and to contradiction.⁸

There are many ways of approaching these complex issues, and there are no final and definitive answers to the questions I have posed. We may

⁸ As part of her argument, O'Hanlon rightly makes the point that "there are no neutral spaces from which women could defy and hold themselves apart from Indian patriarchy" (1991:104) and she points out some of the significant contradictions in Shinde's critique of gender relations in nineteenth-century India. I do not wish to dispute her emphasis on the power of dominant gender ideologies to frame women's discourse in certain ways, but I do wish to call attention to the fact that all women's resistance to such ideologies does not rely on an essentializing strategy that serves only to reproduce patriarchal categories.

begin, however, to think about these theoretical dilemmas by listening closely to women's words, and paying close attention to the ethnographic contexts in which they may be spoken.⁹ I focus here on songs performed by groups of women primarily on the occasions of births, marriages, and calendrical festivals in the western Uttar Pradesh villages of Pahansu and Hathchoya.¹⁰ These songs articulate powerful critiques of pervasive North Indian ideologies of gender and kinship solidarities. They do so, however, not from a single female perspective, but from the differently situated perspectives of sisters and daughters on the one hand and wives and daughters-in-law on the other; they envision not the single kind of valued solidarity premised in the dominant norms of patrilineal kinship or a unitary female solidarity, but constantly negotiated solidarities among shifting categories of kin, solidarities that may be selectively and intentionally invoked by women in their everyday lives when the requirements of patrilineal ideology are experienced as oppressive. And finally, as I compare the representations of disruption in kinship solidarities found in men's and women's oral traditions, I suggest that men's oral traditions do indeed constantly resort to essentializing strategies, as they describe fractured solidarities as stemming from the dangerously disruptive and often

⁹ I have elsewhere discussed the ways that the presence of the ethnographer, senior village women, and high caste men may call forth different strategies of resistance or talk of "tradition" on the part of Hathchoya women (Raheja 1994:72-74).

¹⁰ I recorded these songs in Pahansu (Saharanpur District) in 1977-79 and 1988, and in Hathchoya (about twenty miles away in Muzaffarnagar District) in 1990. Women's song repertoires changed throughout this time, for many reasons. A few of the song texts I recorded in 1988, for example, are very similar to those found in two pamphlets of Hindi songs collected in Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar villages by a teacher at a local college (Sharma 1983, 1984). A teacher from that college had given me a copy of those pamphlets, and I had them with me in Pahansu in 1988. The young literate women I knew there pored over those printed texts, and they were eager to tell me which ones were part of their own repertoires, which ones they had heard in the village, which ones they had heard during visits to other villages, and which ones would never be sung by women of their own community. In some cases, they found new songs they liked and approved of, and insisted on performing them for me and "filling up" my tape recorder with them. I could see from this experience that women actively sought to enlarge their repertoires, although they had quite definite ideas about what kinds of songs they thought appropriate or wanted to sing. Other songs I have recorded incorporate lines from Hindi film songs and melodies borrowed from them. (The impact of film songs has increased since the simultaneous arrival in Pahansu of electricity, television, and rented VCRs in 1987). New songs on new themes constantly appear, as they always have, as women's lives and experiences change (Raheja and Gold 1994:187-93; Gold 1995). I have not tried, in this essay, to capture much of that sense of transformation through time.

uncontrollable “nature of women” (*triyā charitra*).

Women’s Perspectives on Kinship Solidarities, Conflict, and Desire

I have spent a total of several years talking with men and women in Pahansu and Hathchoya. Because I was working for much of this time on questions of caste and landed dominance, many of those conversations took place in Gujar households, since Gujars are in this region one of the principal landed castes. In Pahansu, they comprise a bit more than one-half of the total population, but they hold nearly all of the land; in Hathchoya, they have slightly less of a monopoly on landholding, but there too their dominance is decisive. Both are large multi-caste villages of several thousand people and about fifteen castes.

Although most of what I have to say about gender and oral traditions derives from the knowledge that Gujar women shared with me, their perspectives on kinship relations are in many respects like those of women of other castes. For most women in rural northern India, for example, a central fact of women’s experience is the movement from natal village to conjugal village at marriage. Events of everyday life, feelings, crises, rivalries, loyalties, rituals, givings and receivings, work, and love are all constantly discussed and commented upon in relation to women’s positions in *pīthar* and *sasurāl*, natal village and conjugal village, and in relation to their vastly different identities as sister and daughter in one village and wife and daughter-in-law in another.

Although women of many different castes may understand this movement from natal kin to conjugal kin as central to their experience, their perspectives on this movement are not entirely uniform. The songs I heard in Pahansu and Hathchoya that take up a sister’s perspective adopt an ironic view of the fact that while women are enjoined upon marriage to become “one’s own” (*apnī*) to their husband’s family and “other” (*parāī*) to their natal kin, they nonetheless expect that their relationship with their natal kin (and their brothers in particular) will be close and enduring. And women speaking as wives subversively reiterate the theme that the husband-wife relationship should be valued over and above the husband’s ties to his own natal kin, and above the solidarity of the “joint family.” We can read both perspectives as being equally critical of some of the central assumptions of patrilineal kinship. Songs sung from the point of view of the sister challenge patrilineal ideals and their requirement that women distance themselves from brothers who, from the sister’s perspective, are “born of the same mother” and thus important to her. Songs sung from the point of view of wives challenge patrilineal ideals by repudiating their

requirement that intimacy with the husband should be controlled so that his ties to his own patrilineal kin take precedence, and its requirement of wifely obedience to the husband's senior kin. Thus, rather than a uniform "female subaltern voice" here, we find that women speaking as sisters may devalue the marital bond, and women speaking as wives may decry their husbands' attachment to their sisters and insist on the primacy of the conjugal tie over all other solidarities. While of course it is the particularities of North Indian kinship ideology that have produced this distinction, these divergent voices are not merely echoes of male authority. Sisters and wives provide contradictory readings of kinship practices, yet both resist that authority and seek to undermine some of the most oppressive conventions of its ideology.

Women Speak As Sisters

When women speak as sisters, they speak most often of being sent away from their natal kin when they marry. They speak of the importance of the enduring tie to brothers, and of the danger that a brother may forget them and pay greater attention to the needs of his wife. And they speak ironically and critically of a central tenet of North Indian kinship that decrees that the woman becomes "other" and "alien" (*parāī*) to her natal kin upon her marriage, even though she is "born of the same mother" (*māñ jāī*) as her brothers. This official representation of the transformation that women are said to undergo at marriage has important ritual significances,¹¹ and it is also significant in women's everyday lives. Men often complain, for example, that if wives maintain close ties with their brothers, the husbands' authority over them will be diminished, since women will be able to rely on the brothers when disputes arise in the *sasurāl*; men say that there will be too much "interference" in their ability to control women if that were to happen.¹² But women's songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya resist this effort to circumscribe a woman's solidarities and the advantages they may provide.

The following three songs from Pahansu are sung at weddings, as the bride is taken out of her natal home just after her marriage in the company of her husband and his kinsmen, to begin the journey to her conjugal place. The first "song of the bride's departure" (*bidāī gīt*) ironically juxtaposes the

¹¹ See for example Inden and Nicholas 1977 and Trautmann 1981.

¹² Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon 1989:34-36. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see my discussion in Raheja and Gold 1994:106-7.

two identities of the departing daughter: she has become “alien” and “foreign” (*parāī*) to her natal kin, but she remains nonetheless a sister “born from one mother” (*māñ jāī*). The rhyming of the two phrases *parāī re* and *māñ jāī re* that occurs in many *bidāī* songs heightens the ironic effect; the sounds are similar, but the identities and the solidarities they describe are so very different:¹³

Song of the Bride’s Departure 1

bābul kā ghar chhor lādī
ho gāī āj parāī re
bābā rovai dādī rovai
bare dukhon se pālī hai
bhāīyā kā man bhar bhar āvai
kahāñ chali māñ jāī re.

Leave the house of your father, dear girl,
 today you’ve become *parāī*.
 Your grandfather cries, your grandmother cries,
 they’ve taken such trouble to raise you.
 Your brother’s heart now overflows,
 as he asks where his sister, born from one mother, has gone.

The second song of departure implores the father over and over again to listen to the daughter’s complaints about the differences in the way sons and daughters are treated, and to her descriptions of the sorrow experienced by a young woman as she leaves her friends behind and is forced to fly “wherever we’re made to take wing,” to a distant alien place:

Song of the Bride’s Departure 2

kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
bhāīyā ko diye bābul mahal do mahale
hamko diyā pardes re sun bābul mhāre.

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
 You’ve given my brother, my father, a two-storied house,
 listen, father, you’ve given me only a foreign land.

kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.

¹³ The *re* that occurs at the end of these phrases is a vocative particle.

*tāroñ bharī mainne guṛiyāñ jo chhoṛī
chhorā sahelioñ kā sāth re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
I've had to leave my fancy dolls,
listen, father, I've had to leave my friends.

*kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
ham to bābul āngan kī chiriyāñ
jidhar uṛāo uṛ jāeñ re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
We are birds in the courtyard, father,
listen, father, wherever we're made to take wing, there we have to fly.

*kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
mahaloñ tale se ḍolī jo nikalī
biran ne khāī pachhar re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
When my palanquin left the house,
listen, my father, my brother was thrown down with sorrow.

A *bannī kā gīt*, a “song of the young bride” performed by the bride’s kinswomen at the rituals preceding the actual wedding rite, captures in the words of the girl’s natal kin the sense of an alien kinship solidarity to which the bride may not be welcomed.

Song of the young bride

*lādo mat kar soch man meñ
sajan kā ghar jānā hogā.
vahāñ dādī na bābā hongē, des parāyā hogā,
sab apnī-apnī kahenge, terī na koī sunegā,
nainoñ se nīr bahegā, āñchal se ponchhnā hogā.*

Dear one, don't think so much about it,
you have to go to your husband's house.
Your grandmother and grandfather won't be there, the land will be alien.
Everyone there will say “mine, mine,” no one there will say “yours.”
Tears will flow from your eyes there, you'll wipe them with the end of your wrap.

Because in India kinship relationships are so frequently talked about in terms of the gift-giving and receiving appropriate to them, women's songs often express these ironies in relation to a perceived tension between a

man's obligations to give generously to his sisters on the one hand, and his wife's expectation that the marital bond will be more important to him on the other. Many songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya speak ironically of women's hopes that a brother will continue to support his sister by supplying her with gifts in the husband's place on the one hand, and of the ambivalence a brother and his wife may feel when they are called upon to give generously.¹⁴ Songs sung at the time that the "mother's brothers' gifts" (*bhāt*) are given, just before the wedding of a sister's child, speak most plaintively of these contradictions.

Just after a sister's child's marriage is arranged, she usually makes a trip to her natal home for *bhāt nautan*, "the invitation for the giving of *bhāt*," to inform her brothers of the impending marriage and to tell them the gifts that she expects to receive. She takes a small dish of unrefined sugar as a solicitary gift, and when she ceremonially gives it to her brother, her brothers' wives and other women in her own natal place sing a "song for the *bhāt* invitation," which speaks of a wife's refusal to give to her husband's sister.

Song for the *Bhāt* Invitation

bhāt nautan ko chalī lālī.

The husband's sister comes for the *bhāt* invitation.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe kapṛā rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some cloth,

bajājī kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with a cloth-seller, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe sonā rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some gold,

sunāroṅ kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with the goldsmiths, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe bartan rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some pots,

ṭhaṭheroṅ kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with the tinkers, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

In this song, the conflicting perspectives on gifts to sisters become poignantly clear. The women who have married into the sister's natal home express contempt for their husband's sister who comes to ask for gifts. The possibility that her brothers themselves may take up a similar attitude towards her is suggested in songs that are sung when the *bhāt* is about to arrive at the sister's conjugal house. Women then gather just inside the doorway and sing as the brother arrives and as he gives the gifts to his

¹⁴ These contrary perspectives on gift-giving are examined at length in Raheja 1995.

sister, just at the threshold of the house. The tension between the sister and her brother's wife is prominent in all of the *bhāt* songs I recorded in Pahansu, songs that are always sung from the vantage point of the sister:¹⁵

Song of the Mother's Brothers' Gifts 1

*aṅganā bahār āyī rī
ki savere uṭh āvaiṅ bhāṭiye.*

The courtyard is filled with delight,
tomorrow morning the *bhāt* givers will
come.

*merā māthā pharak rahā rī
ki ṭīkā jhumar lavaiṅ mere bhāṭiye*

My forehead is throbbing,
in hopes that my *bhāt* givers will bring
forehead ornaments.

*merā man yūṅ kah rahā rī
ki thossā nā dikhavaiṅ mere
bhāṭiye*

My mind is saying this:
don't show your thumb in refusal, my
bhāt givers.¹⁶

Further stanzas in this song mention other parts of the sister's body for which she expects her brothers to provide ornaments.

In another *bhāt* song the woman's fear proves to be warranted, as the brother himself replies to his sister. In the dialogue portrayed in the song, the brother refuses each of his sister's demands:

Song of the Mother's Brothers' Gifts 2

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab bartan lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo chammachiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of cooking pots,
don't bring me one little spoon.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā maiṅ sab sab bartan bhūlā
mere yād rahī ek chammachiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of cooking pots,
I remembered one little spoon.

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of another particularly poignant *bhāt* song, see Raheja and Gold 1994:93-97.

¹⁶ Holding up a thumb is a defiant gesture of refusal in northern India.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab sab gahane lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo aranya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of ornaments,
don't bring me a worthless trifle.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab sab gahane bhūlā
mere yād rahi ek aranya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of ornaments,
I remembered a worthless trifle.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab sab kapare lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo ghāghariyā.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of cloth,
don't bring me just one skirt.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab sab kapare bhūlā
mere yād rahī ek ghāghariyā.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of cloth,
I remembered just one skirt.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab bhāt bhatīje lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo bhāvajiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring all my brothers and nephews,
don't bring one brother's wife.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab bhāt bhatīje bhūlā
mere yād rahī terī bhāvajiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot all the brothers and nephews,
I remembered your brother's wife.

In this *bhāt* song, the brother claims that he has forgotten to bring the many

gifts that the sister demands. He forgets to bring the ornaments she expects, and he brings only an *aranya*, a worthless piece of jewelry that no one will appreciate. And most importantly, he forgets to bring his sister's other brothers and her brothers' sons, all of whom would be expected to come forward at the *bhāt* ceremony and present their sister with gifts. He remembers, though, to bring his own wife, whose voice we heard in the the song of the *bhāt* invitation, refusing to give the cloth and pots and jewelry to her husband's sister. The verses of this song are a catalog of unwanted and disparaged things, and the brother's wife is the last on the list. The sister sees that as she is sent away from her natal place, another woman comes who may take her place in her brother's affections, and the brother may increasingly come to regard her as *parāt* rather than as *mān jāī*. The source of the differing expectations held by the sister and the brother are attributed to the exigencies of North Indian kinship, to the custom that requires that women be sent from their natal place to a distant "foreign land": *kalī kī rītī yahī*, "this custom of a degenerate age."

What is evident in these songs is an ironic awareness of the contradictory identities of married women in North India. In juxtaposing these contrary images of one who is both *parāt* and *mān jāī*, women in North India comment critically upon the construction of female identities in patrilineal kinship, and attribute the tensions in their relationships to the contradictory expectations found therein, and to the fact that a brother may come to believe too strongly in the patrilineal ideology that stresses a woman's alienation from her natal kin.

Women Speak As Wives

In songs sung from the point of view of wives, patrilineality and the solidarities it entails are rooted in morally problematic assumptions about the value of the marriage bond in comparison to the husband's patrilineal kinship ties and about the nature of female sexuality and the threats this bond poses to those relationships among the husband's natal kin. Women clearly see that they are disadvantaged as they move from natal place to conjugal place, chiefly because they make the move alone, leaving their families and their friends behind. Furthermore, when they come to the *sasurāl*, they find that intimacy with the husband is to be limited so that a close bond between husband and wife will not come to threaten the solidarity of the men of the husband's patriline. This latter problem could develop in two ways. First, senior kinsmen may feel that if an overly close bond develops between husband and wife, the husband might shield her

from their demands. Second, it is widely feared that if such a close conjugal bond exists, the wife might be able to convince her husband to separate from the joint family or cause rifts in the solidarity of male kinsmen. Thus as women critique these aspects of the patrilineal ideology, they critique the power relationships that frame their lives, and they envision a solidarity that may often be at odds with the hierarchies and solidarities that are most valued in the patrilineal kinship ideology.

In many songs, women comment critically on the fact that although they move from natal place to conjugal place and are expected by their husbands' kin to transfer their loyalties there, they are often regarded nonetheless as interlopers, while at the same time being reminded that they are no longer "one's own" to their natal kin. There is no place, then, that they can truly call their own. I recorded the following song in Hathchoya in 1990, not at a ritual event but on a sultry summer afternoon when I was sitting on a rooftop, gossiping with a group of Gujar women. There was the usual round of leg massaging (*pāoñ dabānā*), a gesture performed by young daughters-in-law to display their respect for the senior women of their husband's village (see photo 1). They knew of course that I had been tape-recording women's songs, and they soon began to ask me why Americans would be interested in such things, and what I intended to write about them. One thing I said to them then was that I wanted to know about women's conflicts with their kin, so they obliged me by singing a round of songs about "fights between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law" (*sās bahū kī larāī*) and about the sorrow (*dukh*) a woman experiences in her *sasurāl*. And so the daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law sang, all together, this song of a young woman's complaints about those senior women to whom deference must be shown:¹⁷

Sitting Song

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
mujhe lar bhīr kheto bhejeñ.
juāñ tuṭā hai batāve bail buḍḍhā hai batāve.
mujhe kharī hai rulāve he ḍoloñ pe.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
They quarrel with me and send me to the fields.
They tell me that the yoke is broken, they tell me that the oxen are old.

¹⁷ "Sitting songs" (*baiṭhne ke gīt*) are songs performed at singing and dancing sessions (at marriages and festival occasions) during lulls in the dancing.

They make me cry as I stand on the boundary of the fields.

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hi dukhī is ghar meñ.
mujhe lar bhīr kolij bhejeñ.
bastā phaṭā hai batāve māstar buḍḍhā hai batāve,
kolij phuṭā hai batāve.
mujhe kharī hai rulāve sarakoñ pe.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
They quarrel with me and send me off to college.
They tell me that the bookbag's torn, they tell me that the teacher's old.
They tell me that the building's crumbling.
They make me cry as I stand in the street.



Photo 1: A young daughter-in-law massages the legs of a senior woman in Hathchoya, August 1990

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
 mujhe lar bhīr bhojan bhejeñ.
 namak tej hai batāve roṭī kachchī hai batāve.
 mujhe kharī hai rulāve mahalo meñ.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
 They quarrel with me and send me off to eat.
 They tell me that the food's too salty, they tell me that the bread's unbaked.
 They make me cry as I stand in the house.

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
 mujhe lar bhīr pīhar bhejeñ.
 ammā marī hai batāve bhābhī kānī hai batāve,
 bahanā bhāgī hai batāve.
 mujhe kharī hai rulāve mahalo meñ.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
 They quarrel with me and send me off to my natal place.
 They tell me that my mother's dead, they tell me that my brother's wife's one-eyed.
 They tell me that my sister's run away.
 They make me cry as I stand in the house.

In this song, the husband's kin tell the wife that she has no one in her natal place: no mother, no sister, just a one-eyed sister-in-law. In each verse her pleasurable anticipations are shattered by her husband's kin. They quarrel with her in her husband's place, and tell her that she has no one at her natal place.

Although women's songs sometimes address listeners as "sisters," thus envisioning a solidarity of women based on shared experiences, and perhaps on the experience of singing these songs together (Raheja and Gold 1994:142-48), women's songs that are sung from the vantage point of wives also envision a solidarity between husband and wife that should stand against other publicly valued solidarities. I recorded many songs in Pahansu and Hathchoya that are critical of the ways that the husband's kin might attempt to control the wife and limit intimacy with her husband; this is one of the most common themes in the songs I heard. The following is a "dancing song" (*nāchne kā gīt*) sung at women's singing and dancing sessions at the marriage of a son, and at calendrical festivals such as Holi and Tij. It lists some of the demands and complaints a wife may hear at her *sasurāl*:

Dancing Song 1

is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīn naṇadī.

*is ghar ke sūsar jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main ghūn̄ghaṭ kār̄hūn̄
phīr bhī kahaiñ dīkhā muñh dīkhā
muñh dīkhā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The father-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I cover my head three times with my veil,
he'll say nonetheless that my face is showing, my face is showing,
that my face is showing, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar kī sāssū jī bari haṭhīlī.
tīn bār main jhārū lagāūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ kūḍā yahāñ kūḍā
yahāñ kūḍā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The mother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I sweep the floor three times with a broom,
she'll say nonetheless that there's dirt here and there, there's dirt here and there,
that there's dirt here and there, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar ke jethā jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main khānā parossūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ bhūkhā hāy bhūkhā
hāy bhūkhā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The elder brother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I serve him food three times,
he'll cry nonetheless that he's hungry, he's hungry,
that he's hungry, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar kī jīṭhāñī jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main bachche khilāūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ royā hāy royā
hāy royā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The elder sister-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I feed the children three times,
she'll say nonetheless that they're crying, they're crying,
that they're crying, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ nañadī.
is ghar ke devar jī baṛe haṭhīle.
tīñ bār maiñ chaupar khelūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ nā khelī nā khelī
nā khelī merī nañadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The younger brother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I play *chaupar* with him three times,
he'll say nonetheless that I didn't play, I didn't play,
that I didn't play, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ nañadī.
is ghar kī durānī baṛī haṭhīlī.
tīñ bār maiñ bartan māñjūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ jūṭhe ye jūṭhe
ye jūṭhe merī nañadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The younger sister-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I scrub the pots three times,
she'll say nonetheless that they're dirty, they're dirty,
that they're dirty, husband's sister.

Other songs go further and suggest definitive solutions to such difficulties. In the next dancing song, for example, a woman speaks to her college-going husband. She urges him to provide a solution to the problems she experiences in the *sasurāl* and proposes one herself: she suggests to him that his relationship to her should take primacy over his bond to his natal kin, and that he should separate their own household from that of his mother and his brothers' wives. The song ends with the wife urging her husband to send his own sister off to her *sasurāl*:

Dancing Song 2

*kolij ke paṛhne vāloñ bājā bajāke jāiyo
bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
sās laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
sāssū kā charkā jī rājā alag dharāke jāiyo.*

Oh college student, go off making music,
go off making music and singing a song for me.
My mother-in-law will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
My mother-in-law's spinning wheel, husband-lord, go off making it separate from
ours.

*kolij ke paṛhne vālon bājā bajāke jāiyo
bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
jīṭhānī laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
jīṭhānī kā chūlhā jī rājā alag dharāke jāiyo.*

Oh college student, go off making music,
go off making music and singing a song for me.
My elder sister-in-law will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
My elder sister-in-law's hearth, husband-lord, go off making it separate from ours.

*kolij ke paṛhne vālon bājā bajāke jāiyo
bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
naṇadī laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
naṇadī kā ḍolā jī rājā sasurāl sajāke jāiyo.*

Oh college student, go off making music,
go off making music and singing a song for me.
My husband's sister will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
My husband's sister's marriage palanquin, husband-lord, go off sending it to her
in-laws' place.

This song's devaluation of the joint family and of patrilineal solidarities is echoed in the next dancing song, in which the singers also mock the deference behaviors that the kinship ideology requires of young married women, hinting of the costs to women of such conventions:

Dancing Song 3

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
he rī mere hāth hue bekār sās tere charaṇ dabāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
My hands have become useless, oh mother-in-law, from pressing your feet.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
he rī mere pair hue bekār jīṭhānī tere pīche phīrne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
My feet have become useless, oh elder sister-in-law, from following right behind
you.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
he rī meri jībh huī bekār durānī tere kām batāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.

My tongue has become useless, oh younger sister-in-law, from telling you
to do your work.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūnḡhaṭ kāṛhne se.
he rī mere nain hue bekār naṇad tere bhej maṅgāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
My eyes have become useless, oh husband's sister, from weeping and asking that
you be sent away.

A fourth dancing song explicitly invokes the solidarity of husband and wife that is to be mobilized against men within the joint family who may oppose the wife:

Dancing Song 4

*susar mere ne ṭīkā gharvāyā.
ṭīkā dekhke jalā rī pītasarā.
ādhī sī rāt pahar kā taṛkā
tālā torke badyā rī pītasarā.
kuchh jagi āp jagā liyā rasiyā.
donoñ ne gher liyā rī pītasarā.
joran lagyā hāth dharan lagyā pagṛī
ijjat sanbhāl bahū rī pītasara.*

My father-in-law had a forehead ornament made for me.
My husband's uncle saw it, and it inflamed him with jealousy.
In the middle of the night, in the early morning hour,
My husband's uncle broke the lock and came inside.
I awakened and awoke my beloved.
We two surrounded him.
He joined his hands in supplication, he put his turban cloth at my feet,
And he said "Daughter-in-law, respect me, I'm your husband's uncle."

Other verses follow that are identical to this one, except that the names of other ornaments are substituted for the forehead ornament.

In this song, a wife tells of the treachery that a woman may experience in her conjugal place, when her husband's uncle attempts to steal her jewelry. Such a scenario is not so far-fetched as it may seem. Thefts of jewelry and other valuables from family members, or at least speculation about it when something is lost or misplaced, are in fact not uncommon in the villages where I worked; they often indicate where the fault-lines in "the rounded unitary world of kinship" may be found. Speculation about possible thefts, or even actual accusations, speak tellingly, in the words of

everyday speech, of the same tensions and contradictions that are commented upon in women's songs. In this song, the wife envisions a resolution. In her attempt to confront her husband's uncle in the bedroom, she is joined by her husband; "we two" surrounded him. The uncle, who according to the conventions of North Indian kinship should be accorded unquestioning respect, is made to show extreme deference to the young daughter-in-law, as he touches his turban-cloth to her feet. The song thus sets up a solidarity between husband and wife that is seen as a preferred alternative to the solidarity among men in the *sasurāl*.

Another dancing song speaks of another kind of treachery in the *sasurāl*, and suggests that wives need not passively submit to it, and that they may indeed find ways to silence those who would speak against them:

Dancing Song 5

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
bahū oṛho chaṭak chūnariyā
sir rakh lo nīr gagariyā.
choṭī naṇadī le lo sāth rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?¹⁸
Daughter-in-law, cover your head with a shimmering veil,
and put the water pot on your head.
Take your husband's younger sister with you, your eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
maiñne oṛhī chaṭak chūnariyā
sir dhar lāi nīr gagariyā.
choṭī naṇadī le lī sāth, rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
I covered my head with a shimmering veil,
and I put the water pot on my head.
I took my husband's sister along, my eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā..
tum baiṭho kadam kī chhāyā
maiñ bhar lāūñ nīr gagariyā
bībī ghar mat kahiyo jāy rasīle doū nainā.*

¹⁸ The phrase describing the eyes is *rasīle doū nainā*, literally, "juicy two eyes." The words *ras*, "juice," and *rasīlā*, "juicy," connote the ideas of ripeness, sexual readiness, attraction, and beauty.

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 My husband's sister said to me: Sit down in the shade of the banyan tree,
 I'll fill the water pot.
 Don't tell them at home that I filled the pot, your eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
 merī nañadī baṛī chhichhorī.
 usne jāy sikhāī apnī maiyā
 ammā bhābhī ke do yār rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 My husband's sister is very deceitful.
 She went and complained to her mother:
 mother, my brother's wife keeps two men, her eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
 sājan se jāy kahūñgī
 tujhe ghar se dūr karūñgī
 bībī phīr na lūñgī terā nām rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 I'll tell my husband all about it,
 I'll tell him to send you away from here,
 And I'll never say your name again, my eyes are so alluring.

In this tale of treachery and deceit in the conjugal place, the husband's sister relies on cultural images of uncontrolled female sexuality, as found in male oral traditions, to fabricate a story that her brother's wife has found a lover, a story that, when reported to her mother and her brother, might turn the husband away from his wife.

Such themes of uncontrolled sexuality leading to betrayal are very often found in male oral traditions, and in those songs and stories there is no voice to counter the accusation. In women's songs, however, although it may be a woman (a mother-in-law or a husband's sister) who makes the complaint, it is always apparent that the song itself is a challenge to those negative images of the dangerous and sexually voracious female. In the only dancing song I recorded that does not focus directly upon the kinship context in which the relationship in question unfolds, a man is "thirsting" for a woman he sees at a well. The woman takes pride in her body and its beauty, but she nonetheless rebuffs him until she learns that he is in fact her husband, whom she has not recognized. The traveler's thirst is recognized by the listeners as standing in for sexual desire:

Dancing Song 6

*mere sir pai bañtā ṭokanī
mere hāthoñ meñ lohe kā ḍol
maiñ patlī sī kāmñī.*

Two water pots are on my head.
And the dipper's in my hand.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.

*ek rāh musāphir mil gayā
chhorī thoṛā sā nīr pilāy
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

In the path I met a traveler—
“Girl, give me some water to drink.
This thirsty man has come a long way.”

*chhorā nā merī ḍubkai ḍolchī
re chhorā nā merā nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmñī.*

“Boy, my dipper doesn't reach down to the
water,
And my body doesn't bend down.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*chhorā kiske ho tum pāhune
re chhorā kiske ho bhartār
maiñ patlī sī kāmñī.*

“Boy, whose honored guest [*pāhunā*] are
you?¹⁹
And whose husband are you?
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*gorī bāp tere kā pāhunā
re chhorī terā hūñ bhartār
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

“Fair one, I'm your father's *pāhunā*.
Girl, I am your husband.
This thirsty man has come a long way.”

*chhorā ab merī ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorā ab merā nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmñī.*

“Boy, now my dipper reaches down to the
water.
Now my body can bend.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*chhorī ab kaise ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorī ab kaise nivai hai sarīr
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

“Girl, now does your dipper reach down?
Now how does your body bend?
This thirsty traveler has come a long way.”

*chhorā ḍubak ḍubak ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorā murtuṛ nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmñī.*

“Boy, I tried and tried and the dipper
reached down.
I twisted and turned and made my body bend.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

In this dancing song, desire is seen as neither dangerous nor threatening; by putting the expression of longing and desire first in the voice of the man, and the forthright and clever repartee in the voice of the woman, many of the conventional notions about women's inability to

¹⁹ *Pāhunā* (“guest”) is a term very often used to refer to a son-in-law visiting his wife's natal village.

control their sexuality are thus subverted.²⁰ But the sexual desire itself is celebrated. It is as if this song is a commentary on the previous one; the wife strikes up a relationship at the well only if the traveler proves to be her husband, and the accusations of the husband's sister are shown to be unfair.

²¹ Now this song could be read simply as reinforcing the patrilineal ideal of unwavering devotion to one's husband, and it would not be wrong to do so; women's critiques of gender ideologies are seldom wholesale and unambiguous. But the song's insistence on the woman's ability to control her own desire, while not disowning it, does pose a critique of one of the central propositions upon which male control of female sexuality is premised.

In many other songs, such acknowledged desires can only be fulfilled if the husband is prepared to go against the wishes of his natal kin. In the following song for the festival of Tij, for example, a mother-in-law denies her daughter-in-law one of the pleasures of a married woman and has her sent away under false pretenses. When the husband is consumed by remorse for his own complicity in the plan and wants her to come back, he must act alone and go against the wishes of his mother:

Song for the Festival of Tij 1

āyā rī sāsū merī sāvan mās
beḍ bañṭā de pile pāṭ kī.

[Wife speaking]

Mother-in-law, the month of Savan has come,
twist a rope of yellow silk for me to swing upon.²²

²⁰ For a more wide-ranging analysis of women's perspectives on sexuality in general, see Gold's discussion of Rajasthani women's songs in Raheja and Gold (1994:30-72).

²¹ In another song I recorded in Hathchoya in 1990, a "thirsty man" demands water from a beautiful woman at the well, but she rebuffs him by telling him tales of how slovenly she will be if she goes off to live with him, thus not only neatly reversing the images of sexual voracity that are so common in male traditions but also providing an alternative twist to the images of the slovenly woman (*phūhar*) that abound in male oral traditions.

²² The festival of Tij is celebrated in the month of Savan. At this festival women enjoy swinging on rope swings and singing special songs. I recorded many of these Tij songs in Pahansu, and they are probably the most subversive women's songs reported from northern India. See Raheja and Gold 1994:13-133, 142-45; and Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994.

*mhāre to rī lachchho vo bedoñ kī āñ
beḍ bañtāiyo apne bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Twisting a rope for us is ill-omened,²³
Go and twist a rope at your father's place, girl.

*jo to rī sāsū tere beḍoñ kī āñ
beṭā kañvārā kyūñ nā rakh liyā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
If twisting a rope is for your house ill-omened,
then you should have kept your son unmarried.²⁴

*sun sun re beṭā is lachchho ke bol
lachchho to bole hamēñ boliyāñ jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Listen, listen, son, to this girl's talk,
this girl is speaking harsh words to me.

*jhūṭhe to ri ammā tere jhūṭhe haiñ bol
lachchho nā bole tumheñ boliyāñ jī.*

[Husband speaking]
It's untrue, mother, your words are untrue,
this girl isn't speaking harsh words to you.

*jo to re beṭā tujhe ho nā yakīñ
koṭṭhe pe charhke beṭā sun le jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son]
If you don't believe what I say, son,

²³ *Āñ* is a word used to refer to a situation in which some unpropitious circumstance such as a death or a serious accident is associated with a particular activity or object, so that within the family that activity or object becomes ill-omened and thus to be avoided. Women in Pahansu explained to me that the mother-in-law is lying about the *āñ*, using it as an excuse to prevent her daughter-in-law from enjoying the pleasures of Tij.

²⁴ Celebrating the festival of Tij is apparently so important for the woman who speaks in the song that she regards it as an important prerogative of a married woman, and this is why she tells her mother-in-law that it would be better for her son not to have married than for her to be denied this celebration. I do not know of any other festivals that are spoken of in this way, as a celebration that women have a right to participate in.

Then climb up on the roof and listen to what she says.

*uṭh uṭh rī lachchho vo huī hai saver
chakkī pe rakhā terā pīsanā rī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son's wife]
Get up, get up, girl, morning has come,
There's grain at the grindstone that needs to be ground.

*phorūñ rī sāsū terī chakkī kā pāt
bagar bakherū terā pīsanā rī.*

[Wife speaking]
I'll smash the stones of your grindstone, mother-in-law,
and I'll scatter your grain all over the courtyard.

*āveñge to rī lachchho ve devar jēṭh
chug chug chābbeñ terā pīsanā rī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Your younger and older brothers-in-law will come along, girl.
[Wife speaking]
Let them pick up and eat from the scattered grain, then.

*sachche to rī ammā tere sachche haiñ bol
lachchho to bole tumheñ boliyāñ jī.
kaho to rī ammā ise man se bisārūñ
kaho to bhejūñ dhan ke bāp ke jī.*

[Husband speaking to his mother]
It's true, mother, your words are true,
this girl is speaking harsh words to you.
Tell me mother, should I forget this girl,
tell me, mother, should I pack her off to her father?

*kāhe ko to beṭā ise man se bisāro
bhejo to bhejo dhan ke bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son]
Forget this girl, son,
pack her off to her father.

*uṭh uṭh rī lachcho tu bharle sīngār
tujhe ri bulāi tere bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law, lying to her daughter-in-law]
Get up, get up, girl, put on all your finery,

your father is calling you back to his place.

*kaun to jī āyā mujhe lenehār
kaun to āyā vādā kar gayā jī.*

[Wife speaking]

Who has come to take me there,
and who has made the arrangements?

*nāī to rī bahū āyā tujhe lenehār
nauvvā chalaupvā vādā kar gayā jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]

Your family's Barber has come to take you,
and he arranged a nine-day visit.²⁵

*kyā yā to unke mis aur kāj
kya unke janame hain bālake.*

[Wife speaking]

Is there some ritual going on there,
has a child been born at my natal place?

*chhoṭe bhāīyā kā tere mis aur kāj
bare bhāīyā ke janame hain bālake.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]

Your younger brother has some ritual work [i.e., he is about to be married],
and your older brother has just had a child.

*ho lie jī rājā ke ghoṛe asavār
lachchho to le lī pālakī jī.
chhoṛī to jī rājā vo ban khañd ke bīch
ser dharukke lachchho ekī jī.*

[Narrator speaking]

Her husband-lord went with her, he rode on a horse,
the girl was taken in a palanquin.
The husband-lord abandoned her in the jungle,
a lion roared and the girl was all alone.

*kholo rī ammā vo chandan kivār
lachchho to āī terī pāhunī jī.*

²⁵ A man of the Barber caste often carries messages and arranges for such visits.

[Wife speaking to her own mother, having arrived somehow at her father's place]
 Open, mother, your sandalwood door,
 This girl, your guest, has come.

*kaun to rī beṭī gayā tujhe lenehār
 kaun to gayā vādā kar āyā jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Who went to bring you here, girl,
 and who has made the arrangements?

*nāi to rī ammā mujhe gayā lenehār
 nauvvā challauvā vādā kar āyā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
 Your Barber came to take me, mother,
 and he arranged a nine-day visit.

*kyā to rī lachchho mhāre mis aur kāj
 kyā mhāre janame hai bālake jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Do you think we have some ritual work,
 do you think a child has been born?

*chhoṭe bhāīyā kā mān mis aur kāj
 baṛe bhāīyā ke janama hai bālaka jī.
 kāhe binā ammā yo ghar sunsān
 kāhe binā yo ghar bhinbhinā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
 Mother, my younger brother has some ritual work,
 and my older brother has had a child.
 But why, mother, is the house deserted,
 and why is there only the sound of buzzing flies in the house?

*bahūoñ binā hai yo ghar beṭī sunsān
 bachchoñ binā hai ghar bhinbhinā jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Without a daughter-in-law the house is deserted,
 and without a child there is only the sound of buzzing flies in the house.

*ho lie jī rājā ghoṛe asavār
 ghoṛā to riṅgā se le baṛ tale jī.*

[Narrator speaking]

The husband-lord rode out on his horse;
the horse was tethered under the banyan tree.

*koṭhe pe chaṛhke tu ammā dekh
chalte musāphir āye pāhune jī.*

[Wife speaking]

Go up on the roof, mother, and have a look,
A weary traveler, your guest, has come.²⁶

*uṭh uṭh rī lachchho tu bhar le sīngār
tujhe rī bulāī terī sās ne jī.*

[Husband to his wife]

Get up, girl, get up, and put on your finery,
your mother-in-law calls you back to her place.

*vo din to rājā tum kar lenā yād
ser dhaṛukke lachcho ekī jī.*

[Wife speaking to husband]

Husband-lord, remember that day,
a lion was roaring and this girl was alone.

*vo din to lachchho tu man se bisār
tujhe rī bulāī terī sās ne jī.*

[Husband speaking]

Put that day, girl, out of your mind,
your mother-in-law is calling you back to her place.

In this song the husband comes to regret the fact that he has taken the advice of his mother and sent his wife away. Although he tells his wife at the end that her mother-in-law has called her back, Pahansu women agreed that the *sās*, the mother-in-law, was not in fact eager to grant the wish of her son to be with his wife.²⁷ The song ends with the husband's entreaty to

²⁶ Here the wife first refers to the man as an unknown traveler, but then she realizes that he is her husband, her mother's *pāhunā*, which means literally "guest," but is used in Pahansu almost exclusively to mean "son-in-law."

²⁷ In other songs from Pahansu depicting efforts of a man's natal kin to prevent the development of a close, enduring intimacy between husband and wife, the husband comes to regret despairingly his complicity with those natal kin, and in three songs the voice of the husband is heard at the end of the song, shouting from his rooftop, "Oh men, don't listen to

his wife to return with him to the *sasurāl*, and we do not hear the resolution. We suspect that she is eager to be reunited with her husband; it is she who asks her mother to go up on the roof and observe the traveler who has come, but she nonetheless reminds him of her torment when he left her alone in the jungle. She does not go back silently, without voicing her discontent. Most importantly, though, the difficulties between husband and wife are represented, in this and many other Pahansu women's songs, as deriving from the tension between the ties binding a man to his natal kin and the ties binding him to his wife.

The words of these songs, sung from the differing positions of sister and wife, do not coalesce into an abstract and essentialized "female" voice, but mirror the possible perspectives of women positioned, simultaneously, in different ways within a system of relationships. And these voices speak not of the solidarity of the patrilineal group, and not necessarily of a solidarity of women, but of shifting solidarities that women may rely upon in their varied situations: now a solidarity between brother and sister that may aid a woman if her husband and his kin mistreat her or turn her out, and at another moment a solidarity between husband and wife that threatens the unity of male kinsmen but at the same time may render a married woman less isolated, subordinate, and vulnerable in her conjugal place. Both of these solidarities are devalued by the norms of patrilineal kinship, but celebrated in women's oral traditions and used by women in their everyday struggles for material and emotional resources. Moreover, as Ann Gold and I have argued (1994), these alternative moral perceptions map out a terrain from which women may practically as well as poetically counter those who would try to silence and suppress them. And yet it would be a mistake to read these songs as literal descriptions of women's quarrels with one another, or of mistreated daughters-in-law. These vivid depictions of sorrows and of sometimes violent reprisals (Raheja and Gold 1994:142-46) serve as commentaries on the contradictions in North Indian kinship and gender ideologies. Women need not fight every day with their mothers-in-law or be banished by their husbands in order to experience the hardships of being sent away as a bride to a "foreign place," and to experience the isolation there.

your mothers and your sisters, or your house will be destroyed." See Raheja and Gold 1994:ch. 4 and Raheja 1994.

Men's Oral Traditions and the "Character of Women"

Although varied stances are thus taken with respect to central tensions in North Indian kinship, women's song traditions do seem to differentiate themselves from male traditions in that such tensions figure prominently in the song texts, regardless of which perspective is adopted. Men's song and narrative genres, on the other hand, tend to portray kinship tensions and fractured solidarities as emanating not from contradictions in the kinship ideology itself, but from an essentialized "women's character" that is seen as dangerous to kinship solidarities centered on males. While this viewpoint may be somewhat less evident in oral traditions performed by males for audiences of both men and women, it appears to be very pervasive in songs that are sung when men gather on their own.

Men's Songs and Folk Drama

Men in rural western Uttar Pradesh often sing work songs called *malhār* at night during the rainy season, and during the rice harvesting season when farmers sleep in the fields to guard the piles of newly harvested grain. *Malhār* are also sung when groups of men work at village sugarcane presses.²⁸ They may sing as they prod a bullock to turn the press, as they stoke the fire beneath the boiling vat, or as they stir the boiling juice with long wooden poles. Or they may sing as they stop to rest and smoke a hookah together. Ved Vatak has commented that *malhār* sung on such occasions consistently depict desire and difficulties in male-female relationships from the purported vantage point of the woman, and very often in a female voice, framed in the first person with feminine verb forms.²⁹ Vatak suggests that this sort of portrayal is consistent with the fact that, although sexual exploits and sexual pleasure may be talked and joked

²⁸ Sugarcane is a significant cash crop in Pahansu. Most of the cane is marketed at cooperative sugarcane societies and processed far from the village, but a portion of the harvest is also processed at these village presses for use within the village.

²⁹ Vatak collected these songs in Meerut district, just south of the two districts (Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur) in which I tape-recorded men's and women's songs. He points out that there is no doubt about the male authorship of these songs. He writes that in Meerut they are sung only at the sugarcane presses, where women do not participate in the work, and, secondly, that they are framed in the Hindi *dohā* meter that, according to Vatak, is characteristic only of men's songs and folk poetry of the Hindi-speaking region (1979:118).

about in men's casual banter, it is generally viewed as inappropriate and demeaning for men to admit to having desire and longing when separated from wife or lover (1979:118-19). But women's songs, as we have seen, do not hesitate to depict the longing of a husband for his wife. Vatuk also points out that another factor operating here may be the notion that it is women's sexual yearnings, not men's, that are uncontrollable, and that women are generally thought of as the dangerously aggressive sexual partners. He goes on to say that men's songs are seldom concerned with husband-wife relationships, but focus instead on the yearnings of a woman for her lover.

But whether they are concerned with spouses or with lovers, a further point may be made about these *malhār* songs from western Uttar Pradesh. In this genre of men's oral tradition, love relationships, as well as conflicts between men and women, seem most often to be depicted in a vacuum, without reference to the wider kinship context in which such relationships unfold. In women's oral traditions on the other hand, relations between men and women are seldom represented in isolation from the countervailing kinship loyalties that impinge upon desire. Thus, while the *malhār* songs supposedly represent a female voice, it is definitely not a local female perspective that one hears in these men's songs. These songs tend to depict separation from the lover³⁰ and not conflicting kinship ties as the primary difficulty, as in the following work songs recorded by Vatuk:³¹

Malhār 1

sotī thī rotī thī, malātī thī do āñkh.
supne me pītām mile, kar na sakī do bāt. (1979:118)

I was sleeping, crying I woke up; I rubbed and rubbed my eyes.
 In a dream I saw my love, but could not talk to him.

³⁰ Long separation from the husband is a common theme in women's songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya as well, but, unlike the men's songs, women's songs focus almost exclusively on the tensions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that seem to erupt when the husband returns, as in a number of songs for the festival of Tij that I discuss in Raheja and Gold 1994. The idea of simple separation from the husband may come more to the fore in women's songs from regions where men are in fact often absent for long periods of time, whether serving in the army or employed in distant cities; see Narayan's essay in this volume for songs of separation from Kangra.

³¹ I have slightly modified Vatuk's translations, based upon the transliterated Hindi texts that he provides.

Malhār 2

*sāmmaṇ āvaṇ kah gaye, bīte bāra mās.
chhappar purāne ho gaye, tarṅkan lāge bās. (129)*

He promised me he would come in the month of Savan; twelve months have passed since then.

Thatched roofs have become old, and their bamboos are beginning to crack.

Only two other difficulties in male-female relations seem to be acknowledged in these *malhār* texts, the distress of a woman who has been married to a boy too young to satisfy her or who remains without a man at her father's house:

Malhār 3

*ratan katorī ghī jalāī, chūlhe jalāī kasār.
ghūṅghaṭ me gorī jalāī, yāne ho bhartār. (126)*

Butter burns in the jeweled bowl, pudding burns on the hearth.
The fair one burns behind her veil, if her husband is too young.

Malhār 4

*kallar sukkī kangaṇī, dherū sukke dhān.
gorī sukkī bāp ke, kele kaisī gabh. (126)*

The grain dries up in the barren land, and piles of paddy dry up.
The fair one, like a banana sapling, dries up at her father's house.

This fourth *malhār* is particularly interesting in its differences from the women's songs I have heard in Pahansu and Hathchoya. Whereas women's songs consistently use the imagery of birds being forced to take flight as they describe the sorrow of women leaving their natal place, or view the husband's place as a "foreign land," *malhār* songs see the father's house only as a place where a woman pines for a man, drying up like drought-stricken grain until she has a husband.

While in North India women may occasionally sing simply about separation or husbands too young to satisfy them,³² women's songs from

³² Songs of young husbands also occur in oral and written *barahmasa* ("twelve months") poetic texts from western Uttar Pradesh. Wadley (1983:62) has translated a version sung by a Karimpur farmer. Gold translates a "small husband" song from Rajasthan (Raheja and Gold 1994:57-58), and translations of several small husband songs are provided by Archer (1985:162). I have not heard any women's songs from Pahansu or Hathchoya in which this motif occurs.

Pahansu and Hathchoya almost always speak of vastly more complex sources of discord and unhappiness. Men's songs from western Uttar Pradesh seem to make no comment at all on what women there see as an inherently contradictory and problematic world of kinship solidarities. Thus, while both men's and women's songs may see love between spouses or lovers as something to be desired and sought after, men's and women's traditions differ in their understanding of the barriers that stand in the way and of the sorrows a woman must face in the pursuit of love.



Photo 2: A *sāng* performance in Pahansu, March 1978

In Pahansu and Hathchoya, men sing songs called *rāginīs*, with or without simple musical accompaniment, as they sit in the fields at night; *rāginīs* are also sung by semi-professional local singers when men gather together, away from women, at weddings.³³ The *rāginīs* themselves are songs taken from locally performed *sāng* folk dramas, or from inexpensive chapbooks containing *rāginīs* from a particular drama.³⁴ *Rāginīs* are never sung in the presence of women, and men in Pahansu effectively forbid women from attending the annual *sāng* performances in the village, put on by itinerant troupes of professional actors. In fact the men of the house in which I lived were so disturbed my own attendance that I was able to witness only the first day of a five-day performance of *Hir Ranjha* in March 1978 (see photo 2).

Many *rāginīs*, and the *sāng* dramas from which they are taken, are concerned with male-female relationships, but their depictions of kinship and its instabilities are very different from those found in women's song traditions. As in the *malhār* songs, desire and longing are most frequently expressed in the voice of a woman, and here too conflicts in these relationships are seldom traced to tensions within the wider network of patrilineal kinship ties. In *rāginīs* and *sāng* dramas, difficulties in marital and love relationships seem generally to be traced to the workings of "fate," to separations imposed by distant political circumstances (e.g., the partition of India and Pakistan in a song of the lovers Caman and Lillo recorded in Pahansu), and especially to "the character of women" (*triyā charitra*) that inexorably prompts them to sexual voracity or the betrayal of their husbands. A particularly telling example of the latter occurs in the well-known *sāng* drama "Rup-Basant," and in *rāginīs* from the drama that are sung in Pahansu. Vatuk and Vatuk summarize the story as follows (1979b:196-97):

On her deathbed, the mother of Rup and Basant pleads with her husband not to take a second wife after her death, for the sake of their sons'

³³ Women are not supposed to be within earshot when men gather and sing *rāginīs*, and consequently I was able to be present only briefly at such sessions. Mahipal S. Tomar made most of the tape-recordings for me.

³⁴ *Sāng* dramas are performed by troupes consisting only of male actors, primarily for male audiences. As in the case of the informal performances of songs from the dramas, much disapproval is heard in Pahansu if women attempt to watch or listen to *sāng* performances (see Raheja and Gold 1994:xxi). See Vatuk and Vatuk 1979a, 1979b and Hansen 1992 for descriptions of the ethnographic contexts and predominant themes of these dramas.

well-being. He agrees, but some time later is persuaded to marry a young girl. This second wife is, however, housed in the palace in an apartment separate from that in which the young boys are living and they do not have any contact with her. One day they are playing ball and the ball goes over the wall into their stepmother's courtyard. Rup goes to retrieve the ball. The stepmother is struck by his beauty and attempts to seduce him. He refuses and manages to leave. Later, when her husband comes to her apartment, she accuses Rup of sexual assault. Chatur Singh does not believe the story, but is convinced when her maid corroborates the story. He confronts Rup, who denies the accusation but refrains from revealing his stepmother's attempt to seduce him. Chatur Singh orders Rup executed. Basant, loyal to Rup, accompanies his brother and the executioner into the forest. The executioner takes pity on Rup and kills a deer, whose eyes and blood he takes back to the palace as proof of Rup's death. The two brothers go on to have many adventures. After twelve years they return home. Their father comes to know the true story and has his wife hanged.

In this story, and in a number of other *sāng* dramas with plots involving a sexually seductive older kinswomen, it is evident, as Vatuk and Vatuk point out (1979b:218-19), that “women's character” is regarded as the source of the difficulties that unfold in the drama. It is the sexual seduction and the queen's false reporting of the events in her apartment that seem to be most elaborated upon in the dramas, and the *rāginīs* describing these scenes are the ones that appear to be most popular and most often sung by men. It is “woman's character” and the stepmother's attempt to disguise this character that are thus prominent in village renditions of the story. And the way in which this *triyā charitra* may disrupt the unity of patrilineal kin also comes to be depicted in the dramas and songs, as the queen tells a false version of the story to the king and thus tragically turns him against his own son, resulting in a twelve-year separation of father and sons.

A *rāginī* from this drama was recorded on a winter night in Pahansu in 1988 when a group of men, mostly Gujars, had gathered at a tube-well in the fields. They regaled each other with quite bawdy jokes, and then, without musical accompaniment, one man began to sing a *rāginī* perhaps suggested to him by the risqué stories of women's sexual proclivities that his companions had just been telling. Although the story of Rup-Basant is well-known among Pahansu men, he preceded his song with a brief recounting of it, for the benefit perhaps of my tape recorder. Because it focuses on the story that the queen fabricates, the song is most concerned with “woman's character” as embodying a dangerous and deceitful sexuality, and with the unfortunate disruption of the unity of men bound in patrilineal relationships, as the king listens to the untrue story of his son's

treachery. The words of the *rāginī* are the words the queen spoke to the king as she lied to him about his son:

Rāginī

*ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.
 ho re chor kī dhāl mere mahal ke meṅ ān baḍyā.
 jab main usko dikhī kyon chor bhor huā khaṛā.
 ho merī kaske le pakṛī kalāī ho terā basant.
 main bolyī re chālyā jā thāre paṛe mār kāle kī.
 vo bolyā main jāṭā kyonā dahashat na kisī sāle kī.
 merī būndī dashā banāyī.
 ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.
 main bolyī re jal ke mar jā ghar meṅ āg bhaterī se.
 vo bolyā main martā kyonā ishk karūṅga tere se.
 merī būndī dashā banāyī.
 ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.*

Oh, your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.
 He entered my palace like a thief.
 When I saw him I said, “Why are you standing there like a thief?”
 Oh, he grabbed my wrist, your Basant.
 I said, “Go away from here,” and I gave him a death-dealing curse.
 He said, “I’m not going, I’m not afraid of any *sālā*.”³⁵
 He made me all disheveled.
 Oh, your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.
 I cursed him, “Die by fire, there’s so much fire in the house.”
 He said, “Why should I die, I’ll go on seducing you.”
 He made me all disheveled.
 Oh your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.

Thus, while women’s songs envision a web of relationships that is inherently unstable because of the power relations and contradictions within the structure of North Indian kinship, contradictions that seem inevitably to result in discord and disruption, men’s oral traditions seem to envision what Guha has termed the “rounded unitary world of kinship” fractured only by “fate,” or “woman’s character,” her inherent and dangerously eruptive sexuality. Women’s traditions contextualize marital discord within specific, shifting, and cross-cutting configurations of kin, while men’s traditions seem most frequently to offer essentializing characterizations of female

³⁵ *Sala* is the kinship term for a wife’s brother. It is often used as a term of abuse. Here the meaning seems to be that he is not afraid of anyone who might try to protect the queen, as her brother might try to do.

nature as the cause of disruption and conflict.³⁶

Kissā Totā Mainā: Representing Male and Female Perspectives in Popular Culture

These two perspectives on relations between men and women are graphically represented in “The Story of the Parrot and the Starling” (*Kissā Totā Mainā*), a printed text of the North Indian *kissā* genre that concerns itself solely with conflict-ridden and often violent relations between the sexes.³⁷ The story itself was apparently composed by one Pandit Rangilal about 1870, and has been in print continuously since that time; more copies of this particular *kissā* have been printed and sold than any other in this ubiquitous and cheaply available Hindi and Urdu genre of chapbook literature, and its popularity apparently continues to increase relative to other *kissā* titles (Pritchett 1985:79-101).

As the story opens, a male parrot, caught in a rainstorm and unable to return to his own nest, has alighted on a branch near the nest of a female starling. She angrily tells the parrot to leave her tree and take refuge somewhere else. When he asks why she refuses to let him stay, she answers that there is no species as lacking in compassion (*bedard jāti*) as the species of men. The parrot replies to the starling that it is the species of women that is lacking in human understanding and devoid of good qualities, and he

³⁶ The tendency of men’s song and narrative genres to depict women as the disruptive agents in patrilineal kinship is of course consistent with the way in which men in North Indian villages tend to place the blame for the break-up of joint families or dissension among patrilineal kinsmen on quarrels among the wives of brothers, or to attribute it to the existence of co-wives whose descendants are divided by the fact that “there were two mothers” in the distant past. In Pahansu, for example, a bitter rift between two closely related families had developed in 1988 over a land dispute associated with the current government-implemented land consolidation efforts (*chakbandhī*). Though the quarrel clearly had arisen among the men over specific issues concerning the valuation and redistribution of plots of agricultural land, the men involved nonetheless constantly prefaced their explanations of the case to me by speaking of the existence of co-wives several generations ago (“there were two mothers,” they would say) who rent the otherwise supposedly seamless fabric of patrilineal relationships.

³⁷ I was prompted to reread the 144-page Hindi text of *Kissā Totā Mainā* that I had purchased in a Saharanpur bookstall in 1979 by Sudhir Kakar’s discussion of it (1990). He uses his explication of the text to argue that relations between the sexes are viewed in India as inherently conflictual. I use it somewhat differently, as an illustration of some varied perspectives on kinship solidarities and the way in which conflicts between men and women are viewed in relation to those solidarities.

recites the following proverb:

*triyā charitra jāne nahīn koy
khasam mār ke satti hoy*

No one knows the character of a woman;
She kills her husband and then claims to be a *sati*.³⁸

The parrot then asks the starling what defects she has seen that have produced her hatred for men. The starling says that she will tell a story about a man that will explain her hatred, and thus the two begin a series of fourteen often very gory stories of the cruelties perpetrated by men against women told by the female starling, and of the cruelties inflicted by women on men told by the male parrot. While Sudhir Kakar's discussion of *Kissā Totā Mainā* focuses primarily on the fact that the stories represent male-female relations as conflict-ridden and lacking in intimacy, I wish here to focus on the differences in the stories told by the female starling on the one hand and those told by the male parrot on the other, and the differences in the perspectives on kinship solidarity therein.

In five of the seven tales told by the female starling, the factor that precipitates male rejection of or violence toward a wife or lover is a sudden conviction that he must place his consideration for his parents above his feelings for his wife.³⁹ The following is an abridged translation of the first of the starling's stories:

Ahmad Ali, the handsome son of a wealthy Muslim, stopped one day at a village and noticed the beautiful daughter of a Hindu Sweeper standing in a doorway. He was so struck by her beauty that he fainted and fell to the ground. The people of the village gathered round to revive him, and when he awoke they asked him what had happened. He sighed, and recited verses about how he had been struck with love at that first glimpse of the girl. The crowd tried to persuade him of the folly of this, since he was Muslim and the girl was of the Hindu Sweeper *jāti* (a so-called untouchable caste). But Ahmad Ali replied only that he could not live

³⁸ Kakar (1990:51) also finds this proverb to be important in understanding this *kissā* text.

³⁹ A principal motif of the remaining two stories is the cruelty of a man who would turn on his wife or lover after she has demonstrated that she values her relationship with him more than her relations with her natal kin. These two stories, then, in a sense mirror the other five, and all are concerned in a fundamental way with incipient tensions in North Indian kinship.

without the girl, and he insisted that the villagers go to her parents and ask them to arrange for the wedding, telling them that if this request was denied, he would go to their house and pound his head on the door until he was dead.

When the girl's father heard about this, he was astounded, and asked Ahmad Ali to think carefully about the proposal, stressing the difference between the occupations of their separate castes and the hierarchical considerations (*uñcī-nīcī bāteñ*) that made such a marriage difficult. But Ahmad Ali would take none of this to heart, and so the girl's father finally agreed to the marriage.

They were married, and lived happily for some time in the girl's village. Then one day Ahmad Ali began to think again of returning to his own country. When he made his wishes known, the girl's parents happily saw the pair off with gifts of wealth and jewelry. But when they reached the last stage of their journey, Ahmad Ali began to consider what his mother and father would think of his marriage to a Sweeper girl, and so he decided to stab her and throw her into a well. He returned to his parents, and lied to them about how he had spent his time while he was away. Meanwhile, the girl, still alive in the well, was discovered by a traveler. He helped her find her way back to her parents. Because of her loyalty to her husband, she told them nothing of what he had done, and explained her stab wounds by saying that thieves had attacked them and taken everything they had.

After a few months, when he had squandered all the wealth that had been given to him by his wife's parents, Ahmad Ali decided to return to the village and announce to the girl's parents that a son had been born to her; he hoped in that way to receive many more gifts from them. When he saw the girl alive and well there, he thought that he would not be able to escape alive. But when he realized that his wife bore no grudge against him, he was overcome with shame and begged her forgiveness. Because she had never told her parents the truth about what he done to her, they welcomed him. Several days later, when he announced that he would return to his own country, he was given much wealth and jewelry, and his wife set off with him once more. But his fears overcame him again along the way, and this time too he stabbed her and threw her into a well. Once again she was saved, this time by a Sweeper from her own village. She went back to her natal place and never again spoke the name of the husband who had twice betrayed her so violently and without remorse.

In the tales told by the female starling in *Kissā Totā Mainā*, there are no instances in which the starling comments on "men's character." Men may be characterized as untrustworthy or pitiless in the stories, but in each case the text seems to situate these qualities in relation to the conflicting loyalties precipitated by a marriage, and not in relation to a fixed and essentialized male nature. In story after story, troubles set in when men

honor their commitments to the requirements of patrilineal solidarities and refuse to acknowledge the importance of loyalty to the wife. Of course, one might argue that in this story told by the female starling, it is nonetheless the beauty of the Sweeper girl that sets the tragic story in motion, and that in some sense, still, the root cause is the power of female sexuality, but clearly it is the pressure of conflicting claims upon the man's loyalty and not the woman's beauty that is seen as problematic from the female starling's point of view.

The stories told by the male parrot are completely different. As Kakar points out in his discussion of the text, the proverb concerning "woman's character" (*triyā caritra*) with which the frame story begins resonates throughout all of the parrot's stories. This female nature seems to refer most specifically to her sexuality, as Kakar also points out (1990:50-51):

In the tales, the male perception of the woman as an erotic partner is of a sexually voracious being who is completely ruled by the dictates of her body. Especially vulnerable to the power of eros, the phrase *jab uske sharir ko kamdeva ne sataya* ("when her body was sorely troubled by the god of love") is used solely in connection with a woman, never a man. She is the initiator of sexual advances and loses all sense of proportion and moral constraints when in the grip of erotic passion. . . . When sexually intoxicated, the woman takes one lover after another without discriminating between young and old, handsome and ugly, rich and poor. . . . It goes without saying that women are also deceitful and unpredictable, with motivations that are an enduring puzzle to men.

The tales told by the male parrot reiterate this image of dangerous and unpredictable female sexuality over and over again, and it is this unfathomable and uncontrollable sexuality that poses the most serious threat to kinship solidarities. The following is an abridged translation of the twelfth story in the text, a tale told by the parrot:

A merchant married his daughter to a man from a distant city. The couple lived for a while in the girl's house. But soon after the marriage, the wife was "sorely troubled by the god of love" and she became enamored of the handsome son of a jeweler who lived nearby. Through a servant girl, she sent a rhymed note to him, telling of her desire for him: "The mangoes are ripe, the lemons are ripe, and the leaves still are green / But there's no gardener to tend them, and without a gardener to water it, the garden soon dries up" (*ām pake nībū pake, pat rahe sarsāy/ māṭī uskā hai nahīñ jal bin bāg sukhāy*). They became lovers, and the husband learned of the affair. He decided to stay awake one night, and he saw his wife steal away to meet

the jeweler's son. He confronted her with evidence of her betrayal, but she tricked him into thinking that she still loved him, and begged for his forgiveness. He forgave her then and there, and the parrot interrupted his narrative at that point to comment to the starling that men have such merciful hearts that they can even forgive a wife who has behaved so wretchedly.

The husband took his wife back to his own city. But the girl kept on thinking of the jeweler's son, and he too could not be consoled. He became a renouncer and went away to the jungle, lost in his grief.

He wandered in the jungle for many days, and finally came upon the city where his beloved now lived. He camped there at the bathing pond and hoped to catch a glimpse of her.

He did soon see her, and when she recognized her lover she told him that she would think up some ruse to get him into her house. She returned home and pretended to be sick. Her husband called many kinds of healers and physicians, but their treatments produced no effect. Meanwhile the wife again deceived her husband, and made him think that she loved him. The parrot inserts his own comments at this point, saying that if the gods themselves can be tricked by the illusions and deceptions conjured up by women, how then could ordinary men be expected to have the strength to understand the "character of women"?

So, having by deceit brought her husband under her power, the girl told him that perhaps her life could be saved by the renouncer camped at the bathing pond, who had, she said, saved thousands of people. So the husband went straightaway and begged him to come and cure his wife. He was brought to the room where she was lying and made a show of curing her. The husband was so grateful that he asked the renouncer to come every day to their house to eat, and so the two lovers were able to resume their affair.

Thus they carried on until one day the husband had to go away to another village. They seized their opportunity and took all the jewelry and left the house at night together.

They settled in another town, but soon the girl fell in love with yet another handsome young man, and betrayed the jeweler's son just as she had betrayed her husband. The parrot ends his tale of female fickleness by asking the starling whether there is anything in the world so lacking in respect and loyalty as a woman.

In this and all the other tales told by the parrot, there is never an attempt to interpret women's actions in terms of their position within a set of kinship relations, or in terms of a set of conventions that may pose irresolvable dilemmas for men and women alike. Rather than the contextualizing strategies found in the female starling's stories of men's treatment of women, we find in the parrot's tales repeated assertions that it is only in terms of women's intrinsically and essentially deceitful,

capricious, and sexually voracious nature that their actions may be understood, and that men are helpless victims of the power women have to weave a web of illusion and deception. *Triyā kā charitra*, “the nature of women,” accounts for everything in tale after tale.

Perhaps one reason that “The Story of the Parrot and Starling” has enjoyed such popularity over the last 120 years is the fact that the author of the tales has shaped them in such a way that they resonate so well with the gendered perspectives on kinship solidarities and their instabilities that are found in women’s and men’s oral traditions in northern India. The contextualizing and essentializing strategies of the written *Kissā Totā Mainā* text seem to mirror the contextualizing strategies of women’s songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya on the one hand, and the essentializing strategies of men’s songs and narratives on the other.

Women’s songs, then, interrogate aspects of the essentializing portrayals of “woman’s character” (*triyā kā charitra*) found in the songs and stories performed by men for male audiences. From the several divergent kinship positionings evident in women’s songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya, they contest the very notion of a uniform female subjectivity that is posited in men’s song and narrative and in Guha’s analysis of Chandra’s death as well. Many songs also contest the notion that uncontrollable sexuality is an inherent and essential aspect of women’s moral disposition. In focusing so persistently on the widely ramifying fissures in the web of kinship in which male-female relationships are situated in northern India, and in taking up contradictory perspectives on these relationships, they articulate a resistant presence grounded not necessarily in female solidarity but in a reflexive awareness of the ironies of their own shifting kinship identities and in a critical perspective on the solidarities premised in patrilineal kinship systems. The alternative solidarities women propose are crisscrossing and always shifting solidarities, now among women, now between a sister and a brother, and now between husband and wife. And in constructing these critiques and in proposing their alternatives, women’s expressive traditions do not simply reverse the essentializing characterizations found in other kinds of oral texts and in so many everyday conversations. Rather, the words of women’s songs seem to acknowledge that the difficulties women face are the consequences of a particular set of social practices, practices they perceive as the contradictory “customs of a degenerate age.”

Nation, Gender, and Kinship in Oral Traditions and in the National Media

When I first carried out fieldwork in Pahansu from 1977 to 1979, the village had not been electrified; thus, performed representations of kinship ties and gender consisted primarily of songs, stories, and readings of a few printed texts (such as *vrat* ritual manuals) that made their way to the village. When I returned to Pahansu in January of 1988, electricity had been available for only two or three months, but there were already thirty televisions in the village. The most popular programs at that time were the weekly Hindi film broadcasts and Sunday morning installments of the *Ramayana*, the airing of which completely emptied the village streets, as nearly everyone settled themselves before one of those thirty television sets. My son Kevin, who was six at the time, managed to discover that “He-Man: Master of the Universe” made a weekly appearance on Doordarshan, but his enthusiasm for the American cartoon series was not widely shared in Pahansu.

Over the past ten years, television sets have become an important dowry item in northern India, and the periods of time people spend in front of them seems continually to grow. During a 1993 trip to western Uttar Pradesh, I spent a considerable amount of time watching the evening National Programme, a novel kind of participant observation for me, since there were far more broadcasts of interest to village people than when I had last been in Pahansu. Programming had meanwhile been transformed, as commercial sponsorship of a wide variety of serial programs produced in India has created new forms of popular discourse that may perhaps transform the nature of women’s songs and other forms of oral tradition.

Will studies like this one of women’s expressive forms have only a sort of antiquarian interest as television comes more and more to occupy the attention of men and women in urban and rural areas alike? Or are there significant continuities between discourses about gender and kinship in folkore and older forms of popular culture on the one hand and representations of gender in contemporary Indian television on the other, such that analyses of oral traditions and analyses of contemporary media representations can inform one another? This is of course an enormously complex question. In this conclusion to an essay that has examined rural women’s contestations of dominant representations of kinship solidarities, I wish only to raise some questions about the continuing relevance of such poetic critiques as televised cultural products come more and more to occupy the attention of both men and women in India.

Purnima Mankekar (1993) has recently analyzed television serials and

viewers' responses to them in New Delhi, focusing specifically on questions of gender and national identity. She points out that communal harmony and national integration are major themes in current Indian television, and that this project of nation-building is sustained by powerful state-appointed selection committees that are able to oversee the programs that are aired. Mankekar argues that gender issues form a critical subtext in these programs: gender representations and national solidarities are fused in the discourse of televised serials. In serials such as "Param Veer Chakra" and "The Sword of Tipu Sultan," she suggests, "the male protagonists' relationships with women are *constantly* posed against their devotion to the country, and the female characters' attitudes and behavior complement or serve as a foil to the men's heroic patriotism" (546). While women's heroic self-sacrifice and dedicated motherhood are understood as critical to the welfare of the nation, womanhood is also seen to be at odds with national interests: in serial after serial, and in male viewers' interpretations of the programs, women are depicted as holding back their men in a cowardly manner from exercising their "courageous" impulses to serve the nation, out of fear for their safety and out of a desire to protect only their own narrow kinship ties. Thus, national unity and resolve is seen to be threatened by women's creation of their own solidarities, the kinds of solidarities extolled in women's songs.

Television serials and male viewers alike see the role of women in the family as analogous to the role of women in the nation: women's duty is to protect and to sacrifice for the family and the nation, and to preserve the integrity of both by checking their impulses to value their own relationships more highly than the integrity of the larger set of solidarities defined by males (551). Thus, as Mankekar argues, "attempts to depict positive and progressive images of women are circumscribed by metanarratives of nation and family" (553). Mankekar goes on to analyze female viewers' oppositional readings of these discourses: women with whom she spoke repeatedly critiqued these representations of women's duties to the nation, saying for example that it is the women who suffer when men go off to war and place their own duties to the nation above their wives' interests.

Representations of gender and kinship in male-authored songs and folk drama on the one hand, and of gender and the nation in the televised serials on the other, may thus overlap in significant ways. In both cases, women are seen as posing threats to larger male solidarities of kinship or nation, and the "ideal woman" is one who restrains her own desires and gives priority to the preservation of a unit that may not serve her own interests. But as singers and as television viewers alike, women recognize that these discourses are perpetuated to the disadvantage of women and that

the representations of gender found therein are not unchallengeable facts of life.

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“A Flowering Tree”: A Woman’s Tale

A. K. Ramanujan

In this short paper I shall present a story about a woman, told by women in the Kannada-speaking areas of south India, hoping that you will hear even through my translation the voice of the woman-teller. Then I shall offer a reading of it for discussion and suggest in passing certain characteristics of the genre of women-centered tales.

Indian folktales told around the house usually have animals, men, women, and couples as central characters. There may be other secondary characters like supernatural beings, both divine and demonic, but they are not the focus of domestic oral tales. If the tales are comic, they invert and parody the values of the serious ones. In them, kings, tigers, demons, and even gods and goddesses could be figures of fun and act like morons, as they do not in the serious tales. King and clown change places. Thus the folktales of a culture have a number of contrastive genres in dialogue with each other. Each kind of tale has special characteristics, its own “chronotope,” if one wishes to invoke Bakhtin.

For instance, animal tales tend to be political, portraying how the powerless, the small, and the cunning sidestep or outwit the powerful. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *Pañcatantra*, a book of tales meant to educate princes on the ways of the world, should consist mostly of animal tales. Where men are protagonists, especially in tales of quest, women are secondary: they are usually part of the prize, along with half a kingdom; sometimes they help the hero in his quest for the magic flower or in his derring-do (for example, getting the milk of a tigress or slaying the ogre, thus qualifying him to marry the princess and receive his half of the kingdom). These stories end in marriage—for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and of the setting up of a new family as he comes into his own. But in women-centered tales, the heroine is either already married or she is married early in the tale, and then her troubles begin. In a tale called “The Crab Prince” or “The Fish Prince” (*ēḍikumāra*, *mīnakumāra*) the young woman is often sold or married to a wild, murderous animal-bridegroom, and the rest of the story tells how she makes him human, handsome, and gentle. In another, the woman marries a

man fated to die soon (as Savitri does in the classic tale), vies with Yama the God of Death, and tricks him into giving her husband a long life (among other things). In “The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll,” he is already dead, predicted by astrologers to lie as a dead man until a good woman serves him for twelve years (or pulls out the thousands of needles from his body), after which he returns to life.

In such tales not only is the pattern of the tale different (and not easily accommodated by Propp’s schemes, which work well for male-centered tales), but the same symbols that occur elsewhere may take on different meanings. For instance, a snake in a male-centered tale is usually something to be killed, a rival phallus, if you will. In women-centered tales, that is, where women are the protagonists and also usually the tellers, snakes are lovers, husbands, uncles, donors, and helpers (see Ramanujan 1991a; Kakar 1989). Thus the meaning of the elements, the interpretation of the symbolism, depends on what kind of tale it is: a snake in an animal tale, a male-centered tale, and a women-centered tale is not the same animal. Far from being universal, symbols do not even mean the same thing as one moves from genre to genre. So the gender of the genre, if one may speak of such (and surely the gender of the teller, the listener, and the interpreter), becomes important in interpretation. A woman’s culturally constructed life-forms, her meaning-universe, is different from a man’s in such tales. This simple-minded essay is meant to further the exploration of this universe of women’s discourse.¹

Other kinds of women’s tales counter various constructs and stereotypes (held by both men and women), such as the passive female victim, conceptions of karma, or even chastity. Since I have treated these subjects elsewhere, I would like to focus here on a tale that speaks of a woman’s creativity, her agency, and the way it is bound up with her capacity for speech.

The rest of this paper will speak in some detail of one story—“A Flowering Tree”—collected in several versions in the Karnataka region over the last twenty years by me and fellow folklorists. Here is the story:

¹ This essay is part of a series that may be called Women’s Tales: They Tell a Different Story (see Ramanujan 1982, 1989, 1991b, 1993). As suggested in these papers, different kinds of women’s materials are relevant in constructing this story: proverbs and riddles used by women, female saints’ lives and poems, tales and *vrarakathās* told by women in women-only contexts, wedding songs, retellings of myths and epics of women, and so on. Folktales are part of this “female tradition,” yet need to be explored and seen as a whole in relation to other parts of the culture. The folktale universe (both men’s and women’s tales) itself is in a dialogue relation to the more official mythologies of the culture; see Ramanujan 1991b.

In a certain town, the king had two daughters and a son. The older daughter was married.

In the same town, there lived an old woman with her two daughters. She did menial jobs in order to feed and clothe and bring up her children. When the girls reached puberty, the younger sister said one day, "Sister, I've been thinking of something. It's hard on mother to work all day for our sakes. I want to help her. I will turn myself into a flowering tree. You can take the flowers and sell them for good money."

Amazed, the older sister asked, "How will you turn into a flowering tree?"

"I'll explain later. You first sweep and wash the entire house. Then take a bath, go to the well, and bring two pitchers full of water," said the younger sister.

The older sister listened to her carefully, swept and wiped and cleaned, took a bath, and brought two pitchers of water without touching them with her fingernails.

Right in front of their house stood a tall tree. The sister swept and wiped the ground under it too. Both girls then went there, and the younger one said, "Sister, I'll sit under this tree and meditate. Then you pour the water from this pitcher all over my body. I'll turn into a flowering tree. Then you pluck as many flowers as you want, but do it without breaking a sprout or tearing a leaf. When you're done, pour the water from the other pitcher over me, and I'll become a person again."

The younger sister sat down and thought of the Lord. The older one poured water from the first pitcher all over her sister. At once, her sister changed into a great big tree that seemed to stretch from earth to heaven. The older sister plucked the flowers carefully, without hurting a stalk, or sprout, or leaf. After she had enough to fill a basket or two, she emptied the second pitcher of water over the tree—and the tree became a human being again, and the younger sister stood in its place. She shook the water from her hair and stood up. They both gathered the flowers in baskets and brought them home. The flowers had a wonderful fragrance. They wove them into garlands.

"Where shall I sell them?" asked the elder sister. "Sister, why not take all of them to the king's palace? They will pay well. Mother is always doing such awful jobs for our sake. Let's pile up some money and surprise her," said the younger one.

So the older sister took the basketful of garlands before the king's palace and hawked her wares, crying, "Flowers, flowers, who wants flowers?" The princess looked out and said, "Mother, mother, the flowers smell wonderful. Buy me some." "All right, call the flower girl," said the queen. They both looked at the flowers, and they were lovely. The queen asked, "How much do you want for these?" "We are poor people, give us whatever you wish," said the older sister. They gave her a handful of coins and bought all the garlands.

When the older sister came home with the money, the younger one said, “Sister, sister, don’t tell mother. Hide it. Don’t tell anyone.”

They sold flowers like this for five days, and they had five handfuls of coins.

“Shall we show these to mother?” asked one.

“No, no, she’ll get angry and beat us,” said the other. The two girls were eager to make money.

One day the king’s son saw the flowers. They smelled wonderful. He had never seen such flowers anywhere. “What flowers are these; where do they grow; on what kind of tree; who brings them to the palace?” he wondered. He watched the girl who brought the flowers; one day he followed her home to the old woman’s house, but he couldn’t find a single flowering tree anywhere. He was quite intrigued. On his way home he tired himself out thinking, “Where on earth do they get such flowers?”

Early the next morning, while it was still dark, the king’s son went and hid himself in the tall tree in front of the old woman’s house. That day too, the girls swept and washed the space under the tree. As usual, the younger girl became the flowering tree, and after the older one had gently plucked all the flowers, the tree became the young woman again. The prince saw all this happen before his very eyes.

He came straight home and lay on his bed, face down. His father and mother came to find out what the matter was. He didn’t speak a word. The minister’s son, his friend, came and asked him, “What happened? Did anyone say anything that hurt you? What do you want? You can tell me.” Then the prince told him, bit by bit, about the girl turning into a flowering tree. “Is that all?” said the minister’s son, and reported it all to the king. The king called the minister and sent for the old woman. She arrived, shaking with fear. She was dressed in old clothes and stood near the door. After much persuasion, she sat down. The king calmed her and softly asked her, “You have two girls at your place. Will you give us one?” The old woman’s fears got worse. “How does the king know about my daughters?” she thought. She found her voice with difficulty and stammered, “All right, master. For a poor woman like me, giving a daughter is not as great a thing, is it, as your asking for one?”

The king at once offered her betel leaf and betel nut (*tāmbūla*) ceremonially on a silver platter, as a symbolic offer of betrothal. She was afraid to touch it. But the king forced it on her and sent her home.

Back home, she picked up a broom and beat her daughters. She scolded them.

“You bitches, where have you been? The king is asking after you. Where did you go?”

The poor girls didn’t understand what was happening. They stood there crying, “Amma, why are you beating us? Why are you scolding us?”

“Who else can I beat? Where did you go? How did the king hear about you?”

The old woman raged on. The terrified girls slowly confessed to what they had been doing—told her how the younger girl would turn into a

flowering tree, how they would sell the flowers and hoard the money, hoping to surprise their mother. They showed her their five handfuls of coins.

“How can you do such things, with an elder like me sitting in the house? What’s all this talk about human beings becoming trees? Who’s ever heard of it? Telling lies, too. Show me how you become a tree.”

She screamed and beat them some more. Finally, to pacify her, the younger sister had to demonstrate it all: she became a tree and then returned to her normal human self, right before her mother’s eyes.

The next day, the king’s men came to the old woman’s house and asked her to appear before the king. The old woman went and said, “Your Highness, what do you want of me?”

The king answered, “Tell us when we should set the date for the wedding.”

“What can I say, your Highness? We’ll do as you wish,” the old woman said, secretly glad by now.

The wedding arrangements began. The family made ritual designs on the wedding floor as large as the sky and built a canopied ceremonial tent (*pendal*) as large as the earth. All the relatives arrived. At an auspicious moment, the girl who knew how to become a flowering tree was given in marriage to the prince.

After the nuptial ceremony, the families left the couple alone together in a separate house. But he was aloof, and so was she. Two nights passed. Let him talk to me, thought she. Let her begin, thought he. So both the groom and the bride were silent.

On the third night, the girl wondered, “He hasn’t uttered a word. Why did he marry me?” She asked him aloud, “Is it for this bliss you married me?”

He answered roughly, “I’ll talk to you only if you do what I ask.”

“Won’t I do as my husband bids me? Tell me what you want.”

“You know how to turn into a flowering tree, don’t you? Let me see you do it. We can then sleep on flowers, and cover ourselves with them. That would be lovely,” he said.

“My lord, I’m not a demon, I’m not a goddess. I’m an ordinary mortal like everyone else. Can a human being ever become a tree?” she said very humbly.

“I don’t like all this lying and cheating. I saw you the other day becoming a beautiful tree. I saw you with my own eyes. If you don’t become a tree for me, for whom will you do that?” he chided her.

The bride wiped a tear from her eyes with the end of her sari, and said, “Don’t be angry with me. If you insist so much, I’ll do as you say. Bring two pitchers of water.”

He brought them. She uttered chants over them. Meanwhile, he shut all the doors and all the windows. She said, “Remember, pluck all the flowers you want, but take care not to break a twig or tear a leaf.”

Then she instructed him on how and when to pour water, while she sat in the middle of the room meditating on God. The prince poured one

pitcherful of water over her. She turned into a flowering tree. The fragrance of the flowers filled the house. He plucked all the flowers he wanted, and then sprinkled water from the second pitcher all over the tree. It became his bride again. She shook her tresses and stood up smiling.

They spread the flowers, covered themselves with them and went to bed. They did this again and again for several days. Every morning the couple threw out all the withered flowers from their window. The heap of flowers lay there like a hill.

The king’s younger daughter saw the heap of withered flowers one day and said to the queen, “Look, mother, brother and sister-in-law wear and throw away a whole lot of flowers. The flowers they’ve thrown away are piled up like a hill. And they haven’t given me even one.”

The queen consoled her, “Don’t be upset. We’ll get them to give you some.”

One day the prince had gone out somewhere. Then the king’s daughter (who had meanwhile spied and discovered the secret of the flowers) called all her friends and said, “Let’s go to the swings in the surahönně orchard. We’ll take my sister-in-law; she’ll turn into a flowering tree. If you all come, I’ll give you flowers that smell wonderful.”

Then she asked her mother’s permission. The queen said, “Of course, do go. Who will say no to such things?”

The daughter then said, “But I can’t go alone. Send sister-in-law.”

“Then get your brother’s permission and take her.”

The prince came there just then and his sister asked him, “Brother, brother! We’re all going to the surahönně orchard.”

“It’s not my wish that’s important. Everything depends on mother,” he answered.

So she went back to the queen and complained, “Mother, if I ask brother, he sends me to you. But you don’t really want to send her. So you are giving me excuses. Is your daughter-in-law more important than your daughter?”

The queen rebuked her, saying, “Don’t be rude. All right, take your sister-in-law with you. Take care of her and bring her back safely by evening.”

Reluctantly, the queen sent her daughter-in-law with the girls.

Everyone went to the surahönně orchard. They tied their swings to a big tree. Everyone was merrily playing on the swings. Abruptly the king’s daughter stopped all the games, brought every one down from the swings, and accosted her brother’s wife. “Sister-in-law, you can become a flowering tree, can’t you? Look, no one here has any flowers for her hair.” The sister-in-law replied angrily, “Who told you such nonsense? Am I not another human being like you? Don’t talk such crazy stuff.”

The king’s daughter taunted her, “Oho, I know all about you. My friends have no flowers to wear. I ask my sister-in-law to become a tree and give us some flowers, and look how coy she acts. You don’t want to become a tree for us. Do you do that only for your lovers?”

“*Che*, you’re awful. My coming here was a mistake,” said the sister-in-law sadly, and she agreed to become a tree.

She sent for two pitchers of water, uttered chants over them, instructed the girls on how and when to pour the water, and sat down to meditate. The silly girls didn’t listen carefully. They poured the water on her indifferently, here and there. She turned into a tree, but only half a tree.

It was already evening and it began to rain, with thunder and lightning. In their greed to get the flowers, they tore up the sprouts and broke the branches. They were in a hurry to get home. So they poured the second pitcher of water at random and ran away. When the princess changed from a tree to a person again, she had no hands and feet. She had only half a body. She was a wounded carcass.

Somehow, in that flurry of rainwater, she crawled and floated into a gutter. There she got stuck in a turning, a long way off from home.

Next morning, seven or eight cotton wagons were coming that way and a driver spotted a half-human thing groaning in the gutter. The first cart driver said, “See what that noise is about.”

The second one said, “Hey, let’s get going. It may be the wind, or it may be some ghost, who knows?”

But the last cart driver stopped his cart and took a look. There lay a shapeless mass, a body. Only the face was a beautiful woman’s face. She wasn’t wearing a thing.

“Ayyo, some poor woman,” he said in sorrow, and threw his turban cloth over her, and carried her to his cart, paying no heed to the dirty banter of his fellows. Soon they came to a town. They stopped their carts there and lowered this “thing” on to a ruined pavilion. Before they drove on, the cart driver said, “Somebody may find you and feed you. You will survive.” Then they drove on.

When the king’s daughter came home alone, the queen asked her, “Where’s your sister-in-law? What will your brother say?” The girl answered casually, “Who knows? Didn’t we all find our own way home? Who knows where she went?”

The queen panicked and tried to get the facts out of the girl. “Ayyo! You can’t say such things. Your brother will be angry. Tell me what happened.”

The girl said whatever came to her head. The queen found out nothing. She had a suspicion that her daughter had done something foolish. After waiting several hours, the prince talked to his mother.

“Amma, amma.”

“What is it, son?”

“What has happened to my wife? She went to the orchard to play on the swings and never came back.”

“O Rama, I thought she was in your bedroom all this time. Now you’re asking me!”

“Oh, something terrible has happened to her,” thought the prince. He went and lay down in grief. Five days passed, six days passed, fifteen

days passed, but there was no news of his wife. They couldn’t find her anywhere.

“Did the stupid girls push her into a tank? Did they throw her into a well? My sister never liked her. What did the foolish girls do?” he asked his parents and the servants. What could they say? They, too, were worried and full of fear. In disgust and despair, he changed into an ascetic’s long robe and went out into the world. He just walked and walked, not caring where he went.

Meanwhile, the girl who was now a “thing” somehow reached the town into which her husband’s elder sister had been given in marriage. Every time the palace servants and maids passed that way to fetch water, they used to see her. They would say to each other, “She glows like a king’s daughter.” Then one of them couldn’t stand it any longer and decided to tell the queen.

“Amma, Amma, she looks very much like your younger brother’s wife. Look through the seeing-glass and see for yourself.”

The queen looked and the face did seem strangely familiar. One of the maids suggested: “Amma, can I bring her to the palace, shall I?”

The queen poohpoohed it, “We’ll have to serve her and feed her. Forget it.”

So the next day again the maids mumbled and moaned, “She’s very lovely. She’ll be like a lamp in the palace. Can’t we bring her here?”

“All right, all right, bring her if you wish. But you’ll have to take care of her without neglecting palace work,” ordered the queen.

They agreed and brought the Thing to the palace. They bathed her in oils, dressed her well and sat her down at the palace door. Every day they applied medicines to her wounds and made her well. But they could not make her whole. She had only half a body.

Now the prince wandered through many lands and at last reached the gates of his sister’s palace. He looked like a crazy person. His beard and whiskers were wild. When the maids were fetching and carrying water, they saw him. They went back to the queen in the palace and said, “Amma, someone is sitting outside the gate, and he looks very much like your brother. Look through the seeing-glass and see.”

Grumbling indifferently, the queen went to the terrace and looked through the seeing-glass. She was surprised. “Yes, he does look remarkably like my brother. What’s happened to him? Has he become a wandering ascetic? Impossible,” she thought. She sent her maids down to bring him in. They said to him, “The Queen wants to see you.”

He brushed them aside. “Why would she want to see me?” he growled.

“No, sir, she really wants to see you, please come,” they insisted and finally persuaded him to come in. The queen took a good look at him and knew it was really her brother.

She ordered the palace servants to heat up vats of oil and organize great vessels of steaming water for his bath. She served him and nursed him, for she knew he was her brother. She served him new dishes each

day, and brought him new styles of clothing. But whatever she did, he didn't speak a word to his elder sister. He didn't even ask, "Who are you? Where am I?" By this time, they both knew they were brother and sister.

The queen wondered, "Why doesn't he talk to me though I treat him so royally? What could be the reason? Could it be some witch's or demon's magic?"

After some days, she started sending one or another of her beautiful maids into his bedroom every night. She sent seven maids in seven days. The maids held his hands and caressed his body, and tried to rouse him from his stupor. But he didn't say a word or do a thing.

Finally, the servant maids got together and dressed up the Thing that sat at the palace door. With the permission of the disgusted queen, they left It on his bed. He neither looked up nor said anything. But this night, It pressed and massaged his legs with its stump of an arm. It moaned strangely. He got up once and looked at It. It was sitting at his feet. He stared at It for a few moments and then realized It was really his lost wife. Then he asked her what had happened. She who had been silent all these months suddenly broke into words. She told him whose daughter she was, whose wife, and what had happened to her.

"What shall we do now?" he asked.

"Nothing much. We can only try. Bring two pitchers of water, without touching them with your fingernails," she replied.

That night he brought her two pitchers of water without anyone's knowledge. She uttered chants over them and instructed him: "Pour the water from this pitcher over me and I'll become a tree. Wherever there is a broken branch, set it right. Wherever a leaf is torn, put it together. Then pour the water of the second pitcher."

Then she sat down and meditated.

He poured the water on her from the first pitcher. She became a tree. But the branches had been broken, the leaves had been torn. He carefully set each one right and bound them up and gently poured water from the second pitcher all over the tree. Now she became a whole human being again. She stood up, shaking the water off her hair, and fell at her husband's feet.

She went and woke up the queen, her sister-in-law, and touched her feet also. She told the astonished queen the whole story. The queen wept and embraced her. Then she treated the couple to all kinds of princely food and service and had them sit in the hall like a bride and bridegroom for a ritual celebration called *hasĕ*. She kept them in her palace for several weeks and then sent them home to her father's palace with cartloads of gifts.

The king was overjoyed at the return of his longlost son and daughter-in-law. He met them at the city gates and took them home on an elephant howdah in a grand ceremonial procession through the city streets. In the palace they told the king and queen everything that had happened. Then the king had seven barrels of burning lime poured into a great pit and

threw his youngest daughter into it. All the people who saw this said to themselves, “After all, every wrong has its punishment.”²

One could say many things about this story. For instance, one of its themes resonates with our present concerns with ecology and conservation. Each time the younger daughter becomes a tree, she begs the person who is with her to treat it/her gently and not to pluck anything more than the flowers. Indeed, we were told by our mothers when we were children not to point to growing plants in the garden with our sharp fingernails, but only with our knuckles; our fingernails might scratch the growing ends. Poems like the following in classical Tamil speak of the sisterhood between a woman and a tree:

What Her Girl Friend Said

to him (on her behalf) when he came by daylight

Playing with friends one time
 we pressed a ripe seed
 into the white sand
 and forgot about it
 till it sprouted
 and when we nursed it tenderly
 pouring sweet milk with melted butter,
 Mother said,
 “It qualifies
 as a sister to you, and it’s much better
 than you,”
 praising this laurel tree.

So
 we’re embarrassed
 to laugh with you here

O man of the seashore
 with glittering waters
 where white conch shells,
 their spirals turning right,
 sound like the soft music
 of bards at a feast.

² Beck and Claus 1987:142-50.

Yet, if you wish,
there's plenty of shade
elsewhere.³

Or there is the Vīraśaiva poem that connects the gentle treatment of plants with other kinds of love, by Dasarēśwara, a saint who would not even pluck flowers for his god but would pick only the ones that had dropped to the ground by themselves (Ramanujan 1973:55):

Knowing one's lowliness
in every word;

the spray of insects in the air
in every gesture of the hand;

things living, things moving
come sprung from the earth
under every footfall;
and when holding a plant
or joining it to another
or in the letting it go

to be all mercy
to be light
as a dusting brush
of peacock feathers:

such moving, such awareness
is love that makes us one
with the Lord
Dasarēśwara.

They say in Kannada that when a woman is beautiful, “one must wash one's hands to touch her” (*kai tōlakōṇḍu muṭṭabeku*). There is also the suggestion that a tree is vulnerable to careless handling, just as a woman is. A tree that has come to flower or fruit will not be cut down; it is treated as a mother, a woman who has given birth. Thus the metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture. A relevant one here is that the words for “flowering” and for “menstruation” are the same in languages like Sanskrit and Tamil. In Sanskrit, a menstruating woman is called a *puṣpavatī* (a woman in flower), and in Tamil *pūttal* means “menstruation.” Menstruation itself is a form

³ *Narriṇai*, 172, anonymous author, in Ramanujan 1985:33.

and a metaphor for a woman’s special creativity. Thus a woman’s biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolized by flowering. In this tale, as in a dream, the metaphor is literalized and extended. The heroine literally becomes a tree and produces flowers without number over and over again, as the occasion requires. It is her special gift, one that she does not wish to squander or even display. She makes her secret known to her sister first only because they have no money and because she wishes to save her mother from some of the rigors of poverty. After that, her gift becomes known to others and she has to do it at their bidding.

As described in the tale, out of the five times she becomes a tree, only the first and last times are voluntary acts. The second time, her mother orders her to show her how she earned her money because she suspects her of selling her body. Then the prince eavesdrops on one of these transformations and wants to have such a woman for himself. Once he gets her, he compels her to become a tree in his bedchamber on his wedding night, and on every night thereafter. It becomes almost a sexual ritual, a display of her spectacular talent to arouse him sexually, so that they can sleep together on the flowers from her body. Even before she gets used to it, thanks to the flowers that pile up outside her bedroom window, her young adolescent sister-in-law gets curious, puts her eye to a chink in their door, and wants to show her off to her companions. She uses her own and her mother’s clout as in-laws to coerce her to go with her alone to the orchard; she and the other pubescent teenage girls tease her (“Will you do it only for your lovers?”), playing on the sexual nature of her talent, and force her to become a tree. Despite her abject requests not to hurt her, they ravage the tree; when she is returned to her human state, she too is left ravaged and mutilated. It is a progressive series of violations until she finally ends up being a Thing.

In a way people have begun to treat her as a thing, asking her “to make a spectacle of herself” by displaying her secret gift. In a way, one might say, even the first time, she herself becomes a tree to sell her flowers, making herself a commodity. The fifth and last time she becomes a tree, she has to wait for the right person and the safe occasion, another bedchamber in an older married sister-in-law’s household, with a husband who has missed her and searched for her and thereby changed.

These five occasions seem pointedly to ask the question: when is a woman safe in such a society? She is safe with her own sister,⁴ maybe with

⁴ In women’s tales, the true antagonist as well as the helper of a woman is another woman, just as in men’s tales the hero battles always in the company of an older male, a father-figure, and often with brothers. Stepmothers, stepsisters, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-

her mother, but not quite with a newly wedded husband who cares more for a display of her talent than for her safety, and most certainly not with a teenage sister-in-law or mother-in-law. She is safe only with a married sister-in-law (who is probably not threatened or envious), and lastly with a husband who, through an experience of loss, has matured enough to care for her as a person.

As I said earlier, she is most vulnerable when she is a tree. She can neither speak nor move. She is most open to injury when she is most attractive, when she is exercising her gift of flowering. Each time she becomes a tree, she begs the one who is pouring the water to be careful not to hurt her. Yet, paradoxically, when she is mutilated, she cannot be healed directly. She can be made whole only by becoming the tree again, becoming vulnerable again, and trusting her husband to graft and heal her broken branches.

The recurrent unit of the story is “girl becoming tree becoming girl.” This is also the whole story; the recurrent unit encapsulates the career of this woman in the story. What are the differences between a woman and a tree? A woman can speak, can move, can be an agent on her own behalf in ways that a tree cannot. Yet symbolically speaking, the tree isolates and gives form to her capacity to put forth flower and fragrance from within, a

law, and rival women who usurp the heroine’s place abound in these women’s tales. In the tale of Lampstand Woman, even Fate is Mother Fate. (In a man’s tale, “Outwitting Fate,” Fate is Brahmā, a male.) Men in these tales are usually wimps, under the thumbs of their mothers or other wives; mostly they are absent. Sometimes they are even dead, waiting to be revived by their wives’ ministrations. Mother-in-law tales in south India have no fathers-in-law. The wife and the mother share a single male figure (who is both son and husband); the older and the younger woman are rivals for power over him. In other tales, where the central figure is an active heroine, she may battle alongside a man, usually her husband—sometimes she has to rescue him from his scrapes and often from bondage to another woman. In a tale called “A Wager” (an Indian oral tale, also found in the eleventh-century *Kathāsaritsāgara*, it is also the story of Shakespeare’s *All’s Well that Ends Well*, which he gets from Italian novella-writers, who probably got it from India), she talks back or out-riddles an arrogant, spoiled prince who vows that he will punish her for out-talking him by first marrying her and then abandoning her. She makes a wager with him that she will beget a son by him and get the son to capture the father and bring him to her. She wins the wager by disguising herself as an acrobat dancer, sleeps with him, and gets herself with child by him. Through her son who is an expert in all the arts, including banditry, she triumphs over her husband who is now the king. Her son outwits all the father-figures in the realm, especially the police chief and the king. He finally captures the king, his father, in a humiliating laundry sack, smothered in the dirty linen of the whole town, and delivers him bound hand and foot to his mother. The father and the mother are reunited, if this could be called a reunion. The central bond in this case is between the mother and son, not between the husband and wife who are really in conflict.

gift in which she can glory, as well as one that makes her vulnerable. It expresses a young woman’s desire to flower sexually and otherwise as well as the dread of being ravaged, a possibility that the very gift brings with it. In telling such a tale, older women could be reliving these early, complex, and ambivalent feelings towards their own bodies—and projecting them for younger female listeners.⁵ If boys are part of the audience, as they often are, the males could imaginatively participate in them in ways that might change their sensitivity towards women.

The repetition of the unit “girl becomes tree becomes girl” marks the divisions of the story and gives it its narrative time, the *chronos* of the “chronotope.” In a typical male-centered story, this dimension is marked by the adventures of the prince, his failures, and final success, often measured in threes. The spaces in the women-centered story are marked by alternations of Interior and Exterior (the *akam* and *puram* of classical Tamil poetics), by alternations of domestic and public space in which the action takes place. In this story, the given instances of the transformations move from the girl’s own yard to the prince’s bedchamber, then to the orchard, where it is most dangerous, and back to a second bedchamber. Indeed, one of the oppositions between a woman and a tree is that the former is an interior (*akam*) being, both living indoors and having an interior space, a heart (all of which are meant by the South Dravidian term *akam*), and the latter lives outdoors, in a public space (*puram*). It is one of the ironies of this story that she is forced to become a tree in the wrong space, in the bedchamber. And when she becomes a tree in the orchard, the greatest harm comes to her. These transitions emphasize the special symbolic charge of the tree: it is not any old tree, but a phase in a human career; its past and future is human and female, capable of living both within and without. Such is the time-space, the chronotope, of this woman’s tale. Other women’s tales also play with this balance and alternation of interiors and exteriors.

In the orchard, with the wild pubescent girls, the young woman becomes a tree, full of fears that are all too real and unable to return to her whole human female being: she becomes a Thing, something that has the face of a woman but the helplessness of the tree. She is neither woman nor tree, but both, betwixt and between. The Thing cannot move by itself and does not speak. She lives in the servants’ quarters, both within and without. It is only when she speaks to a “significant other,” her husband in this tale, and tells him her story, that she is able to return to her original female body. She waits for recognition by him. She waits to tell her story in its

⁵ I am indebted to a discussion with Sudhir Kakar for this formulation.

entirety and give him instructions on how to heal her: he is to pour water on her, and, when she becomes a tree, to put back the broken leaves and branches lovingly in their place, and pour the water on it—and she will be whole again. This is also the time when she voluntarily, and for her own good, undergoes the transformation. She has recovered her agency.

I would suggest that agency in these women's tales is connected with their being able to tell their own story and its being heard.⁶ After the first time, every time that she protests that she does not wish to become a tree, she is not heard; she is forced to do so against her will. Many women's tales end with this kind of self-story being told and being heard. Very often, as in the story of "The Dead Prince and The Talking Doll," they are told in an adjoining room, to a lamp or a talking doll that says "Hm Hm!" as a human listener would when he hears a story. The husband overhears it and learns the truth about his wife. It moves her from being a silent or unheard woman to a speaking person with a story to tell. Indeed, the whole tale tells the story of how this woman acquires a story through experience, mostly suffering—until then she has no story to tell. In some tales, as in "The Lampstand Woman," this is explicit: she is usually a princess whose life is a blank at the beginning; she marries and her troubles begin. She becomes a servant, usually in her own sister-in-law's house, is accused of stealing a child's necklace, and is punished. Her head is shaved and a lamp is placed on a cowdung patty and slapped on her shaved head. She becomes a living lampstand and has to light the path of visitors. But she hardly speaks until her suffering reaches its nadir; when the husband from whom she is separated arrives, she has to light the path to his bed. He does not recognize her and asks for a story. She tells her own story and as the narrative proceeds it dawns on the husband that he is in the presence of his own wife, who is now a lampstand woman to whom all these horrible things have happened, unbeknownst to him. When the whole story is recapitulated in her own voice, he recognizes her and the tale ends in a reunion.

One may add that speech means not only agency for the woman but also sexuality. In many Kannada tales, the coded phrase for sexual intimacy

⁶ In other tales, there are other ways for a woman to be an agent on her own behalf: for instance, in tales of abandoned wives who have to travel, often to rescue their own dastardly husbands, they travel in male disguise—as women writers like George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte often wrote under male pseudonyms. In some tales, they are not safe with their brothers or fathers who have incestuous designs on them, though the folktale universe, as it explores many different emotions and attitudes toward the same situations, also presents protective brothers, though rarely protective fathers.

between a woman and a man is “they talked to each other.” In a tale about a husband who is not sleeping with his wife, the forlorn wife is asked by a caring old woman, “Isn’t your husband talking to you?” When she hears that he is not, she proceeds to find ways of making the husband talk to the wife, even angrily: she asks the young woman to put pebbles in his yogurt or rice, or to pack salt into his curry so that he can get angry with her and they can exchange words. At the end of “Dead Prince,” the prince and the young woman are found “talking to each other all night.”

Since writing about the transformation of the “dumb” woman to a speaking person, and the relationship of speech to a woman’s agency, I came across Ruth Bottigheimer’s pages on speech in Grimm’s household tales, especially in “Cinderella” (1987:ch. 6). She points out how speech is an indication of power. Many recent sociolinguistic works have been concerned with the question of who speaks when, for discourse is a form of domination, and speech use is “an index of social values and the distribution of power within a society” (51).

In English, one speaks of “having a voice, having a say;” in German *mundig* (from the word for mouth) means legal majority and legal personhood. The poor do not have it; they are silent. Women, like children, should be seen, not heard: “Since the early days of the Church, women had been barred from speaking in the house of god, as well as preaching, teaching, or speaking in public” (Brown 1986:59-60). The good woman has a soft low voice and says little; Cordelia in *King Lear* is praised for this. Eve’s sin begins with her speaking to Satan. There are many jokes about garrulous women: women, generally speaking, are generally speaking.

In the later editions of the folktales that Wilhelm Grimm rewrote, as a male rewriting women’s tales, he gives women little direct speech; he also substitutes *sagen* or “said” for *sprechen* or “spoke,” as the latter is more forthright. *Sprechen* emphasizes the act of speaking and *sagen* the content of an utterance (see Bottigheimer 1987:55). In his last version of “Cinderella” (1857), Cinderella, the good girl, speaks only once in direct speech; the bad women, the stepsisters and the stepmother, five and seven times; the prince in authority has eight direct speeches and the ineffectual father only three, two of which are mere thoughts. However, this feature may be different in different cultures: in Danish variants, where women have greater freedom and power, Cinderella is not gagged as in the German ones. It would be interesting to ask similar questions in the Indian context, especially of tales that are told by both men and women. It would also be

revealing to see how men like myself interpret these tales and what biases we bring to them.⁷

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