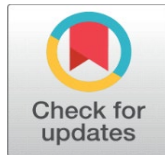


WOMEN AND FOLKLORE IN HINDU TRADITIONAL FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Most of the women-centric folk rituals, as a performative act, take place inside a house, which constitutes a major part of everyday life and socio-cultural practices, usually performed by the women of the family which gets transferred from one generation to another. The space that has been created for and by the women in a household is considered sacred in Hindu religion, as in this space the common socio-cultural and religious beliefs, values and meanings are assimilated, and practiced forming a culture, which corresponds and reflects the larger worldview of the society. In folklore studies, these cultural expressions are studied in the context of their current performances. However, this paper explores the theoretical aspect of different keywords such as women and household; women and folk-religion; women and performative folk rituals; recurring themes in women folklore; interpretation of signs and symbols used in folk rituals performed by women; and folklore and femininity. These keywords present the folklore concepts and theoretical understandings of 'folklore in making' around women, borrowing important folklore theories and interdisciplinary approaches.

Keywords: Folk Rituals, Hindu Traditions, Hindu Religion, Gender Studies, Women Spaces, Akam, Puram, Signs and Symbols, Femininity, Folk Culture Studies

"Human beings make society just as society makes them."
_Sherry Ortner



1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. WOMEN AND HOUSEHOLD

Most of the women-centric folk rituals, as a performative act, take place inside a house, which constitutes a major part of everyday life and socio-cultural practices, usually performed by the women of the family which gets transferred from one generation to another. The space that has been created for and by the women in a household is considered sacred in Hindu religion, as in this space the common socio-cultural and religious beliefs, values and meanings are assimilated, and practiced forming a culture, which corresponds and reflects the bigger worldview of the society. Children are brought up in this culturally preserved community, where they learn and propagate the shared ideas, through continuous practices and repeated assertions, somewhat overshadowing their individuality. In this environment, they are also assigned with their gender-based performative behaviours according to their considered biological sex, so that the constructed normative pattern can be created and preserved to hold a patriarchal societal structure. In a patriarchal society, where men control the outside space and are worshiped for their role, women are given a position in this space where they are held responsible for maintaining the auspiciousness and well-being of the familial space inside and outside. The "akam" space, according to A.K. Ramanujan is characterised by the internal space

of a household, which is women-centric symbolising the value, beliefs and ethos of their community in a society as practiced and preserved by women in a more sacred and auspicious liminal space, marking the boundary of “puram” space, which is more male-centric performed in the outside spaces of a household symbolising the strength and vagility of their community in a society. These spaces provide a fostering ground for the next generation to learn, play and perform everyday living in a more socially accepted structure.

2. WOMEN AND FOLK-RELIGION

Although, in Hindu religion, women play a strong significant position. In the household spaces there are several folk deities which closely resemble the auspicious, yet everyday female qualities and ethos, resonating with the lives of female practitioners. The concept of “Shakti” is the one unifying factor which provides the greater meaning to the celebrated image of female power and binds all female goddesses, folk deities and even mortal female members as part of one magnanimous image. Women in such traditions grow up assuming similar roles, which they witness from their childhood as a norm, systematically passed down from their female successors. In most exogamous social arrangement of marriage, especially in Hindu tradition, where women are expected to move out of their paternal family to their in-law’s family after the marriage, they carry their traditions, rituals and cultures with them. In such scenario, “she” becomes not just a carrier, but also a caretaker of these shared beliefs. From the very beginning female members in a family are conditioned for their in-house jobs/chores. Also, women and their gendered identity are especially fabricated in such a way that it holds contradictions in itself. While bearing the “idea of women” in a society, the male dominated religious texts either portray them on the one hand as a constructive force for their ability to reproduce; while on the other as a destructive force for their ability to dysfunction a societal structure by moving out of the sacred space; hence “she” ends up being an easy victim and subject of control, dominance and oppression.

This idea is furthermore complexed, as in a pre- dominantly patriarchal society, where women’s space is often limited to the security of four-walled household set-up for all their life. In such situations, where women tend to lose the agencies of their free will in experiencing individual self, they carve space and find an expression through folklore, folk practices and rituals on an everyday basis, often sanctified surrounding a religious discourse. Although, due to the old history of patriarchy, which has conditioned men and women alike to think in a more linear way, hinders and highly influences such possibilities of re-creating a “space of one’s own”. While performing folklore, folk performances and rituals, which directly portrays the socio-cultural traditions, the performers somehow manage to find a voice which expresses their joy, satisfaction, lament, pain, questions, complains etc. reflecting the struggles of ordinary life invariably.

However, to understand the position of women in a society, it is important to trace the history of patriarchy and the politics around the female body. Gerda Lerner in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* convicts that patriarchal system is historical, and she rejects its ‘natural’ existence, “it has a beginning in history. If that is so, it can be ended by historical process” (Lerner 6). It is noted by several other historians that patriarchy emerged during Neolithic era dating 10, 200 BCE, as a means to form small colonies and establish ownership. As men and women fixed their roles to substantiate the idea of creating a household, a secured domain, where women reproduced future progenies and took care of the internal states of livelihood, while men took external responsibilities to fetch basic need for a family, hence creating a mutual way of sustenance. After men grew aware of his role in paternity and held control of the extensive outside world, their desire to own a herd and a territory led them to prefer virgin or ‘chaste’ women to claim ‘ownership’. This abstained females from polygamy to confirm the origins of single descendants and capsulated them to a limited single household. Gradually, a male-oriented discourse was formed as a means of communication, where women were active, as well as passive, recipients of the shared information, which is still preserved and celebrated by both men and women through folklore and its forms. As Lerner explains, “Women have “made history”, yet they have been kept from knowing their history and from interpreting history, either their own or that of men” (Lerner 5).

Thereafter, as the patriarchal set-up strongly established, women were soon reduced to a subservient positions, to share and exchange between two families, and its male kind for the means of reproduction to increase the mass of their clans and form bigger societal groups inheriting same values and culture, safeguarded by men and followed by women, further promoted gender-based discrimination. While these normative bearings set certain ‘inequal’ gender roles and behaviours as weak, emotional, adaptive, irrational, creative, etc, on the other hand strong men distinguished as more strong, practical, rigid, rational, logical, etc, on the basis of socially constructed psychology of the two “naturally equal” born sexes. Such common beliefs seeped deeply in the subconscious and conscious minds of the constructed civil society in the name of age-old folk culture, beliefs and tradition performed through many folklore practices, from daily routines

to occasional practices. Moreover, the possession of power created a realm of social politics to enforce larger control of one leader or one ideology (pre-dominantly of males) and the dominance over other smaller groups, acquiring and exploiting land, wealth and 'commodified' women through clan fights. This created the sense of insecurity and believed competition between several existing groups, impeding an egalitarian set-up within a civil society by further diving the society on the basis of class, caste, race etc. which is also well represented through different folklore practiced by women of different caste, class, race, religion, etc. A fabricated self-imposed notion of 'honour' was also pressed on both males and females to prosper in their limited fields of action, however, any chances of 'role- reversal' were majorly unacceptable.

In India two types of traditions, Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic, prospered invariably in the socio-cultural beliefs, which are solidified. Especially, after the widespread of written Sanskritic texts around "Greater Traditions", preserving important mythologies, representing "absolute truth", provides religious background to the orally transmitted folk discourses, therefore blurring the lines between the folk ethos and local worldview. This creates a dynamic structure, where folk heroes, who are more human are given a sanctified godly position, in form of human incarnations, as most commonly known as avatar (descents) in Hindu religion, giving rise to idol worshiping. In this specific context, the image of women gets transformed from a natural and symbolic image, an epitome of 'Nature' into the religious image, an assistant godly wife/daughter of a higher form, such as Parvati to Shiva, Radha to Krishna, Sita to Ram, etc. As these women are always shown as a helping figure, standing beside the bigger 'male' form, where they also show their perseverance, love, kindness and responsibility to acquire that position. These religious images of godly women are more conservative and limits women's position to be worshipped inside the sanctuary of a household, creating a bounded space. The female body is also subjected to the 'male gaze' in such space, as she is expected to be the perfect counterpart, who is conventionally beautiful and socially cultured. These designated performative roles and behaviour typecast a gendered identity surrounding the female body and her space, which traps her in the fabricated conscience of moral, judgement and values. Such character-based impositions leave woman as mere a subject to the scrutiny, "in and out" the space. In religious texts women lose their voice to the male dominated one when portrayed in myths and religious stories, whereas the scope of interpretation is also limited as women were rarely theologians. While, in several folklore the subjugation and scrutinization of women is often expressed and lamented, creating a more liberal, self-expressive and critical voices, a space for "women's lived experience and self-representation" inside its spatial domain.

3. WOMEN AND PERFORMATIVE FOLK-RITUALS

The most recurring performative role for women in folk rituals, especially in India, revolve around the concept of purity and fertility. Female body is symbolised as a reproductive energy, during most folk-rituals. The act of keeping fast for the protection of their husband, brothers, kin, environment, and of the whole family construct a space, where they hold the agency to practice it more passively. In Hindu tradition, young females before coming to the age of puberty are considered as a living sacred deity. The folk ritual called kanjak/kanjaka puja observes a long day fast and offerings are made to the young female members to please them, ultimately pleasing the traditional goddess, who is believed to have descend on the earth in their form. Even during the Navratri on the last day, nine young females are invited to offer food, decorative stuffs and toys to please them, who symbolise the productive force of Nature through them, often portrayed by nine religious deities symbolic to strength, wisdom, perseverance, protector, beauty, virtues, etc. who are worshipped for nine days of Navratri.

Although it is arguable that the sacred image of women is another gender-based construct, where women are just put on the pedestal of divinity and purity to control their reproductive ability. From the very young age, women are made aware of their role to reproduce and keep the name of the family going in the society. As often, women are physically and mentally exploited to re-create male progeny as if delivering males in a patriarchal society makes out an ultimate profit of the marital bond. Even the idea of purity holds stigmatisation and further control over the reproductive part of the women, which is vagina, in order to ensure chastity. The relation between woman and her vagina is controlled and exploited by man and his phallus, ultimately delineating the image of women from a human being to her vaginal space. Therefore, we see the dichotomy of domination layering up and politically complexing the body and space of women in a patriarchal society.

However, it has been noted that women delimit the interference of men in such performative folk rituals, where she gains a subjective control to practice folk rituals and create a symbolic universe around her, expressing her true desires and space. As folk rituals are often performed in mas, which signifies the unity and shared knowledge of women, who

create varied personal discourses of their own struggles and worldview, attaining specialisations in it. Although, many a times, such folk rituals also suffer the subjugation at the hands of male body. Folk example, a prominent Gali (abuse) folk ritual is often performed by women during the marriage rites, where they abuse the exploitative patriarchal system, pissing the in-laws for taking dowry and exploiting the rights of the bride and her family. But mostly it has been sunned down by progressive men, symbolically silencing the voices of women, who expressed their pain and agony under the male dominance.

There are many other folk rituals in Hindu religion, where women performers are aware of their constitutive position, hence they grow more conscious of it while performing. As A. K. Ramanujan points out at the role of these folk rituals in women lives, he states, folk rituals help in “modelling and scripting their psychic and relational lives.” (Ramanujan 46)

4. RECURRING THEMES IN WOMEN FOLKLORE

There are a few common recurring themes specially in women folklore, which are love, pathos, separation, marriage, purity, fertility, etc. Women as a body are given a role of conservationist, caring, kind, protective, creational, etc; keeping in mind all these preconceived roles and values constituted around a women identity, she represents the same psyche-process through the performative and expressive folklore surrounding thematic base. It is crucial to note that her folk image, body and space mostly revolves around her co-dependency on the favour of her male member of the society. She is seen worshipping for a good husband, brother, nephews; yet she is conscious about her position, and uses her artistic abilities to express laments, complains, and show pain of separation from the lover, usually separated by the family because of class, caste, race, region difference, or simply to deny her the agency to choose for herself.

5. INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS USED IN FOLK RITUALS PERFORMED BY WOMEN

Folk rituals are symbolic representation which communicate between the “folk” and their socio-culture praxis. The messages and values of folk customs, beliefs, traditions are generated and preserved through folklore and folk materials. The possibilities of interpretation of these folk signs and symbols create a space of individuality within the private and public space of the “folk”. The co-relational quality around the abstract signs and symbols, creates a new genre of symbolic culture within domains of the folklore genre. Although, the signified, “presumption of meanings” created by the cultural signifiers also establishes an idea of position and hierarchy within the system (prise de position), carried through the common knowledge, language and religion, according to the Gramscian concept of “spontaneous philosophy”.

Most signs and symbols signify the role of Nature, human as a part of nature, unification of soul and body, and socio-cultural life in a rural set-up of folk traditions. However, due to the construction of hierarchies within the symbolic space of language, beliefs, rituals, customs and traditions, the interpretation of signs and symbols used in the same folklore vary according to the area, class, caste, race, gender, etc. For example, use of local birds and animals, use of common dialect which changes from place to place, use of material culture such as sickle for famer, books for brahmin (a sub-division of higher- caste in Hindu religion), broom for chamar (a sub-division of lower-caste in Hindu religion) and ornaments for women, etc. But the significance and the larger meaning remains somewhat same, irrespective of these changes.

Therefore, the importance of signs and symbols in folklore and folk rituals is to demonstrate a socio-cultural life; and through these signs and symbols the scope of interpretation widens up which tries to assimilate all the people in its form, by providing an individual meaning put in context of the social life. Therefore, in most of the folklore and folk rituals different forms, motifs, signs and symbols are integral to create a macrocosm of larger meaning of “celebration of folk life”. As H. S. Gill in A Phulkari from Bhatinda explains:

“It is a small world where nature is not very distant from culture. However, the conceptual distances are created by the abstract forms of multicolored squares and circles, impressionistic configurations and the composite blend of all symbols required for a propositional, harmonious setting of a carefully worked out meditational system. In its extreme simplicity lies its sublimity” (Gill 44)

6. FOLKLORE AND FEMININITY

Folklore as a stream of consciousness, travels from one place to another carrying the rich culture, traditions, beliefs and rituals, similarly, women who are constituted into 'being and becoming' travel from one family to another carrying the shared knowledge and pass it on to the future generations. The pliable characteristic of folklore, as it changes forms and content according to the need of the time and space, similarly the gendered behaviour of the women makes them adjustable according to the need of the patriarchal society. It can also be looked upon, as one unravels the dichotomies between 'classical' and 'folk' tradition that the latter is dominated and subjugated by the dominant culture of classical religion and art, similarly as female body suffers at the hand of male body. Earlier, as classical scripture-based religion came into being, it influenced the folk traditions, which was considered uncivilised and rural, and was mostly orally performed and practiced.

As Seemanthini Niranjana in her book *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualisation and The Female Body* (2001), notes that space and gender exist in the moves of abstraction, and both the entities are defined in relation with their "oppositional" one:

"Space, for instance, is spoken of as that which is open, or lacking solidity, immediately evoking a strong association with emptiness.... strikingly similar disposition embodies gender...is conceptualised as a quality or identity deriving its significance from a delineation against its opposite, as in the observation that to be female is to be non-male." (Niranjana 63)

Similarly, folk tradition can also be read in oppositional relation with the classical; wherein folk losses and gain its value being non-classical. Folklore, more or less, is adjoined with illiterate folk, a socio-culturally, politically, and economically weaker section of the society; mostly subordinated women of the society perform the 'folk' rituals. While classical art and tradition have always a part of civilised literate society; while rich, male influential section of the society holds patronage of the classical art culture. As female are also subjected to the security and support provided by the males of the family. Yet, in such continuum praxis folklore maintain its folksiness to create a distinct feature, similarly, females try to embrace the femininity as a distinct feature, without losing it to the masculine subjugation.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None .

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