

**CHANGING IDENTITY: WOMEN AND THE RITUAL OF *RATAULI* IN
NEPAL**

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Abstract

My research “Changing Identity: Women and the Ritual of *Ratauli* in Nepal” explores the paradoxes regarding the constructions of sexuality of the so-called high caste Hindu women in the local practice of *ratauli*. It is an event in the Hindu marriage in Nepal, which is celebrated by only women. Through the analyses of my informants’ experiences at *ratauli*, I address in what ways gender identities are transformed in and through the sexual investments of this ritual. I have analyzed my informants’ life stories of *ratauli* and further conducted interviews with them to explore the different performances of sexuality enacted by the participants: married and unmarried Hindu women.

Women’s different experience in *ratauli* demonstrates that, in practice, constructions of sexuality among the Hindu women are not universal, and there is a great variety in different categories such as young, old, married and unmarried women of the so-called high caste Hindu women. Participating in *ratauli* made women self-critical of their own subjectivities and their own sexuality. Regardless of their age and marital status, all women identified this ritual as celebration of femaleness and female solidarity. However, older women, in comparison to younger married and unmarried women are ready to challenge the restrictions imposed on their sexuality. Women performing in *ratauli* see themselves change their identities through their performances and roles in *ratauli* as a form of resistance, which leaves their lives unaffected.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Women's sexuality is always considered a matter of shame and is never supposed to be discussed openly in the context of orthodox Hindu society of Nepal. The orthodox Hindu society in Nepal attaches so much value to men's freedom (sexual and otherwise) but never considers women's desires and aspirations outside men's interests. As for myself, I grew up in an upper class/caste patriarchal Hindu family in Kathmandu¹, believing that as a woman I had certain obligations towards men who were seen as our protectors and breadwinners. From childhood, I was used to seeing my mother and aunts attending to household tasks without any complaint. I was repeatedly told that I should do the same when I became a woman. When I had my menstruation for the first time, I was considered polluted and was confined in a dark room for fourteen days, restrained from going to school and seeing any male members of the family. That experience reinforced my belief that women's sexuality is a matter of shame and should never be discussed openly. It was from then when I wanted to question and challenge the patriarchal norms that subjected us, women to men's interests and repressed our sexualities.

After my enrolment in the MA, in the Gender Studies Program, CEU, my interest in sexuality studies grew stronger on exposure to various theories on women's bodies and sexuality. It encouraged me to study Hinduism and women's sexuality. I wanted to explore how orthodox Hindu culture and tradition are shaping women's sexuality in Nepal. I think there are some interesting paradoxes regarding women's sexuality in Nepal. While on the one hand, the dominant upper caste Hindu ideologies prohibit any

¹ Capital city of Nepal

open discussion of sexuality, on the other, there are some rituals and cultural performances, such as *ratauli*, where sexuality comes to be highlighted through the participating women's activities. In this research work, I explore the paradoxical construction of sexuality in this particular ritual of *ratauli*.

1.1. The context of *ratauli* in Hindu marriage

Ratauli is an event of the Hindu wedding ritual that takes place in the groom's house after the male participants of the men's wedding party have departed to the bride's house, leaving behind all women allegedly 'safe' in the home. It is also important to know that the *ratauli* event takes place on the occasion of the wedding of so-called high caste people of Nepal. These high castes are the Brahman and Chettri people and they traditionally follow the Hindu faith. *Ratauli* is an exclusively female ritual without male participation. Males of all ages are prohibited to participate; they might face insults or even beating should they only try to approach. It is the groom's mother, sisters and his other female relatives who may participate in the *ratauli* ritual until the wedding party of the groom returns with the bride next morning. This is a closed ceremony where the women of the groom's household must stay up all night, keeping the light burning while the groom and the bride are performing actual marriage ritual scheduled at the bride's house. The major highlights of *ratauli* are to make fun of heterosexuality, to make jokes about the sexual interaction through women dancing, impersonating the male part as well².

During the *ratauli*, women of all ages participate in the rowdy and licentious songs and dances, and mimicry of males. Three stages of entertainment take place in *ratauli*. Dance and song is the first part, where young married and unmarried women form lines and dance

² On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression.2004pp21 .

and sing responding to each other. These are more of general types of dance and songs, the main theme of the songs and dance are of love, separation, work and other female activities carried out in daily lives. In the second stage, auspicious so-called “mangal” songs are sung by middle-aged women, mostly post menopausal women. These mangal songs are less religious and they are songs of joy. In the third stage, the ritual reaches its peak. Satirical songs, dramas are performed by elderly married women that mock men. These women are dressed in men’s clothes and use long poles as the main prop of the performance which is used as a phallic icon for the satiric imitation of the sexual intercourse. As for the phallic icon, this icon is used in a non-religious context which is against the religious context of use of *linga*, the phallic symbol of Lord Shiva, so boys and men are not supposed to view *ratauli*.

Another interesting rule is that the main satirist is the groom’s mother (sister-in-law, in case the groom does not have a mother), who is helped by her *ratauli* friends to dress up like a man and perform the sexual parody³. Just before the *ratauli* begins, the son bids farewell to his mother, while the mother stays behind in the home, in charge of the light by keeping the lamps alight for the whole night, singing and dancing with her *ratauli* friends. The mother of the groom is responsible for guarding the lamps until the two wicks of the flame join and form one flame, representing the union of the bride and the groom, while the actual marriage ritual takes place at the bride’s place in the absence of the groom’s female relatives. The reason for this prohibition is that the groom’s mother is seen to have become ‘shakti’ that is the embodiment of female power for she has borne a son and thereby realized her female potential. It is this power that renders her auspicious to perform major activities in the son’s marriage. Consequently, every activity of *ratauli* carries some

³ On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal.1998pp213

power dynamics of sexuality in the performance of the different categories of female participants.

1.2. Identifying rationales for the study of *ratauli*

While the intersection of the cultural and the social shapes women's sexuality differently in Nepal, one can easily be projecting judgmental values of sexuality taken from Euro-American feminist scholarship without understanding the logic of local concepts and practices. In the existing scholarship, the ritual of *ratauli* has been explained as an event of the wedding in a contextualized form. But the goal of the studies so far has been to provide the ethnographic details of the ritual, dealing with the castes and gender relations in it. There has not been a study on the categories of women who perform and their perspectives on their performance. I argue that the different activities in *ratauli* can be identified in terms of the sexual themes and that *ratauli* can be explored in terms of the ranges of meanings of sexuality emerging in the different stages of the ritual.

In this research work I carry out an empirical research hoping to be able to develop an explanation of the ritual from within the local context of practice. Hindu women in orthodox Nepalese society are assumed to be asexual for the public eye, disregarding the paradoxical practices of sexuality in front of the semi-publicity of the groom's female relatives, which are apparent in rituals like *ratauli*. So, in order to underscore the counter-discourse to the social norm regarding the aspects of women's sexuality in Nepal, I explore and address the different performances of sexuality enacted by married and unmarried Hindu women participating in the ritual of *ratauli*. My overall concern in this research is with the ways gender identities are transformed in and through the sexual investments of the ritual of *ratauli*. In order to explore this, I address the following specific questions: How does impersonating men and other performances in *ratauli* work counter - effectively

to the expected public norms of marriage. What is the significance of impersonation for the performers and for the participants watching in the audience.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 explores the foundation for the thesis. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background for the paradox in the construction of sexuality in Hindu women of Nepal, reviewing some of the relevant works done on Hindu rituals in Nepal. In Chapter 3, I elaborate on the methods used for the data collection and analysis. In Chapter 4, I provide my research findings and answers to the questions. Finally, I present my conclusion in the last chapter of my thesis.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS: PARADOXES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY AMONG HINDU WOMEN OF NEPAL

Projecting the values of sexuality on the basis of Euro-American feminist scholarship without understanding the logic of local concepts and practices have often led to misrepresentations about Hindu women and Hindu societies in Nepal. The assumption that Hindu women are asexual often precludes the possibility to see the broader aspects of Hindu culture and practices. Although there have been some anthropological studies conducted on the local traditions and rituals, the little research available on sexuality and rituals of Hindu women has ignored paradoxes regarding the constructions of sexuality. Despite the understanding that gender roles and sexuality are constructed differently in Hinduism, there have been very little analytical studies on them. While the ones available attempt to provide a universal picture of Hindu women; the portrayal of “asexual objects” as this typical feature. In her book *Worlds of Knowing*, Jane Duran attempts to show differences in the constructions of sexuality and gender within the “Indo-Aryan” and “Tibeto-Burman”⁴ women within Nepalese society.

In relation to “Indo-Aryan” women, those who follow Hinduism, Duran discusses the extensive influences of goddesses on Hinduism and the impact of such traditions on society, attitude of women and on their local lives. She provides an example of the local practice, “Kumari”, the worshiping of living Hindu goddess, stating that it is quite unbelievable to see the details of the search for a young girl to embody “Kumari”⁵ (108). She argues that the search implies that the local traditions invest women’s sexuality with

⁴ Indo-Aryans are the people who primarily live in South Asian region especially Indian Sub-continent. Tibeto-Burman are the Mongoloid people who primarily live in Central Asian regions and speak Tibeto-Burman languages.

⁵ Kumari is a living Hindu goddess in Nepal and word Kumari means virgin in Nepali

the meaning of less dignity and see women's body as corrupt. I believe that her argument is supportive to prove that the underlying Hindu foundation has always contributed in devaluing women's sexuality within the orthodox Hindu societies of Nepal.

Duran also mentions the concept of *shakti* or power in the Hindu tradition. Her argument that "contaminants associated with the female body allow for the possibility of greater transcendence" and that "many Nepalese women are in charge of a variety of activities [...]and that the tradition does not seem to be disempowering them," suggest a paradoxical status of women's sexuality within Hindu tradition and culture (115). Duran, on the one hand, explains about influence of goddesses and their power of sexuality in orthodox Hindu society, while on the other hand, she provides an example of local practice (Kumari), to argue how the female body is misused in the name of worshipping goddess. Duran brings out two contradictory arguments on sexuality of women in orthodox Hindu society of Nepal but does not attempt specifically to "spell out" the existing paradoxical relation between them.

Julie Leslie, in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, uses two distinct approaches to elaborate the religious roles and rituals of Hindu women. Her first approach is the textual approach, where the majority of her interpretations in this book are based. She contends that the interpretation of women's religious roles and rituals in the Hindu texts have been done through the males' perspectives, consequently, these text-based male perspective has not been able to provide the significant meaning and values of Hindu women's roles in rituals and has created some difficulties in theoretical understanding. Instead of the masculine text-based approach, Leslie adapts an empirical approach to produce the actual voices of women. She uses the voice and perspectives of women to include issues related with their sexuality and reproduction and she finally, comes to the conclusion that the only celebrated option for women in Hinduism is that of a "good wife" and that women

themselves find pleasure in pleasing their husbands. (12). It is evident that Leslie's interpretation of Hindu women's roles in rituals provides a generalized notion of Hindu women, and makes it rather difficult to understand if the roles are prescribed to them by their male counter parts or women themselves have internalized these ideologies. Additionally, it also limits the scope of understanding on the variations of construction of gender roles and sexuality in the Hindu rituals.

Marriage rituals have been studied extensively by the anthropologists, the study which focused on the lives of women, their sexuality and ritual activities in Nepal is Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High Caste Women in Nepal*. Bennett examines the paradoxes along with the social structure and analysis of myths and rituals within the Hindu system. She discusses that Hindu women upon marriage leave their natal home to join their husband's house, where they are considered dangerous and threatening by their relatives of the groom because of their sexuality, while the unmarried women or sisters of the same household of groom has paradoxically, a higher status in their natal homes despite them being younger females.

Bennett's argument is that women come to be seen problematic because of their association with sexuality and fertility. Her argument also proves that Hindu religion puts more control on women's sexuality in keeping the lineage pure. She uses the symbolism of menstrual blood and rituals of purification to show the aspects of meanings attached to female body and their sexuality in Hinduism (214-15). Through her work, Bennett provides the multiplicity of women's identities which discards the notion of homogenous image. She mentions that the mother is associated with "purity" and asexual being whereas daughter-in-laws are considered to be dangerous (239). Bennett uses two models "patrifocal" and "filiafocal" to show the paradox located in women's sexuality. In Bennett's view, "Patrifocal" model, acknowledge women through their duties as affine, i.e. as wives

but they are not trustworthy and are threatening, while, the another model is “filiafocal”, in which men respect their sisters and daughters within their own patriline. Though, Bennett, with the help of model explains the construction of sexuality in women, she does not go more detail into these debates to show the paradoxical construction of female sexuality.

In *All the Mothers are One*, Stanley N. Kurtz discusses Bennett’s two perspectives on women as the “dominant patrifocal model” and the “subsidiary filiafocal model” (22). He argues that according to Bennett, women are perceived not as wives or in-laws but as daughters and sisters. Kurtz argues that if seen from Bennett’s perspective, women are not in position to provide long term benefits to the household and that may also mean that they should not be considered threat as well. If Kurtz’s argument is taken into consideration, it opens up the issues for further exploration and understanding of such ritualized concern for female sexuality.

Considering from the position of Kurtz’s, I argue that woman’s status is associated with her position as a sexual being, and in Hindu societies ,a woman’s status (marital) and her sexuality is a category which changes with her age in the marital relation. It can also be argued that constructions of sexuality within the categories of Hindu women are different from those of other religions and that most of which are evidenced through many local rituals. Some of the local rituals like *ratauli* and *Tij*⁶ are such practices which express the paradox of female sexuality in Hindu ideology.

Vivienne Kondos in her study *On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression* addresses the significance of the mixed ritual sequences of *ratauli*. She argues that the actions around *ratauli*, i.e. the dancing, the male impersonation and the sexual joking, could undermine the established notions of the social importance of men in

Hindu society and the seriousness with which men take their masculinity. *Ratauli* is in fact women business only and the secrecy in this ritual, as put by Kondos, is the mock of masculinity where “all men are being subjected to the laughing inquisition” (22). So according to Kondos, *ratauli* is the occasion where women can “make fun of sexuality” and “enjoy the ribaldry”. She brings into the controversial issues related with female sexuality in the ritual of *ratauli*. On the one hand, Kondos points out that certain details of women’s performance at *ratauli* may or may not have started with idea of a specific role but it may have become incorporated so as to avoid certain “pragmatic negative effects” (26), and that is why it is imperative to exclude men from this ritual. Kondos, on the other hand, also mentions that certain activities can transgress social demands, and with constantly working on them, can also help to constitute the social realities. For Kondos, women’s expressive forms on *ratauli* have a subversive value as women’s behavior in *ratauli* do not conform usual expectations and there is the mixture of “ritual and ribaldry”(21). Either way, the manner in which women participate and perform on *ratauli* show a specific meaning on the construction of sexuality of Hindu women. It can be said that *ratauli* is the occasion for female sociality, but it is also the occasion where they can prevail over the restrictions put on their sexuality.

Mary M Cameron, *On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal* asserts that women of all ages participate in different performance level in *ratauli*. She discusses the three entertainment stages that take place in *ratauli*. In the first stage, young married and unmarried women sing and dance in response to each other. In the second stage, auspicious songs are sung by middle-aged women. In the third stage, the satirical songs and dances are performed by older married women (213). Cameron’s interpretation of different stages in *ratauli*, indicate that women of all ages participate in the ritual and that

⁶ It is a festival and ritual event for women, celebrated on the third day after the new moon in the Nepali month of Bhadra (mid-August to mid-September). It is often referred as “the women’s festival” because on

specific performance, stage is assigned to them according to their marital status and their knowledge on issues of sexuality. If Kondos finds the performances of women in *ratauli* to have subversive values, Cameron, on the other hand, finds it as important for her discussion to elaborate on the categorization of women performers in every stage. Cameron's discussion of performances through dance and songs on *ratauli* can only be useful to articulate cultural values of Nepalese Hindu society and Hindu wedding rituals. But through my research, I point towards the significance of performances on *ratauli* and their importance in portrayal of sexuality in Hindu women.

As I have mentioned before, *Tij* can be considered as another Hindu ritual which is potentially relevant for the analysis of female sexuality, but which has only been analyzed as the festival primarily for high caste Hindu women of Nepal. It is another exclusive “women's festival”, where women decorate themselves with their finest jewelry and clothing and gather together to sing and dance in front of a temple or in an open area, while they worship lord Shiva⁷ and maintain a fast for the whole day. In their article, “The songs of *Tij*: a genre of Critical commentary for women in Nepal” Debra Skinner, Dorothy Holland and G.B. Adhikari interpret that the available literature on *Tij* have not been able to deal with the significance of this ritual, presenting it to be such a ritual which that only reaffirms patrilineal values without exploring in subversive values. Another problem which authors bring out is about the issue of *Tij* songs. According to them, in the available literatures, authors have not taken into consideration the songs and dance of *Tij*, and that most texts mention about the songs and dance, without any supporting evidence that “women sing as they dance”. The authors state that the lack of attention to the songs is unfortunate because in the songs of *Tij* women are voicing a critical commentary on “gender relations” and on situation that has dominated them as “females”. Although, the

this day all ritual activities are carried out by women and girls.

⁷ Shiva is considered to be the supreme God in Hinduism.

focus of my research is not on the songs and dance of Hindu women in all rituals in general but on particularly in ritual of *ratauli*, it is important to note that most of the literature produced so far have either focused on the women's festive dancing or on their ritual austerity. I believe that these texts have expressed very little on how performances in certain rituals have made female sexuality acceptable.

Gloria Goodwin, Raheja and Ann Grodzins *Gold's Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* is an important book which analyses the expressive forms of dancing songs, songs of birth, marriage, festivity, ritual and informal personal narratives of women's songs and stories from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, India, which address the issues of representation of South Asian gender and kinship. The authors argue that the songs and stories presented in this book try to resist the tendency of a dominant patriarchal ideology to define femininity in the South Asian context. In the chapter "Sexuality, Fertility, and Erotic Imagination" Gold's offers a translation and analysis of wedding songs. The translated version of these lyrics provides the differences between the dangerous sexuality and good fertility by celebrating female sexuality. Gold, in this chapter points out the conflict or opposition between women's sexuality and fertility, or the "split images" of South Asian female. Gold draws on works of some authors to show how dominant vision of South Asian femaleness is represented in folklore, rituals and cinema. Gold cites Kakar stating "[..]cultural splitting of the wife into a mother and a whore" and "claiming that although women may be honored as ritual partners and mother [..]they are seen as a female sexual being[.]the patriarchal culture's horror and scorn are heaped upon the hapless wife" (34). Gold argues here that Kakar has not completely justified his view of South Asian female sexuality and his analysis of split image model because he has ignored on the aspects that could provide a paradox of female sexuality and its potential for fulfillment.

Similarly, Gold also refers to Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* saying that, although many of Bennett's informants have referred to sexual activities and shown their fondness towards sexual jokes, Bennett has not focused much on these attributes toward female sexuality. While there is a close link between the construction of female sexuality and their day to day verbal and other activities, Bennett does not seem to have given consideration to these aspects.

Coming back to the ritual of *ratauli*, my final point is concerned with its performativity. Kondos asserts that the anthropological literature on *ratauli* has not addressed much about the fun activities carried out in the ritual. She states that the actual fun starts in *ratauli* when women start "dressing up", "wearing disguises" and "uttering sexual innuendoes" (26). On such occasion, sexuality is not taken as shameful and threatening but as liberating and joyful. This stands as a contrast in the construction of female sexuality and which I try to encounter in my research. My research therefore deals with the ways gender identities are transformed through *ratauli*, exploring the construction of sexuality in it. As Judith Butler (1993), argues gender identity is a form of cultural practice, where gender is achieved, articulated through reiteration of sexual practices. She cites "drag" as an example of performativity that subverts the expected reiteration of the gender norms, she is posing a question "[...]what is meant by understanding gender as an impersonation?" (230). She asserts that "the practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice.[...]and embodying is a repeated process" (231). In order to show that citing of the norm can result in transgressive parodies she turns to the gender performance of a drag. With the help of her performativity theory, I will show how the different activities in *ratauli* which are to imitate sexual interaction, impersonation and sexual jokes expose the socially accepted categories of "Hindu women" and which, I think, will provide different insights into the paradox of sexuality of Hindu

women in Nepal, regardless the majority of my informants accounts of their participation in the ritual.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As my research focus is to expose the otherwise hidden paradoxical construction of Hindu women's sexuality in Nepal through the exploration of the performances of the ritual *ratauli*, I turn to ritual participants for their perception of the performances. As my study is focused on the performances at the ritual through the narrative accounts of the participants, my approach is both descriptive and critical at the same time. My approach is that, I explored *ratauli* through identifying different dimensions of texts, songs and myths involved. Similarly, I analyzed experience of women's performances in *ratauli*, to explore the different constructions of sexuality of women in this ritual. At the same time, I try to be critical and identify the contradictory perspectives in my materials, including the actual life narratives I have elicited from *ratauli* participants. My study comprises of multiple data collection methods which include both approaching my potential informants via e-mail and once gained their willingness to participate in my research. Then, I asked them to write up their stories and send them on to me. On the other hand, I also made internet calls with some of them for discussing my reading of their written narratives. In this way, it opened up the research design again to them through which I got a new dimension of the *ratauli* performances emerging in the course of these semi-guided phone interviews. Similarly, I use my own autobiographical narrative of the ritual to provide a perspective for locating myself in the research.

My method of narrative inquiry is also based on sharing of the perspectives through the organization of the second round of interaction with my informants via the internet (skype) mediated interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews, asking those women who have either been the performers or the audience at this ritual to recount their memories in response to my focalizing semi-structured questions (Appendix 1). The narrative inquiry

of the experience of women in *ratauli* created a process of reflexive thinking for them. At the same time, collecting the experiences of different women and their overlapping narratives of the experiences also exposed the contradictory practices of sexuality involved and helped to answer my ultimate research question: in what ways gender identities are transformed in and through the ritual of *ratauli*. Finally, taking into account of the actual formation of the interpretation of the researched women's narratives helped me argue for the dynamic and contested nature of sexual practices and the importance of the location when forging the meaning of sexuality.

Basically, I draw on Charlotte Linde's⁸ method of narrative analysis of life stories with a focus on the strategies of argumentation in order to explore the different meaning of women's sexuality in *ratauli*. As Linde defines "[...]life story is a temporally discontinuous unit told over many occasions and altered to fit the specific occasions of speaking, as well as specific addressees, and to reflect changes in the speakers' long-term situation" (1993:51). Therefore, I recorded all the talks produced on skype otherwise I would not have been able to analyze the difference in the textual construction of the implied/actual listeners in their written stories. I elicited the part of their life stories that could sufficiently explain the narrative specificities of their accounts of their experiences in *ratauli*.

Because of the limited time and geographical distance involved, I could not go to the actual field site and carry out a proper ethnographic research. My method mainly consists in the collection of women's narratives on their *ratauli* experiences in a way which is rather formulated according to the combined method of oral history and life narrative writing, a way of storytelling. As Donald Ritchie observes about the relevance of life narratives for academic research: "[...]individuals use the insights gained from current

⁸ Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence

events to help them make new sense out of past experience” I drew on his work⁹, for using this method. At the same time, I made use of auto/biographical research on life writing as developed by Liz Stanley *The Auto/biographical I*, and where she argues that the emerging stories, should they be gathered orally or in writing are textual constructions and therefore it is required to analyze them to see the strategic use of the narrative genre as sources of producing particular meaning of women’s sexuality.

3.1. Sampling, selection and sources

Ratauli, an exclusively female ritual, is practiced at the Hindu weddings in Nepal, where the women participants and performers belong to the so-called high caste people. For my study, I chose this ritual not only to define its content but also to generate meaningful action or significance attached to it; in this manner I focus on the performances at the ritual process.

As my informants are all female participants of *ratauli*, I selected the sample target population of 11 women informants who have either performed or witnessed the ritual. As *ratauli* entails three major entertainment stages, I also selected my informants accordingly, 5 informants from stage one, 4 informants from stage two and 2 from stage three (details of the stage and their short profiles in Appendix 2). My informants are married and unmarried women, both old and young. They have participated in either of the three entertainment stages during the *ratauli* and all of them have been the audience of those performances. There are overlaps regarding the actual performance parts carried out by the participants. For example, all my informants acting as performer in the first stage and are just members of the audience in the other stages of *ratauli*. As I could not visit the actual research site, I was aware of the complications that could arise regarding the ways of establishing contact with my informants. Hence, I used the method of snowball sampling to create the linkages

⁹ Doing Oral History.1995 pp 13

to make sure that I will have participants in all the ritual functions and can secure my targeted number of informants. The snowball sampling method is the process of selecting a sample using networks¹⁰ (Kumar, 1996:162). In my case, I contacted my first “gatekeeper”, my aunt, whom I had seen perform at *ratauli* in Nepal and through whom I received email addresses and other contact addresses of my informants, Sheela, Nani, Paru, Asha, Dev Kumari, Devi Amaa, Sita and gathered the narratives from them. My second “gatekeeper” came as Nani herself, through whose help, I could contact other informants, Rita, Bina, Bela and Gayatri.

Although, my position for this project is that of the researcher, yet, as I have discussed before, my own experiences of witnessing the performances at *ratauli* are of importance for both the research design and the interpretation of the narratives. My own experience of being involved in the *ratauli* for the first time was three years ago at my brother’s marriage. Through the spectacle of *ratauli*, I was confronted with the knowledge of womanhood and sexuality, through my relatives’ ‘obscene’, mostly sexual allusions at the *ratauli*.

I used internet interview transcripts whenever I thought was required and collected written narratives of my informants via e-mail as a source of my primary data. For internet interviews, I made calls with my informants, Sita, Asha, Nani, Rita, Sheela and Devi Amaa at their respective places as they all had access to internet and were equally aware on its usage. Hence, in case of Devi Amaa, she was supported by her daughter to get in touch with me through the internet calls. I randomly chose few of my informants from every stage, for the interviews on the basis of what they had written as their narratives. I wanted to explore and elaborate more on what they had narrated in their experience.

¹⁰ Research Methodology: A Step- by –Step Guide for Beginners

As for the secondary sources, I have used the information collected from the reports, published and unpublished journals, newspaper articles, newspaper cuttings through internet sources. And mainly, I have drawn on the ethnographic study of *ratauli* in Vivienne Kundos's *On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression* and Lynn Bennett's *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High Caste Women in Nepal* to focus on the aspects of ethnographic details of *ratauli* and also how a paradox regarding women's sexuality in these works.

3.2. Data Collection

As I had to develop a research project to understand the paradoxes regarding women's sexuality in the highlighted ritual of *ratauli*, I collected the narrative stories of the informants who have performed and participated in this ritual. I relied on the internet for carrying out my research project. I conducted interviews on skype and collected narratives through e-mail. This method of research organization involved multiple e-mail exchanges between me and my informants over a period of my research work. I asked my questions in Nepali and later translated them into English. As people in Nepal, especially women, are generally unused to receiving e-mails for the purpose of interviewing, I was careful with the selection of my informants and the handling of the project so that my informants will not refuse to write about the issues of sexuality and their performances in the ritual. To ensure that, I do not have to face this problem, I had prepared research consent form, highlighting the major focus of my study and what had to be contributed by my informants. All my informants were requested to read and sign the form (format of the form is in Appendix 3) for writing stories for me, and in my case all my informants readily agreed to sign the research consent form, and sent them to me.

My position in this project is not only that of the researcher but I have also contributed my personal autobiographical experiences of *ratauli* and used them for the

analysis. As for myself, I wrote an autobiographical narrative account of my experience of the event of *ratauli*, my position is subjective reviewing my past memories for a deeper understanding of myself. But much more of a theoretical concern for me is what Stevi Jackson¹¹ formulates about the constructed nature of recollections, those of the researcher included: “Memories are not already there in story form, rather it is in story form that we construct and reconstruct our memories- and these stories are historically located and mediated” (1998:54). My autobiographical narrative is the re-presentation of my past experience, written on the basis of my research guiding questions.

According to Sidonie Smith¹² “[...] reading personal narratives we find ourselves immersed in complex issues of representation, ideology, history, identity, and politics as they bear on subjectivity”(1993:393), and writing about my own experience of *ratauli* has represented my subjectivity. Personal narratives until recently were not given more attention by scholars in the humanities; they were basically read as information provided by other people, or personal narratives were taken as popular culture which lacked narrative structure. However, presently personal narratives are considered as key sources for issues related to the “self”, argues Smith. My interpretation of knowledge through my personal narrative has not come to be some personal desire to add to my research project but I have attended to the auto/biographical location of the academic the knowledge production explicitly. While writing my own narrative, I have identified the moment in *ratauli* which had influenced me, especially those moments where I felt uncomfortable seeing my relatives perform at the ritual. My personal narrative functions this way for identifying the possible significant moments where I was emotional, what I disliked and what I liked the most during the *ratauli* and this way helped me to orient my reading of the informants’ narratives and doing the actual phone interviews.

¹¹ Stories: Memory, Narrative and Experience in Feminist Research and Theory

3.3. Data analysis

After collecting all the narrative stories including my own autobiographical writing, and making calls with some of my informants, I have translated them into English and also transcribed all my interviews. I kept the transcriptions true to what had been on the tape and translated word to word. As qualitative ways of data analysis provide ways of examining, comparing and interpreting meaningful patterns or themes, I determined the useful themes for my research on the basis of the major concern of my research, which was to explore how gender identities are transformed in and through the ritual of *ratauli* and also to answer my major concern on knowledge on the paradoxes on construction of Hindu women's sexuality. As my focus was on finding the themes regarding the perception, experience and performance of women in the ritual *ratauli*, I used their information and analyzed depending on the questions addressed.

The oral narrative of my informants' personal experience is the account of the past as the time they were writing the narrative was different from the time of the event of *ratauli*. So, I tried to make additional contacts with my informants before analyzing the data. My focus entirely depended on the interpretation of my informants' spoken narrative of their experience and I tried to locate my basic themes from sequence of talks conducted with them.

3.4. Time Frame

In the first two weeks of April 2007, I tried to establish contact through my gatekeepers on whom to approach for my research. As soon as I received information from them, I started contacting them and sending out the research consent form. By the third week of April, I had collected consent forms from all my informants. As all my informants had access to internet and computers, it was easier for me to make contacts with them and

¹² "Who's Talking/ Who's Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative

collect their narratives, which I could do by the beginning of May 2007. And, in the meantime, I started writing up the chapters of my thesis outside of the actual analysis.

In the first two weeks of May, I analyzed the actual narratives and established the questions I wanted to concentrate on while carrying out the skype interviews and decided to contact some of them as mentioned above. I carried out the analysis of narratives along with interviews in the last week of the month of May. I finished the draft of my research by the end of May and did the final editing in early June.

3.5. Ethical considerations and Limitation of the study

As my research project concerns the issue of “sexuality” in a context where it is not explicitly thematized in public discourses, I have taken utmost care to ensure that the integrity and morality of my informants is not compromised for the sake of research. I took this into consideration while designing and asking the questions. To avoid unnecessary harm and risk, I explained and described the content and the purpose of the study to my informants in advance through research consent form and calls. I made sure that the “gatekeepers” gave me the contact address of the informants and I made contacts with all of them, myself. As part of the trust building procedure, I asked for the consent of my informants clarifying the procedure for them, such as using pseudonyms for characters and geographical locations, to maintain confidentiality. I also clarified and promised in this form that I will keep all information regarding their participation in ritual anonymous.

As this is an academic research that is carried out within a small framework, my study is done within a very limited time and I had to depend on the internet for viable sources. Considering the practical reason for not being able to go the research site, I reduced the sample size as well and I had to rely on the available literature to do the specific analysis. My sample size was also reduced to women of “particular” group, such

as residing in urban areas and having access to computers. Another limitation for me was building the rapport with my informants through the internet. As the internet was the only medium for me to contact my informants, I had to approach women who had easy access to computers, and which made my research limited to only certain group of Hindu women. Some of my informants are much older than me and due to social hierarchy it was difficult for me to ask them questions on “sexuality”. I made frequent contacts with my informants to make good rapport and obtain their trust.

CHAPTER 4

UNDERSTANDING *RATAULI* WITHIN THE LOCAL CONTEXT OF PRACTICE

Through this research, I aim to position my argument about the paradox regarding the construction of sexuality of Hindu women through focusing on the Hindu marriage ritual *ratauli* in Nepal. My informants were encouraged to talk about their experience regarding this ritual and put more stress on the significance of their participation and performance in it. My research work contains certain insights from my own personal experience, which I believe it also gives a new direction to my research. Here, I have combined what my informants have expressed about their experience of *ratauli*, and I have presented their opinion as it is.

I have divided this chapter in mainly three sub-chapters. Each sub-chapter focuses on each of my specific questions, which help to answer my overall research question regarding the ways gender identities are transformed in and through the ritual of *ratauli*. I have structured my chapter in such way that, in the first sub-chapter, I present my female informants' general perception of the significance of *ratauli* with their understanding of sexuality and in the *ratauli*. My second sub-chapter will explore more on the relevance of sexuality in relation to the ritual of *ratauli*. I will relate their experience to the theories on the myth of sexuality of Hindu women. I also include my experience of *ratauli* in this sub-chapter. The last sub-chapter will focus on perspectives of female sexuality through the ritual's differential perceptions by the mother-in-laws and also by the young daughter-in-laws. Here, I will show *ratauli* is also an event for celebration of female sexuality and strategies for claiming power. Moreover, these sub-chapters altogether will entail how gender identities are transformed in the ritual of *ratauli*. As for every sub-chapter, I analyze the data, the narrative life stories of my informants, I quote them, wherever, I feel

the textual part must be highlighted. As far as quoting is concerned, my structure narrows from quoting all my informants in the first sub-chapters, to performers of each stage in the second, and, finally, only elderly and married women in the third.

4.1. The significance of ratauli for Hindu women

In this sub-chapter, I focus on my informants' general perception of female sexuality and of their performances in *ratauli*. As this sub-chapter entails the perception of female sexuality, I try to encompass the views of almost all of my informants from all the performance stages of *ratauli*. I elicit the data via the stories of my informants on their different experiences of the ritual, their interpretation and understanding of *ratauli*. I will explore how their knowledge of the ritual has given some insights on how local cultural practices interact and coexist within the powerful Hindu religious ideology and help in shaping new ideas of women's sexuality. The significant issues which emerge from the experiences of women will show how Hindu women in Nepal are engaging with complex activities and are transforming the cultural Hindu ideologies of sexuality through *ratauli*.

The most interesting factor of the interpretation of *ratauli* among informants was that, most of them were more aware of its celebratory part than its significance for the construction of sexuality. The similarity among most of the informants was the lack of knowledge on the specificity of this ritual. Although most of them had participated and performed in *ratauli*, very few were aware that their performance could be related to their sexuality. Sheela, an elderly married women and who mainly performed in the second stage of the performance of *ratauli* says,

Ratauli has a cultural and religious value in the Nepalese societies and especially in marriages; it is celebrated with much vigor. This ritual is one of the important events that women can enjoy thoroughly¹³. As women in Nepal have to live under the patriarchal oppression of men, *ratauli* can said to be the event where they can

¹³ I underline the textual parts which I have analyzed.

express themselves and provide themselves with the opportunity to joke about and satirize the system.

Many informants felt that Hindu women had no freedom in the past to express themselves as compared to today, and, therefore, *ratauli* could be that platform where they actually got opportunity to showcase their talents and speak their minds, as Sheela mentions above “...as women in Nepal have to live under the patriarchal oppression of men”, it is understandable that *ratauli* is one such event, where women do not have to be conscious of the patriarchal oppression and enjoy their freedom. *Ratauli* is perceived as a blissful event by all the informants; some, however, perceived it as an event to spend some quality time with each other. Rama, another elderly married woman, describes her view of *ratauli*:

As women were not allowed to join the procession of male party of groom to bride's home, they had to stay at home and they started opting for a form of entertainment for themselves and this is how *ratauli* started.

Rama's opinion on *ratauli* here, comes as a strong point stressing the resistance towards patriarchy, her understanding of *ratauli* may be different but shows this is one event where women fought against their exclusion and showed their resistance to patriarchy. Sheela mentions that *ratauli* holds an important significance for entering into the auspicious married life.

Unlike Sheela, many other informants provided different versions about celebrating the ritual. Most of them depicted *ratauli*, as a form of dance which starts with a slow tempo at first, gradually mounting to an exciting climax when women participants sing and dance to a fast rhythm. This form of interpretation shows that *ratauli* is understood as a celebration of songs and dance for women. I argue that these women interpret *ratauli* as a form of action which gives them pleasure, though for many informants, this could be an event of joyful dance and song, I argue that in other ways, they interpret it as dismissing

patriarchy. As it is considered shameful for women to dance and sing openly in orthodox Hindu society, *ratauli* is one event where the groom's mother, sisters and female relatives dance all night.

Judith Lynne Hanna argues¹⁴ that dance images about sexuality and gender reveal aspects of communication and dominance patterns and social and cultural change which may affirm or challenge the existing social order. While in most of other occasions dancing is traditionally restricted because of its overt sensuality and sexuality, *ratauli* is such an event where even such dances are allowed. However, my informants had basic ideas on the impact of *ratauli* in their lives, they are well aware of the power that *ratauli* may have, but I believe it is the patriarchal system again, which does not allow them to speak openly on *ratauli*. Issues on sexuality are hardly discussed in public in the Hindu societies.

It is not only astonishing but also paradoxical to know that the significance of *ratauli* for my informants is still limited as a form of celebration but not the celebration of their own sexuality. During the course of interview, one of my married informants, Dev Kumari, said:

As senior female of the household cannot join the marriage procession and while they are waiting for the groom to come back with his bride the next day, dancing and singing is the best way of killing time, and we do such things which cannot be imagined of being normally done in a crowd, so celebrating *ratauli* is a way of expressing hidden feelings of women.

Dev Kumari says that through *ratauli*, women's hidden feelings and intuition is expressed. She takes pride in doing the "unconceivable" things in the ritual. However, it can also be inferred from this interview that not only sexuality is repressed and not openly discussed even amongst women in Hindu society, but this sexually repressive culture has been actually restricting women, especially high caste Hindu women, to embody sexual purity and not to make it public. This is not to suggest that my informants had

¹⁴ Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire. 1988, pp 24-26

misconceptions about sexuality and were totally ignorant of the celebration of *ratauli*, but their understanding could not bring out the details about the underlying factors of the ritual. It can be said, it is still a taboo to acknowledge the verbal expression and pleasure of sexuality in orthodox Hindu society of Nepal. Issues of sexuality in contemporary Nepal are not yet challenged even after the waves of modernization, Westernization; neither is there an additional understanding on the dynamics to how *ratauli* functions now.

Ratauli is a platform for the expression of sexuality and sexual desire for the Hindu women. Asha, a young unmarried girl has a different perspective on it. She writes,

It is a special ritual which brings close ties between the new bride and the groom, and this ritual is a symbol for long unification of blissful married life, and this event is really auspicious.

Asha, on the one hand, has not participated in many *ratauli* rituals but on the other hand, she has this image of marriage as a beautiful union. In the past decade, various forces of globalization such as mass media, cable TV, and internet have been projecting “Euro-American” images of sexuality even in rural areas of Nepal. The women of Nepal could be said to be moving along with this space. Along with the growth of many urban centres and their exposure to international standards, there is now a plausible participation of many young women and girls into higher education. But these young girls and women are stuck between the two worlds, one, maintaining their own cultural values and the other, keeping pace with the global standards. As far as my informants were concerned, it can be said that they were well aware with the effects of globalization but when it came to the local practice as that of *ratauli*, they were less aware about the major significance of their dance and songs in the ritual of *ratauli* and how they had the agency to subvert the orthodox Hindu ideologies through their performances.

Moreover, for an unmarried girl like Asha, it is her socialization process which restricts her to open on sexuality issues. An unmarried Hindu girl's sexuality is extremely

important to the honor and prestige of her own family and of the society as a whole. As James F. Fisher asserts it is important to shield sexuality of young unmarried girls in Hindu societies, he points out; unmarried girls are often kept ignorant about sexuality issues. Fisher, in his study¹⁵ of the dual role of women in Nepalese society, argues that unmarried girls' roles are valued as a religious gift which is to be "given away"; therefore, she is not to be used or possessed sexually before marriage. In the case above, Asha, though well educated and well conscious of the effects of globalization also opted to deviate her understanding and portrayal of *ratauli*, for she had to remain ignorant on issues of sexuality before her marriage. She describes *ratauli* as the event which symbolizes the beginning of a long lasting married life and she does not admit to the obscenity present in *ratauli* that is allowed under the cover of a disguise.

Ratauli is the ritual that not only simply manifests the orthodox Hindu beliefs and ideology but also provides an important insight into the way in which sexuality is constructed in different categories of women in Nepal, and also demonstrates the cultural practices and the opinions of sexual nature of these different categories of women through the ritual of *ratauli*.

Devi Amaa¹⁶, one of the oldest and the only informant who had a long experience of *ratauli*, explains her views on the ritual as wonderful. At the age of 65, she remembers the strength and vigor she had had all her life to participate in *ratauli*:

This is our tradition and it is very significant to us, as during this event all the female relatives meet and can relate our personal stories with each other, and therefore get opportunity to understand each other.

She says that her experience at *ratauli* taught her how to respond to younger women also to be open to the ideologies that prohibit certain behaviors for women. She remembers *ratauli* in a positive manner; she says that it helped her in challenging the behavior that

¹⁵ Himalayan Anthropology: the Indo-Tibetan interface.1978.pp 139

reinforced the stereotype of women as submissive and silent. It helped her formulate her opinions on female sexuality and that *ratauli* is such a ritual which marks Hindu women as sexualized beings and through the recognition of their sexuality, women are given importance, and female gender is celebrated. Her description on the understanding was very profound and it had made some good changes in her life as she writes:

And now I know there is no shame in expressing oneself, participating in *ratauli* gave me a platform to be free, [...] control of men on women's body and mind makes them lose the self-esteem and confidence.

She explains that she has utilized in her life that new outlook which she attained from *ratauli*. The happiness, she expresses in the above quote is the result of her age and many experience of *ratauli*.

According to Susan S.Wadley,¹⁷ Hindu ideology presents the concept of female as duality: on the one hand, if she is *shakti*, i.e. energy or power, then on the other hand; she is *prakriti*, nature and this dual character of the female allows us to understand the role and rule models of women in Hindu society. As asserted by Wadley, a Hindu woman is fertile, benevolent as *prakriti*, and at the same time she is destroyer as well as aggressive as *shakti*. She says the Hindu ideology of female sexuality has always been regarded as active and has also assumed to be in need of male control and men have the status as controllers of “their” women's sexuality in Hindu societies. Nani, a married woman, has a similar view, she sees that *ratauli* as a unique event for women of Nepal living under patriarchal subordination. She writes:

Women are generally subordinated in our culture and we are just like puppets in the hands of our husbands and sons, but *ratauli* is one significant occasion where we get together to express freedom. And in *ratauli*, especially, the mother of the groom is given so much importance; she is made fun by all the other women on her freedom, her freedom from all the controls she bore till the marriage of her son.

¹⁶ Denotes as “mother” in Nepali, Amaa is often used to address women of older age.

¹⁷ Women and Symbolic System: Women and the Hindu Tradition, pp 115-117.
<http://www.jstor.org/view/00979740/sp040010/04x0039m/0> Accessed May 25th, 2007.

While advocating her personal experience about the marriage of her son, she describes her happiness at the importance and values she received at her son's marriage. She continued to agree that *ratauli* was the only event, when she could celebrate her womanhood and motherhood. As a woman's status is raised in society, once she bears a son, it is obvious that according to that, that Nani, was had all the pleasures of being the mother of the groom in *ratauli*. She was special for the event as she was the "mother of the groom" and she was free from all her duties.

Wadley, in *Women and Symbolic System: Women and the Hindu Tradition*, positions the meaning of gender in Hindu societies within the construction of the sexuality of the female gender in accordance with the order and disorder. She argues that females must be controlled because of their capacity to create disorder in society and challenge patriarchal societies. Women's power is linked with sexuality and it is feared that women have the power to distract and pollute men and therefore women have to be kept under control. Paru, another married, middle-aged woman writes:

In a male dominated society like Nepal, usually women are quiet, shy and introvert types....may be, women take up this ritual as a chance to feel liberated without any restrictions. If you participate in *ratauli*, then you learn the most important aspect of your life. It may be an important ritual for the mother of the groom but I believe that every woman participant gains something out of it...they learn the "other side" of themselves.

The sense of freedom felt by Paru is very evident. She has rediscovered herself through *ratauli*, participating in *ratauli* was an enriching experience for her. This is the opportunity that could allow women to get together who are always constrained and restrained by social mores, and those whose lives are often defined by rules made by other people, and those who need freedom from the multiple chores that leave them very little to think about themselves. These are the assumptions which contribute to the sense of the "other side", Paru was referring to above.

Most of the time, the control of women's sexuality and reproduction is linked with purity. The notion of Aryan¹⁸ women's purity is depicted in many Hindu rituals and beliefs, and has been expressed through emphasis on their virginity and chastity, in Hindu culture; a woman's purity always has great implications for her family as it is associated with the prestige of the family. Likewise, the sense of freedom through *ratauli* had such a great impact on Paru, Nani and Devi Amaa's life because it helped them to establish the notion and feelings of themselves as free and capable, and most importantly as "sexual human beings". *Ratauli* helped them to expose their hidden desires.

Tanika Sarkar¹⁹ argues that nationalists tried to put focus on love as the foundation for the Hindu marriage. According to her, nationalists refused to agree on the fact that the production of sons was the actual aim of Hindu marriage. She further argues that nationalists viewed Hindu marriage as a beautiful union of love, and ensured that marriage was good for women, for they would not only get the affection of their husband but also marriage would provide them better security in society. In actual practice, this view seems to differ in patriarchal societies of Nepal. Bina, a young married woman, states:

[..]as in our society, only sons are considered to be the actual heirs of family of procreation, it is necessary that son's marriages be celebrated with more enthusiasm than daughter's, and so is the significance of *ratauli*,...it is considered auspicious and an important event of Hindu marriage ritual.

Her interpretation is consistent with the claim that women had to produce sons in patriarchal Hindu societies to gain certain status. Moreover, the importance of sons in women's lives reinforces the system which always privileges male and discards women. Her experience is similar to Nani's. If we consider Bina and Nani's interpretation, it becomes evident that women's ritual behavior in *ratauli* reinforces the ideology of the male dominated system and help in inheriting it into the generations to come. *Ratauli* could be an event for the celebration of women's sexuality and their communion, but, at the same

¹⁸ Aryan is the race directly attributed to the native of South Asian people.

time, it is also the celebration of motherhood. The mother of the groom is the central focus of the event, she is given the utmost importance in the ritual as she is exercising her power of womanhood and motherhood.

Most of the married women write that in *ratauli* the performances are done so that the new bride is auspicious for the family. Rita, a married woman describes:

[..].*ratauli* is celebrated with great joy and happiness so that daughter-in law shall be smart, tactful, diligent and procreative; the longer the performance, the better the new daughter-in-law would be [...]there is a belief that the daughter-in-law would bring everlasting peace and happiness, if *ratauli* is performed with full zeal.

Rita stresses how Hindu religion honors motherhood, and new daughter-in-law entering the household is compared with “Laxmi”, Hindu Goddess of wealth and fortune. In addition to her, there were other married informants who expressed a similar view. Their statement that “daughter-in-law would be diligent” demonstrates that primary function of Hindu marriage is for the procreation of children. Although, there are certain other ceremonies of Hindu nuptials to indicate the importance of procreation, *ratauli* can be pointed out as the ritual which signifies this fact and intends to make the union fruitful. *Ratauli* ritual is not only constructing female sexuality, i.e. of a daughter-in-law, to be threatening to the household but also as a source of power and increase. As Sheela stated, “Marriage of a son is important for a mother, as then, the mother gets to hand over responsibilities to her new daughter-in-law.” She perceives *ratauli* as an event where mother of the groom can dance and sing in order to relish her freedom. It can be said that older women also help in reinforcing the system. As this is the marriage nuptials of a son, the to-be mother-in-law is jubilant at her son’s marital relationship, now she becomes powerful as soon as the new daughter-in-law enters the home. The relation between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Hindu families are shaped by the social and economic dependence on the male members of the house and also on between the

¹⁹*Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*.pp 40

generational age gap between these them. From Sheela's statement, it becomes clear that once a woman has passed her sexually active years, she no longer needs to suppress her sexuality, she is granted more freedom in society.

Once again, it becomes apparent that the changes in women's position throughout their life are directly linked with their reproductive capacity and their image as sexualized beings. Female sexuality is extremely important to the household to make it sure that the lineage is well continued. Hence marriage rituals are vital in the Hindu culture and rituals like *ratauli* are very significant to perpetuate the orthodox Hindu religious belief. While *ratauli* holds a great scope for the understanding of female sexuality, the specific meaning of the ritual has been deviated. This ritual in the context of orthodox Hindu society ignores the evident differences in the construction of sexuality and the position of women with regard to their age and sexual control. Even the educated girls and professional married women could not acknowledge *ratauli* as a marriage ritual which possesses different sexual meanings in association with their performance. For unmarried girls, even if they are theoretically aware on the facts of sexuality, there is always an emphasis that they remained silent on the issue.

While *ratauli* is significant for its mix of several ritual sequences, such as the lighting lamps, the performance and the fun and games, most of the informants (mostly married) primarily interpreted *ratauli* as a joyous occasion where women sing and dance. However, some women were also aware of the significance of *ratauli* for women living in a patriarchal society. Older married women are more positive to accept and express their views on *ratauli* with its significance to female sexuality than the younger women. It is evident that the age of Hindu women and their expression of sexuality develop differently in orthodox Hindu societies, creating a different experience for women. In addition, it can

be concluded that, the understanding of *ratauli* by these women also differ significantly in relation to their involvement in married life and status within society.

4.2. Hindu women, sexuality and myths as represented in *ratauli*

In the previous sub-chapter, I focused on my female informants' general perception of the significance of *ratauli*, more specifically, on their understanding of sexuality and in the *ratauli*, in particular. My general finding there was that the unmarried, younger women were hesitant to acknowledge the issues of sexuality associated with *ratauli* while the elder, already married women were quite confident on expressing their views on the aspects of sexuality in *ratauli*. *Ratauli* was understood by women differently in relation to their age and position. In the current sub-chapter, in order to explain this discrepancy between the informants, I will explore further the relevance of sexuality in relation to the ritual of *ratauli* and relate them to theories on the myth of sexuality of Hindu women. The major theories of myth discussed here are, the procreative power of mother, and the concept of "dangerous wives", which, I also relate to in the last sub-chapter. But here, I will show how myths can be explained through the construction of gender identities in participants' performances.

I will draw on the literature that argues for a paradoxical construction of sexuality of Hindu women and analyze how that has been projected in the particular case of *ratauli* in my informants' stories. All my arguments in this sub-chapter draw on the experiences of my informants performing in *ratauli*, through the life stories which they sent to me via e-mail and also from the conversations I made with some them via internet calls(skype). I also offer here my own experience as a participant in this ritual.

In this sub-chapter, I first analyze the account of experiences of my informants in stage -wise order of *ratauli*. I will start with performance details of elderly women, then married ones who have also taken part in their own son's marriage and lastly, I analyze the

experience of the younger generation, which also includes my own experience, and I compare their perception of sexuality.

As the term “freedom” in defining the ceremony for them, as a safe space is repeatedly used again and again by many informants, it can be understood that *ratauli* comes to mean not only the free time for the participating women to be able to have fun, the fun in dressing up and mimicking men, but it is also the occasion free from male presence and one that is for female sociality only. While the exclusion of men is mandatory, the actual performance and the type of the roles in *ratauli* is believed to have started with or without some specificity on these matters, however, is that those certain roles may have become incorporated in the process of having fun and entertainment.²⁰ In other words, the initially less specified occasion of having fun over the years has developed to hold certain values for women that the presence of men would certainly ruin or preclude. The absence of men is the prerequisite for the perception of the *ratauli* ritual to function as the critical site in many aspects of women’s behavior in *ratauli*.

My informants, Nani, Sheela, Paru and Rita, all of them elderly and married, have participated in *ratauli* event in their son’s marriage, express their happiness over the importance they received at their sons’ marriage. Motherhood is considered the greatest glory of Hindu women. Hindu texts²¹ and tradition recognize mothers and motherhood to be even greater than heaven. It is significant that mothers are given importance during the celebration of *ratauli*, the worshipping of the lamps is performed by mother, she lights up the lamp in the beginning of *ratauli* and has to guard it for the whole, and the lamp is lit as the symbol of union of the groom and the bride. So, the mother is the most valuable person in a marriage of a son, hence, she is the most important participant in the *ratauli* ritual.

²⁰ Vivienne. Kondos. On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression. 2004. pp 23

²¹ One of the greatest epics of Hinduism, **Mahabharata** says, “While a father is superior to ten Brahmin priests well-versed in the Vedas (spiritual texts of Hinduism) a mother is superior to ten such fathers, or the entire world.”. <http://mailerindia.com/hindu/veda/index.php?hinduwomen>. Accessed June 1, 2007

This heightened prominence of the mother of the groom can also be understood as the importance of female sexuality in Hindu tradition. It implies that women are valued as sexual beings in Hindu society more than their Goddesses. However, this form of worshipping precisely by abstracting women from actual practices of sexuality implies women as these highly respected beings as mothers only, in a way so much elevated that we cannot really see that this motherhood should also imply some actual practice, even if reduced to reproductive activities.

Moreover, in *ratauli* ritual, it is through the recognition of a women's sexuality and their motherhood and its subsequent importance to the household that women (mothers) are involved in that their female gender is celebrated. So, in a way, it cannot be said that Hindu women are uniformly subordinated and oppressed. C.J Fuller, in his work²², argues that Hindu women, especially later in life have considerable power and influence, not only in the home management but also in children's marriage and in many other matters where important decisions are taken by them. If motherhood is the cherished ideal for Hindu women, then *ratauli* is one event where it is given its due.

Most of my informants who have performed in *ratauli* as man said that they were very self-conscious about their performance in the beginning. However, for every woman who actively takes part in *ratauli* and impersonates men, there are many more women who hesitate to come forward to perform and dress up as male. Nani is certainly not one of them. She expresses delight over the applause she had received for her *ratauli* performance. She remembers the incident where she had used a stick as a phallic symbol along with the dressing up as a man, and danced in an erotic manner. She proudly states:

I was mimicking my husband and I was not ashamed of my sexual behavior. The idea of using the stick in the form of *linga*²³ was the most prominent one, and

²² The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India .pp 21

²³ In Hinduism, it means the phallus and it is also the symbol of God Shiva, and is worshipped as symbol of generative power.

without the stick the dancing of my performance would not have been worth appreciating.

The stick used by Nani in her performance indicates the change in her gender and it is articulated by the phallus object used in the performance that is assumed to be directly linked with male sexuality. Nani, dressing up as a man and using the stick as a form of symbolic phallus can be explained in terms of Judith Butler's notion of "performativity". In Nani's impersonation act, gender is achieved through the parodic reiteration of the gender matrix. Nani's feels using the phallic object was necessary for the impersonation as it subverted the gender-roles. In this way, *ratauli* entails subversion of certain ideologies. Dev Kumari, who is older married woman and who belongs to the third stage level of performance, writes in her narrative:

I have a memorable experience of *ratauli*, being a mother of six sons; I have had the pleasure of enjoying *ratauli* in the marriage of all my sons. *Ratauli* is all about togetherness. It is about eating delicious food, enjoying dance and songs. As I was the mother of the groom, I received all the attention in this ritual. I was given the utmost importance, but at the same time, I was also teased and made fun of, and was also made to dance and perform "mischievous" acts for them.

Dev Kumari finds it pleasurable to think about the marriage of all her sons and the event of *ratauli* where she had performed. As understood in the previous sub-chapter, for the married elderly, the ritual means an event where they can see themselves as more powerful than the other female participants, to whom "utmost importance" is given. However, the rest of the part, I have underlined in the quote addresses a new dimension of the ritual. Dev Kumari, here quite clearly remembers the *ratauli* event in the marriage of her second son, Mohan, where other participant women made her dress up like her husband and caricature him, to "perform mischievous acts" for the audience in the ritual. Dev Kumari finds her performance in this particular *ratauli* event "mischievous" in that she was not only mimicking the sexual interactions but also was exposing her husband by that making him the object of the laughing inquisition in front of other women, where most of

them are the members of the same family. So, the masculinity of her husband was put up for comparison and his dignity challenged. Dev Kumari's recount of the mocking performance in *ratauli* comes to be seen as the only event where women can afford to make fun of their husband and their so-called "masculinity". Dev Kumari says that women should feel free to perform this night.

Ratauli has also affected Devi Amaa, an other women whom I have also categorized on the basis of her general evaluation of *ratauli* in the previous sub-chapter as one belonging in the elderly group. On a personal level, she talks about how the participation in the ritual has affected her perception of sexuality and how that has also shaped her dealings with younger women and girls. She explains how *ratauli* always gave her confidence to think positively of issues about sexuality and in discussing about it freely with other women. Already performed more than seven times in *ratauli* so far, both in her son's marriage and in other relatives' marriages, she describes her joy in her performance.

Usually, I played the male part in songs and dance but I also remember mimicking particular caricature of the males of our society, like that of eve-teasing.²⁴

When Devi Amaa participated in the ritual in the role of a man, it meant that most of the time she was also dressed up like one and basically performed a male's part in duet dances and songs. What is most important here for my analysis is the point in her narrative, which I quoted above, where Devi Amaa says that her performance in *ratauli* has helped the other, young women to see how women are often harassed publicly in patriarchal society and also how they are privileged in the name of their masculinity and expose the hidden gender discrimination in society.

The place of women in Hindu society can be often seen as a paradox²⁵. On the one hand, women, especially young girls are subjected to abuse and discrimination; on the

²⁴ **Eve teasing** is an expression used by men on women for sexual harassments, verbal molestation, especially in the Indian sub-continent region.

²⁵ <http://www.mapsofindia.com/culture/indian-women.html>. Accessed June 1, 2007

other hand, women receive great respect and reverence as they get older. As Devi Amaa's performances entail, how women in society are positioned, as women get older, they have lesser insecurity of their sexuality while younger, the women, more insecure they are. *Ratauli* can be considered one such symbolic site where women, transforming their gender identities, challenge the dominant constructions.

Expressing their views along the same line are Sheela and Nani, who also believe their performance in *ratauli*, in a way, was the challenge to the dominant construction of their femininity, sexuality and the space provided to them in the orthodox Hindu society. Sheela who is also member of the group 2 identified as that of the elderly women says the following:

I have always performed as man in *ratauli*. As for my own sons' marriage, my participation was limited to only *dohari*²⁶ songs but for other *ratauli* events, I chose to act as a man, as I was more comfortable enacting it as it is a closed ceremony and there is no fear of society. The highlights of my performance are that I try to unfold the social stratification existing in our society. I have performed as a drunkard man, a wife-batterer and an eve-teaser.

Sheela's statement demonstrates that through her performance in *ratauli*, she tries to show the gender problems prevalent in unequal social orders of society. By stating "no fear of society" Sheela is referring to the secrecy of the *ratauli* ceremony, a traditional regulation that women can appropriate to their advantage. With no hindrances from society and men, women use their power through secrecy in *ratauli* and thematize men's abuse of women. As for men, by the power of the ritual, they can not have any exact idea about what actually happens in *ratauli*. They do not know for real if their wives are making fun of their dignity and masculinity simply because men are required to be absent on this occasion. There is one other point we need to clarify. The subversive potential of *ratauli* is not perceived by the participants in that it should be the occasion for proposing 'solutions'. Sheela does not mention the expectation that her performance should provide any solution

²⁶ Duet songs

of the problem enacted through her impersonations of abusive men. She believes that *ratauli* has its value in that it is a “closed ceremony” where there is no fear of society and together women can do what they want to. In that sense we can say that the transgressive potential of the men-impersonation in the ceremony consists in the power of laughter itself²⁷.

My own experience of being involved in the *ratauli* for the first time was three years ago, at my cousin’s brother’s marriage. Though the whole process of this ritual was entertaining and a new experience for me, in hindsight, I can also realize that I was also embarrassed and amazed seeing my aunts and my mother perform in most awkward dances. I do not remember if I had any discussion about her performance with my aunt after the ritual. It was meant to be performed within the closed room and forgotten all about later. Therefore, questioning and discussing after the event on the sexual performances seem either challenging or unfamiliar.

My aunt had dressed as a man and she had tied a banana in between her legs as a symbol of penis, and along with my mother they danced in a duet. While, my aunt started chasing younger women in the audience group which included me, my sister and other relatives, there was much chaos in the room for we started running in surprise.

I must say, it was also some ways a pleasant surprise for me in that sexuality was thematized explicitly to me and by my own mother. Although I was observing *ratauli* for the first time and was not so comfortable with the activities going on since I was witnessing the acts which I had never expected to have come from my aunts and my mother, through these very experiences, I indeed had an awakening of knowledge of womanhood and sexuality. I was confronted with my relatives’ explicit sexual allusions at the *ratauli*. Just like Nani, my aunt was also trying to be a “man” and her gestures were

²⁷ Vivienne. Kondos, On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression.pp 23

weird for me. Though I could hear so many older women making sexual jokes, I was unable to understand the meanings of more than half of them. The songs which my aunts and relatives sang mostly sounded like abusing their husbands, including my own father. Whenever, there was dance sequences and awkward movements from the performer's side, there was lots of giggling and whispers in the audience - the position from where I was watching the events.

Now, three years later, when I analyze my own experience and position in *ratauli*, I realize that *ratauli* is an effective way of exploring issues of sexuality and gender roles. I am aware that the cultural construction of Nepalese society is shaped by Hindu ideology which promotes patriarchal attitudes and practices that exclude women from a variety of functions and from open discussion of issues of sexuality while at the same time apparently puts them on the highest pedestal of religious order..

Similar to my experience of *ratauli* was that of Gayatri who is also unmarried. She states her discomfort and embarrassment of *ratauli* experience like this:

I was amazed to hear older women sing “vulgar” songs relating to sexual activities, and their performances were to some extent vulgar too [...]. I also sang in *ratauli*, with other women, but my songs were not related at all with sexuality, they were local Nepali folk songs.

Gayatri expressed her anger over those older women who teased and initiated younger women in *ratauli* event to act as sexual beings. The reason why Gayatri and I felt uncomfortable may be the reason that for the unmarried girls like us, we are socialized to keep silent concerning sexuality issues and not to discuss them in public. This is the knowledge and belief which we receive from women in our household i.e. our aunts and mothers, and seeing them not following those very rules which they had set for us, was indeed difficult to perceive them as decent women in terms of those rules. But above all,

we were expected to know certain aspects of sexual practice that we were not actually told about.

Whereas for many “experienced” and older women *ratauli* was the opportunity to challenge these restrictions, in hindsight, after becoming familiar with feminist scholarship, as another source of knowing about sexuality, now I see that as gender is socially constructed, so is sexuality, and whatever sexuality comes to mean in our life, it seems “natural” to us only because it has been embedded in our culture and religion for a long time. In this regard, I see *ratauli* as the potential site where the unsaid aspects of sexuality are also laid out, educating the young women, telling them about aspects of female sexual experience that otherwise, outside of the ritual’s space should remain unsaid.

Sita, now married for some years, shares her first experience of *ratauli* as an unmarried girl to be a little awkward:

It was not comfortable seeing some women performing the activities which mimicked sexual activities, but after my own marriage, those awkwardness are removed. I do participate in dressing and acting as men. I don’t mind, after all it is all about entertainment and fun. [...] We have internalized this notion of restrictions, and there is no such thing as good or bad; it is how we perceive them.

Sita was very open to the activities that take place in *ratauli* and her observations about the importance of actual practice does support my own retrospective recollections about my own embarrassment and also my understanding that controlling the division between what gets verbalized and where is also part of the ritual.

Contrary to Sita’s idea is of Bina’s. She is a newly married woman who feels that engaging bawdiness in *ratauli* will spoil the cultural meaning of this ritual:

Once, I had participated in the *ratauli* event of my neighbor, some women were enacting how a husband makes love to his wife, how he behaves and speaks on the night of *Suhagraat*²⁸ and I think, these kind of activities ruin the essence of this ritual and moreover, will badly affect the unmarried girls.

Bina, particularly is eager to express her anger on the certain activities that exists in *ratauli*. She also points out that in the name of *ratauli* women try to cross the limit of shame and modesty. Bela, another young married woman, expressed that her performance in *ratauli* has always been cherished; she mainly takes part in dances and singing songs.

Actually, the performance stage in *ratauli*, where I basically take part is in songs, where I usually sing songs other than the “conventional”²⁹ ones and sing in response to others, in a form of competition, and in an interactive way.”

Bina and Bela are happy about the fact that in their perception *ratauli* is the celebration of femaleness, and that the solidarity of women is affirmed through participation in this ritual. Here, I argue that the performance and enactment in *ratauli* have given women of different categories, old, young, married and unmarried, an opportunity to be self-critical and conscious about the gendering aspects of the social order and the social role of their own sexuality.

According to Sherneen Laloo, the Hindu woman is regarded as “dangerous” if she is alone or unmarried and “auspicious” if she is married, as married woman's sexuality is confined within a marital relationship and inside the space of the home. She further explains in her article³⁰ how Hindu religion puts “control” on woman's sexuality. In Hinduism, when goddesses are worshipped alone, they are regarded as “dangerous” and when a married woman is seen as “auspicious”, a clear message is sent to women that female sexuality is best contained and explored within marriage. However, if Laloo's explanation is taken into account, then it can be said that when motherhood is celebrated in *ratauli*, then it is celebrated assuming that their sexuality is auspicious instead of dangerous, because in the *ratauli* event, the mother of the groom raises her status from

²⁸ The first wedding night, this is considered to be most sacred ritual of love in Hindu marriage when the wedded couple unites not only physically, but also spiritually.

²⁹ The usual Nepali folk songs sung in *ratauli*.

³⁰ Hindu women and sexuality

“dangerous wife³¹” to that of pure and auspicious mother-in-law. The concept of “dangerous wife” shows how daughter-in-laws in Nepalese are seen to be threat to the lineage.

In this sub-chapter, I have argued how sexualities of Hindu women are socially constructed and mediated by Hindu religion and culture. And in the ritual of *ratauli*, I showed how women’s experiences and status in society shape their attitude towards their sexuality when confronted with it in the ritual. My informants came up with different kinds of *ratauli* experiences, with the older and much experienced, *ratauli* performance was not a shock as they had not only seen and participated in it before but they have also done, practiced sexuality itself before. With the younger women and unmarried girls, there were some discomfort and uneasiness with the performance and it could be said that this is due to their unfamiliarity with certain aspects of the issues of sexuality that they do not learn about from their mothers outside the ritual space and also with their (expected) non-existent actual practice as the other source that could prepare them for the “mischievous” performances to come by their own mothers or close relatives. While for some other women, they did not enjoy the *ratauli* performances and were reluctant to be open to new perspectives of sexuality altogether. It can be said that *ratauli* is the ritual which functions to show the multi-faceted meanings of female sexuality, depending on the previous experience and knowledge of the participants.

4.3. *Ratauli* and gender norms in Marriage

In this sub-chapter, I analyze how the patriarchal marital norms are subverted or transformed in the ritual of *ratauli* through the performances of the participants. But, unlike the previous sub-chapter where the impersonation was considered in terms of its relationship to the norms regarding male sexuality, here I am analyzing the data from the

³¹ Concept of Lynn Bennett used in *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High*

perspective of female sexuality through the ritual's differential perceptions by the mother-in-laws and also by the young daughter-in-laws. In the previous sub-chapter, I compared the relevance of sexuality in relation to *ratauli* relating them to theories on the myth of sexuality of Hindu women. While, here, I want to argue that *ratauli* is also an event for celebration of female sexuality and strategies for claiming power. Here, I analyze the life stories of my informants, the elderly and married women on their accounts of the activities in *ratauli* which explains existing power structure within the ritual that can challenge the gender norms in Hindu marriage. All of these women (my informants) have participated either in *ratauli* of their own son's wedding or at relatives'.

Given the account of the prevailing gender norms in Hindu society, the reality is that women at every level are dependent on men for their livelihood and support, and their sexuality is in complete control of men's authority. But this statement, suggesting, that characterizations of Hindu women as repressed and submissive could be half truth in the context of the ritual of *ratauli*. Gender norms in Hindu marriage are to a large extent reinforced by the traditional religious Hindu ideology but I argue that *ratauli* is such a ritual which helps to subvert this "stereotype".

Singing, dancing, male impersonation and sexual joking, which are the major features of *ratauli* and therefore the places offered for women's active participation in all of these activities show that women are not simply the silent victims of an oppressive gender system. They are afforded a certain amount of power in society. *Ratauli* showcases this power of Hindu women, which is derived from their capacity to resist the prescribed social order of orthodox Hindu beliefs about their own sexuality and gender roles.

Almost all of my informants expressed their satisfaction and pleasure regarding their performance parts in *ratauli*. The emphases given by the informants to their own performances in the ritual demonstrate that Hindu women's role as submissive is not

“natural” and is actively contested. In *ratauli*, they challenge the gender roles assigned by the society and the patriarchal hierarchy that is sanctioned by Hindu religion. Such constructions of gender and sexuality could be taken as potential disruptions and problematic within a patriarchal framework when it is applied to young people like the unmarried women in the audience in *ratauli* as young women are assumed to be ignorant on the sexuality issues.

Though, the ritual of *ratauli* reflects the hidden reality of the Hindu society through the construction and presentation of the performances of women such as the impersonation and dances, not all believe so. Most of my informants analyzed the ritual of *ratauli* weighing the negative and positive aspects of it and in the process, exposed their own ideologies that have shaped their reflections on the gendered norms and values. Nevertheless, they all seem to agree that participation and performance in *ratauli* can actually teach women about their own roles in maintaining prescribed gender norms within the patriarchal marriage relation as well as how they may have the agency to transform their role in the *ratauli* with the breaking up of oppressive gender construction and have a break from all those norms.³² According to Bela, who has been married for some years, *ratauli* should be performed within some limits. She expresses:

Participating in *ratauli* gives greatest satisfaction, as one takes part in it only once in one or two years, so it is refreshing for all women. And also it preserves our tradition; our future generation learns a lot of practical as well theoretical aspects of it [...] such as we sing songs about dowry and rights of women, so message is sent across these songs to the younger generation in the audiences but we have to control the rowdy³³ aspects of it.

Bela refers to “rowdy performances” as activities that do not teach the audience the “right” way to behave. In her view the lessons which they might learn and internalize from

³²<http://209.85.135.104/search?q=cache:FWU3nqNHIMUJ:www.newpaltz.edu/asianstudies/nycas/2003%2520UG%2520Ryan%2520Prize%2520Renee%2520Karl.pdf+india+ritual+women+sexuality&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=4> .Accessed June 1, 2007

such performances can also disturb their actions. As the patriarchal norms are used to impose control on the new bride as she is an outsider and could be a threat for the prosperity of the household or even a threat for the mother-in-law, the songs and performances in *ratauli* also signify that the incoming bride or the daughter-in-law would be auspicious, obedient and would not disturb the traditional patrilineal joint family system. Since the bride is not present, the message is not addressed directly to her but to all young women, all prospective brides are to learn the “place” in the new household they are to move once married. But there is a more immediate lesson for the female household of the groom to learn or rather to prepare for.

A newly married through her marriage will have to enter the household of the *ratauli* ritual. As soon as the new daughter-in-law enters the home, it is assumed that conflicts arise between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law under the patriarchal Hindu joint family structure. Now, from here onwards, in this sub-chapter, I am going to analyze the stories and interviews in terms of the different meanings they perceive from the conflictual perspective on the relationship between the mother-in-law and that of the daughter-in-law. I focus on how their relationships bring change in the power structure within the family.

On the one hand, in the stories of my informants who are already mother-in-laws, there appears the rivalry of the mother and the sisters of the household on one side with the wife (the new bride to enter the premises the following morning) for the affection of their son/brother while on the other hand, the new bride has very little freedom of speech and is completely in control of her mother-in-law and other members within the family.

Sheela remembers the *ratauli* event of her son’s marriage, she had never felt so important in her life, she writes:

I had the feeling of importance of being a mother-in-law for the first time, I knew my days of hardship were over. for then my son was getting married and I was being the mother-in-law.

³³ She is referring to the male impersonation and the sexual parody.

Sheela's happiness over her son's marriage indicates that she was having a power privilege over her new daughter-in-law. In a Hindu joint family structure, a daughter has more responsibilities over her mother-in-law than her own mother. Marriage in patriarchal Hindu South Asian countries like Nepal means that women and girls are expected to conform to ideologies of wifely fidelity and chastity, as part of their religion and culture. Moreover, these women have internalized these ideologies through their devotion to their family, and the same definitions of female identity have made it easier for them to be able to adapt with the issues of men's control over their sexuality, mobility, reproduction, labor and so on³⁴. It can be said that the same ideologies have helped relate women's power as wives and mothers.

As the performance in *ratauli* is linked to the goodwill of the household of the family, it is also a way of the celebration of women's procreative power, the worship of her sexuality. *Ratauli* ritual has definitely the importance of sexuality embodied in it with the marriage of the girl. According to Susan Wadley,³⁵ a woman derives power, both creative and destructive from her reproductive capacity. She says, and it is considered creative, when through the reproductive capacity, a woman explores her sexuality, she faces regulations governing her sexual behavior. When this issue is linked with the cultural practices and performance of *ratauli*, then, mother-in-law's procreative power is celebrated, praised. At the same time, the same power is considered destructive for the daughter-in-law and through auspicious songs and worship of lights, and therefore she is prayed for to the Gods to ensure that the lineage will continue well and good influences be brought in the family by the new bride.

³⁴ <http://saxakali.com/Saxakali-Publications/recastwgfam.htm> Accessed June 1, 2007.

³⁵ Struggling With Destiny in Karimpur pp51

Most of my informants had the choice of roles to perform in *ratauli* but most of them performed in whichever activities they felt more comfortable doing. However, their performances were also based on what was actually expected from most of them. Most of the women, according to their age and status in society, performed according to that stage. For example, only middle-aged, married women perform most of the impersonation activities and sexual parodies, while young unmarried women and girls sing and dance.

Sita, for example, confidently stated that she had no awkwardness in performing as a man and she equally enjoyed dancing and singing other songs. When I spoke to her over the phone, she was all excited to relate her impressions on *ratauli*:

Well, there are other festivals, where we get opportunity to dance and sing but *ratauli* is different.[In the others], you don't get a chance to mimic man and that also in front of so many women. Moreover, *ratauli* also provides a platform to attack our own mother-in-laws and sister-in-laws through our performances, songs and dances.

This kind of expression is obvious from a young married woman like Sita who believes *ratauli* helps to change gender identities, it allows a woman to speak of the injustice and gender discrimination one faces daily within one's household, the discrimination which could have been done by the husband, the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law. Therefore, in her perception, *ratauli* is that platform for women who can address those feelings of theirs, for which they have no words or courage to express otherwise. It can be said, these performances act as psychodrama³⁶ which help women to come forward with their problems.

However, some mother-in-laws keep a different view on the ritual. Rita, for example, argues that even though the mother of the groom is teased, made fun of and forced to dress up as man, it is actually the value given to her, for her motherhood. She describes her

³⁶ It is the concept developed by Jacob L. Moreno, and it is the form of drama which explores the problems of people through certain actions on stage and with the use of props also.

experience of eating food in *ratauli*, how she was kept hungry by her *ratauli* friends and served the last hour. This is another interesting factor of *ratauli*, when *ratauli* members eat together; the groom's mother is served last despite her seniority and importance, this is the breaking of the usual hierarchy of sequencing and if the mother is angry, the *ratauli* members would fight back, attacking the status quo. Usually, it is men and boys who are the first to eat, along with children, then comes, mother-in-law and finally comes the turn of the daughter-in-law. With the reversal of this practice, it proves that, there exists the hierarchical arrangement within the household and within the marriage system. But reversal is important in *ratauli* because if strictness in seniority and superiority maintained then there will be no proximity among the *ratauli* members. This practice can also be taken as the subversive aspect of *ratauli*.

Performances in *ratauli* are not perceived as something threatening and shameful, but as an important part of the ritual and taken in a form of entertainment, which in itself is the paradoxical aspect. Impersonation of men and sexual parody, which are the integral part of performances in *ratauli*, may begin as a source of arousal, but for many women participants and performers, other aspects become important, such as making fun of masculinity, and achieving a masculine sense of self and also trying to escape from the feminine gender norms. Not being able to subscribe to gender norms outside the ritual can be seen as an indicative that gender identities are changed only in the ritual of *ratauli*, and that there is very little done on shifting one's ideas through the performances outside the ritual.

Precisely because all the newly weds are to end up in some other women's household, as far as *ratauli* is concerned, it can also be viewed as the space of solidarity where women seek some power and autonomy in the context of marriage through this ritual. Regardless of their location in their home, women (mother of the groom) are enjoying the ritual as an

occasion that can compensate them for the hardships of gender they had to endure in their new family's space before the moment of the son's marriage that endows them with some power in the ritual's space.

CONCLUSION

Hindu women have always been glorified as asexual beings, limiting and confining them to oversimplified and disempowering social roles. The presence of sexual taboos in Hindu society has always added to the conflicts around the sexuality of Hindu women, trying to secure it as homogeneous. But, in practice, constructions of sexuality in the Hindu women are not uniform. There is a vast variation in constructions of sexuality emerging as soon as we take into consideration for example the social dimension of the different categories of the so-called high caste Hindu women in Nepal. And *ratauli* is one such local practice where the sexuality of high caste women are articulated through the ritual practices. That is, *ratauli* can be seen as a wedding ritual that gives a valuable insight into the multiple construction of sexuality of women in Hindu tradition. Academic works on *ratauli* so far in Nepal have only been mostly ethnographic accounts of the ceremony, such as in Vivienne Kondo's *On the ethos of Hindu Women: Issues, Taboo and Forms of Expression* and Mary M Cameron's *On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal*, whereas for my research work I used the ritual to explore the different patterns and meanings of sexuality and its constructions in high caste Hindu women of Nepal.

My informants for the research comprised both married and unmarried Hindu women who had either participated as audience members or performed in *ratauli*. I had to make sure that I have access to the perception of both groups of participants as my main research question was concerned with the paradox in constructing female sexuality of both married and unmarried Hindu women. It is through the division of these women's ritualized performances in *ratauli*, and the narratives of their *ratauli* experiences that I brought into focus the transformation of women's gender identities in and through the semi-public space of the ritual of *ratauli*.

The variety of experiences of my informants in *ratauli* is no more remarkable, regardless of their age and the marital status, than the fact that they all identify this ritual as celebration of femaleness and female solidarity. They see the ritual as an occasion that enhances female autonomy and agency through their performances and participation in *ratauli*.

Although *ratauli* is part of the ceremony of a Hindu wedding, the actual performances in it undermine those ideological expectations of women's sexuality in Hinduism. The secrecy of *ratauli* means that it is completely women's ritual and is considered imperative in bringing about female sociality. The analysis of the women's narratives of their experience of *ratauli* show how sexuality is socially constructed and interpreted in culturally specific ways. Women's status and age played greater control and autonomy over the understanding signification of *ratauli* where the older women in comparison to younger married and unmarried women were ready to degenerate the restrictions imposed on their sexuality through this ritual. Performances in *ratauli*, the songs, the sexual parody and male impersonation explicitly criticize the male privilege in the society, thus *ratauli* comes to function as the space to resist the orthodox patriarchal Hindu ideologies and practices that dominate women's sexuality and lives as a whole. Here, I argue that the enactment of women in *ratauli* provides them a critical self-consciousness for their own subjectivities and the gendering aspects of social order of their own sexuality. It can be said that *ratauli* is the ritual which functions to show the multi-faceted meanings of female sexuality, depending on the previous experience and knowledge of the participants helps these women to change their gender identities in this ritual while roles do not change when they come about from the ritual.

In Hinduism women's sexuality is worshipped in their function as mother. Woman as mother is spiritually glorified. Yet, the real fun in *ratauli* begins with the groom's mother

wearing disguises, teasing, sexual parodying and eating in an anti-hierarchical order. These different themes in the ritual embody the position of the groom's mother in the ritual as the relatively most powerful woman whose success as a woman is proven as mother of the groom and can now liberate her as the rowdy fun-maker of the ceremony. The mother of the groom, from the perspective of the Hindu norm, is considered auspicious precisely because she bore a son and could fulfill her female potentiality and thereby has proven her "shakti", the power. Hence she is forbidden to go along to her son's wedding itself. The *ratauli*'s space of prohibition however is appropriated by her and her female relatives into a semi-open public of sexual explicitness. Also indicated in *ratauli* is the idea that marriage will change the relationship in the household, as the new bride enters it. As the power relation in the family will not be same anymore after the entrance of the new daughter-in-law in the groom's house, we can also view that *ratauli* help women in the groom's extended household to understand the change in their own roles in maintaining the gender norms within the Hindu patriarchal marriage relation. Yet, in this regard again the ritual also provides these women the autonomy to laugh at their roles, loosening the grip of these norms.

Power offers an interesting analytical dimension of women's sexuality in Hindu context. There are two contradictory perceptions of women. On the one hand, Hindu religion scriptures associates women's sexuality with immense power. On the other hand, in daily practice, women's sexuality is controlled by the power of "masculinity". Therefore, here I argued that the ritual of *ratauli* in itself is a cultural manifestation of contradiction in the construction of sexuality of high caste Hindu women in Nepal. They are expected and therefore taken to be submissive and silent about, their sexualities while in some local practices such as all female context of *ratauli*, women express their sexualities explicitly and in defiance of normative ways. I also argued that the construction of gender and

sexuality, or rather the access to these non-normative practices depends on the position and age of women in the ritual of *ratauli*. In other words, the space of the ceremony is informed by a differential, non-equal power dynamic as far as the participant women are concerned.

Nepal is in a phase of transition, and gradually moving towards the new horizon or “modernization” in its political, social and ideological realms. “Modernization” also means a resistance to the dominant upper caste Hindu ideologies, and ritual and cultural practice like *ratauli* explains the relationship between resistance and freedom. Here, Lila Abu-Lughod's study³⁷ is significant in the Nepali context and the context of *ratauli* as diverse groups of Hindu women construct their identities as a way of resisting against the patriarchal social order. As Abu-Lughod studied women's folk songs, jokes, satires and ceremonies in an Egyptian village called Beud and found that the Beudian women romanticize the subversive potential of the rituals in the course of which they decorate themselves not for comfort but to resist their traditional lifestyle and their status as women. Her argument is applicable to the women performing in *ratauli* in that here women also see themselves changing their identities through the performances in *ratauli* as a form of resistance. As my own experience of *ratauli* was the awakening of my own sexuality and womanhood, I must also argue that the experience of *ratauli* helped me see how Hindu women in Nepal were engaging with complex activities and were transforming both the cultural and global ideologies of sexuality. I realized that performances at *ratauli* were the unique way of resistance towards the patriarchal Hindu system that restrict and control women's sexuality. However, what my informants did not ever mention is the limited special and temporal dimension of the ritual in their lives, let alone the fact that the subversive potential of laughter never cuts against the caste system itself.

³⁷ Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society. 1998

In order to understand different social constructions of women's sexuality in Nepal, and the ways and degree to which their meanings are possible to be integrated into the Hindu tradition further research of the local cultural practices that encounter such paradoxes has to be carried out in different caste systems. I argue that these studies should not be dominated by the pre-conceived notion of the Hindu ideologies but they should be treated and studied separately taking into account the ranges of meanings on the construction of sexuality of Hindu women of Nepal.

APPENDIX

Appendix 1

Semi Structured Interview Schedule

After sharing a memorable story of *ratauli*, informants were requested to answer some of the questions below.

- (1) What do you understand by *ratauli*, and why do you think it is performed only during the event of wedding?
- (2) What do you think about the significance of this ritual?
- (3) What is your experience regarding participating in the ritual of *ratauli*? How many times and in what roles have you participated in it? What do you think the significance is of the song/dance/ performance you have presented in *ratauli*?

Appendix 2

Short profile and the stage of performance

These are the profiles of my informants who have either participated or performed in the ritual *ratauli*. I provide a short profile of each of my informant, stating her age, marital status and the stage of her performance level. The objective of serving these profiles is just to explain the diversity that existed amongst my informants, and in relation to their performance level.

Informants participating in stage one

Sita is a thirty-five year old married woman, and a mother of two. She is educated, currently working in a private company. She seemed very confident and open in her views, when I talked with her over the phone. She had a very energetic attitude and was not ashamed to share the details of her performance with me.

Bina is another thirty-five year old mother and married. Bina has been married for six years now and she is currently a Nepali teacher at a reputed school in Kathmandu. Bina lives in a joint family with her mother-in-law and brothers-in-law.

Bela is thirty years of age, recently married. Bela is educated and has been working in Government Bank in Kathmandu, where she had been working before marriage.

Asha, must be they youngest amongst my informants, yet most educated too. She is twenty-seven years of age and unmarried. She is an MBA student and working at a private consultancy. She showed great interest in talking with me but was hesitant when she had to talk about her observation about the different performances at *ratauli*. She is at present living with her parents.

Gayatri is another unmarried, young woman of thirty years of age. She lives in a joint family with her parents, brother and sister-in-law. Gayatri, though not as educated as Asha, works in a reputed NGO. Gayatri is all too proud about her performances in *ratauli*.

Informants participating in stage two

Nani is forty-seven and a middle-aged married woman. She has two sons and both are married. Nani works as a social activist. Nani supported me in finding four other informants for my research. Nani was not at all uncomfortable in sharing her experience of *ratauli* and I built up a good relation with her, at once. I made two calls for conversation with her, and each call was interesting. Especially, she took great pleasure in explaining about her “stick dance” with me.

Paru is another middle-aged woman, about fifty years of age who is also a mother of a son. Paru had participated in *ratauli* in her son’s marriage. She is basically a homemaker. She mentioned that it was only in her son’s marriage, she had most enjoyed the dancing.

Rita is a middle aged woman; forty-three years of age currently residing in US with her family. She remembers the moments she had enjoyed in her son’s marriage in Kathmandu. Rita is all eager to participate and perform in *ratauli* once more in her life. It was easy to contact her in US than with rest of my informants in Nepal. Rita was all happy to share her feeling about *ratauli* with me.

Sheela, a mother of four sons, has been married for about thirty years now, and is living in a joint family. Sheela at fifty-five is a homemaker, Sheela finds pleasure in being in home all the time, and she is happy when she gets an opportunity to participate in event like *ratauli*. Sheela was little hesitant to talk about her performance in *ratauli* with me but after three conversations over skype, we established a good rapport and then she could open up more freely with me.

Informants participating in stage three

Devi Amaa, is probably the oldest amongst all informants. At sixty-five, she is a widow, and lives with her sons and daughters-in-law. Devi Amaa, was the most entertaining informant I spoke with. Though, in the beginning, I was feeling uncomfortable to pose my questions to her, she, on the other hand, kept me at ease by telling about her experiences in each of the seven times she had participated in *ratauli*. Her experience in each performance was exciting. Devi Amaa was helped by her daughter to get in touch with me over skype.

Dev Kumari, is a mother of six sons and has participated in *ratauli* event of each of her sons. She is a widow, sixty- two, and lives with her second son and his family. Dev Kumari, also eagerly wrote to me about her memorable experience of *ratauli*, which was the marriage ceremony of her son Mohan (with whom, she is living at the moment). I could derive many interesting aspects from her story.

Appendix 3

Format of Research Consent Form sent to the informants

Research Consent Form

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is part of the process of informed consent. This form should give you the general idea of what research I am undertaking and how your participation will be involved in it. If you would like to know more details about the research, please ask me. I hope that you would understand the issue I am undertaking for my research and would help me with your valuable participation.

Research Title: Changing Identity: Hindu Women in the Ritual of *Ratauli* in Nepal

Researcher: Nemu Joshi. MA Student, Department of Gender Studies, Student, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary.

Overall objective of the research: The overall aim of my research is to explore and address the different performances of sexuality enacted by married and unmarried Hindu women participating in the ritual of *ratauli*. My overall concern in this research is to understand the ways gender identities are transformed in and through the ritual of *ratauli*.

Procedure: For the purpose of my research, I expect your help. I will ask you to write up your experience in a story regarding your participation in *ratauli*. You may use any language you are comfortable in and send it to me through internet or fax at your convenient time. Similarly, I would also like to request you to talk with me over the phone, on the same issue and cooperate with me in discussing the story you have earlier written for me. Confidentiality

I will keep your confidentiality and strictly maintain your anonymity. All information gathered will be used for my research analysis only and I will use pseudonyms for the purpose of quotes. No names of people or places, or other identifying characteristics will be mentioned in my research. I will take efforts to respect your trust and see that you won't experience any discomfort or fear risk during the course of interviews and as a result of my research.

Naturally, I will let you know the results of the study on its completion, i.e. after June 2007.

Agreement

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood the scope of my study and agree to participate as an informant. You are free to not answer and take part in this research process. You should feel free to ask for clarification and information at any moment throughout the research procedure. If you have further questions concerning matters related to this research, please contact me at, nemujoshi@hotmail.com.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Thank you so much for your co-operation. Without your willingness to work with me, I wouldn't be able to carry out this research and meet the requirements of my MA degree. I am looking forward to working with you.

Nemu Joshi

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