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## Presenting the Absence: A Contrapuntal Reading of the *Māita*<sup>1</sup> in Nepali *Tīj*<sup>2</sup> Songs

By Balram Uprety<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Much before the arrival of Western feminism in Nepal with its vocabulary of protest and polemics, the discourse of right and fight, Nepali women have had a long complex and ambivalent genealogy of protest in the genre of *Tīj* songs. However, such discourses have been rendered invisible by the dominant epistemology that derives its ideological sustenance from the Eurocentric and Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge production. The collusion of native patriarchy with the dominant epistemological system can be located in the absence of any systematic engagement with the *Tīj* songs in the indigenous academia. Through Nepali women's complex and highly nuanced conceptualization of the *māita* (the parental home) and the *ghar* (the house where women get married into), the paper seeks to show how Nepali women problematize not only the Western construction of the silenced native subaltern, but also the erasure of Nepali women's voice in the construction of 'knowledge' by the native patriarchy.

*Keywords:* *Tīj* songs, *Māita*, *Gghar*, Feminism, Patriarchy, Erasure, Alternative epistemology.

### Introduction

One of the fundamental concerns of academics regarding folklore research, especially in South Asia, has been that it has seldom moved beyond the preliminary stages of collection and classification. According to Alan Dundes, the noted American folklorist:

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<sup>1</sup> The house in which a woman is born in. The house is always seen as a transit point for a woman in Nepali society. In a patrilocal Nepali society, she has to leave her home and go to the house of her husband after marriage. The violence of this movement—physical and psychological—and the questioning of such system is the preoccupation of many *Tīj* songs discussed in the paper.

<sup>2</sup> *Tīj* has been variously spelt by different authors: Bennett (see note 8) spells it *Tij*, Skinner and Holland (see note 22) spell it *Teej*. I, however, spell it *Tīj*, which corresponds to the phonetic pronunciation of the word in Nepali. Celebrated annually from *bhādra*, *śukla dwitīyā* (mid-August to mid-September), *Tīj* is primarily the festival of upper caste Nepali women i. e. Bahun and Chhettri women (which in popular construction and the age of global consumerism is gradually becoming the festival of *all* Nepali women). On *Tīj* Nepali women who are married away, are taken by their father or elder brother to their natal home for feasting on the first day of the festival. The feasting is followed by rigorous fasting for the longevity of their husband's life. As they fast for the long life of their husband, women go to the nearest Shiva temple or public place where they sing and dance. Their singing enacts a complex cultural phenomenon: women undermine the patriarchal ritual of fasting by singing songs that critique patriarchy. The songs enact counter-hegemonic femininity; women's alternative conceptualization of their subjectivity. The songs that deal among many other aspects of their life also come to problematize the opposition between *māita* and *ghar*: an aspect rarely dealt by indigenous or other researchers are the locus of the present study.

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... there is relatively little interpretation of folklore. Much more energy has been devoted to question of classification than analysis...But collection and classification are not a substitute for analysis...But for whatever reason, folklorists typically stop their intellectual work with the presentation and identification of data...The problem is that the fundamental question of meaning is never raised or discussed at all.<sup>4</sup>

This paper therefore seeks not only to document but also to critically read what has been collected, published, documented, and archived on women's *Tīj* songs so that Nepali folklore scholarship moves beyond the stage of collection, labeling and classification to that of theoretical framing and cultural analysis.

Even where there has been some attempt in existing scholarship at the interpretation of available folk cultural artifacts, the epistemology that underpins a large part of such interpretation raises some uncomfortable fundamental questions. In a 'Third World' dependent upon western theoretical and epistemological systems for its critical vocabulary, the academic dealing with the subaltern subject must speak in Euro-American idiom and voice if she wishes to be heard 'at the centre'. If she does not do so, she has not spoken at all.

The infatuation of western feminism with the 'silenced native subaltern woman' is not politically and ideologically neutral, but situated in the complex location of western feminists vis-à-vis the cultures of the other. The task of the postcolonial feminist academic in this context is to 'bring to voice' - to facilitate the recording and dissemination of the cultural production of women - so that there are texts that can then be worked with, as it were. The evolving tradition of women's songs that I deal with in my work is a phenomenon that predates the emergence of feminism in the twentieth century west. While such cultural production may not use a vocabulary that feminists would instantly recognize as one of resistance, the academic, with his/her bilingual and bicultural training in the cultures of both the Nepali women's communities and the western academy can then provide a gloss on the subaltern archive in the critical language dominant in the academy. It is with this aim in mind, that I read the dominant patriarchal representation of Nepali women problematically and subversively in order to chart out a longer alternative 'her-story' of resistance in the genre of songs.

### **Understanding *Tīj*: Contexts and Concepts**

The *Tīj* in Nepal celebrates female agency as well as more quotidian aspects of women's lives. Most importantly, *Tīj* is associated with songs, dancing and singing. In the eastern part of Nepal, the song that accompanies the celebration of *Tīj* is known as *Sangini*; in other parts of Nepal, it is simply called *Tījé gīt*.

Ajayabhadra Khanal states that in the social history of Nepal, especially in the hilly region, *Tīj* songs have played the most central role in the emancipation of women.<sup>5</sup> In the politically charged writing of leading Nepali editorial columns, *Tīj* becomes Nepali women and vice versa. It becomes an event that spans the lives of all Nepali women, not only the Hindu ones, thus linking the festival with the nation-building project. In the *Gorkhapatra Daily*, the editor writes that:

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<sup>4</sup>Alan Dundes, preface to *Interpreting Folklore*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), vii-viii.

<sup>5</sup>Ajayabhadra Khanal, "Miss Nepal, *Tīj* Ani Saśaktikaraṇ: Pūjibādle Mahilā Unmukti Andolanlāi Bandhak Banāuncha?" (Miss Nepal *Tīj* and empowerment: has the movement for women's emancipation become a pawn of capitalism?), Open Ed, *Annapurna Post*, September 1, 2011. My translation.

The ambience of the entire country has been carnivalized by the festivity ushered in by the *Haritālikā Tīj*. Unforgettable is the ever-swelling confluence of literature, music and art collectively created by women participating in *Tīj*. It must be the uniqueness of *Tīj* that it is not confined amongst Hindu women alone. Today, *Tīj* has become intimate and indispensable for non-Hindu as well as for the Hindu women who would not celebrate it traditionally. Therefore, to describe this festival of pan-Nepali women as a festival of Hindu women would be a distortion.<sup>6</sup>

On the festival of *Tīj*, women expect to be taken to their *māita*<sup>7</sup> for celebration no matter how far away their *māita* is. If women are denied this, their anguish and agony leads to poignant lamentation reflected in the songs.

Amongst Hindu women *Tīj* is almost an affirmation of certain aspects of what patriarchy has conditioned them into thinking of as ‘essential’ aspects of their selfhood, such as their role as daughter, wife and mother. Celebrated annually from *bhādra*, *śukla dwitīyā* (mid-August to mid-September) to *panchami*, the celebration of *Tīj* is associated with many mythological stories. On *dwitīyā*, women feast on milk, curd, butter, sweets, fruits and numerous delicacies; it is an indulgent preparation for the rigorous fasting to be undertaken on the next day. The gastronomical indulgence is known as *dar khāne* that is, ‘to feast on *dar*’. Thus the festival oscillates between the sacred and the secular. On *tritīyā*, married women and unmarried girls who have started menstruating go through rigorous fasting, mostly without water. The married women fast for the longevity of the life of their husbands: unmarried girls who have started menstruating fast for a ‘good’ husband. From the early morning, the fasting women go to a river or any water body to bathe and worship Shiva-Parvati and sing songs. On *panchami*, women worship *saptarṣi*, the seven mythological *ṛṣis*. The seven *ṛṣis* are considered in Brahminical culture to be the sources of male spiritual pedigree. The *ṛṣi pujā* is, according to traditional accounts, supposed to ‘rescue’ women from the sin of touching men when they become ‘untouchable’ during menstruation.

Though the ritual performativity of *Tīj* cannot be undermined, the centralities of songs that accompany the festival have not received serious academic attention from indigenous as well as international academia. The tendency of Nepali as well as international academia to date the ‘arrival’ of feminism in Nepal with the onset of pro-democracy movement in Nepal in the 1990s overlooks the vocabulary of protest embedded in the *Tīj* songs. While the ritual performativity of the archetypal *Tīj* endorses patriarchy, the songs underline women’s counter hegemonic, contrapuntal reading of patriarchy.

Taking one salient thematic of *Tīj*, i.e. Nepali women’s complex conceptualization of their *māita* (the natal home) and the *ghar*, the house where they have been married into<sup>8</sup>, the paper attempts to underline a long genealogy of protest before the infiltration of feminist discourse from the West in the 1990s, the patriarchal monolithic construction of the *māita* as an idealized space,

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<sup>6</sup>Editorial, *Gorkhapatra Daily*, September 12, 2010. My translation.

<sup>7</sup>Their parental home.

<sup>8</sup>Marriage is traditionally a passive experience for Nepali women. The notion of choice in marriage is very recent in Nepal. The songs under discussion underscore women’s conformity as well as contestation of such praxis.

bereft of contradictions, fissures and ruptures, and above all the erasure of women as the producers of critical and contrapuntal epistemology.<sup>9</sup>

*Māita* occupies a central place in Nepali women's socio-emotional imaginary. As we have stated earlier, the classical songs romanticize and idealize the parental home, while more recent compositions take a more pragmatic view of the *māita*. I seek to examine why and how women create a perceptual dichotomy between *ghar* and *māita* in their songs. Foucauldian archaeology helps one to map an alternate oral history of *māita* also as a place of gaps, ruptures, fractures, disillusionment, and conflict, an aspect rarely problematized in the folk and popular imagination. Tracing the trajectory from the classical to the contemporary *Tīj* songs, I shall establish how the process of idealization and sacralization is a reciprocal one: the *māiti*<sup>10</sup> tends to idealize and sacralize the *cheli* as much as the *cheli*<sup>11</sup> does the *māiti*. This collective cultural tendency operates as a weapon of patriarchy rendering women economically powerless even as they are made objects of love and devotion ritually.

“As a stream runs to the ocean, a *cheli* runs to her *māita*”<sup>12</sup>, “cherished is even a dog from one's *māita*”<sup>13</sup>, “women jump over a year-old shrub to reach their *māita*”<sup>14</sup> -these Nepali proverbs still in circulation, testify to the place of *māita* in Nepali women's lives. From the folk to the popular, from cinema to literature, the celebration of the *māita* goes beyond the cultural boundary of the Nepali context and has a strong resonance in many North Indian communities. What explains such an obsessive romanticization of the *māita*? For Mary M. Cameron,

The *maita* represents an idealized place of childhood and adolescence and an idyllic time when the physical landscape and the movement of agricultural season and ritual cycles are first experienced by a girl. Women say they remember their *maiti* in dreams, in songs, in yawns, and in sneezes...*Maiti* is a metonym for the people living there, conventionally associated with parents, siblings, sisters-in-law, and grandparents...the *maita* is a key symbol in women's psychological and emotional states...A married woman's soul often returns to her natal home to see the people there, as they appear in her dreams.<sup>15</sup>

*Tīj* is the festival when such romantic invocation of the *cheli-māiti* bond is reiterated.

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<sup>9</sup> At this juncture, it is necessary to comment on the mediation of meaning in these songs, since the interpretation of the songs will largely depend on the received version of the oral/written text. While I have personally collected and translated many of the songs, I have also extensively translated into English many of the songs that have been recorded by other scholars in Nepali. I have tried to keep as close to the literal meanings as possible, and while much is lost in any translation process in terms of innuendo, puns or double meanings, my own bilingualism has enabled me to bring these subtler levels of meaning embedded in the source language to the surface and hence the reader's attention when I am glossing the songs or interpreting them in the target language. Translation itself is a political act, and an interpretive one. Many readers will not have engaged with such songs, especially the rural ones, before this, and hence, in order to enable a fuller understanding I have provided substantial quotes from the songs.

<sup>10</sup>Members, especially male, of a woman's natal home.

<sup>11</sup>Daughters and sisters are reverentially and indulgently referred to as *celi* by people of her *māita*.

<sup>12</sup>D.B. Singh, *Triveni: Ukhān-tukkā ra vāgdhārākā* (A confluence of proverbs, idioms and phrases), (Darjeeling: Arpana Prakashan, 2005), 39.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Mary M. Cameron, *On the Edge of the Auspicious: Gender and Caste in Nepal* (Kathmandu: Mandala Publications, 2005), 188.

Parajuli puts the interplay of psychosocial and cultural dynamics into perspective.

*Chori-celi* long to be at their *māita* on *Tīj* no matter how far away they are. ‘Cherished is even a dog from the *māita*’ - goes a saying in Nepali. Just anybody cannot be sent to bring the daughter home on *Tīj*: it must be the father, the elder brother or the younger one. If none of them are able to go to fetch the daughter home or if the *chori-celi* fail to visit their *māita* for some domestic reason, they get extremely miserable...What greater tragedy can befall a woman who is married into a family with an unsuccessfully married younger sister-in-law, a widowed elder sister-in-law, and persistently nagging *sāsu* and *sasurā*! ...amidst the laughter and merriment in the birthplace and the familiar surroundings of the *māita*, the meetings with the friends and the neighbours, *chori-celi* forget their nagging misery. The *māita* acts as an ointment on their stinging wounds.<sup>16</sup>

Parajuli seems to suggest here that *māita* cannot be critically appreciated without studying its binary opposition, *ghar*. The valorization of *māita* can be perhaps understood only once the binarism as an operational strategy of patriarchy is underscored. Why do women create such perceptual dichotomy between *ghar* and *māita*? The following song, to some extent, tries to grapple with this issue.

*Sasurā*<sup>17</sup> told me do not go, *hamkyāilo*<sup>18</sup>!  
My *bābā*<sup>19</sup> has come to fetch me home, *hamkyāilo*!  
My *āmā*<sup>20</sup> has come to fetch me home, *hamkyāilo*!  
My *dāju*<sup>21</sup> has come to fetch me home, *hamkyāilo*!  
My *didi*<sup>22</sup> has come to fetch me home, *hamkyāilo*!  
My *bhāi*<sup>23</sup> has come to fetch me home, *hamkyāilo*!  
My *māita*<sup>24</sup> shall I go now, *hamkyāilo*!  
Deliciously shall I indulge, *hamkyāilo*!  
After dancing in the *cautāri*<sup>25</sup>, I shall go to *pādherā*<sup>26</sup>!  
I shall take *chorā-chori*<sup>27</sup> along with me, *hamkyāilo*!  
For three months shall I stay at *māita*, *hamkyāilo*!  
I have not been to *māita* for a long time, *hamkyāilo*!

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<sup>16</sup>Krishna Prasad Parajuli, *Nepali lokgūko ālok* (A light on Nepali folksongs), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 2007), 176-177. My translation.

<sup>17</sup>Father-in-law

<sup>18</sup>*Hamkyāilo* is a nonsense word that creates the poetic nuances of defiance and gaiety, subdued wildness and a sense of gay abandon.

<sup>19</sup>Father.

<sup>20</sup>Mother.

<sup>21</sup>Elder brother.

<sup>22</sup>Elder sister.

<sup>23</sup>Younger brother.

<sup>24</sup>See note 1.

<sup>25</sup>A shed made by the roadside for travellers to rest.

<sup>26</sup>*Pādherā* is the place from where people, mostly women, fetch water. The Hindi equivalent word for *pādherā* is *panghat*.

<sup>27</sup>Sons and daughters.

Worthlessly have I wasted my life, *hamkyāilo*<sup>28</sup>!

The fantasy of dancing and going to the *pādherā* merits close attention. *Tīj* is primarily the festival of the two elite upper caste Nepali Bahun and Chhetri women. The Parbatiya<sup>29</sup> upper caste women live a disembodied existence - all spirit but no body. The act of dancing gives them bodies, which they are not allowed to possess. The sensual body of a dancer is an anomaly and, therefore, threatening. The Brahminical patriarchy acknowledges and sanctifies only the procreating and nurturing roles of women, and there is, therefore, an assertion of freedom from these roles in the fantasy of the speaker. The celebration of freedom also permeates the speaker's perception of the *pādherā*.

*Pādherā* is the place where women go to fetch water. In the North Indian context, the equivalent is *panghat*. In the Nepali rural context where the division of labor is fairly gendered, collecting water is an exclusively women's work, thereby making *pādherā* a completely 'feminine' space. In a culture where women's mobility beyond the domestic sphere is fairly monitored and regimented, *pādherā* as a space beyond the boundary of domesticity occupies a richly ambivalent status: it is inside, an extension of home in terms of women gathering water for home, yet outside, for it is spatially located beyond the boundary of home. For the Parbatiya upper caste women, who live in hilly terrain, the collecting of water is a difficult act. Many folk songs refer to the drudgery of this activity. Yet to read *pādherā* only as a space of drudgery would be to underwrite the different ways in which women subvert and appropriate this space. Women transform a place primarily associated with hard labor into a space of female bonding and socializing, sometimes romance, and into a space of gossip. For women, such transformation operates ambivalently. It is disempowering for it reduces a 'female' space and the female bonding and socializing into what is commonly perceived by men to be a space for gossip and trivia, thereby creating a binary between the purposeful, serious, productive male discourse and female gossip. As Homi Bhabha puts it, most stereotypes are fraught with anxiety and are embedded in power politics: they articulate the anxiety of the dominant group to classify, categorize, and hence 'tame' and subdue and therefore trivialize the 'other' that it cannot control.<sup>30</sup> The common Nepali saying, "gossiping women even fail to notice the slipping off of their petticoats," not only trivializes women and their culture of orality and hearsay, but also betrays the anxiety of the patriarchy that is excluded from the exclusive female space of *pādherā*. Besides, *pādherā* is not a homogeneous space: the *pādherā* of the *māita ghar*, the subject of the speaker's fantasy, is different from the *pādherā* of the *ghar*, a point to which I shall return later.

The sub-text of the song here can be retrieved by paying close attention to the rhythmic repetition of *hamkyāilo*. The fantasy of gastronomical indulgence, "*salla salla khāmlā*", a phrase that defies any attempt at translation without violence to the original, bears the idea of the food that flows endlessly, easily and merrily. In the Nepali rural agrarian context, food becomes fluid or flowing only when the main staple diet rice is taken with curries, *dāl*, milk, butter, curd and meat. Such combination gives rice the fluidity fantasized by the speaker. Needless to say, such excess and indulgence is a pointer to prosperity. For the speaker in the song, *māita* and *ghar* are

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<sup>28</sup>Dharmaraj Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman* (My travel in Nepal), (Kathmandu: Nepal Press, 1959), 244. My translation.

<sup>29</sup>Nepalis, because of their origin and habitation predominantly in the hills of Nepal, are known as Parbatiya, which means pertaining to the hills. The Nepali language, because of its origin in the hills, is also referred to as the 'Parbate' language. Nepali/Parbatiya are therefore used synonymously in this thesis.

<sup>30</sup>Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 18-36.

the two poles of her emotional geography. The mere possibility of visiting the *māita* on *Tīj* seems to liberate or rescue the speaker from the ‘wasteland’ of the *ghar*, where she has entirely “wasted” her life.

Such a binary is repeatedly reinforced in many *Tīj* songs. Another song dramatizes the binary through a conversation between the woman and her in-laws:

Wife: *Bhaiyā*<sup>31</sup> has come to fetch me home  
 For the yearly festival of *Tīj*  
 Allow me to visit my *māita*<sup>32</sup>, my *swāmi rājai*.<sup>33</sup>  
 Husband: I know nothing about that matter  
 Plead with your *sāsu*<sup>34</sup> rather  
 Wife: My father must be unknotting a bundle of clothes now  
 How ill-fated am I! I feel dead here.  
*Sāsu*: *Sasurā*<sup>35</sup> has been clothing you, I have been feeding you  
 Do not cry, *bahū*<sup>36</sup>, thinking of your *māita*  
*Buhāri*: Sleeping on a *khaṭiyā*<sup>37</sup> and washing in a brass pan  
 How can the *ghar*<sup>38</sup> ever become the *māita*!<sup>39</sup>

Here the mother-in-law, or *sāsu*, asserts that since *sasurā* and herself have been clothing and feeding the *buhāri* or bride, the latter should have no reason to cry and long for the *māita*. For *sāsu*, who herself has been a *buhāri* at one point in her life, to be a *buhāri* means to exist, survive. For the *buhāri*, the *ghar* would always remain a *ghar* for it cannot ensure her the affection and the special privileges like “sleeping on a *khaṭiyā* and washing in a brass pan.” More than physical objects or spaces, these are the markers of power and hierarchy. And the journey from the floor in the in-laws’ home to the *khaṭiyā* is not only a journey in space but also in time. In order to enjoy such privileges, the bride herself would have to become a *sāsu* which implies a long temporal journey.

The *māita-ghar* opposition is more clearly spelt out in the following song.

On reaching *ghar*<sup>40</sup>, I met *sasurā*<sup>41</sup>  
 So unlike my *bābā*<sup>42</sup>, O *siri Bhagawān*!<sup>43</sup>  
 On reaching *ghar*, I met *sāsu*<sup>44</sup>

<sup>31</sup>Brother.

<sup>32</sup>See note 1.

<sup>33</sup>*Swāmi rājai* means my lord, my beloved.

<sup>34</sup>Mother-in-law.

<sup>35</sup>See note 17.

<sup>36</sup>Daughter-in-law.

<sup>37</sup>Bed.

<sup>38</sup>See note 2.

<sup>39</sup>Mohanraj Sharma and Khagendra Prasad Luitel, *Lokvārtāvīgyān ra loksāhitya* (Folkloristics and folk literature), (Kathmandu: Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2006), 120. My translation.

<sup>40</sup>See note 2.

<sup>41</sup>See note 17.

<sup>42</sup>See note 18.

<sup>43</sup>O *siri Bhagawan* literally means ‘O my God’. Here it is an exclamation of anguish and surprise, shock and rude awakening.

<sup>44</sup>See note 32.

So unlike my *āmā*<sup>45</sup>, O *siri Bhagawān*!  
 On reaching *ghar*, I met the elder brother-in-law  
 So unlike my brother O *siri Bhagawān*!  
 On reaching *ghar*, I met the elder sister-in-law  
 So unlike my *bhāju*<sup>46</sup>, O *siri Bhagawān*!<sup>47</sup>

In the signifying system of kinship, a woman's biological *bābā* and *āmā* are replaced and substituted by *sasurā* and *sāsu* as the 'new' parents. Since this semantic relocation is not necessarily accompanied by emotional re-alignment, such grafting must necessarily appear as resulting in a mockery of the original. The following striking lyric visualizes a scenario where the poet persona is injured in an accident. When both father and father-in-law find the body of the injured woman, their reactions are in stark contrast to each other.

I did not embroider in the *sirphūl*<sup>48</sup> of my head,  
 After falling from the bridge, I was not instantly dead,  
*Bābā*<sup>49</sup> and *sasurā*<sup>50</sup> went out in my search,  
 And found me lying on a bed of stones,  
*Bābā* cried, this is my daughter,  
*Sasurā* said, those are my ornaments,  
 As *bābā* started to lament frantically  
*Sasurā* started to take off the jewellery.<sup>51</sup>

The father's selfless love for the daughter is pitted against the inhuman greed of the *sasurā*. The vilification of the *ghar* informs a sizable corpus of the *Tīj* songs, wherein the *ghar* becomes the abode of sinners - the *pāpighar*. Thus, the daughter is described as returning to her parental home, vowing never to return. The comforting food of the parental home is preferred in contrast to the bitter gourd, symbolizing bitter experiences, dished out at the in-laws' home.

*Āmā*<sup>52</sup>, prepare the curry of *ghiraūlā*,<sup>53</sup>  
 That bitter gourd, I shall not have.  
 Force me not so much, *āmā*  
 Never shall I go back to that *pāpighar*<sup>54</sup>  
*Didi*<sup>55</sup>, prepare the curry of *chichinni*<sup>56</sup>  
 That bitter gourd I shall not have  
 Force me not so much, *didi*

<sup>45</sup>See note 19.

<sup>46</sup>Wife of elder brother.

<sup>47</sup>D.B. Singh, "Sanginimā Hāmṛā Celi-beṭikā Bilounā," (The lamentations of our womenfolk in sangini), *Sunchari Samachar* (Siliguri), September 15, 2005, first edition. My translation.

<sup>48</sup>A golden ornament designed in the shape of a flower that is worn on the head.

<sup>49</sup>See note 18.

<sup>50</sup>See note 17.

<sup>51</sup>Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 181.

<sup>52</sup>See note 19.

<sup>53</sup>Gourd.

<sup>54</sup>Her husband's house is referred to as *pāpi* or sinful/sinister.

<sup>55</sup>See note 21.

<sup>56</sup>A kind of vegetable.

Never shall I go back to that *pāpighar*.  
*Bhāju*,<sup>57</sup> prepare the curry of *barwar*<sup>58</sup>  
That bitter gourd I shall not have.  
Force me not so much *bhāju*  
Never shall I go back to that *pāpighar*.<sup>59</sup>

The speaker probably uses the metaphysically loaded word, *pāpi*, more in a secular sense than a sacred one. Through this word, the woman is trying to signify the cruelty, the exploitation that she had to undergo in the *ghar*. Why does, then, the speaker use the word *pāpi* with a strong otherworldly resonance? Though the dichotomy between sacred and secular is a fairly recent one in Nepal, it is equally true that Parbatiya women, till very recently, were not considered full legal subjects. Hence, any offense against them has no corresponding classificatory word and must be couched in the linguistic framework of metaphysics. In the absence of any secular or legal protection, women had to rely upon the ‘moral uprightness’ of the people around her. The parting words of the bride’s father at the end of a traditional marriage ceremony, “Look after her and the merit (*punya*) is yours; kill her and the *pāp* is yours”, underlines the fact that women were denied legal subjecthood.

The following song is probably one of the most poignant descriptions of the displacement that comes about in a woman’s life when she is forced to shift from her parents’ home to a hostile environment after marriage. This relatively more contemporary *Tij* with overt political overtones and self-reflexivity unravels some of the crucial constituent features of a *pāpighar*. The song describes the transition in the singer’s life as “Nepali *cheli*’s lot”.

Lend me your ears *didī-bahini*<sup>60</sup>  
Nepali *celi*’s<sup>61</sup> lot, here I bemoan.  
For ten long months, you carried me  
In your womb, o *āmā*<sup>62</sup>.  
O *bābā*<sup>63</sup>, you fulfilled our wish for education.  
You got us educated and made us your friends,  
But today, you are marrying me away.

After describing a journey by palanquin to the *ghar*, the song goes on to describe the horror of ill treatment at the hands of her in-laws. Metaphors of captivity and claustrophobia inside the wedding palanquin create a sub-text of premonition and foreboding. The mere thought of *ghar* fills the speaker with anxiety.

After threshing the paddy in the morn,

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<sup>57</sup>See note 44.

<sup>58</sup>A kind of vegetable.

<sup>59</sup>Govind Acharya, *Lokgītiko viśleṣaṇ* (An analysis of folksongs), (Kathmandu: Pairavi Prakashan, 2005), 233. My translation.

<sup>60</sup>*Didi-bahini* means sisters in the Nepali kinship system. However, instead of referring to the kinship system there is invocation of collective sisterhood for ‘feminist’ protest in the present context.

<sup>61</sup>Daughter or sister addressed indulgently and reverentially.

<sup>62</sup>See note 19.

<sup>63</sup>See note 18.

I went to the *rāniban*<sup>64</sup> to cut grass.  
Under the load of grass and hailstorm and rain,  
I sat in the *cautāri*<sup>65</sup> and wept.  
Morning had slipped into noon,  
As I returned from the chore.  
The *gagretā*<sup>66</sup> reveals a *gāgri*<sup>67</sup> toppled over.

Rage-darkened *sasurā*<sup>68</sup> black in hue.  
A big *gāgri* took I to fetch water again.  
As I returned with a *gāgri* full of water,  
How must I have felt to see a livid *sāsu*<sup>69</sup>!  
Furious, *sāsu* left for the field.  
In place of rice, alas, there was maize on my plate.

The father-in-law's silence is a classic example of how patriarchy can perpetrate violence by not even using physical violence. The *sasurā* is silent; he does not even gaze at the speaker. He is active in his passivity. The rage scripted over his body is the language and code of patriarchy. The harried bride picks up the toppled *gāgri* and runs to the *pādherā*<sup>70</sup> to fetch water and meets an equally livid *sāsu* on her return.

I had dwelt earlier upon the *pādherā* as a heterogeneous space. This song refers to the *pādherā* of the *ghar* as opposed to the *pādherā* of *māita*. Anger punctuates her departure to as well as her return. Here, the *sāsu*'s anger merits some scrutiny. She participates in the dominant codes of patriarchy and derives power from it. It is only through such collusion that she can exercise power and authority. Patriarchy, evidenced by the song, rules by dividing women against women. More than the "rage-darkened" *sasurā*, it is the "livid" *sāsu* that troubles the speaker. Her need for female sympathy causes her to exclaim,

How would *sāsu* have felt if I were her daughter!  
How long shall I endure such pain and fear?  
Never may I laugh in this *pāpighar*.<sup>71</sup>

The bland maize meal given to her is the culmination of the series of '*pāps*' or sins that characterize her in-laws behavior at the *ghar*. With regard to the Parbatiya food and its politics, what needs to be emphasized here is the hierarchy of foods. Rice, considered to be the staple diet by the Nepali, occupies the highest status. Eating rice twice a day and having sufficient rice grain is taken to be the mark of prosperity. One has not eaten unless one has eaten rice.<sup>72</sup> In such a gastronomical hierarchy, *dhīdo*, the boiled meal prepared out of maize, millet, wheat and barley corn occupies the lowest place and is taken to be the marker of poverty and destitution. However,

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<sup>64</sup>Dense forest.

<sup>65</sup>A small shed made by the roadside for travellers to rest.

<sup>66</sup>Space made for keeping utensils in which water is stored.

<sup>67</sup>A rounded utensil with a narrow neck made for fetching as well as storing water.

<sup>68</sup>See note 17.

<sup>69</sup>See note 32.

<sup>70</sup>See note 25.

<sup>71</sup>Acharya, *Lokgītiko viśleşan*, 227.

<sup>72</sup>See Cameron, *On the Edge of the Auspicious*, 64-65.

a meal of *dhīdo* sometimes signifies more than destitution when dealt out in non-subaltern homes: it is not free from power politics. Mothers-in-law may force their daughters-in law to eat *dhīdo* in order to put the latter in their place. It could thus be used, as in the present song, as an instrument of punishment.

The address to the listener of the song, *didi-bahini*, “sisters both older and younger,” raises some interesting issues. The songs were originally transmitted orally, and hence it was difficult to pinpoint the authorship of the songs. Unlike Anglo-Saxon oral poetry, or other oral traditions, the singer did not leave a personal signature within the songs. However, this lack of an author meant that in the process of transmission other singers who took up the song could add their own special touches, or personalize the songs to the context of the particular female audience hearing them. The absence of a sympathetic woman in the in-laws’ home is mentioned in the song, but a larger community of women is also invoked to whom the complaint is addressed. This address to the larger community of women is also subtly didactic in purpose, reminding women of the need for solidarity; a solidarity that patriarchy breaks by pitting the female in-laws of the *ghar* against the new bride.

The oral nature of the origin and transmission of the lyrics also opens up the performative potential of the songs. Many of the songs are in the form of conversations or dialogues, some merely addressing the audience plaintively, but others that depict dialogues between women and their many in-laws, or, as in the case of the following song, between the aggrieved woman and her confidante Kamalā. This is a remarkable song composed in more contemporary idiom, exemplified by the reference to the “terry-cotton blouse.”

How beautiful is your terry-cotton blouse, Kamalā!  
Your singing will cheer all, Kamalā!  
“Why are you glum?  
New is the straw-mat and blanket and new is the pillow!”  
The heirs are my father’s sons, Kamalā, I am an outsider.  
Adjust the rope, Kamalā, when you climb a hill with a heavy load  
Away flies my heart from this *pāpighar*! O return my *sindūr*!  
What bird swoops down, Kamalā, quivering its tail?  
With my *māiti* beyond nine hills, dazed, I cry all day.  
A little kid is gamboling on the field  
Gloomy are my days, Kamalā, as my *māita* is far this *Tīj*...  
My ring of pure gold, Kamalā, is topped with a coin  
What *pāp*<sup>73</sup> drove me away, Kamalā, from my birthplace!  
Tied am I like a cow, Kamalā, to this mirthless *pāpighar*.<sup>74</sup>

The speaker seeks succour from an easy companionship with Kamalā, to whom she unburdens her heart. While the lamentation at not being able to return to the parental home on the festive occasion forms the recognizable theme of the poem, there are other features of the lyric that deserve comment. When the confidante seeks to console the speaker, she mentions that she is an ‘outsider’ in her parental home, simply because as a daughter, her right of inheritance is disregarded. Note the animal imagery in the song: while the image of the cow reminds her of her own status in the *ghar*, the sight of a kid leaping about or even a bird swooping down reminds her

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<sup>73</sup>Sin.

<sup>74</sup>Acharya, *Lokgītiko viśleşan*, 233. My translation.

of her own girlhood when she was relatively unrestrained and free. Indeed, she goes so far as to wish to undo her marriage, by asking for the vermilion to be returned.

A striking feature of this song is the interlacing of these complaints with references to more quotidian things such as conversations about blouses, adjusting basket ropes, jewelry and even new bed linen. Is this interlacing to be read as a realistic touch that approximates the free-wheeling conversation of women in everyday life, or even a signifier of the deliberate masking of bitter complaint by 'safe' table-talk when in-laws are around or eavesdropping? It is possible to read even the references to purely material things such as jewelry as symbolic representations of what the speaker is trying to convey, confidentially, to her friend. Material objects do take on deep affective value in many of these songs, for instance in the following lyric where the *māita* is represented by an umbrella and a hairpiece.

The best gold makes a beautiful hairpiece,  
As a night is made lovely by the stars and moon...  
The hairpiece gifted by my father,  
And the umbrella by my mother.  
I could not go to my *māita* even on *Tīj*,  
And have spent the night weeping.  
In that beautiful dusk,  
My mother cries thinking of me.  
I could not go to my *māita* on *Tīj*,  
My father's heart is shrouded in darkness.<sup>75</sup>

### **Problematising the *Māita*: A New Kind of Realism**

The tendency to idealize the *māita* as the place of pure and unalloyed bliss not only informs the folk songs we have examined, but also interpretations by folklorists, starting from Dharmaraj Thapa and Krishna Prasad Parajuli to D.B.Singh.<sup>76</sup> The invocation of the *māita* as a space of bliss permeates the folk as well as the popular imagination. Drawing upon Michel Foucault, I wish to map an alternative archaeology of the *māita* as a space of contradictions, ruptures and breaks: the 'other' side of the *māita* seldom 'canonized' by the dominant patriarchal discourse. Foucault states,

The history of ideas usually credits the discourse that it analyzes with coherence. If it happens to notice an irregularity in the use of words, several incompatible propositions, a set of meanings that do not adjust to one another, concepts that cannot be systematized together, then it regards it as its duty to find, at a deeper level, a principle of cohesion that organizes the discourse and restores to it its hidden unity. This law of coherence is heuristic rule, a procedural obligation, almost a moral constraint of research: not to multiply contradictions uselessly; not to be taken in by small differences, not to give too much weight to changes, disavowals, returns to the past and polemics; not to suppose that men's discourse is perpetually undermined from within by the contradictions of their desire, the

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<sup>75</sup>Performed by Harikala Wagle, when she was in private conversation with the author, Kathmandu, August 2010.

<sup>76</sup>See Dharmaraj Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman*, 235-36; Krishna Prasad Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 176-77. All the folklorists mentioned portray *māita* as an idealized site of memory, nostalgia, and longing. The fact that women simultaneously accept and resist such dominant discourse of *māita* does not appear in their writing.

influences that they have been subjected to, or the conditions in which they live; but to admit that if they speak, and if they speak among themselves, it is rather to overcome these contradictions and to find the point from which they will be able to be mastered.<sup>77</sup>

The univocal and monolithic perpetuation of an idealized *māita* fails to capture women's complex and highly nuanced conceptualization of the parental home. The mythology of the *māita* emphasizes how it imparts rootedness, stability, security, and identity to women. Such a view essentializes the *celi-māiti* bond as unchanging and inviolable and therefore fails to map alternative experiences of the *māita*. The *māita* as an emotional space can also be tenuous and unstable.

In the bonds that a *celi* shares with her relatives in the *māiti*, her bond with the parents occupies the central position and is expected to be the most enduring. *Bābā* and *āmā* become synonymous with the *māita* as exemplified by Nepali proverbs, “*Bābā-āmā* make a complete *māita*, *dāju-bhāi* a half; but the nephew none.”<sup>78</sup> The following *Tīj* song also underlines the tendency to use the *māita* and *āmā-bābā* interchangeably.

*Sirphūl* is to be worn on the head  
On the feet the *bīj*<sup>79</sup>  
O why for an orphan girl  
Has come the festival of *Tīj*!<sup>80</sup>

All go to *māita* when comes the *Tīj*  
There in *Muglān*<sup>81</sup> is my *māita*  
I go to work even on such a festive day  
Alas! On the threshold fall my tears!<sup>82</sup>

Any attempt at understanding the institution of the *māita*, without discussing the cultural tendency to sacralize the *celi*, daughters and sisters, is bound to be incomplete. The simultaneous existence of what Bennett calls the ‘filiafocal model’ in which daughters and sisters are sacralized along with the patrifocal one in which the in-marrying women occupy the lowest status renders Nepali sexual politics interesting. Bennett locates in filiafocality a counter discursive and counter-hegemonic tendency; the tendency to reverse and therefore balance the dominant patrifocal model.<sup>83</sup> However, Bennett does not ask one significant question: how does the politics of sacralization affect daughters and sisters? Are the sacred deference and the periodic *dakshinā* or donations and worship that women receive at *māita* as *celi* really empowering? Is the symbolic capital that daughters and sisters receive as effective as the ‘real’ capital inherited by the brothers and sons? In the final analysis, sacralization empowers women symbolically and ritually while it

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<sup>77</sup>Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 168.

<sup>78</sup>Singh, *Triveni: Ukhān-tukkā ra vāgdhārākā*, 15.

<sup>79</sup>An accessory for the feet.

<sup>80</sup>Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 180.

<sup>81</sup>*Muglān* in the classical folk corpus refers to India: *Muglān* meant a land of Mussalman, or a country ruled by Mussalman.

<sup>82</sup>Fate; Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 180. My translation.

<sup>83</sup>Lynn Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 124-213.

disempowers them ‘actually’ and ‘really.’ However, such ritual and symbolic capital functions ambivalently for women. The politics of sacralization can also act as a weapon for regulating female sexuality. Being invested with sacred and ritual capital, women cannot help but ‘interiorize’ the patriarchal gaze that mythologizes their sexual purity and austerity and continues to revere them so long as they enact the patriarchal ideals of purity and *pativratādharma*<sup>84</sup>.

The idealization of the parental home is challenged in more unusual songs where one can clearly discern powerful undercurrents of anxiety and tensions that mark women’s relationship with their *bābā* and *āmā*. The female persona singing the song actually places curses upon her parents and relatives for their perceived neglect of her. Only the brother escapes being cursed because he acknowledges her presence.

I had met *bābā* on that mount, he refused to look at me  
May *bābā* never go without a leaky vessel and a *hatuwā*<sup>85</sup> buffalo.  
When I met *āmā* on that mount, she refused to look at me,  
May *āmā* never go without a leaky pot and drenched firewood.  
I had met my *dāju*<sup>86</sup> on that mount, he refused to look at me,  
May he always aimlessly wander and cry in strange lands.  
I had met my *bhāi* on that mount, he turned and looked at me,  
May he be always blessed with shining shoes and an umbrella in his hand!<sup>87</sup>

Regimented epistemology, in the name of coherence and cohesion, tries to tame and subdue alternative truths as contradictions, aberrations or exceptions. The song dramatizes how antipathy and hatred generate an alternative paradigm of the bond with the parental home. In a culture where women are deified by the *māiti* as sacred beings, worthy of worship and spiritual deference, the *celi*’s curse can be a spiritual nightmare for the *māiti*, for the word ‘curse’ does not merely denote, in the Hindu context, the ‘secular’ act of hurling abuse. It is a metaphysically loaded act, which takes place only when actors experience suffering and wish to inflict a great injury.

Women’s experience of the fragility and instability of the *māita* informs many *Tij* songs. The repeated references to the cold, indifferent *māiti*, and especially uncaring and competitive *māiti* women, highlights the fractures that beset the emotional geography of the *māita*.

I have been living on leaves and dressing in bark,  
O bird! Hide my shame and tell them that I am happy.  
If my *bābā*<sup>88</sup> were to know, he would send gifts instantly,  
If my *āmā*<sup>89</sup> were to know she too would send many gifts,  
If my *bhāju*<sup>90</sup> were to know, she would celebrate my misery.  
...If my *buhāri*<sup>91</sup> were to know, she would celebrate my misery.  
...If my *bhāi*<sup>92</sup> were to know, he would send me some money,

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<sup>84</sup>The patriarchal ideology that requires its women to treat their husband as god.

<sup>85</sup>A cow or buffalo that refuses to be milked except by special individuals.

<sup>86</sup>See note 20.

<sup>87</sup>Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman*, 236-37. (My translation)

<sup>88</sup>See note 18.

<sup>89</sup>See note 19.

<sup>90</sup>See note 44.

<sup>91</sup>See note 34.

<sup>92</sup>See note 22.

If my *dāju* were to know, he would send me some clothes,  
 If my *bhadā*<sup>93</sup> were to know, he would get me delicacies,  
 If my *kāki*<sup>94</sup> were to know, she would send me some grains,  
 If my *māiju*<sup>95</sup> were to know, she would shed tears,  
 If my *bahini*<sup>96</sup> were to know, she would start clapping,  
 If my *didi*<sup>97</sup> were to know, serves you right, would she say...<sup>98</sup>

This song shows the *māita* as a complex space of compassion and conflict, co-operation and contest. However, the stereotype of jealous women, *buhāri*, *bahini* and *didi*, needs further investigation. All the male members of the family in the song are presented as caring and affectionate. Some of the women, some very close such as *bahini* and *didi*, are presented as competitive or unfeeling. The song seems to suggest that division amongst women is often a cause for women's suffering. These *Tīj* songs, instead of celebrating women's rootedness in the *māita*, enact an acute sense of rootlessness, disorientation and crisis. They bemoan a sense of the gradual loosening of the tie constantly threatened and needing anxious enactments in songs and rituals, in events and festivals. The strong control that the parental homes seeks to exert over the 'purity' of the daughter means that the *māita* can heartlessly reject its own if it feels that the 'purity' or chastity of the daughter has been sullied. This is seen in the song where the loss of chastity is symbolized by an embroidered handkerchief that has been stained and which even a washerman will not clean. Needless to say, in this "conversation song," the daughter is disowned by the father of the house.

On this smothering pitch dark rainy night,  
 O my ever kind *bābā*, open your door to me.  
 "Have you run away or have you disgraced us?  
 This door shall not open for you!"<sup>99</sup>

This little *kusume rumāl*,<sup>100</sup> the *dhobi*<sup>101</sup> will not wash,  
 O *nāni*<sup>102</sup>, the *māitighar* is not for us, *celi*.<sup>103</sup>

Given the centrality of the economy in the construction of identity, it is perhaps important to recover women's critique of the essentially feudal *māita* as the originary place of socio-economic discrimination. We have to retrieve the nuances of the classical *Tīj* songs and read them against the grain using Derridean methodology in order to recover women's economic critiques. A close reading of classical *Tīj* songs shows how economic discrimination is scripted in the

<sup>93</sup>Son of a woman's brother.

<sup>94</sup>Wife of father's younger brother.

<sup>95</sup>Maternal aunty.

<sup>96</sup>Younger sister.

<sup>97</sup>See note 21.

<sup>98</sup>R. D. and L. L., *Nepalkā bivinna jāti ra lokgīt: Ek paricay*, (The different ethnic groups of Nepal and their folksongs: An introduction), (Kathmandu: Jagadamba Prakashan, 1965), 86-87. My translation.

<sup>99</sup>Acharya, *Lokgītiko viśeṣaṇ*, 229. My translation.

<sup>100</sup>Small pretty handkerchief.

<sup>101</sup>Washerman.

<sup>102</sup>*Nani* is the term used for addressing small children or people who are young. However, in this song, women use it to address each other, affectionately and informally.

<sup>103</sup>Mohanraj Sharma and Khagendra Prasad Luitel, *Lokvārtāvīgyān ra loksāhitya* (Folkloristics and folk literature), (Kathmandu: Vidyarthi Pustak Bhandar, 2006), 91. My translation.

unconscious of the language itself. Women frequently speak of jewelry and losing valuables, but it is quite clear that these are not their own property but in the control of either their parents or in-laws. A close reading of the following ‘classical’/old *Tīj* songs shows how economic discrimination is scripted in the unconscious of the language itself.

After purifying *bāba*’s *āgan*  
We’ll lock ourselves in and play  
The *celi* who has locked herself in  
Her head is without a *sirphūl*  
I will wear a *sirphūl* if luck favours me  
Would I be allowed to go on playing.<sup>104</sup>

In my *bābā*’s garden, there is a big-leaved *rāyo*<sup>105</sup>  
I lost my *sirphūl* when I went to pluck it.<sup>106</sup>

For the annual festivities of the *Tīj*  
*Bābā* has come to take me home  
The nasty *sāsu* has hidden my *sirphūl*  
Get up you *sirphūl*! And open the door,  
Get up you *sirphūl*! And light up the fire,  
Get up you *sirphūl*! And clean the home,  
Get up you *sirphūl*! And sweep the floor  
Get up you *sirphūl*! And bring pure water.  
In my *bābā*’s garden, there is a big-leaved *rāyo*  
I lost my *mundri*<sup>107</sup> when I went to pluck it  
The nasty *sāsu* has hidden my *mundri*.  
Get up you *mundri*! And open the door,  
Get up you *mundri*! And light up the fire,  
Get up you *mundri*! And bring water,  
For the annual festivities of the *Tīj*  
My *bābā* has come to take me home,  
The nasty *sāsu* sent me home, crying!<sup>108</sup>

What is significant in these songs is the ‘economic’ gendering of the unconscious of the language. In the discourse of the economy, neither the *māita* nor the *ghar* belongs to women. Both of these spaces are no-woman’s land. In the first song, the garden belongs to her father-in-law. What merits scrutiny here is that the speakers are not even talking about property and ownership per se. The first speaker is planning to ritually purify *bābā*’s *āgan*<sup>109</sup> and enjoy for a while; the second is referring to the loss of her *sirphūl* when she had gone to pluck *rāyo* “in my *bābā*’s garden”. This

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<sup>104</sup>Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman*, 237-38.

<sup>105</sup>A leafy vegetable with large leaves.

<sup>106</sup>Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman*, 241.

<sup>107</sup>An ornament worn by women on the nose.

<sup>108</sup>Thapa, *Mero Nepal bhraman*, 241.

<sup>109</sup>Courtyard.

is a classic example of the unintended yet insidious eruption of the unconscious of the language to signify a cultural order where women naturally belong nowhere and own nothing.

The narrative of women begging for dowry or *dāijo* from the *māita* is found in many classical *Tīj* songs. Dowry would guarantee a better ‘reception’ for the new bride at the in-laws’ home.

Nine pairs of pigeons on my *bābā*’s rooftop,  
Give me a pair as dowry my *bābā*...  
“Pigeons do not make dowry my *celi*,  
Take a cow as dowry instead but not pigeons,”  
Who will tend the cows and who till the fields?  
“Take a cowherd for the cow.  
But not the pigeons for you.”<sup>110</sup>

Another song that documents the practice of begging or bargaining for dowry pits female siblings against each other as they compete to get a portion of the family’s property or wealth.

Beautiful silken *coli*<sup>111</sup> and *phariyā*<sup>112</sup> and a train of *bhariyā*<sup>113</sup> for the eldest sister,  
But where are they for me?  
O do not cry! We shall send *bhariyā* for you,  
*Sirphul* on the head and rings for your ears shall we give you.<sup>114</sup>

Whether the *dāijo* constitutes women’s inheritance or *stridhan*<sup>115</sup> and the economic merit of this sort of ‘endowment’ can be endlessly debated. What cannot, however, be ignored here is that these songs represent women as culturally sanctioned beggars. The politics of casting women as culturally sanctioned ‘natural’ beggars denies the *celi* any ‘claim’ on the *māiti* property. A woman’s moral and cultural ‘right’ to beg contrast sharply with the son’s legal and natural right to claim and possess the inheritance. The *māiti* exercises the power over *celi* by reserving the power of frustrating or fulfilling the *celi*’s wish. The act of giving also establishes a moral hierarchy. In the Parbatiya Nepali culture that sacralizes *dān*<sup>116</sup> as spiritually meritorious,<sup>117</sup> the donor earns the capital of prestige in society by giving the *celi* what she should have got anyway as a biological heir. The much-idealized fabric of the *māita* has many holes and gaps.

More contemporary songs articulate the *celi*’s recognition that economic discrimination is the fundamental cause of her marginalization. In this dramatization of a conversation between a

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<sup>110</sup>Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 326-327. My translation.

<sup>111</sup>Blouse.

<sup>112</sup>A sari draped in typical Nepali fashion.

<sup>113</sup>Porters.

<sup>114</sup>Parajuli, *Nepali lokgītiko ālok*, 319. My translation.

<sup>115</sup>Property over which women have exclusive right.

<sup>116</sup>Gift.

<sup>117</sup>Cameron, *On the Edge of the Auspicious*, 135-40. The glorification of *dān* in the Parbatiya Nepali community has its ideological and material roots in the ideology and praxis of the caste system. As people were divided into four castes, Bahun, Chhetri, Vaiśya and Śudra, each was enjoined to follow a caste specific occupation. As the creators of the system, Bahun reserved for themselves the occupation of teaching and worshipping. Bahun as a category needed to survive economically and *dān* became an essential way of ensuring the means of survival. Hence the the *Purānas*, *Smṛtis* and *Dharmaśāstras* deal exhaustively with the merit of giving *dān* to the Bahun. See Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Calcutta: Stree, 2006), 50-51.

girl and her parents, the girl is clearly shown to provide unpaid labor to the parental home till the time she is married off, without getting a share of the property:

Daughter: I rose in the morning to pick flowers,  
But did not pick them because they were covered with dew,  
Parents just keep the daughters to do work at home,  
But not even a small piece of courtyard is given to them.

Parents: The small piece of courtyard is needed to dry the paddy,  
Go daughter to your husband's house to get your property.

Daughter: We have to go empty handed to our husband's home,  
The brothers fence in their property.  
My brothers' many clothes rot away in a box,  
But when they have to give us a single cloth, tears come to their eyes.<sup>118</sup>

Undercurrents of rebellion mark this song. Bennett points out the fact that before marriage the 'sacred' daughters and sisters are made to do more work at *māita* than their brothers. Sisters and daughters are not given anything when the family property is partitioned amongst the sons. *Tīj* songs, also called *Sangini* in the eastern part of Nepal, characteristically defined by Nepali folklorists as a women's genre marked by lamentations and complaints has in this song acquired a confrontationalist vocabulary, thereby reorienting the commonly perceived notion that the 'classical' *Tīj* songs are not merely the documentation of lamentation and helpless resignation but also of polemics and protest. This song indicates an awareness of the economic exploitation of the woman-as-domestic labor figure. Women's liminality resulting from such imbalance in the domestic economy is hinted at in a song that I have referred to earlier as well: "How beautiful is your terry-cotton blouse, Kamalā!" An emotional and analytical distancing of the speaker from her "father's sons" is needed, perhaps, to critique the gendering of economy and her erasure from the spatial and emotional geography of the (non)-home. The *māita* acts as a transit point for these women. It is not surprising then, when Bennett reports the popular adage amongst the upper caste Parbatiya Nepali that 'women belong to the species that goes to repair the wall of others.'<sup>119</sup> Sandwiched between multiple (non)-homes and yet perpetually homeless, the (non)-home *māita* is better than the "mirthless *pāpighar*" simply because it is the better of two unpleasant options; it is more preferable to be a 'sacred outsider' in her parental home than a dangerous one at the in-laws'.<sup>120</sup> The unfairness of this choice is made clear in the song about a girl wanting to become a boy on the day of her marriage.

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<sup>118</sup>Debra Skinner, Dorothy Holland and G.B. Adhikari, "The Songs of Teej: A Genre of Critical Commentary for Women in Nepal," *Asian Folklore Studies* 53 no.2 (1994): 268.

<sup>119</sup>Lynn Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Sacred Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 166. According to her, "*Āimāiko jāt arkāko gharko bhiittā tālne jāt ho,*" which means that women belong to the species that goes to repair the wall of others, is widely in circulation in Nepali society. Though, it is not exactly a proverb, it has a proverbial status. Senior female members of the family use this saying as much as the male members - showing how women have internalized the patrilocality as an inevitable existential destiny.

<sup>120</sup>I use the phrase 'a sacred outsider' to problematize Bennett's endorsement of what she calls the filiafocal model of kinship organization, as an alternative to the dominant patrifocal one. See Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sister*, 124-318. While it cannot be denied that daughters and sisters are revered as sacred beings in the 'filiafocal'

A ten-paise *sindūr*<sup>121</sup> now takes over my life.  
 After repaying money for your ten-paise *sindūr*,  
 ... I'd rather stay with *bābā*.  
 ...The life-giving *bābā-āmā* I shall look after.  
 Tell me which deity to placate to become a son?  
 What offerings are needed to please that deity?  
 Leaving her *janmaghar*<sup>122</sup> a daughter must go,  
 I would rather be a son by dying tomorrow.  
 Transplant the flower that has blossomed near the door,  
 Strangle your love for this ill-fated daughter.<sup>123</sup>

For Lacan, desire is the desire for the other and it is fundamentally mimetic. The speaker's desire to "be a son by dying tomorrow" treats the 'phallus' as 'the transcendental signified'. The peculiarity of the song, however, is its ambivalence. The speaker wants "to be a son by dying tomorrow" so that she can look after her "life-giving *bābā-āmā*." It is only by becoming a son that she can perform the duty towards her parents that she wishes to perform as a devoted daughter. She fails to realize that her participation as a son in the patriarchal system would further reproduce the patriarchal order that she wants to escape. The strength of the song lies in laying open the limitation of her vision. The speaker maps out an alternative within the medium of the dominant; her moments of subversiveness turn out to be the moments of conformity.

In our analysis, the *māita* emerges as a complex place. It functions as an emotional refuge as well as a financial one during women's moments of distress. However, the speakers or these singers are also critically aware of the *māita*'s other functions. It functions as the most fundamental agent of patriarchy, a space that produces and reproduces patriarchal values, norms, and puts women as daughters through the route of patriarchal socialization and bestows them with patriarchal subjectivities. In the old and the contemporary folk songs women do articulate their ambivalent bond with the *māita*, perhaps less explicitly so in the older songs; this is a bond marked by tenuousness, ruptures and anxiety. These songs vocalize women's critique of the *māita* as the most significant hub of patriarchal values and ideology.

Why, then, does the dominant epistemology controlled by the upper caste male Nepali folklorists privilege only the glorified image of the *māita*? Why is women's critique of the *māita* as a phallogocentric space not allowed any discursive space and respectability? The discursive erasure of women's critique of the *māita* has two major implications. Firstly, by erasing women's critique of an institution that functions ambivalently for them, dominant folklore research denies women the role of the *producers* of a critical episteme. The production of 'critical' epistemology is seen to be the domain of patriarchal rationality by most scholars, as evidenced by the phrasing and wording of their analyses. Secondly, the erasure of women's critique helps mythologize the *māita* as the idyllic 'pastoral' for women, invalidating women's depiction of the *māita* as the originary locus of patriarchal oppression.

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model, the politics of sacralization does not come without other pitfalls and patriarchal regimentation. Ritually sacralized and deified, she continues to remain a sacred outsider at *māita* as she remains a dangerous one at *ghar*.

<sup>121</sup>Vermillion that costs a meagre amount.

<sup>122</sup>House where one was born.

<sup>123</sup>Acharya, *Lokgītiko viśleṣaṇ*, 232. My translation.

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