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Reinterpreting the Play: Women's Cultural Performance as a Subversive Site

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Abstract

This study investigates women's performances, such as *Khela-Tamasha* (play-act), *Nakkal* (enactment/imitation), and *Kajari* folksongs, as potent tools for questioning the gender stereotypes and hegemonic gender ideals which subordinate women. To achieve the objectives of this study, ethnographic data were collected in 2022-2023 across Mirzapur, located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory and Antonio Gramsci's theory of counter-hegemony, this study argues that rural women's traditional play-acts and enactments, characterised by cross-dressing, theatricality, and bold speech, challenge their oppression. Through their performative expressions, these women harness the power of cross-dressing, challenge traditional masculine roles, and display their erotic desires. Further, by embracing non-conforming gender roles and expressing their desires during performance, women's traditional performative acts display the transformative power of folk traditions in challenging dominant societal structures.

Keywords: Play-Acts; *Ratjaga*; Subversion; Empowered Language; *Kajari* Festival; India

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Introduction

Kajari is a festival and rural women's folksong celebrated and sung during the *Sawan* month (July to August) in the eastern region of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Women perform *Kajari* songs each night for 12 days, from *Nag-Panchami*[1] until the *Kajari* festival. Additionally, they celebrate *Ratjaga* (night vigil) on the eleventh day. Typically, in Ratjaga, women sing and dance in private spaces during special occasions, such as childbirth, marriage, and the *Kajari* festival (Prasad, 1987). In Mirzapur, women celebrate *Ratjaga* to commemorate the birth of Goddess *Vindhyavasini* because the region is the abode of Goddess *Vindhyavasini* (*Shakti-Pitha*),[2] thus making it unique as a subject of this study. Another reason for conducting fieldwork in Mirzapur is *Ratjaga*'s association with the *Kajari* festival and folksong, as the region is the originating place of *Kajari* folksong, where women's performances and enactments are central to this tradition. Sheela Devi (Madguda village), while explaining the duration of the performance, said, "*Kajari festival begins on Nag-Panchami [falls on the fifth day after the new moon in Sawan month] when women worship Nag or snakes and offer milk and lava (puffed rice).*" Kusum Devi described these traditional play-acts during *Ratjaga* as *'Khela-Tamasha'* (play) and *'Nakkals'* (enactments/imitations), integral to the folksong *Kajari*. In these performances, women take on male/female personas, including "groom," "policeman," "bride," and "washer man." Rural women perceive such performances as play, a game-like physical activity consisting of singing, dancing, enacting, and rejoicing. Such songs/performances provide a dialogic structure that enables them to comment on the discriminatory behaviour and hegemonic rules imposed on them. Thus, the night of *Ratjaga* provides a breathing space for rural women to play, act, and subvert prescriptive gender roles in a normative setting. This study conceptualises women's play (*Khela-Tamasha and Nakkal*) as the performative act (the entire performance, not a fragment) and argues that rural women's play challenges hegemonic patriarchal values and rigid gender norms by defying the prototypical image of women and envisioning alternative realities. "Play" refers to both their performative tradition and the frame (structure) of the play, with "enactments" and "play-acts" used interchangeably for their performances.

Huizinga defines *play* as a cultural phenomenon, not a biological one. He explains that it is an innate urge to exercise a particular faculty or the desire to dominate or compete. The scholar also defines it as an "abreaction", an outlet for harmful impulses, as the necessary restorer of energy wasted by one-sided activity (1949: 2), such as excessive physical labour, pressing discriminatory norms and hierarchical order in the rural society. Additionally, play allows individuals to create alternative worlds and identities far removed from their everyday lives. The masks and disguises, as the characteristics of play, offer the individual entry into another world and, in rowdy play, a license for misbehaviour (Masters, 2008). The question arises: why do rural women engage in play, and what factors enable them to engage in subversive and defiant play inside a performative context, which a rural society does not approve of outside this performative frame? Such acts outside their performative context can be offensive and threaten the power dynamics, as emphasised by Prabha Devi, "*we cannot say anything to them (men) after the festival*." Therefore, their norm-defying performances must be legitimised in a ritual and festive context as they provide an appropriate performative atmosphere. Women do not indulge in performative acts outside this context because festival, ritual, and folk performances are interconnected. Moreover, such traditional

[1] Hindus celebrate *Nag-Panchami* in Sawan month in India and Nepal by worshipping snakes, which symbolise divine power. People offer milk and flowers to snake idols or live snakes.

[2] In Hinduism, *Shakti-Pithas* are sacred shrines dedicated to Shakti, which are believed to be the sites where parts of Goddess Sati's body fell after her death during Lord Shiva's grief-stricken dance.

activities are typically expressed only during festivals and have limited acceptance from society. Women's engagement in the play comes out, temporarily, as a response to the arduous nature of their combined roles in domestic and agricultural domains and the strict hegemonic structure. As I noticed, in Mirzapur, women start their days earlier and end them later than men. Amidst these gender hierarchies, play enables women to release tension, reduce stress, and improve their mental health.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section describes how women's play-acts exhibit a more nuanced understanding of gendered norms and their subversion, both inside and sometimes outside the confines of performative spaces in rural contexts. Performative acts become a site where perceived social standards and hegemonic values are questioned and challenged. The second section examines the transient agency availed by role-playing and cross-dressing, which allows women to question patriarchal views without facing repercussions. The final section explores the empowering potential of these performances to challenge and critically engage with dominant patriarchal ideologies, notions of masculine virtues, and male-dominated public spaces.

Methodological Reflections

I was collecting *Kajari* songs in Mirzapur and was familiar with rural women's tradition of dramatic performance and role reversals during the *Kajari* festival. In 2022, I reached Shivpur and Madguda (fieldwork villages) with the help of my key informant, Ram Narayan Sharma, whom I met during my earlier field visit in 2021. Initially, my position as a male outsider induced a feeling of self-awareness and hesitation among the women of Shivpur as I was the first researcher to approach them with an audio recorder and digital camera. However, repeated engagements with Sita Devi and Poonam Devi (aged 65 years) through multiple field visits fostered an appropriate environment to collect women's experiences. Poonam Devi's assistance facilitated the data collection process from the women of Madguda. Rural women helped me decode the local expressions that occurred in their performances. Most play-acts and accompanying narratives were collected on the *Ratjaga* and *Kajari* festivals from 2022 to 2023. In these villages, women perform various acts at the *Chaughat*, a dais-like platform in every village reserved for women's *Kajari* singing and unfiltered performances. The location of their performances remains unchanged, but during the *Kajari* festival, they moved to the market area for their performance. This physical space is evoked, deified, and transformed into a performative place through offerings, songs, and the act of touching the earth as a gesture of worship before the performance. *Chaughat* is a gender-segregated space; as Sita Devi said, "No men are allowed in this space" during the performance, but the lurking presence of men is nearby because such a space exists within the village. Recordings of *Kajari* folksong were the central focus of this research. However, the connection between women's performative traditions and the *Kajari* singing tradition motivated me to observe and document their performative acts. Unlettered married and unmarried women between 18 and 70 years old participate in the play-acts. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the article in place of participants' real names in order to protect their privacy and confidentiality.

Scholars have investigated similar performances of both genders to flesh out cultural practices in the past and have argued towards the subversive and carnivalistic potential of performative acts. Ethnographic studies have thoroughly examined cultural performances, such as David Shulman's (1985) analysis of performative acts during the Mariamman festivals in Tamil Nadu, where he argues that satire and playfulness create a safe space for challenging authority. In the Mariamman festival, the clowns bring creative energies that generally lie dormant or are subdued or excluded, challenging the ordered domain of social life. Similarly, Anthony Shay (1995) explored Iranian women's comic theatrical plays, *bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*, performed by and for women. While reflecting traditional roles, these plays allow women to explore multi-vocal expressions of identity that

challenge societal norms. They further represent women's creativity to oppose the patriarchal structure, using humour and theatricality to explore and critique their societal roles. In similar context, Smita Tewari Jassal's (2012) work mainly focuses on the *Kajari* folksong and conceptualises it as play and recreational activity to make rural women's agricultural labour less onerous. Jassal quoted Huizinga (1949), who defined play as:

> An activity outside of ordinary life that is not serious despite the player's intense involvement, that takes place in a delimited area or space where non-players are kept at a distance, that has its own time and duration, and that serves as a mechanism for forging social groupings (Jassal, 2012: 75).

Studies have addressed the themes of migration, materialistic demands, and nature worship reflected in *Kajari* folk songs (Jassal, 2012: Singh, 2019); however, rural women's performative tradition and subversive potential have been explored less. This study fills the gap by examining women's traditional play. It highlights the significance of cultural practices in the self-imaginings of rural women, which often contradicts the social perception and prescriptive literature's construction of women (Jassal, 2012). Women's unfiltered and impromptu use of language, transgression of gender norms and defiant behaviour contrast with conventional expectations. The study's novelty lies in its focus on the traditional performative practices of rural women, offering a fresh perspective on the broader discourse of folk play, female agency, and subversion. It extends our understanding of how, through their performative acts, traditional notions of fixed gender identities and male dominance are negotiated and challenged.

Field and Folks: An Overview of Shivpur and Madguda Villages

This section provides a brief overview of women's daily lives in Mirzapur and selected regions, including Shivpur and Madguda. Here, Alan Dundes's (1966) suggestion is significant that while context is essential for interpreting folksongs, scholars must interact with the community to learn about the Indigenous interpretation of the folklore. Mirzapur is a region known for the *Vindhyavasini* temple, the textile industry, and folksongs. It is experiencing a tourism boom because of its lush green mountains, waterfalls, and proximity to Varanasi city. The region is heavily populated by the *Kurmi* (non-elite tiller) and *Maurya* caste (a vegetable-growing and selling caste).

Moreover, the district's prosperity is accompanied by technical advancements, mechanisation of farm activities, and replacement of labour-intensive agricultural activities with tractors for ploughing, electric threshers, and motor-driven tube wells. Though agricultural labour is still needed, new technologies have crept into agriculture. As a result, songs related to the agricultural process appear to decline in this region. Now, it is limited to their household or on public stages, which especially bothers elderly and middle-aged women due to the shrinkage of their performative culture and rituals, as the young generation has an apathetic attitude towards cultural spaces. However, this agricultural scenario is different across the region. Shivpur and Madguda are *Mallah* caste villages on the River Ganga's banks. The *Mallah* community is historically a caste of professional boatmen who worked on rivers as traders, boatmen or fishers (Sinha, 2014); thus, they either have a small piece of land or do not own any land to farm. In both villages, fishing remains the primary profession of the people, and almost 75% of families own two or three boats. Some men farm on sandbars, and others run shops or work as daily wage labourers. Some have migrated to earn their livelihood. To support their families, women run shops in the village while also helping their husbands with tasks such as tilling, sowing, and reaping crops.

Poonam Devi of Shivpur village was a skilled performer of *Nakkal* and *Khela-Tamasha* who either led a group of women or assumed significant roles; for instance, she played the role of a commoner in an act and a mother in another performance. She was loud and vocal while

abusing or criticising the lecherous nature of men. Another woman was Anju Devi; though she did not actively participate in such play acts due to her old age and health, she called herself the *Samaji* group's leader. *Samaji* is a group of women who took out a procession at the *Kajari* festival. Suman Devi from Madguda, although shy and reserved during the interview, skilfully controlled male relatives while playing the joker role. Sheela Devi, an elderly woman from the same village with extensive knowledge of songs and plays, was unable to perform due to her age but led the singing group and challenged men to compete. Rajani Devi was vocal during her interviews and actively participated in the performances despite her old age and her daughter's continuous request to go home. However, her daughter joined the group and performed till morning. As I observed across the region, most women are engaged in household chores, agricultural activities, and routine life. However, leisurely activities and women's performance in the festive atmosphere help them suspend the monotony and oppressiveness of the tedious nature of household duties and prescribed roles.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a critical framework that challenges essentialist notions of gender as a fixed and stable category. She argues that "gender is not a pre-existing reality but is performatively produced and enforced by regulatory practices of gender coherence" (1990:33). She explains that "performativity is not a singular or intentional "act" but rather a repetitive practice through which discourse creates the very effects it names" (Butler, 1993:2). It suggests that performative activities, such as repetitive behaviours, gestures, and acts, shape a person's gender identification. These intrinsic or natural behaviours are social constructions that people repeatedly engage in, giving the impression of a fixed gender identity. Butler also presented the possibility of subverting gender by destabilising and challenging normalised actions. By continuously repeating acts, behaviours, or desires that challenge dominant gender assumptions, individuals can establish and reinforce a new way of performing gender (Butler, 1990; 1993). Similarly, rural women's annual performances, which contest established gender identities and challenge conventional gender roles, offer them a breathing space to display their deviant voices and alternative self-imaginings.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony also provides a lens for studying women's counter-hegemonic practices. Hegemony refers to a ruling class's cultural, ideological, and political dominance over subordinate groups. Hegemony is sustained when the ruling class's values, beliefs, and norms are accepted as natural or inevitable by the rest of society, described by Gramsci as the "spontaneous consent" of the masses (Gramsci, 1971:12). In contrast, counter-hegemony involves actively challenging and resisting the dominant hegemony. Gramsci argued that marginalised groups can contest the prevailing order by creating alternative ideological and cultural frameworks. He notes, "the challenge for the subordinate class is to develop a new 'conception of the world,' able to gain social and political traction against the dominant order" (1971: 333). Moreover, it refers to "reclaiming or creating the means and forms of communication necessary for subaltern groups to find their voices and to organize [sic] both locally and globally" (Carroll, 2006: 27).

Through the lens of Butler's performativity and Gramsci's counter-hegemony, this study explains how rural women's performances serve as acts of resistance, reinterpreting their gender and social roles. In rural settings, hegemonic masculinity often confines women to domestic or subordinate roles. However, with their traditional play-acts, these rural women subvert the essentialist gender binary, further illustrating their counter-hegemonic practices. By impersonating males, taking on ambiguous identities, and using bold and obscene speech, women challenge fixed gender identities and demonstrate gender as a fluid category. Thus, traditional performative places and women's plays act as sites, addressing the broader

questions of gender identity and women's agency in oral tradition.

Structure of the Play

In Mirzapur, *Kajari* is a folksong as well as a recreational play performed by women, reflected in this *Kajari* song, e.g., *Abaki Sawan me ho sajanava naihar khelab Kajari* (Oh, husband! I will play *Kajari* at my natal home this *Sawan*). Even the process of *Kajari* singing is structured like a game where women form a circle. During their singing session, they were divided into two groups, facing each other with equal members. One group sang a line while bending forward and then returning to an upright position, while the other group imitated the same movement and repeated the same line. These coordinated actions aligned their physical movement with the song. This variation is referred to as *Dhunmuniya Kajari*. Similarly, women's performances are structured like plays. However, they do not follow a single pattern, as they have different storylines, dialogues, and characters.

This study examines two distinct performances enacted on the night of *Ratjaga*, one comprising play and *Nakkals* elucidating the carpet weaving process and the other focusing on a dialogue between a mother and son concerning the whereabouts of the daughter-in-law's jewellery. These performances were documented in Shivpur, highlighting Poonam Devi and Sarita Devi (in her early 40s) in principal roles, supported by other female participants. Additionally, two other performances are described as customary practices associated with the *Kajari* festival—where Anju Devi, Poonam Devi, and Sita Devi led a procession from Shivpur to the marketplace (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Women in Shivpur Village Leading a Procession to the Marketplace while Assuming Different Roles.
Source: Author

Unlike their traditional performative acts the previous night, they demand money from men by blocking the road. On the *Tij* festival, which is closely associated with the *Kajari* festival and is celebrated in the same *Sawan* month, married women in India and Nepal fast and worship Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati for the well-being of their husbands and family (Skinner et al., 1994). In North India, male members of the groom's side bring *Tij* (gifts, edible stuff that can be eaten

during fasting and items for adornments) to the bride. I recorded a performance portraying a direct encounter between the bride's and groom's parties, with Suman Devi assuming the role of a joker (Figure 2), supported by other women as constables and attendants**,** accompanied by *Kajari* songs.

Figure 2: Suman Devi is Chasing the Male Relatives while Assuming the Role of a Joker on the Night of the Tij Festival in Madguda Village.
Source: Author

These diverse performances display a dialogic framework featuring role reversals, cross-dressing, subversive undertones**,** and a sense of impunity. Notably, the *Ratjaga* performance transpired at *Chaughat*, a locale devoid of male presence, contrasting with the customary or ritualistic practices enacted in the presence of men, thereby employing performative strategies to challenge prevailing gender stereotypes.

These are traditional performances passed down from generation to generation, and their scripts preserved collectively in the memories of women. Senior women mainly play the lead roles and indulge in dialogue, whereas other women act as supporting characters or chorus, providing critical and humorous commentaries on social issues. They briefly discuss the act before its commencement, and everyone grasps quickly, which further hints at the significance of group dynamics and collective consciousness. Moreover, I noticed slight variations in the structure of the same play in adjacent villages; for instance, I recorded an act in Shivpur in 2022 where women's performance detailed the carpet weaving process. Poonam Devi and Sunita Devi consecutively assumed the roles of ordinary man and owner (*Seth*) of the carpet weaving firm, and other women held shawls and sticks, signifying carpet and carpet weaving tools. Poonam Devi (disguised as a commoner) has a dialogue with the owner (Sunita Devi), who faces each other. Whereas, in Madguda (2023), the performance's form, lyrics, and props remain the same, but the character formation changes, reversing the direct structure of communication in the earlier performance to an indirect one in Madguda. Here, instead of the owner, his

daughter-in-law communicates with the commoner, sitting behind a shawl with her veil on, thus avoiding direct communication with any male as per societal norms. However, the central theme of acting against authority remained the same as the daughter-in-law confronted the commoner as a response when he started abusing her for the order delay. Performance's dialogic structure (every performance is structured in a way that it allows women to have a dialogue with other disguised men/women, for example, an exchange of dialogue between son and mother, customer and the owner and daughter-in-law and commoner) enables them to have a conversation with men (women in disguise) and critique discriminatory and hegemonic ideologies.

Here, I briefly present the structure of another play-act. In Shivpur, women form a circle by holding hands, while two women consecutively play the role of mother (Poonam Devi) and son (Sarita Devi). Mother chases her son to beat him as he gives his wife's jewellery to the different men of the village, which enables her to criticise these men individually. While running, the son took one lady out of the circle, and it continued until the last two members remained. The main characters remain the same and removed members stay there to comment and amuse everyone. The circle became smaller after addressing and criticising the men. Ultimately, two remaining women caught the disguised son who gave his wife's jewellery to the men of his village, marking the end of this performance.

Powerful Play: Breaking the Gender Norms

This section highlights women's strategies to denounce the imposed feminine virtues during their powerful play. As discussed above, women break the stereotypes of language, normative behaviour, and body during their intense play. Sita Devi's statement, "*We do not recognise anyone on that day (on the festival Kajari), be it, elder brother of husband, father-in-law or anyone else,*" highlighted contradictory viewpoints as senior family members are highly respected in the rural Indian context (Jassal, 2012; Chowdhry, 2014). This performative space enables women to engage in acts of abuse and ridicule, challenging sexual norms and constraints. It suggests the potential for norm-defying behaviour within the alternative world they have constructed, typically prohibited and self-censored in everyday life. Moreover, this section deals with how women's cultural play advances their discussions against gendered language, stereotypical roles, and adherence to the female dress code, thus answering how women's cultural performance challenges and subverts gender norms inside the performative place. In this context, MacLeod notes that women:

> Even as subordinate players, they always play an active part that goes beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance, [sic] a dichotomy that flattens out a complex and ambiguous agency in which women accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time (1992:534).

In the Indian rural context, women adhere to society's prescriptive social and linguistic norms because social structure and power dynamics control women's speech. Suppose we focus on women's public adherence to the norms of silence and submission in daily conversations. In that case, we risk overlooking women's verbal strategies to oppose the dominant ideology (Raheja & Gold, 1994). However, the performative space allows them to denounce restraining language standards. Susan Gal also noted, "linguistic forms are strategic actions, and verbal interactions are often sites of struggle about gender, kinship, and power" (1991:176). Women use non-normative language that is different from everyday language, visible in their performative speech. Their performative acts are replete with obscene and abusive expressions. In writing about women's songs, anthropologists have emphasised discourse and language to indicate the subversive nature of these songs and the challenge they pose to the dominant discourse (Chowdhry, 2005). Women in Mirzapur deliberately improvise play-acts to incorporate more abusive words and slang. Poonam Devi considered *"abuse a part of the language,"* whereas women's language,

characterised by vulgarity and obscenity, is curbed and controlled in Bhojpuri societies. When I asked Sita Devi why women abuse during the performance, she criticised the inappropriate language used by men during the Holi festival and equated it with women's folksong *Gari* (abusive song) and said, "*Have not you seen women singing abusive songs (Gari) at weddings? It is like this.*"

Gari is usually a wedding song in which the women of the bride's party abuse the groom's party (Gupta, 2001). Their insults and abusive words target the men of the groom's party, showing the bride-giver's resistance and anguish towards the bride-takers. Mostly, these songs are verbal abuse, but sometimes, due to their context, they are called *Gari* (Henry, 1975). Similarly, in these play-acts, women target men in their village. Women indulged in play-acts on *Ratjaga,* where Poonam Devi and Sarita Devi assume the roles of mother and son, respectively. Mother (Poonam Devi) asked her son about the jewellery of his (Sarita Devi in disguise) wife. Naming one of the senior members of the village as the jewellery lender gives her a chance to highlight the corrupt behaviour of that man by abusing him. Sarita Devi said, *"I had given him jewellery to take medicine as his (pelharave retaye gayal) penis is cut"* in a funny but mocking way. Similarly, Sarita Devi and Poonam Devi employed the same role-taking strategy in a play about carpet weaving. They portrayed the roles of a carpet firm owner and a commoner requesting a carpet. When the commoner asked about his order, the owner gave him an excuse by blaming the other village men for the delay of the order, providing an opportunity to critique the menfolk in general. This play shows solid grounding in Mirzapur's history and socio-cultural milieu, as the region is a hub for the carpet industry. Women start the performance with a choric song that uses an unacceptable yet jocular phrase, "cross-eyed buttocks" *(Adha chutar kana).*

> *Aana nache taane nache nache soot purana re,*
>
> *Parage-parage jolahin nache adha chutar kana re.*
>
> (Warp dances, weft dances, even the old yarn dances,
>
> Female weaver dances stepwise with cross-eyed buttocks.)
>
> Group Performance, Shivpur, 2021

The song subtly addresses the employee-employer relationship, subverting professional role hierarchies by mocking and insulting the owner for prioritising another's carpet over completing the commoner's order, thereby challenging the established order. Their abusive language is not only limited to the common villagers, but they hurl abusive terms at administrators, officials, and respective members of the society such as '*Pradhan*' (the head of the village), 'advocates' and 'police officers' as they mock *Pradhan's* greedy nature and unmarried status, which is perceived as a stigma in rural society. They are not free to speak in front of male family members. However, the site of play during festivity provides a free hand to women to challenge gender-specific language and its associated powerlessness. During a group interview with women regarding the same play-act in 2023, Prabha Devi simultaneously highlighted the culture of abuse. She admitted the significance of context by stating that neither group can utter a single word after the end of the festivity. She explained, "*Be it father-in-law or elder brother of husband, women critique and abuse them, and they cannot utter a single word. Abuse is part of this (performative) culture.*"

There are acts performed in the presence of men where women confront and challenge men to compete with them. This act is related to the *Tij* festival, following a subversive custom where village women directly challenge the groom's relatives at night. Women assumed male roles and had face-to-face encounters and dialogues with men during the performance, distinguishing the plot and narrative from the previous acts of the *Ratjaga* and *Kajari*. Ram Narayan Sharma and I were in Madguda on a day that did not coincide with the celebration of the *Tij* festival. Ram Narayan Sharma, therefore, asked the Madguda women to recreate the act. The women willingly complied with our request and demonstrated the entire act. After having dinner

at night, the groom's relatives (played by Ram Narayan Sharma and Suresh Sonkar) go to bed. Suman Devi dressed as a joker and other women as policemen and attendants with *lathis* and sticks, forcing them to wake up by abusing, blaming for theft, and sometimes pushing with sticks. However, in a ritualistic context, women instructed these two men, and they followed their instructions.

> Kusum Devi- Strike! Strike! (Ram Narayan Sharma- Who is there?) You came here after stealing and sleeping with ease. (Suman Devi- Where are you from? From where have you come?) Reeta Devi- Walk, you thief; you thief, you stole and came here.

Although people follow most of the customs of the *Tij* festival, the performative parts are disappearing even in rural areas due to the commodification of folk culture. The social order gets subverted when the target is men; however, women also mock their in-group female members. It is an unsaid rule in most societies to respect the elders. In the Indian rural context, senior members of the family are revered, and everyone strictly follows this custom. However, during a play-act in Madguda, recorded on *Ratjaga* in September 2023, women pushed Rajani Devi (in her 60s) to the centre. She started playing her role by scratching her head, suggesting she had head lice. Other women asked Anita Devi (in her early 30s and had a sister-in-law relationship with Rajani Devi) to remove them. Initially hesitant, possibly due to my presence as an outsider and male, Anita Devi eventually complied by grabbing Rajani Devi's hair. She pushes her insultingly and dishevels her, an unusual scene in an Indian village where a younger woman behaves respectfully with a senior woman. The everyday norm of respecting the elders is subverted during the play as she chases other older women to treat them similarly. In rural households, elderly women hold authority over younger women, highlighting the hierarchical power division within female groups (Rao, 2012), which this act disrupts.

In literature and media, women are often portrayed as *pativrata* (devoted and faithful wives) and *Bhadramahila* (educated middle/upper-class women), who are submissive and self-effacing, passive, obedient, and devoid of sexual desires (Ray, 2005). Women showing sexual aggressiveness are branded as temptresses, and their unrestrained sexuality could cause social unrest. However, during *Nakata*, women openly treat sexuality as a subject and poke fun at the restraining social standards. *Nakata*, a distorted form of *Natak* (play-like act), is performed during the time of the wedding when the men of the groom's family leave the village with the marriage procession *(Barat)* to the bridegroom's house for the wedding ceremony. Women keep an all-night vigil where they assume the role of husband-wife, sing and dance. During the performance, all the inhibitions and taboos are let loose (Srivastava, 1991). Similar sexual expressions are found in most of the *Kajari* songs. In a song, the husband left his wife to work in a foreign land, highlighting a common theme of migration in these songs. The wife opened a shop, placing sweets on one side and "*navrangi nebula*" (orange/lime) on the other. She was confident that her husband would be tempted by the "*navrangi nebula*" rather than the sweets as he returned, suggesting the conceptualisation of fruits as sexual metaphors in folk consciousness (Narváez, 1996). She further told her husband, who was asking the price of sweets and oranges/limes without recognising her as his wife, that oranges/limes were priceless. Smita Tewari Jassal also pointed out that water and delicious food offerings are recurrent motifs in many songs associated with women's sexual desires (Jassal, 2012). Folksong is replete with erotic expressions such as '*Madan/Kamdeva*' (God of love and desire) and 'abandoned bed,' symbolising unfulfilled desire and sexual longings.

> *Yahi bate aihe more sasu ka putava lobhai ho jaihe na,*
>
> *Yahi nebulava par lobhai ho jaihe na.*

> *Ketane sher dehu bhatin peda ho mithaiya ketane sher na, tora nebula-navarangiya ketane sher na?*
>
> *Mol jin kara raja peda ho mithaiya ki lakh taka na mora nebula-navarangiya ki lakh taka na.*
>
> (My mother-in-law's son came on the same road and got lured
>
> He got lured on orange/lime.
>
> What is the cost of sweet and orange/lime oh shopkeeper,
>
> Oh dear! Do not ask the price of sweets, as my orange/lime is priceless.)
>
> Group Performance, Madguda, 2022

Thus, women's performative genre is a medium through which they break the gendered norms imposed by the patriarchal society. During the carnivalistic performance, women challenge the gendered language, women's subordinate position, and their curbed sexual desires. Thus, as argued above, women's language uses abusive and vulgar slang to mock the male members of society, thus transgressing the boundary of prescriptive behaviours. In their traditional performative place, they defy the given social and sexual codes by displaying sexual desires openly through culturally rooted metaphors, body movements, and gestures.

In the following section, I contextualise women's culture of dressing as men/women during these performances and how cross-dressing is associated with the discourse of power subversion in a rigid social setup.

Cross-Dressing and Agency

In this section, I explore how female cross-dressing and role reversal authorise women to negotiate with patriarchy without punitive consequences in ritualistic or festive spaces. Moreover, it explains how these performances powerfully influence women inside and outside this play. As Greenhill suggests, deliberate dressing up as the other sex:

> [It] [m]ight appear as part of the liberation from sex roles which feminists have demanded for years and the recognition of genderised dress and body image as being in some way a symbol of the workings of power in a society where power is invested in the male sex (1995:165).

It is unusual for women in rural India to dress like men, unlike women in India's metropolitan cities (Tarlo, 1996). However, women's performative places allow them to assert and exercise their agency by transgressing the female dress codes. Various studies suggested that cross-dressing is used as a strategic response to question the male-female gender binary (Gubar, 1981; Hawkes, 1995). Cross-dressing, though now primarily understood as dressing across gender lines, was once a broader concept encompassing any violation of strict rules governing clothing (Ramet, 2004). It is a common practice through which women challenge the gender norms across the regions during women's play. However, both genders cross-dress during festivities, such as men during Holi and women during *Ratjaga*. Ann Gold (2000) highlights the tradition of play and enactment in rural Rajasthan, where men, led by a crowned jester, take out a noisy procession on the streets on the second day of the Holi festival. They engage in wild and violent horseplay, inverting all the social order. Men's conversation is characterised by lewd, vulgar, and inappropriate content during the festival. Similarly, Sita Devi equated her performance with the bawdy and vulgar behaviour of men during Holi and said, *"As you (men) say vulgar and inappropriate things during Holi (Phagua) in the same way women perform in Kajari."* In the *Kottankulangara* or *Chamayavilakku* festival in Kerala, men cross-dress as women as an offering to the goddess *Bhagvathy*. Anu Kuriakose suggests that this religious space allows socially considered men to express diverse gender identities through cross-dressing (Kuriakose, 2018), supporting Butler's dictum of gender as fluid. Even women's *Nakata* follows the same structure where only women are allowed, and they cross-dress as husband and wife and enact all the marriage rituals, acts of consummation, and aftermath of marriage that serve a pedagogical purpose for unmarried girls. Thus, cross-dressing and role reversals are

strategies adopted by both men and women for gender subversion in a specific context.

Bhojpuri society proscribes women's oppositional views as they are perceived as a threat to the social order. Women must follow the guidelines of the female dress code, specifically in men's presence. Similar transgressive and norm-defying practices are present in Mirzapur's folk performances. However, the cosmic fear of hegemonic patriarchy and punishment is still lurking outside this play. Sita Devi (she played the role of a stylish city man on the *Kajari* festival, which pokes fun at urban elite men and their attire), during a procession leading to the marketplace, said:

> I am afraid of my husband. I do not go in front of him in that attire. And if I went in that get up as I was, he would be angry. He will pick up *Lathi* (stick as a weapon) even if he is lame.

Women's cross-dressing grants them increased mobility and access within public spaces. Moreover, whether in public or on stage, female cross-dressing was seen as a challenge to the established gender and class systems and a potential cause of social disruption (Ramet, 2004). Women's cross-dressing helps them create performative places and lighten the atmosphere of controlled spaces in rural Mirzapur. Ram Narayan Sharma highlighted the tradition of cross-dressing by comparing women's performance with men's folk drama *Nautanki*[3]and said, "*Where a boy (a boy or launda impersonating a female) danced as a woman, and there was a joker too.*"

Cross-dressing and power are synonymous during performative acts. In Shivpur village, I noticed that women assume the role of influential and authoritative male characters such as police, constable, and head of the family, which momentarily disrupts the social hierarchy. Prabha Devi's statement during a group interview supports the argument that dressing as a man is coupled with power. "*Women are masters. They wore clothes, shirts, pants, and turban. Now they became (Malik) employers.*" On the *Kajari* festival, women are dressed as police (Anju Devi), *Sai Baba* (an Indian saint played by Poonam Devi), and a stylish city man (Sita Devi). These three led the procession near the railway crossing in Shivpur, an annual ritual associated with the *Kajari* festival. Women appeared well-dressed, well-groomed and refreshed on this day because they purged animosities and repressive thoughts through their unrestrained and bawdy performance on the previous night. Women took out the procession to perform, stopped men to demand money, and accompanied young girls who would submerge the *Jarai* (referring to the barley shoots grown by young girls on the day of the *Nag-Panchami* festival). Their male attire allows them to indulge in rule-defying activities in a public and male-occupied place. It gives them access to areas where they would normally be prohibited from singing, dancing, and performing, especially in the marketplace.

At the marketplace, I noticed Poonam Devi and Anju Devi blocking the path of every passerby, including motorcyclists and tractor drivers. Meanwhile, disguised as a fashionable young man, Sita Devi danced in front of shopkeepers, village councillors, and other men. They do not even care who the person is, as stated by Poonam Devi, *"Be it DM (District Magistrate) or SP (Superintendent of police), even if D.M. or S.P. bring their vehicles on the road, they will confront them,"* hinting at the subversive potential of cross-dressing, and women's agency outside their private performative place. Anju Devi, leader of the group, described how cross-dressing lifted the participants out of their usual persona by creating an altered space on such occasions. She recounted her experience at the

[3] *Nautanki* is a form of Indian folk theatre consisting of music, dance and enactment that deals with serious social issues. It differs from women's performative tradition as it is meant to be performed primarily by men in an open space in front of an audience.

Kajari festival in the Shivpur market, where she halted a police officer's vehicle and asked for money:

> I broke the glass of a police officer. He said I will not give (money); I said, I will break the glass. I do not recognise any constable, police, or judge that day. I do not care whether I live or die.

Role reversal and cross-dressing provide a license to reverse the gender hierarchy with impunity. Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger stated that female characters most frequently appropriate male disguise for greater mobility in the "outside"/public world (1996:96-97). In a similar context, Sunita Devi, while performing as a joker during the night in Madguda, took the liberty to abuse Ram Narayan Sharma and Suresh Sonkar and strike their private parts with her *Lathi*, an otherwise unacceptable act. The festive atmosphere, the freedom of performative space, and her full-body costume comprising colourful fabric pieces allowed her to act in this manner without facing punishment as nobody could recognise her, aligning with concepts of ambiguous identity beyond the male-female binary. Thus, cross-dressing in this performance acts as a shield for Suman Devi. This obscure and disguised identity gives her complete freedom to move freely in the presence of men and denounce all gender expectations. Moreover, the character of the joker posits a double satire on personhood, pretending to be a male/female joker who pretends to be someone else.

This section moves further to explain performative traditions of both genders, such as men's Holi, Launda Naach, and *Kottankulangara* or *Chamayavilakku* festival and women's folk performances, e.g., *Kajari* and *Nakata*, where men/women indulge in cross-dressing, assume various roles, and play reverse gender identities. Further, women's cross-dressing on the *Kajari* and *Tij* provide more significant social movement and freedom, as could be seen in the case of women taking out a procession to the market and abusing or behaving in a socially inappropriate way with men while playing the role of a joker. It allows them to express their repressed animosity and sense of inequality more freely than on regular days. Women engage in performances outside their homes at night (8:00 PM to 6:00 AM), adopting male attire and verbally confronting and challenging men. These subversive actions reflect Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony, as they challenge dominant social norms, such as the prescribed female dress code and hierarchical power relations.

The following section explores how women's play disrupts established male-dominant sexist doctrines, including the distinctions between private and public realms, patriarchal ideologies, and intellectual and creative domains.

Critique of Dominant Values

This section explores women's play as a site to critique the male-dominant and enlightenment ideals, such as the dichotomy of private and public space, the idea of masculine privilege, and the intellectual and creative domain. Women's unfiltered performance allows them to assert their identity in the performative context. Here, reiterating Foucault's dictum to display women's resistance to hegemonic masculinity through their performance is significant, "where there is power, there is resistance," which always assures the existence and survival of 'deviant' voices in all cultures where power operates (Foucault, 1978:95).

According to Habermas (1974), the public sphere is a place for rational-critical conversation, such as salons, coffee shops, and prints media, whereas the private domain is the realm of the individual and family, marked by autonomy and privacy and protected from public scrutiny. This study, however, focuses on the gendered aspect of the public-private divide, where men occupy public spaces like marketplaces, village squares, and river banks, while women are granted private spaces like homes, courtyards, and farmlands. Women negotiate and temporarily broaden the scope of their typically private roles. The personal becomes political as women utilise performance to criticise society's standards, a practice that is consistent with feminist extensions of Habermas' theory. These performances show how minority voices, namely women, establish alternative public

spheres to express agency, critique power, and negotiate cultural limits.

In Mirzapur, women's play unearths this issue of public and private space, as explained by A.K. Ramanujan through the division of the *Akam* and *Puram* genres. Women perform *Akam* (domestic) genres in or around the houses. In contrast, *Puram* genres are performed by men in public spaces (Ramanujan & Blackburn, 1986). This division is relevant in women's folk genres, such as *Nakata*, *Kajari*, and wedding songs, across North Indian states. *Kajari* songs are sung at the *Chaughat*, following the same division of *Akam* genres of women. However, this division is challenged when the setting of the performance shifts on the next day, undermining the claim that women should only perform in domestic spaces. At the *Kajari* festival, women take out a procession and perform in the marketplace, which, according to Urban (2001) is a potential space for subversion. While women's performances typically occur in a gender-segregated space, during the *Kajari* festival, as already discussed above, they enjoy the freedom to dress as men, visit the marketplace, sing, dance, and stop passersby to collect money. This practice, rooted more in custom than in structured performance with plot or narrative, allows them to temporarily transgress the boundaries of their designated private space on this particular day. During the *Ratjaga* night in September 2023, I noticed women and girls (acting as both performers and audience) of Madguda village transformed the entire village into a performative place. At dawn, after performing throughout the night, they encircled the village while singing, concluding their performance by returning to the same location and touching the earth (*Chaughat*). Encircling the village is known as "*ganv-gothana*," which demarcates the interior from the exterior or inside from outside the village. This act of encircling the village further hinted at appeasement and keeping out the evil or maleficent spirits for the well-being of everyone (Mines, 2002).

Women's free play also questions the male authorities by attacking their masculine prowess, intelligence, and superior social position. The joker (Suman Devi in disguise) and other women coerce the two men (Ram Narayan Sharma and Suresh) into entering *Chaughat*, which is a metaphor for their creative potential and empowered position, further legitimising their deviant voices. Sheela Devi, leader of the performative group, challenges both men to compete with her in a singing competition. Women's agency and creative competence are evident when confronting men during the singing session. After dragging them to *Chaughat,* they forbade them to sit by saying, "*Do not sit, do not sit, sing first,*" and threatened them by striking the *Lathi* on the ground. Men appeared as sheepish observers in that situation. Ram Narayan Sharma, a skilled performer, told the women to start first and ask whether the group of women knew the lyrics. Sheela Devi rebuked Ram Narayan Sharma (recipient of the President Award for his contribution to the field of *Chaular*, another variation of *Kajari* singing) and said, "*You will run away from here; I will immediately catch the lyrics. I make men stand hand-folded and stoop too low to touch my feet. Why do I not know?*" Her attitude and singing prowess gave her the confidence to challenge a performer of such a high stature.

The performance resembled a male-female singing competition called a "*dangal*." The women's group started a *Kajari* song or asked a question through the song. As per the rules, men were obligated to reply with a song that was thematically related to women's songs during the *Tij* festival, which is a social custom. In Mirzapur, women forced the groom's male relatives to stay awake and sing at night when they visited the bride's home. Failure to sing resulted in women making fun of, mistreating, and disparaging them. Due to its dialogic nature, women could question the traditional notion that men fulfil women's demands. Women outwitted male relatives by making their demands explicit through a song; even Jata Sharma attempted to respond but was unsuccessful, as his song only addressed the fulfilment of materialistic demands. In contrast, women demanded something out of their calibre's reach, such as a 'scarf made up of sky'

and a 'bodice of smoke.' Women's demands were manifested in these lines:

> *Teen bachan mor mana tabe ta tose razi balamua,*
>
> *Dharati ka lehenga re badare ka chunari,*
>
> *Dhuana ka choli siyavai da tabe ta tose razi balamua,*
>
> *Chakari se chandan pisavai da tabe ta tose razi balamua.*
>
> (You promise me three things, husband; only then I will be ready with you,
>
> I like the skirt made of the earth and the scarf made of the sky,
>
> Stitch a blouse made of smoke. Only then will I be ready with you,
>
> Bring sandalwood ground into the grinding mill. Only then will I be ready with you.)
>
> Sheela Devi and Group, Madguda, 2022

Ultimately, Jata Sharma left the *Chaughat* by accepting his defeat and reciting a proverb (*bakshe bilar moos badavai rahe),* symbolically representing the women who spared him, subjecting him to a minor humiliation.

Folk plays, as discussed above, provide a window through which women criticise the corrupt and pretentious nature of men. They are familiar with men's immoral conduct; however, strict moral codes prohibit them from condemning the same on a usual day. During a play-act in Shivpur, when Poonam (disguised as a mother) asked her son (played by Sunita Devi) about his wife's jewellery, he said he kept it at Ramman's house. Poonam Devi's statement mocked Rajan's indulgence in sexual activity, *"He has seventeen sons,"* which is an exaggeration but also a critique of men's lecherous nature. This cannot be articulated in a typical context. Further, when the mother asked about the daughter-in-law's girdle, the son responded that he gave it to Kamal, a village man known for keeping two wives, thus emphasising his adulterous tendencies. Occasionally, women used humour to target their fellow performers, and other women tolerated this because of the performative frenzy and light-hearted atmosphere as Poonam Devi, during the same act, pointed towards a woman and said, "*Oh Saran, who has taken this overweight (motki) woman as his wife, this woman? Why do you give it to him?*"

They mock the dominant social and behavioural norms by articulating an alternative viewpoint (Chowdhry, 2005). Women's plays dismantle gender and caste barriers, enabling women from the *Mallah* community to question corrupt Brahmanical practices. Sita Devi's mockery of Brahman priests' performance of last rituals challenges the gender and caste boundaries. I interviewed Sita Devi at the Ram-Gaya *ghat* (stairway leading to the river) in Shivpur, a location for funerals and last rites beside the *Ganga* River. I inquired about women's critique of men on the *Ratjaga*, particularly concerning carpet weaving performance. She explained that, per the act's plot, the customer asks, *"Whose carpet is on the loom?"* The owner answers by taking the names of village men, which permits women to highlight these men's physical and moral weaknesses. Similarly, Manta Devi replied to the same question and took this opportunity to critique the *Brahman* (the highest caste group in Hinduism responsible for teaching and maintaining sacred knowledge) priest in front of the *Yajamanas* (religious patron who performs religious rituals with the help of a Brahmin priest) who helped them perform the last rituals:

> Bodai's (carpet) is getting prepared. They (women) say that one who helps perform the *Pind-Dan* [the last ritual performed by the son for the departed souls of his family] ceremony is fraudulent. He torments Yajamanas and extorts money from them.

Women in rural settings faced discrimination based on gender, caste, and social status and internalised such discriminatory and hegemonic ideas. However, such boundaries are blurred, and hegemonic views are questioned in these play-acts. Though women are unfamiliar with the debate of equality between sexes, they are aware of this unequal treatment at the

microcosmic level, as Chamela Devi highlighted the gender differences prevalent in Indian society. Her statement on the limitations imposed by family members on women's engagement in cultural activities brings attention to the crucial problem of gender equality in rural areas:

> If boys are dancing, can't we dance too? But yes, man, you do not allow your wife to go and dance. You will go, dance, and play with other women. That is right for you. If you dance with other women, then it is fine. Then why does it hurt when your wife is going with someone else?

In brief, the purpose of women's enactment and play is not limited to amusement and entertainment but has profound implications in the wider context of some of the societal practices. Their performative acts function as a "safety valve" (Bergson, 2002:64), simultaneously giving a free passage to negative emotions that are non-threatening to society. Moreover, on the *Kajari* festival, women challenge the notion of private spaces by claiming public spaces in the presence of men, marking a performative context distinct from their traditional settings. The conversational structure of play enables them to have a dialogue, and women use this as a juncture to critique the androcentric norms. Their play acts target the domains of creativity, intellect, and dominant values usually associated with men. Further, women outrightly reject stereotypical portrayals of women as weak, submissive, and conforming to gender roles.

Conclusion

In rural areas, women's performative acts display multifaceted emotions during festive and ritualistic occasions. Traditional performative places allow them to innovate and recreate their performative tradition. Furthermore, these are sites where gender norms and hegemonic ideologies are questioned, challenged, and subverted by assuming different identities and counter-hegemonic acts; however, they do not aim for social transformation or radical change outside this play. Women's performance is institutionalised and relatively accepted as a ritual celebration. They challenge the issues propagated and controlled by hegemonic patriarchy, mainly inside their created ritualistic places. Women's play challenges the gendered nature of language by using vulgar, obscene, and instructive speech. They openly display sexual longing and desire, which are usually curbed and controlled as they threaten the social order. They subvert the dominant views of society by cross-dressing, role-reversals, and assertion of power in both public and private spaces. These play acts enable women to critique masculine worldviews, gender disparity and prevailing gender paradigms by challenging and rebuking them in the confines of performative spaces through their innovative and witty additions and recreational play acts.

In Mirzapur, male singers claimed to beautify women's genre by incorporating musical instruments, stage, and costumes, which have never been a part of women's performative tradition. To attract the elite audience, women's traditional *Kajari* songs undergo a classification process to remove perceived vulgarity and stylistic flaws, mainly driven by financial reasons. Classification is a process of sanitising and systematising the arts to make them appropriate for elite and middle-class audiences (Moro, 2004). This leads to the appropriation of women's traditional places by male professional singers, pushing aside women's subcultures and suppressing their subversive oral traditions. Subsequent research endeavours can focus on the appropriation of women's folk songs. It is essential to investigate the culture of women's play acts in general and performative tradition in particular to understand rural women's performative tradition and its potential to challenge hegemonic views and fixed gender identities in the broader context.

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Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest

The Department of Humanistic Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Banaras Hindu University, does not have an Ethics Approval Board, so the study could not obtain ethical approval. However, I confirm that no animal or human trials were conducted during the study. Moreover, I took utmost care to abide by ethical practices. Before the interviews, the purpose and objective of the research were explained to the respondents. Since the respondents were illiterate, they verbally consented to voluntary participation in the study. Furthermore, I declare that I have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent

Written informed consent was not obtained due to the respondents' educational background, as most were illiterate. However, I obtained verbal consent to use their songs, performances and narratives.

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This work has no data available to disclose.

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