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Interpretation of Wifehood: An Anthropological Study of Women in Rajput Folk Wedding Songs in District Bhakkar, Punjab Pakistan

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Original Article

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Abstract

This research examines the portrayal of Rajput women in folk wedding songs in Bhakkar, Punjab¹. The purpose of this research is to understand if folk wedding songs reinforce the negative perception of women as wives by providing them a platform to express and vent out their sentiments and at the same time reinforce the same image of women in social life. Anthropological data collection tools and techniques were used to collect and analyze data. The participant observation technique was used to collect valid and reliable data. The researcher participated in the marriage ceremonies and recorded all folk wedding songs sung by Rajput women that were later transcribed. Purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of five folk wedding songs that meet the objective of this research. Through in-depth interviews, the native interpretation of five selected songs was documented. For the interpretation of songs, snowball and purposive sampling techniques were used to conduct 43 in-depth interviews with women and 7 were selected for this research paper. Thematic analysis techniques were used for data analysis. The research demonstrates that folk wedding songs endorse the negative images of Rajput's wives as quarrelsome, treacherous, customary person in wedding folksongs.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to outline selected categories of Rajput women's folk wedding songs sung at weddings. This article is an attempt to carry out a thematic analysis of the folk wedding songs that depict stereotypical image of Rajput women living in Bhakkar where the research is carried out.

Rajputs regard themselves as sons and daughters of the warriors having the same personality characteristics as their ancestors (Kotrappa, 2016). Being conservative, Rajputs have followed the

¹ This research study is based on PhD work (2022)

same traditional culture for years and take extreme pride in it. Here, it might benefit the readers to get a clear picture of how gender is defined within the Rajput culture.

The Rajput culture is highly segregated in terms of gender roles and division of labor which is quite discernible in their daily life activities as Rajput men and women (Melia, 2010; Unnithan, 1991). Women's roles and duties are well-defined and restricted within the household compared to men, who are defined as being merely responsible for the work outside the home. Through the findings of this study, it is evident that gender roles are linked to the expectations of the society where its individuals live (Deva, 1989). These roles are created based on stereotypes about gender and can be oversimplified for understanding and perception of being male and female. Not only through literature (oral or written) but gender stereotypes are also reflected through commonly used traditional proverbs, which portray the social psyche of that community. In Rajput culture, the common proverb that is frequently used to refer to women is "*Auraat ki aqal gitaa mian howa*" (women's wisdom is in their ankles) means women are not capable of making wise decisions. This proverb may be one of the most significant examples of understanding gender stereotypes. This proverb and many more tend to overshadow women's abilities and capacity and make others judge them through culturally defined roles.

Relationship Between Women and Folklore

The mutual connection between women and folklore especially folk wedding songs provides evidence to the commonly held notion that women are the repositories and embodiment of tradition. In the context of India, the study on communication through songs (Jacobson, 1975) argues that in the cultural context, songs have clear meanings for both men and women. This study also reveals communication through song among Rajputs of Bhakkar. In many countries of the world, for instance, South Asian nations, women are usually held responsible for family-related customs, and rites of passage, especially birth and marriage. They are not only considered the hub for ensuring that tradition and rituals are followed but also are designated with the role of passing them on to the next generation.

Following that line of thinking, it may be assumed that the category of folklore in general and folk wedding songs in particular has a historical relationship to women. Similarly, folksongs when their lyrics are deeply analysed show how they impact traditional customs, stereotypes, and gender roles in any society.

The lyric of the folksongs decodes the main idea of cultural explanation of the stereotyped perception of Rajput women in in folksongs. Exploring folksongs as one of the genres of folklore, one can find a limitless variety of folksongs in various forms and subject matter, ranging from very simple to highly complex. They are part of many life-cycle ceremonies such as wedding songs, birth songs, death songs, devotional songs, and heroic songs (Harlan, 2003).

It is a historical fact that folksongs have always remained a medium for women to channel their expressions, especially in patriarchal societies such as that of the subcontinent. The people of the subcontinent have a long, history of misogynistic traditions and women subjugation. The only vent for the women, developed as a form of expression shape up as folksongs.

The compilation of the folksongs by (Srivastava, 1991) explains that women express their desires under the realm of 'common wishes, constrained desires, and discontent in their conjugal relationships. The scholar claims that folksongs act as a 'safety valve' for women and the functions

on which they are sung give them the opportunity to express their suppressed feelings in a socially acceptable manner.

Perception of Women in Rajput Folksong

Folksongs constitute a significant part of cultural heritage, not merely because they tell us tales long forgotten but fairly because they play a pivotal role in the transmission of ideas and beliefs that provide a framework for a culture to stand upon. It might be of equal importance to study the musical, linguistic, and performance aspects of folksongs. However, the present study aims to analyze and understand the term 'gender' within the cultural context of the Rajput people. The predilection for the social construct of gender may be partially because of its extensive integration with folklore and gender studies and somewhat because these songs trace back to the history of patriarchy, which in a country like ours is undoubtedly a crucial subject to learn about. Without a doubt, the Rajputs have a rich cultural heritage. They regard themselves as sons and daughters of the warriors having the same personality characteristics as their ancestors. Their ethos includes an intense love and pride in their ancestry.

Locale and Methodology

This thematic qualitative research was conducted in urban and suburban areas of Bhakkar City. Participant observation was made through extensive participation in marriage ceremonies and other social events. This helped in developing rapport and winning the trust of participants. Through purposive sampling, only Rajput household women of forty and above age were participants in the research study. There were conducted 84 folk wedding songs, and out of which five songs were selected for this research paper as they depict stereotypical roles image of Rajput women as wives. There were collected 43 in-depth interviews through snowball and purposive sampling for the translation and interpretation of 84 folk wedding songs, whereas for this research paper, 7 in-depth interviews were selected through purposive sampling. Women who were interviewed for translation and interpretation of songs and discussed respondents in the cultural background of the wedding folksongs.

Rajput Wife: A Peek into the Cultural Background

Before we move on to the interpretation of the chosen folksongs, it might greatly benefit the readers to understand the husband-wife relationship within the context of Rajput culture. The study on mothers and mothers-in-law (Fischer, 1983) sheds light on the role of mothers in the Indian context. If we closely view the gendered discourse of wifehood among the Rajputs living in Bhakkar, it is socially expected from a young girl (who would be a future wife) to internalize the Rajput traditional values, customs, and norms that subtly support the patriarchal ideologies. She is trained by her mother or elder sister to serve her father and brothers, keeping in mind the way she must take care of her husband and affinal relatives. In a male-dominated society like that of Rajputs, the wife seems to have more duties and limited rights in contrast to her husband who has more rights than duties. On the contrary, the expectations from the wife remain high and unrealistic as she is expected to be a *pativrata* who would forfeit her life for her husband and family if required.

Traditionally, the relationship between husband and wife in day-to-day interaction is based on husband's superiority and respect which is considered an important feature of the Rajput culture. In the context of the North Indian cultural scenario (also like Rajput ethos in Bhakkar), (Gold, 1997) talks about the societal expectations that govern the husband-and-wife relationship. The husband-and-wife public encounters are unheard of, they are restrained from each other and are expected to display the prescribed attitudes of shame and modesty (especially wives. Owing to the respect

for elder affine, it is customary in Rajputs that a new wife should not talk to her husband when they are around. As absurd as it might sound, in Bhakkar, the same pattern of social expectations has been followed up until now.

In Rajputs of Bhakkar, it seems to appear that a woman's identity as a wife is defined in strictly functional terms. How can she serve, and bring happiness and satisfaction to her husband? And how much can she sacrifice for her husband and his family? As (Ochs & Taylor, 1995) argues, "*all social identities, including gender identities, are constructed through actions and demeanors*". In most of the sociological perspective, the wife's identity is constructed in functional terms. Studies conducted by (Butler, 2006; Sauntson, 2008) argue that gender is something we 'do' and not what we 'are.' The standard of a prototype wife has been so deeply entrenched in the Rajput culture that girls, from a very young age, are taught and trained accordingly. If by any means a girl does not fit the image of a typical Rajput wife, she is secluded and may not achieve the status of a 'fully-qualified wife'. Keeping in mind the Rajput cultural context, one can say that a wife is not what defines her as a wife. Her first and foremost duty as a wife is to satisfy her husband's needs and fulfill her obligation towards him'. Nevertheless, as expected, this prototype model also makes husband-wife relationships asymmetrical. The wife is expected to undertake all the responsibilities from preparing food for the whole family to performing almost all the other household chores.

The form of asymmetrical, non-reciprocal relationship in Rajput families between husband-wife is strongly reflected in the folksongs sung on wedding day. In the collection, most of the wedding songs are not typical, romantic love songs and whilst cogitating, I realized that most of the songs follow the same pattern of thinking and are based on real-life situations.

A fair rationale to explain the behavior has been put forward by (Uberoi, 1993), who claims that romantic love between husband and wife is not encouraged as it might pose a possible threat to responsibility and unity. Thus, in the joint family system, linear relations such as siblings and parents are preferred over the conjugal ones. In this context, (Raheja & Gold, 1994) also points out that the relationship between the newlyweds is under strict scrutiny by the in-laws and any signs of developing intimacy are suppressed instantaneously in the name of solidarity (for the husband towards his kin), which is assumed to be compromised if the wife gains his affection and loyalty. The commonest course of action to curb the young bride's desire to have a good time with her husband or communicate with him is restricted by the affine relations by limiting their (husband and wife) mobility and time spent together.

Discussion and Results

The five selected folk wedding songs are categorized into five major themes and discuss the cultural background of the Rajputs living in Bhakkar. All of these folksongs are sung on the wedding day by the women of the family and friends of the bride.

1. Wife as Quarrelsome Woman

Experiencing the rigidities of the joint family system is a huge challenge that a daughter-in-law faces. The song below portrays a situation in which the daughter-in-law reacts:

Song No. 1

Main niyari hoon gee banrey
Teri maa larey gi banerey
Qanchi sey jeep kooter deyon gee banerey
I will live separately (from the in-laws) my prince
Your mother will fight with me
I will cut her tongue with a pair of scissors
(Translated by the author)

The wife (daughter-in-law) says to her husband that she wants to have a separate household because his mother fights with her constantly. The wife also warns her husband that she will cut his mother's tongue with a pair of scissors if she does not stop fighting with her. The cutting of the tongue with scissors symbolizes that she will forcefully silence them if they do not stop. In this song, a wife is symbolized as a quarrelsome person who initiates fights with her in-laws. She is blamed for the troubles in her in-law's house for demanding a separate home which is against Rajput traditions there.

The study (Kakar, 2001) mentions a wife's point of view within the perspective of South Asia and observes that the unfulfilled longing of a wife for intimacy and affection turns into frustration which gets deeply infused in the women's lives. The wife gets disappointed and starts to fantasize about a happily married life which the joint and the extended family system does not allow them to have thus, throughout her life the unfulfilled desires haunt her, and she is showcased as a troublesome person.

The Wife as a Vessel of Body Shaming and Social Expectations

The expectations from a Rajput wife are generally very high but on the wedding day through wedding songs, the image of the wife is mocked in many ways. Her appearance becomes a major criterion for her selection as a wife as the folksong mentioned below expresses:

Song: 2

Aree aree chori Bagar ²ki thari aqal kithe khori sey
Karam bhutey un mardan key jin ki joro patli sey
Taej hawa main maa udgaye sey Pakram pakri ho rahe sey

O girl from Bangar
where is your wisdom?
Unlucky are those men who have a thin wife
A strong wind blew his wife away!
Now everyone is trying to hold his wife!
(Translated by the author)

A girl from the Bangar village is addressed in the song and she seems to be interrogated about why she (the girl from Bangar) was so clueless while choosing wives for the Rajput men (why didn't she choose wisely?). In the entire song, the village girl is referred to for her bad selection of women for the Rajput man. The women are rejected based on different reasons such as their complexion, height, weight, etc., and are body shamed. Throughout the song, the stereotypical image of women and cultural standards of beauty are displayed and women who are short-sighted, thin, and dark-

² A place in India

skinned are mocked and rejected by the people. However, the husband is not criticized and teased for his physical appearance or body shamed in any way.

The folksong conveys that the acceptance of a woman as a wife from her in-laws is a hard task. She would still be criticized for something even if she had a desirable complexion. Therefore, in Rajput culture, she must prepare herself for the inevitable criticism that might come her way. Culturally, the black/dark complexion of a woman is considered undesirable when a marriage proposal is sorted out. The mother and sisters of the man trying to select a girl with a fair complexion. The point to notice here is that the pressure of being perfect rests only on women and not on men as no standards have been defined to judge the physical desirability and beauty of men. The image of a wife with a fair complexion is reinforced in the Rajput culture and presently many girls try facial creams that lighten the skin and tone the face to a white/fairer color.

Wife as a Treacherous Partner

The below-mentioned folksong narrates a story about a woman who cheats on her husband:

Song: 3

Sava gez kapra lila garkey
Wohi mera lila rang dey
Sava gez kapra jab ragoon aaj raho sari raat
Subha tarka ho gaya lila garkey

Give me ¼ blue cloth o cloth dyer
I need my same blue color cloth-dyer When I dye ¼ piece of cloth tonight be here with me.
O cloth –dye, it has been early morning now give me the same blue cloth.
(Translated by the author)

In this song, a Rajput woman asks her lover, a cloth dyer, for a blue piece of cloth (dupatta). After spending a night with him, on her way back home, her *devar* (Husband' younger brother) sees her and interrogates her suspiciously. She does not answer her *devar's* questions and in response starts to mock him for his wife's lower social status and the birth of a daughter who did not survive.

The story is interesting and reveals Hindu mythological characters with many symbolic expressions. In Hindu mythology, the blue color represents divinity, spirituality, and loyalty. Most of the representations of Krishna are depicted in blue color. The piece of blue colored cloth therefore symbolizes the sacredness of the relationship which she seems to have lost due to her infidelity. She, however, claims that she is faithful to her husband and gives birth to a Krishna-like son. But her *devar* alleges her as the fraudulent wife of his brother. The other folksong also narrates a story from a Hindu context and narrates:

Song:4

Ragbir mara dhokey main
saarey mein ziker chala ho gaa
Chaley cut ghoonghat gani main naar
terey paeroon ki pati hen

Ragbir died by deception as everybody knows
By a shrewd ghoonghat
Taking a fire-like woman
With a foot jewelry on her foot
(Translated by the author)

The folksong talks about an unfaithful woman who plans and kills her lover-Ragbir with help from her brother. The song also displays the murder scene of Ragbir who is poisoned by both the sister and the brother. Ragbir faces a very painful, excruciating death because of the poison. The message that the song communicates is that women should remain in their men's control otherwise they may go astray. If a woman is allowed to go outside her home, she may commit crimes like infidelity, murder, etc. The song also portrays and reinforces a vile image of women, as they are wicked by nature and may try to deceive men with their alluring looks and mannerisms. In this song, the ghoonghat of the unfaithful wife has been referred to interestingly.

Generally, ghoonghat is a veil that is used to maintain social distance (Jacobson, 1975) from non-family men. However, the same ghoonghat can also be referred to as a piece of cloth that can provoke sexual desires in men. It is notable to mention here that Rajput women under study sympathized with the victim Ragbir and cursed the unfaithful woman. Since it is the woman who is held accountable for her behaviors and family's honor. Traditionally, men are not held socially responsible for their deeds and if they do act against sanctioned social norms, they are sometimes forgiven.

Wife as Self-Stereotype

Self-stereotyping occurs when an individual integrates commonly held characterizations i.e. stereotypes of an in-group into their self-concept (Forsyth, 2019). A young Rajput girl is socialized from an early age and made to think in such a way that her major aim in life is to become a good wife and an efficient daughter-in-law. With the reinforcement of stereotypical roles, during early socialization, a Rajput girl adapts to the domestic roles early in life, as defined by the culture. Self-stereotyping is another familiar phenomenon that shapes her gender roles as she continuously formulates and reformulates them in every sphere of her life. As previously explained, self-stereotyping can be defined as a social process that occurs when the stereotyped group describes themselves using widely believed stereotypical traits. The wedding day folksongs also reflect a woman's stereotypical role in the household as this song narrates:

Song:5

Le de oontani mune dhaar kardhni away ji (song.no.55)
Ik tanbey ka bertain ho mune dhaar karni away ji
Merey susaar ji ley de oontani mune dhaar kardni awye ji

Buy a she-camel for me I know how to milk her Bring one copper container
I know how to milk he
(Translated by the author)

My father-in-law bought a she-camel for me I know how to milk her As the song portrays, the daughter-in-law informs her father-in-law that she knows all there is to know about milking animals and thus he (the father-in-law) should bring a she-camel for her. She also asks for a big copper container as she will need that to milk the she-cow.

Seemingly, a very straightforward and uncomplicated situation, yet with profound symbolic meaning depicting the self-stereotyping of Rajput women. As defined by the Rajput customs, the division of labor is by no means fair or symmetrical, however, the women seem to have adapted well to their roles and work within the household and take pride in it. They have fit so well in their stereotypical roles that this is how they tend to define themselves. The folksong talks about a

woman in a stereotypical role as a housewife (daughter-in-law) who must spend her time doing household chores. Moreover, this daughter-in-law through her self-serotyping has accepted her culturally defined role as the household worker. Not just this, but she also takes pride in the fact that she fits so well with the culturally defined role. This song also communicates that in a joint family system, the father-in-law or the eldest brother manages the household expenditures, and their permission is required in case of purchases. This situation also speaks about Rajput men stereotyping as breadwinners.

Conclusion

The folk wedding songs of Rajput women depict the perceptions of wifhood under the patriarchal milieu. The situation of Rajput women in their in-laws' families expected to be subjugated and intimidated against male supremacy. However, the singing of folksongs at weddings provides them a forum to express the wife's (bride) emotions and sentiments, in-law's expectations of her, and the wife's coping mechanism against them. Paradoxically, these folksongs also reinforce the cultural perceptions of the Rajput wifhood. Young Rajput girls socialized in the patriarchal background in their natal families and tried to provide a template for girls in Rajput wifhood role. The perception of wifhood as discussed in folksongs in this research may not be accepted in society as such, however, these perceptions are usually tolerated and socially approved on wedding forums.

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