

Negotiated Solidarities: Gendered Representations of Disruption and Desire in North Indian Oral Traditions and Popular Culture

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Introduction¹

Kalī kī rītī yahī, “this custom of a degenerate age”: thus did North Indian women describe, in a song written down in 1910, the plight of women who must move from natal place to conjugal place to be controlled there by their husband’s kin.² And thus do rural women still today critique the ideology of patrilineal kinship that circumscribes their lives, as a “custom” of the age and not as an invariant consequence of the nature of women and men.

That women’s oral traditions and personal narratives often speak critically of the solidarities of patrilineal kinship is by now a fairly commonplace observation in anthropological and folklore literature.³ In

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² The song from which the quoted line is taken was sung by a Brahman woman in Farrukhabad district. William Crooke published the Hindi text and a translation in 1910 (338).

³ See especially Abu-Lughod 1986, 1993; Briggs 1992; March 1984; Narayan 1986; Narayana Rao 1991; Oldenburg 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994; Seremetakis 1991; Wolf 1972.

this essay I want to ask a further set of questions about some of the more complicated issues concerning kinship, gender, folklore, and resistance. If women's songs and stories and memories are often critical of what Ranajit Guha (1987) has termed "the rounded unitary world of kinship," what are the alternative solidarities they propose? Can we say, as Guha seems to suggest, that resistance can only be located in a struggle in which a solidarity of women opposes itself to a kinship solidarity upheld by men? Or are there in fact multiple and shifting and negotiated and sometimes ambiguous solidarities that women may propose as they encounter that seemingly rounded unitary world? In order to tell a more complicated and ethnographically nuanced story of the ambiguities of resistance and of women's ability to deploy different strategies of critique in different kinds of situations, I want to ask several questions about the songs that are sung by women and by men in rural north India. How for example do women's songs construe disruptions in kinship solidarities? What are the alternative solidarities they set against the solidarities valorized in the official rhetorics of patrilineal kinship? How do women understand the desires that threaten to undermine those official rhetorics? And how do the perspectives on disruption and desire in women's oral traditions differ from those in the songs and stories performed by men for male audiences?

To speak of "women's perspectives" on kinship solidarities is not an easy or straightforward task. What does it mean to say that women's oral traditions are often critical of prevailing ideologies of kinship and gender? As I have written elsewhere, women's songs are sung not in a unified "women's voice" but in the different and sometimes contradictory voices of sisters, daughters, and wives (Raheja 1994, 1995; Raheja and Gold 1994). As Sarah Lamb points out in this volume, women speaking as older mothers have distinct perspectives on kinship relations and the duties of kinsmen to one another. As Margaret Trawick has suggested (1986, 1991), women in different caste and class positions might sing differently of kinship relations, and of ritual values like auspiciousness and hierarchy. And as Kirin Narayan tells us in this volume, individual women have their own repertoires and their own interpretations of songs and song performances. Speaking of a unified female voice is problematic for all of these reasons. Is it possible then to describe women's resistance to the practices, the constraints, and the ideologies of patrilineal kinship simply in terms of a female solidarity that might be opposed to the solidarities defined by men?

To speak of the ways that women's speech critiques prevailing kinship ideologies is indeed to speak somehow of forms of power and varieties of resistance. In South Asian studies, the most effective theorization of resistance has come from the work of the Subaltern Studies

collective. Although they have paid some attention to popular song, proverbs, and other cultural forms through which critiques are spoken (e.g., Arnold 1984, Guha 1983, Hardiman 1984), they have often failed, as Ortner points out (1995:180-81), to analyze these forms as complex cultural productions, as they frequently ignore the texts or relegate extracts of them to appendices. Partly because of this inattention to both the texts and the situations and the ambiguities of their production, assumptions concerning the homogeneity of peasant consciousness, religiosity, and custom sometimes remain unquestioned.⁴ While Hardiman (1992) acknowledges that there is a “tension” between the idea of community-based peasant solidarities on the one hand and caste, class, and gender struggles within it on the other, and while much of his own work does indeed demonstrate the existence of tensions within particular caste communities (e.g., 1984), representations of the politics of folklore in the work of the Subaltern Studies scholars continue to focus primarily on resistance to those outside the immediate peasant community and to pay far less attention to the challenges to “custom” that originate within, or to an ethnographic interpretation of the words that peasants speak.

So far, for example, only one essay in the Subaltern Studies series has substantively focused upon the question of gendered subaltern perspectives. In “Chandra’s Death” (1987), Ranajit Guha incisively illuminates an “untamed fragment” of history, an archival document from 1849 containing the depositions made in the course of an official investigation of an abortion that led to the death of Chandra, a low caste Bengali woman. The depositions were made by three defendants in the case, Chandra’s sister Brinda, her mother Bhagaboti Chashini, and Kalicharan Bagdi, an herbalist who provided medicines to effect the abortion. The events that led to the death of Chandra had been set into motion when Magaram Chasha, Chandra’s deceased husband’s sister’s husband, went to the village of Chandra’s mother and announced that he had been involved in an illicit relationship with Chandra, as a result of which she became pregnant. He demanded that they arrange for an abortion, failing which he would “put her into *bhek*,” that is, force her into a life of Vaisnavite renunciation in which she would effectively remain an outcast, isolated from her family and community.

⁴ David Arnold’s essay (1984) on peasant “customary” responses to the Madras famine of 1876-78 is one of the clearest examples of this tendency to homogenize and reify “tradition.” I have elsewhere discussed Arnold’s views of famine in peasant consciousness at greater length (Raheja n.d.). Gupta 1985 also provides an effective critique of some of the structuralist assumptions of the Subaltern Studies project.

Guha explicates these depositions to illustrate the degree to which the disciplinary thrust of the colonial government had penetrated into rural society by the mid-nineteenth century, but, more importantly, to construct a commentary on gender and kinship relations in rural nineteenth-century Bengal. In the face of the crisis precipitated by Magaram's threat, the herbs for Chandra's abortion were obtained through the combined efforts of a number of kin, particularly Brinda, Bhagaboti Chashani, Bhagaboti's sister's daughter, and her son's father-in-law. Chandra's mother-in-law and Magaram himself contributed toward the payment for the drug. When Chandra died as a result of consuming the herbal paste, she was buried by her brother Gayaram, his wife's brother, and her own mother's brother. In examining the cohesion of this kinship network that prompted mobilization of a web of relationships in the face of crisis, Guha suggests that two sorts of solidarities were activated following Magaram's ultimatum. The first was a solidarity brought about through fear of the shame and the caste sanctions that would follow a discovery of Chandra's sexual transgression, a solidarity rooted, according to Guha, in patriarchy and male dominance. A different and contradictory solidarity, of empathy rather than fear, was evinced by the women who came to Chandra's aid in arranging for the abortion. The desire of the men to terminate the pregnancy was motivated, Guha argues, by "a patriarchal society's concern to protect itself from the consequences of female sexual transgression" (1987:154). He suggests that the decision taken by the women, on the other hand, was "an act of resistance against a patriarchal tradition that was about to claim yet another woman as its victim; and their resistance took that characteristic form often adopted by the oppressed to subvert the designs of their oppressors in the guise of conforming to them" (162). I quote Guha at some length on the nature of these divergent solidarities (164-65):

To explain this resistance merely in terms of the obligations of kin and *kutum* is to ignore what is distinctive about it and sets it apart from kinship solidarity. It is a fundamental condition of such solidarity that the relation between the genders within the group, whatever its structure, should remain cohesive and non-antagonistic. For without such cohesion there can be no reproduction of species, hence no kinship. But that relation turns antagonistic whenever a termination of pregnancy is enforced by patriarchy. On such occasions man's authority stands so clearly opposed to woman's interest that no subterfuge, theological or sociological, can hide the truth of their relationship as one of dominance and subordination. No experience, other than that of rape, elucidates sexual politics more forcefully for the woman. Betrayed and bleeding, she sees a core of coercion in what she believed was mutual consent and an abstract masculinity in the person she

thought was her lover. . . .

It is this knowledge of man's bad faith that makes woman wiser about the limits of a solidarity that pretends to be neutral to gender. The rounded, unitary world of kinship can never be the same for her again. Soiled and humiliated, she has recourse to an *alternative solidarity*—a solidarity of women. Not an "open revolt" armed with trumpet and banner, it is still a visible and loud enough protest in a society where initiative and voice are given to man alone. For when a victim, however timid, comes to regard herself as an object of injustice, she already steps into the role of a critic of the system that victimizes her. And any action that follows from that critique contains the elements of a practice of resistance.

Guha's reading of this fragmentary archival record of Chandra's pregnancy and death is a brilliant one, a compelling commentary on a "patriarchal" discourse on sexuality in which Magaram, the male lover, escapes opprobrium, while Chandra, the woman, must face a forcibly imposed choice between abortion and *bhek*.

Yet several critical issues may be raised concerning this positing of a patriarchal kinship solidarity on the one hand and a solidarity of women on the other. First, although the analysis highlights for us the possibility that women may often come to resist cultural discourses of gender and sexuality, Guha, in speaking of "woman's interest," "woman's consciousness" and a solidarity of women, seems to assume the existence of an invariant homogeneous category, "woman," that exists prior to and outside of the system of kinship relationships. As Chandra Mohanty has pointed out (1984:339-42), however, women cannot be assumed to be undifferentiated subjects prior to their entry into kinship systems; women may in many ways resist the cultural discourses associated with these systems, but they are nonetheless produced as sisters, wives, and mothers within these relations, and women's perspectives on kinship systems may shift in relation to these varied positionings.⁵ Thus, while women do interrogate discourses on kinship and gender, women's perspectives may not coalesce into a closed and unified totality.⁶

Second, without denying the possibility that a solidarity among

⁵ I provide numerous examples of such shifting perspectives in Raheja and Gold 1994.

⁶ See Das 1989 and O'Hanlon 1988 for similar caveats concerning the tendency of the Subaltern scholars to posit a link between a subaltern perspective and concrete and invariable categories of persons, and for observations on the possible disunity and heterogeneity of subaltern subjectivity.

women may be forged in particular contexts of everyday life, it is problematic to speak of women's solidarity as the only alternative to "patriarchal" solidarity. Might women's strategies of resistance include not only the forging of a solidarity among women, but also the stressing of conjugality in the face of a kinship ideology that says that a wife's intimacy with her husband must be contained lest it pose a threat to the solidarity of the men of the husband's patriline?⁷ Or, in other situations, women's resistance may take the form of an insistence on the importance of the brother-sister relationship, since a brother may sometimes be expected to keep his sister's interests at heart, even if this means opposing the interests of her husband and his male kin. And might not women exhibit an ironic awareness of the tensions between these two strategies? It may thus be less appropriate to think of men's interests opposing women's interests in rural North India than to think in a somewhat more nuanced fashion of varying perspectives on kinship ties, kinship solidarities, and male-female relationships that may be strategically invoked in different contexts both by women and by men. Men, as well as women, may often see official kinship conventions as oppressive, and might privately subvert them while publicly conforming to them (Raheja 1994:64-66). There is not, then, one avenue of resistance to the rounded unitary world of patrilineal kinship, but many shifting and intersecting solidarities that run counter to it. The words of women's songs that I heard in rural North India speak eloquently of those negotiated solidarities and of varied struggles against a wholeness that is often achieved only at their expense.

If a solidarity of women is not the only alternative to a solidarity of male kinsmen, can we say with Guha that it is an awareness of "man's bad faith" that prompts a woman to see the limits of the solidarity that pretends to be neutral to gender? We could ask this question another way. Are women's critiques directed towards the individual intentions of their kinsmen and man's bad faith, or towards the contradictions in the kinship system they confront? Rosalind O'Hanlon (1994) has raised some analogous questions in her analyses of an 1882 commentary on gender relations entitled *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, written by Tarabai Shinde, a woman from a small provincial town in Maharashtra. The pamphlet is a critique of nineteenth-century debates about "women's nature," female sexuality, and widow remarriage. From her reading of the

⁷ Ashis Nandy (1990:42-43) has suggested that struggles to redefine women's identity in the West have involved a defiance of the limits imposed by conjugality, while in India such a struggle may necessitate an underscoring of conjugality, in opposition to the prevailing valuation of relationships among men.

text, O'Hanlon argues that while some aspects of Tarabai's critique can be counted as resistance, the gesture is ultimately flawed, because in her view Tarabai takes negative characterizations of female nature, inverts them, and says that they are really applicable to men. O'Hanlon writes that Tarabai "saw women's sufferings in general as the result of men's deliberate viciousness rather than as a product of complex structures of power that transcend individual intention" (1991:102).

Indian women's everyday resistance more generally, according to O'Hanlon, is often hampered by these "essentializing" tendencies she claims to see in the writings of Tarabai Shinde and also in the social practices of the courtesans of Lucknow, in whose songs and skits Veena Oldenburg (1991) has discerned a critical stance towards a kinship ideology the courtesans find oppressive, and in whose words and everyday lives she finds a struggle for material needs as well as a struggle against patriarchal values. But from O'Hanlon's point of view, an underlying essentialism in such critiques serves to reproduce rather than undermine patriarchal ideology.

As I consider the words spoken by women I know in rural North India, I want to question some of the assumptions made by Guha and by O'Hanlon concerning women's resistance to kinship and gender ideologies. In contrast to the picture painted by Guha, women's songs from the villages of Pahansu and Hathchoya are diverse and heterogeneous; women do not necessarily speak in a single "female" voice when they challenge prevailing North Indian assumptions about women, kinship, and sexuality, and the alternative solidarities they posit are far more various and more complicated than those he envisions. In contrast to the picture painted by O'Hanlon, these same women's songs challenge essentializing depictions of female nature not by reversing them and essentializing male nature, but by critiquing, sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly, the very structures of kinship and power that oppress women and sometimes men as well, and by discerning that the world of kinship is not rounded and unitary, but always and inherently liable to fracture and to contradiction.⁸

There are many ways of approaching these complex issues, and there are no final and definitive answers to the questions I have posed. We may

⁸ As part of her argument, O'Hanlon rightly makes the point that "there are no neutral spaces from which women could defy and hold themselves apart from Indian patriarchy" (1991:104) and she points out some of the significant contradictions in Shinde's critique of gender relations in nineteenth-century India. I do not wish to dispute her emphasis on the power of dominant gender ideologies to frame women's discourse in certain ways, but I do wish to call attention to the fact that all women's resistance to such ideologies does not rely on an essentializing strategy that serves only to reproduce patriarchal categories.

begin, however, to think about these theoretical dilemmas by listening closely to women's words, and paying close attention to the ethnographic contexts in which they may be spoken.⁹ I focus here on songs performed by groups of women primarily on the occasions of births, marriages, and calendrical festivals in the western Uttar Pradesh villages of Pahansu and Hathchoya.¹⁰ These songs articulate powerful critiques of pervasive North Indian ideologies of gender and kinship solidarities. They do so, however, not from a single female perspective, but from the differently situated perspectives of sisters and daughters on the one hand and wives and daughters-in-law on the other; they envision not the single kind of valued solidarity premised in the dominant norms of patrilineal kinship or a unitary female solidarity, but constantly negotiated solidarities among shifting categories of kin, solidarities that may be selectively and intentionally invoked by women in their everyday lives when the requirements of patrilineal ideology are experienced as oppressive. And finally, as I compare the representations of disruption in kinship solidarities found in men's and women's oral traditions, I suggest that men's oral traditions do indeed constantly resort to essentializing strategies, as they describe fractured solidarities as stemming from the dangerously disruptive and often

⁹ I have elsewhere discussed the ways that the presence of the ethnographer, senior village women, and high caste men may call forth different strategies of resistance or talk of "tradition" on the part of Hathchoya women (Raheja 1994:72-74).

¹⁰ I recorded these songs in Pahansu (Saharanpur District) in 1977-79 and 1988, and in Hathchoya (about twenty miles away in Muzaffarnagar District) in 1990. Women's song repertoires changed throughout this time, for many reasons. A few of the song texts I recorded in 1988, for example, are very similar to those found in two pamphlets of Hindi songs collected in Saharanpur and Muzaffarnagar villages by a teacher at a local college (Sharma 1983, 1984). A teacher from that college had given me a copy of those pamphlets, and I had them with me in Pahansu in 1988. The young literate women I knew there pored over those printed texts, and they were eager to tell me which ones were part of their own repertoires, which ones they had heard in the village, which ones they had heard during visits to other villages, and which ones would never be sung by women of their own community. In some cases, they found new songs they liked and approved of, and insisted on performing them for me and "filling up" my tape recorder with them. I could see from this experience that women actively sought to enlarge their repertoires, although they had quite definite ideas about what kinds of songs they thought appropriate or wanted to sing. Other songs I have recorded incorporate lines from Hindi film songs and melodies borrowed from them. (The impact of film songs has increased since the simultaneous arrival in Pahansu of electricity, television, and rented VCRs in 1987). New songs on new themes constantly appear, as they always have, as women's lives and experiences change (Raheja and Gold 1994:187-93; Gold 1995). I have not tried, in this essay, to capture much of that sense of transformation through time.

uncontrollable “nature of women” (*triyā charitra*).

Women’s Perspectives on Kinship Solidarities, Conflict, and Desire

I have spent a total of several years talking with men and women in Pahansu and Hathchoya. Because I was working for much of this time on questions of caste and landed dominance, many of those conversations took place in Gujar households, since Gujars are in this region one of the principal landed castes. In Pahansu, they comprise a bit more than one-half of the total population, but they hold nearly all of the land; in Hathchoya, they have slightly less of a monopoly on landholding, but there too their dominance is decisive. Both are large multi-caste villages of several thousand people and about fifteen castes.

Although most of what I have to say about gender and oral traditions derives from the knowledge that Gujar women shared with me, their perspectives on kinship relations are in many respects like those of women of other castes. For most women in rural northern India, for example, a central fact of women’s experience is the movement from natal village to conjugal village at marriage. Events of everyday life, feelings, crises, rivalries, loyalties, rituals, givings and receivings, work, and love are all constantly discussed and commented upon in relation to women’s positions in *pīthar* and *sasurāl*, natal village and conjugal village, and in relation to their vastly different identities as sister and daughter in one village and wife and daughter-in-law in another.

Although women of many different castes may understand this movement from natal kin to conjugal kin as central to their experience, their perspectives on this movement are not entirely uniform. The songs I heard in Pahansu and Hathchoya that take up a sister’s perspective adopt an ironic view of the fact that while women are enjoined upon marriage to become “one’s own” (*apnī*) to their husband’s family and “other” (*parāī*) to their natal kin, they nonetheless expect that their relationship with their natal kin (and their brothers in particular) will be close and enduring. And women speaking as wives subversively reiterate the theme that the husband-wife relationship should be valued over and above the husband’s ties to his own natal kin, and above the solidarity of the “joint family.” We can read both perspectives as being equally critical of some of the central assumptions of patrilineal kinship. Songs sung from the point of view of the sister challenge patrilineal ideals and their requirement that women distance themselves from brothers who, from the sister’s perspective, are “born of the same mother” and thus important to her. Songs sung from the point of view of wives challenge patrilineal ideals by repudiating their

requirement that intimacy with the husband should be controlled so that his ties to his own patrilineal kin take precedence, and its requirement of wifely obedience to the husband's senior kin. Thus, rather than a uniform "female subaltern voice" here, we find that women speaking as sisters may devalue the marital bond, and women speaking as wives may decry their husbands' attachment to their sisters and insist on the primacy of the conjugal tie over all other solidarities. While of course it is the particularities of North Indian kinship ideology that have produced this distinction, these divergent voices are not merely echoes of male authority. Sisters and wives provide contradictory readings of kinship practices, yet both resist that authority and seek to undermine some of the most oppressive conventions of its ideology.

Women Speak As Sisters

When women speak as sisters, they speak most often of being sent away from their natal kin when they marry. They speak of the importance of the enduring tie to brothers, and of the danger that a brother may forget them and pay greater attention to the needs of his wife. And they speak ironically and critically of a central tenet of North Indian kinship that decrees that the woman becomes "other" and "alien" (*parāī*) to her natal kin upon her marriage, even though she is "born of the same mother" (*māñ jāī*) as her brothers. This official representation of the transformation that women are said to undergo at marriage has important ritual significances,¹¹ and it is also significant in women's everyday lives. Men often complain, for example, that if wives maintain close ties with their brothers, the husbands' authority over them will be diminished, since women will be able to rely on the brothers when disputes arise in the *sasurāl*; men say that there will be too much "interference" in their ability to control women if that were to happen.¹² But women's songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya resist this effort to circumscribe a woman's solidarities and the advantages they may provide.

The following three songs from Pahansu are sung at weddings, as the bride is taken out of her natal home just after her marriage in the company of her husband and his kinsmen, to begin the journey to her conjugal place. The first "song of the bride's departure" (*bidāī gīt*) ironically juxtaposes the

¹¹ See for example Inden and Nicholas 1977 and Trautmann 1981.

¹² Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon 1989:34-36. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see my discussion in Raheja and Gold 1994:106-7.

two identities of the departing daughter: she has become “alien” and “foreign” (*parāī*) to her natal kin, but she remains nonetheless a sister “born from one mother” (*māñ jāī*). The rhyming of the two phrases *parāī re* and *māñ jāī re* that occurs in many *bidāī* songs heightens the ironic effect; the sounds are similar, but the identities and the solidarities they describe are so very different:¹³

Song of the Bride’s Departure 1

bābul kā ghar chhor lādī
ho gāī āj parāī re
bābā rovai dādī rovai
bare dukhon se pālī hai
bhāīyā kā man bhar bhar āvai
kahāñ chali māñ jāī re.

Leave the house of your father, dear girl,
 today you’ve become *parāī*.
 Your grandfather cries, your grandmother cries,
 they’ve taken such trouble to raise you.
 Your brother’s heart now overflows,
 as he asks where his sister, born from one mother, has gone.

The second song of departure implores the father over and over again to listen to the daughter’s complaints about the differences in the way sons and daughters are treated, and to her descriptions of the sorrow experienced by a young woman as she leaves her friends behind and is forced to fly “wherever we’re made to take wing,” to a distant alien place:

Song of the Bride’s Departure 2

kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
bhāīyā ko diye bābul mahal do mahale
hamko diyā pardes re sun bābul mhāre.

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
 You’ve given my brother, my father, a two-storied house,
 listen, father, you’ve given me only a foreign land.

kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.

¹³ The *re* that occurs at the end of these phrases is a vocative particle.

*tāroṅ bhārī maiṅne guṛiyāṅ jo chhoṛī
chhoṛā sahelioṅ kā sāth re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
I've had to leave my fancy dolls,
listen, father, I've had to leave my friends.

*kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
ham to bābul āṅgan kī chiriyāṅ
jidhar uṛāo uṛ jāeṅ re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
We are birds in the courtyard, father,
listen, father, wherever we're made to take wing, there we have to fly.

*kāhe ko byāhī bides re sun bābul mhāre.
mahaloṅ tale se ḍolī jo nikalī
biran ne khāī pachhar re sun bābul mhāre.*

Listen, my father, why have you gotten me married in a foreign land?
When my palanquin left the house,
listen, my father, my brother was thrown down with sorrow.

A *bannī kā gīt*, a “song of the young bride” performed by the bride’s kinswomen at the rituals preceding the actual wedding rite, captures in the words of the girl’s natal kin the sense of an alien kinship solidarity to which the bride may not be welcomed.

Song of the young bride

*lādo mat kar soch man meṅ
sajan kā ghar jānā hogā.
vahāṅ dādī na bābā hongē, des parāyā hogā,
sab apnī-apnī kahenge, terī na koī sunegā,
nainoṅ se nīr bahegā, ānchal se ponchhnā hogā.*

Dear one, don't think so much about it,
you have to go to your husband's house.
Your grandmother and grandfather won't be there, the land will be alien.
Everyone there will say “mine, mine,” no one there will say “yours.”
Tears will flow from your eyes there, you'll wipe them with the end of your wrap.

Because in India kinship relationships are so frequently talked about in terms of the gift-giving and receiving appropriate to them, women's songs often express these ironies in relation to a perceived tension between a

man's obligations to give generously to his sisters on the one hand, and his wife's expectation that the marital bond will be more important to him on the other. Many songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya speak ironically of women's hopes that a brother will continue to support his sister by supplying her with gifts in the husband's place on the one hand, and of the ambivalence a brother and his wife may feel when they are called upon to give generously.¹⁴ Songs sung at the time that the "mother's brothers' gifts" (*bhāt*) are given, just before the wedding of a sister's child, speak most plaintively of these contradictions.

Just after a sister's child's marriage is arranged, she usually makes a trip to her natal home for *bhāt nautan*, "the invitation for the giving of *bhāt*," to inform her brothers of the impending marriage and to tell them the gifts that she expects to receive. She takes a small dish of unrefined sugar as a solicitary gift, and when she ceremonially gives it to her brother, her brothers' wives and other women in her own natal place sing a "song for the *bhāt* invitation," which speaks of a wife's refusal to give to her husband's sister.

Song for the *Bhāt* Invitation

bhāt nautan ko chalī lālī.

The husband's sister comes for the *bhāt* invitation.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe kapṛā rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some cloth,

bajājī kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with a cloth-seller, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe sonā rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some gold,

sunāroṅ kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with the goldsmiths, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

jo rī lālī tujhe bartan rī chāhiye.

Girl, if you want some pots,

ṭhaṭheroṅ kā baḍ jā lālī.

then go and live with the tinkers, girl.

lālī ke sir pai guṛ kī ḍālī.

On the girl's head is a lump of sugar.

In this song, the conflicting perspectives on gifts to sisters become poignantly clear. The women who have married into the sister's natal home express contempt for their husband's sister who comes to ask for gifts. The possibility that her brothers themselves may take up a similar attitude towards her is suggested in songs that are sung when the *bhāt* is about to arrive at the sister's conjugal house. Women then gather just inside the doorway and sing as the brother arrives and as he gives the gifts to his

¹⁴ These contrary perspectives on gift-giving are examined at length in Raheja 1995.

sister, just at the threshold of the house. The tension between the sister and her brother's wife is prominent in all of the *bhāt* songs I recorded in Pahansu, songs that are always sung from the vantage point of the sister:¹⁵

Song of the Mother's Brothers' Gifts 1

aṅganā bahār āyī rī
ki savere uṭh āvaiṅ bhāṭiye.

The courtyard is filled with delight,
tomorrow morning the *bhāt* givers will
come.

merā māthā pharak rahā rī
ki ṭīkā jhumar lavaiṅ mere bhāṭiye

My forehead is throbbing,
in hopes that my *bhāt* givers will bring
forehead ornaments.

merā man yūṅ kah rahā rī
ki thossā nā dikhavaiṅ mere
bhāṭiye

My mind is saying this:
don't show your thumb in refusal, my
bhāt givers.¹⁶

Further stanzas in this song mention other parts of the sister's body for which she expects her brothers to provide ornaments.

In another *bhāt* song the woman's fear proves to be warranted, as the brother himself replies to his sister. In the dialogue portrayed in the song, the brother refuses each of his sister's demands:

Song of the Mother's Brothers' Gifts 2

karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab bartan lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo chammachiya.

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of cooking pots,
don't bring me one little spoon.

karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā maiṅ sab sab bartan bhūlā
mere yād rahī ek chammachiya.

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of cooking pots,
I remembered one little spoon.

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of another particularly poignant *bhāt* song, see Raheja and Gold 1994:93-97.

¹⁶ Holding up a thumb is a defiant gesture of refusal in northern India.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab sab gahane lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo aranya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of ornaments,
don't bring me a worthless trifle.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab sab gahane bhūlā
mere yād rahi ek aranya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of ornaments,
I remembered a worthless trifle.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab sab kapare lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo ghāghariyā.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring me lots and lots of cloth,
don't bring me just one skirt.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab sab kapare bhūlā
mere yād rahī ek ghāghariyā.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot lots and lots of cloth,
I remembered just one skirt.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he bhāṭiyā mere sab bhāt bhatīje lāiyo
mere ek na lāiyo bhāvajiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh brother, bring all my brothers and nephews,
don't bring one brother's wife.

*karnāl jile ke mere bhāṭiyā.
he sun bahanā main sab bhāt bhatīje bhūlā
mere yād rahī terī bhāvajiya.*

My *bhāt* giver is from Karnal district.
Oh listen, sister, I forgot all the brothers and nephews,
I remembered your brother's wife.

In this *bhāt* song, the brother claims that he has forgotten to bring the many

gifts that the sister demands. He forgets to bring the ornaments she expects, and he brings only an *aranya*, a worthless piece of jewelry that no one will appreciate. And most importantly, he forgets to bring his sister's other brothers and her brothers' sons, all of whom would be expected to come forward at the *bhāt* ceremony and present their sister with gifts. He remembers, though, to bring his own wife, whose voice we heard in the the song of the *bhāt* invitation, refusing to give the cloth and pots and jewelry to her husband's sister. The verses of this song are a catalog of unwanted and disparaged things, and the brother's wife is the last on the list. The sister sees that as she is sent away from her natal place, another woman comes who may take her place in her brother's affections, and the brother may increasingly come to regard her as *parāt* rather than as *mān jāī*. The source of the differing expectations held by the sister and the brother are attributed to the exigencies of North Indian kinship, to the custom that requires that women be sent from their natal place to a distant "foreign land": *kalī kī rītī yahī*, "this custom of a degenerate age."

What is evident in these songs is an ironic awareness of the contradictory identities of married women in North India. In juxtaposing these contrary images of one who is both *parāt* and *mān jāī*, women in North India comment critically upon the construction of female identities in patrilineal kinship, and attribute the tensions in their relationships to the contradictory expectations found therein, and to the fact that a brother may come to believe too strongly in the patrilineal ideology that stresses a woman's alienation from her natal kin.

Women Speak As Wives

In songs sung from the point of view of wives, patrilineality and the solidarities it entails are rooted in morally problematic assumptions about the value of the marriage bond in comparison to the husband's patrilineal kinship ties and about the nature of female sexuality and the threats this bond poses to those relationships among the husband's natal kin. Women clearly see that they are disadvantaged as they move from natal place to conjugal place, chiefly because they make the move alone, leaving their families and their friends behind. Furthermore, when they come to the *sasurāl*, they find that intimacy with the husband is to be limited so that a close bond between husband and wife will not come to threaten the solidarity of the men of the husband's patriline. This latter problem could develop in two ways. First, senior kinsmen may feel that if an overly close bond develops between husband and wife, the husband might shield her

from their demands. Second, it is widely feared that if such a close conjugal bond exists, the wife might be able to convince her husband to separate from the joint family or cause rifts in the solidarity of male kinsmen. Thus as women critique these aspects of the patrilineal ideology, they critique the power relationships that frame their lives, and they envision a solidarity that may often be at odds with the hierarchies and solidarities that are most valued in the patrilineal kinship ideology.

In many songs, women comment critically on the fact that although they move from natal place to conjugal place and are expected by their husbands' kin to transfer their loyalties there, they are often regarded nonetheless as interlopers, while at the same time being reminded that they are no longer "one's own" to their natal kin. There is no place, then, that they can truly call their own. I recorded the following song in Hathchoya in 1990, not at a ritual event but on a sultry summer afternoon when I was sitting on a rooftop, gossiping with a group of Gujar women. There was the usual round of leg massaging (*pāoñ dabānā*), a gesture performed by young daughters-in-law to display their respect for the senior women of their husband's village (see photo 1). They knew of course that I had been tape-recording women's songs, and they soon began to ask me why Americans would be interested in such things, and what I intended to write about them. One thing I said to them then was that I wanted to know about women's conflicts with their kin, so they obliged me by singing a round of songs about "fights between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law" (*sās bahū kī larāī*) and about the sorrow (*dukh*) a woman experiences in her *sasurāl*. And so the daughters-in-law and the mothers-in-law sang, all together, this song of a young woman's complaints about those senior women to whom deference must be shown:¹⁷

Sitting Song

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
mujhe lar bhīr kheto bhejeñ.
juāñ tuṭā hai batāve bail buḍḍhā hai batāve.
mujhe kharī hai rulāve he ḍoloñ pe.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
They quarrel with me and send me to the fields.
They tell me that the yoke is broken, they tell me that the oxen are old.

¹⁷ "Sitting songs" (*baiṭhne ke gīt*) are songs performed at singing and dancing sessions (at marriages and festival occasions) during lulls in the dancing.

They make me cry as I stand on the boundary of the fields.

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hi dukhī is ghar meñ.
mujhe lar bhīr kolij bhejeñ.
bastā phaṭā hai batāve māstar buḍḍhā hai batāve,
kolij phuṭā hai batāve.
mujhe kharī hai rulāve sarakoñ pe.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
They quarrel with me and send me off to college.
They tell me that the bookbag's torn, they tell me that the teacher's old.
They tell me that the building's crumbling.
They make me cry as I stand in the street.



Photo 1: A young daughter-in-law massages the legs of a senior woman in Hathchoya, August 1990

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
 mujhe lar bhīr bhojan bhejeñ.
 namak tej hai batāve roṭī kachchī hai batāve.
 mujhe kharī hai rulāve mahalo meñ.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
 They quarrel with me and send me off to eat.
 They tell me that the food's too salty, they tell me that the bread's unbaked.
 They make me cry as I stand in the house.

*suno suno he sakhī merā janam hī dukhī is ghar meñ.
 mujhe lar bhīr pīhar bhejeñ.
 ammā marī hai batāve bhābhī kānī hai batāve,
 bahanā bhāgī hai batāve.
 mujhe kharī hai rulāve mahalo meñ.*

Listen, listen, friend, my life itself is sorrowful in this house.
 They quarrel with me and send me off to my natal place.
 They tell me that my mother's dead, they tell me that my brother's wife's one-eyed.
 They tell me that my sister's run away.
 They make me cry as I stand in the house.

In this song, the husband's kin tell the wife that she has no one in her natal place: no mother, no sister, just a one-eyed sister-in-law. In each verse her pleasurable anticipations are shattered by her husband's kin. They quarrel with her in her husband's place, and tell her that she has no one at her natal place.

Although women's songs sometimes address listeners as "sisters," thus envisioning a solidarity of women based on shared experiences, and perhaps on the experience of singing these songs together (Raheja and Gold 1994:142-48), women's songs that are sung from the vantage point of wives also envision a solidarity between husband and wife that should stand against other publicly valued solidarities. I recorded many songs in Pahansu and Hathchoya that are critical of the ways that the husband's kin might attempt to control the wife and limit intimacy with her husband; this is one of the most common themes in the songs I heard. The following is a "dancing song" (*nāchne kā gīt*) sung at women's singing and dancing sessions at the marriage of a son, and at calendrical festivals such as Holi and Tij. It lists some of the demands and complaints a wife may hear at her *sasurāl*:

Dancing Song 1

is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīn naṇadī.

*is ghar ke sūsar jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main ghūnḡhaṭ kārḡhūn
phīr bhī kahaiñ dīkhā muñh dīkhā
muñh dīkhā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The father-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I cover my head three times with my veil,
he'll say nonetheless that my face is showing, my face is showing,
that my face is showing, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar kī sāssū jī bari haṭhīlī.
tīn bār main jhārū lagāūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ kūḡḡā yahāñ kūḡḡā
yahāñ kūḡḡā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The mother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I sweep the floor three times with a broom,
she'll say nonetheless that there's dirt here and there, there's dirt here and there,
that there's dirt here and there, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar ke jethā jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main khānā parossūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ bhūkhā hāy bhūkhā
hāy bhūkhā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The elder brother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I serve him food three times,
he'll cry nonetheless that he's hungry, he's hungry,
that he's hungry, husband's sister.

*is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ naṇadī.
is ghar kī jīṭhāñī jī bare haṭhīle.
tīn bār main bachche khilāūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ royā hāy royā
hāy royā merī naṇadī.*

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
The elder sister-in-law of this house is very unbending.
If I feed the children three times,
she'll say nonetheless that they're crying, they're crying,
that they're crying, husband's sister.

is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ nañadī.
is ghar ke devar jī baṛe haṭhīle.
tīñ bār maiñ chaupar khelūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ nā khelī nā khelī
nā khelī merī nañadī.

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
 The younger brother-in-law of this house is very unbending.
 If I play *chaupar* with him three times,
 he'll say nonetheless that I didn't play, I didn't play,
 that I didn't play, husband's sister.

is ghar meñ merā gujārā nahīñ nañadī.
is ghar kī durāñī baṛī haṭhīlī.
tīñ bār maiñ bartan māñjūñ
phīr bhī kahaiñ jūṭhe ye jūṭhe
ye jūṭhe merī nañadī.

I can't survive in this house, husband's sister.
 The younger sister-in-law of this house is very unbending.
 If I scrub the pots three times,
 she'll say nonetheless that they're dirty, they're dirty,
 that they're dirty, husband's sister.

Other songs go further and suggest definitive solutions to such difficulties. In the next dancing song, for example, a woman speaks to her college-going husband. She urges him to provide a solution to the problems she experiences in the *sasurāl* and proposes one herself: she suggests to him that his relationship to her should take primacy over his bond to his natal kin, and that he should separate their own household from that of his mother and his brothers' wives. The song ends with the wife urging her husband to send his own sister off to her *sasurāl*:

Dancing Song 2

kolij ke paṛhne vāloñ bājā bajāke jāiyo
bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
sās laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
sāssū kā charkā jī rājā alag dharāke jāiyo.

Oh college student, go off making music,
 go off making music and singing a song for me.
 My mother-in-law will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
 My mother-in-law's spinning wheel, husband-lord, go off making it separate from
 ours.

*kolij ke paṛhne vālon bājā bajāke jāiyo
 bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
 jīṭhānī laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
 jīṭhānī kā chūlhā jī rājā alag dharāke jāiyo.*

Oh college student, go off making music,
 go off making music and singing a song for me.
 My elder sister-in-law will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
 My elder sister-in-law's hearth, husband-lord, go off making it separate from ours.

*kolij ke paṛhne vālon bājā bajāke jāiyo
 bājā bajāke jāiyo laharā sunāke jāiyo.
 naṇadī laṛāigī jī rājā jatan batāke jāiyo.
 naṇadī kā ḍolā jī rājā sasurāl sajāke jāiyo.*

Oh college student, go off making music,
 go off making music and singing a song for me.
 My husband's sister will fight, husband-lord, go off giving me a solution.
 My husband's sister's marriage palanquin, husband-lord, go off sending it to her
 in-laws' place.

This song's devaluation of the joint family and of patrilineal solidarities is echoed in the next dancing song, in which the singers also mock the deference behaviors that the kinship ideology requires of young married women, hinting of the costs to women of such conventions:

Dancing Song 3

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
 he rī mere hāth hue bekār sās tere charaṇ dabāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
 My hands have become useless, oh mother-in-law, from pressing your feet.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
 he rī mere pair hue bekār jīṭhānī tere pīche phīrne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
 My feet have become useless, oh elder sister-in-law, from following right behind
 you.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūṅghaṭ kāṛhne se.
 he rī meri jībh huī bekār durānī tere kām batāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.

My tongue has become useless, oh younger sister-in-law, from telling you
to do your work.

*he rī mere lambe sunhare bāl bigar gaye ghūnḡhaṭ kārḡhne se.
he rī mere nain hue bekār naṡad tere bhej maṡḡāne se.*

Oh my long beautiful hair has been ruined, from covering my head with a veil.
My eyes have become useless, oh husband's sister, from weeping and asking that
you be sent away.

A fourth dancing song explicitly invokes the solidarity of husband and wife that is to be mobilized against men within the joint family who may oppose the wife:

Dancing Song 4

*susar mere ne ṡkā gharvāyā.
ṡkā dekhke jalā rī pītasarā.
ādhī sī rāt pahar kā tarḡkā
tālā torḡke badyā rī pītasarā.
kuchḡ jagi āp jagā liyā rasiyā.
donoṡ ne gher liyā rī pītasarā.
jorān lagyā hāth dharān lagyā pagrī
ijḡat sanbhāl bahū rī pītasara.*

My father-in-law had a forehead ornament made for me.
My husband's uncle saw it, and it inflamed him with jealousy.
In the middle of the night, in the early morning hour,
My husband's uncle broke the lock and came inside.
I awakened and awoke my beloved.
We two surrounded him.
He joined his hands in supplication, he put his turban cloth at my feet,
And he said "Daughter-in-law, respect me, I'm your husband's uncle."

Other verses follow that are identical to this one, except that the names of other ornaments are substituted for the forehead ornament.

In this song, a wife tells of the treachery that a woman may experience in her conjugal place, when her husband's uncle attempts to steal her jewelry. Such a scenario is not so far-fetched as it may seem. Thefts of jewelry and other valuables from family members, or at least speculation about it when something is lost or misplaced, are in fact not uncommon in the villages where I worked; they often indicate where the fault-lines in "the rounded unitary world of kinship" may be found. Speculation about possible thefts, or even actual accusations, speak tellingly, in the words of

everyday speech, of the same tensions and contradictions that are commented upon in women's songs. In this song, the wife envisions a resolution. In her attempt to confront her husband's uncle in the bedroom, she is joined by her husband; "we two" surrounded him. The uncle, who according to the conventions of North Indian kinship should be accorded unquestioning respect, is made to show extreme deference to the young daughter-in-law, as he touches his turban-cloth to her feet. The song thus sets up a solidarity between husband and wife that is seen as a preferred alternative to the solidarity among men in the *sasurāl*.

Another dancing song speaks of another kind of treachery in the *sasurāl*, and suggests that wives need not passively submit to it, and that they may indeed find ways to silence those who would speak against them:

Dancing Song 5

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
bahū oṛho chaṭak chūnariyā
sir rakh lo nīr gagariyā.
choṭī naṇadī le lo sāth rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?¹⁸
Daughter-in-law, cover your head with a shimmering veil,
and put the water pot on your head.
Take your husband's younger sister with you, your eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
maiñne oṛhī chaṭak chūnariyā
sir dhar lāi nīr gagariyā.
choṭī naṇadī le lī sāth, rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
I covered my head with a shimmering veil,
and I put the water pot on my head.
I took my husband's sister along, my eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā..
tum baiṭho kadam kī chhāyā
maiñ bhar lāūñ nīr gagariyā
bībī ghar mat kahiyo jāy rasīle doū nainā.*

¹⁸ The phrase describing the eyes is *rasīle doū nainā*, literally, "juicy two eyes." The words *ras*, "juice," and *rasīlā*, "juicy," connote the ideas of ripeness, sexual readiness, attraction, and beauty.

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 My husband's sister said to me: Sit down in the shade of the banyan tree,
 I'll fill the water pot.
 Don't tell them at home that I filled the pot, your eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
 merī nañadī baṛī chhichhorī.
 usne jāy sikhāī apnī maiyā
 ammā bhābhī ke do yār rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 My husband's sister is very deceitful.
 She went and complained to her mother:
 mother, my brother's wife keeps two men, her eyes are so alluring.

*maiñ paniyā kaise jāūñ rasīle doū nainā.
 sājan se jāy kahūñgī
 tujhe ghar se dūr karūñgī
 bībī phīr na lūñgī terā nām rasīle doū nainā.*

How can I go to the well, my eyes are so alluring?
 I'll tell my husband all about it,
 I'll tell him to send you away from here,
 And I'll never say your name again, my eyes are so alluring.

In this tale of treachery and deceit in the conjugal place, the husband's sister relies on cultural images of uncontrolled female sexuality, as found in male oral traditions, to fabricate a story that her brother's wife has found a lover, a story that, when reported to her mother and her brother, might turn the husband away from his wife.

Such themes of uncontrolled sexuality leading to betrayal are very often found in male oral traditions, and in those songs and stories there is no voice to counter the accusation. In women's songs, however, although it may be a woman (a mother-in-law or a husband's sister) who makes the complaint, it is always apparent that the song itself is a challenge to those negative images of the dangerous and sexually voracious female. In the only dancing song I recorded that does not focus directly upon the kinship context in which the relationship in question unfolds, a man is "thirsting" for a woman he sees at a well. The woman takes pride in her body and its beauty, but she nonetheless rebuffs him until she learns that he is in fact her husband, whom she has not recognized. The traveler's thirst is recognized by the listeners as standing in for sexual desire:

Dancing Song 6

*mere sir pai bañtā ṭokanī
mere hāthoñ meñ lohe kā ḍol
maiñ patlī sī kāmnī.*

Two water pots are on my head.
And the dipper's in my hand.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.

*ek rāh musāphir mil gayā
chhorī thoṛā sā nīr pilāy
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

In the path I met a traveler—
“Girl, give me some water to drink.
This thirsty man has come a long way.”

*chhorā nā merī ḍubkai ḍolchī
re chhorā nā merā nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmnī.*

“Boy, my dipper doesn't reach down to the
water,
And my body doesn't bend down.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*chhorā kiske ho tum pāhune
re chhorā kiske ho bhartār
maiñ patlī sī kāmnī.*

“Boy, whose honored guest [*pāhunā*] are
you?¹⁹
And whose husband are you?
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*gorī bāp tere kā pāhunā
re chhorī terā hūñ bhartār
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

“Fair one, I'm your father's *pāhunā*.
Girl, I am your husband.
This thirsty man has come a long way.”

*chhorā ab merī ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorā ab merā nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmnī.*

“Boy, now my dipper reaches down to the
water.
Now my body can bend.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

*chhorī ab kaise ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorī ab kaise nivai hai sarīr
pyāse to āye baṛī dūr se.*

“Girl, now does your dipper reach down?
Now how does your body bend?
This thirsty traveler has come a long way.”

*chhorā ḍubak ḍubak ḍubbai ḍolchī
re chhorā murtuṛ nivai hai sarīr
maiñ patlī sī kāmnī.*

“Boy, I tried and tried and the dipper
reached down.
I twisted and turned and made my body bend.
I'm a slim and beautiful woman.”

In this dancing song, desire is seen as neither dangerous nor threatening; by putting the expression of longing and desire first in the voice of the man, and the forthright and clever repartee in the voice of the woman, many of the conventional notions about women's inability to

¹⁹ *Pāhunā* (“guest”) is a term very often used to refer to a son-in-law visiting his wife's natal village.

control their sexuality are thus subverted.²⁰ But the sexual desire itself is celebrated. It is as if this song is a commentary on the previous one; the wife strikes up a relationship at the well only if the traveler proves to be her husband, and the accusations of the husband's sister are shown to be unfair.

²¹ Now this song could be read simply as reinforcing the patrilineal ideal of unwavering devotion to one's husband, and it would not be wrong to do so; women's critiques of gender ideologies are seldom wholesale and unambiguous. But the song's insistence on the woman's ability to control her own desire, while not disowning it, does pose a critique of one of the central propositions upon which male control of female sexuality is premised.

In many other songs, such acknowledged desires can only be fulfilled if the husband is prepared to go against the wishes of his natal kin. In the following song for the festival of Tij, for example, a mother-in-law denies her daughter-in-law one of the pleasures of a married woman and has her sent away under false pretenses. When the husband is consumed by remorse for his own complicity in the plan and wants her to come back, he must act alone and go against the wishes of his mother:

Song for the Festival of Tij 1

āyā rī sāsū merī sāvan mās
beḍ bañṭā de pile pāṭ kī.

[Wife speaking]

Mother-in-law, the month of Savan has come,
twist a rope of yellow silk for me to swing upon.²²

²⁰ For a more wide-ranging analysis of women's perspectives on sexuality in general, see Gold's discussion of Rajasthani women's songs in Raheja and Gold (1994:30-72).

²¹ In another song I recorded in Hathchoya in 1990, a "thirsty man" demands water from a beautiful woman at the well, but she rebuffs him by telling him tales of how slovenly she will be if she goes off to live with him, thus not only neatly reversing the images of sexual voracity that are so common in male traditions but also providing an alternative twist to the images of the slovenly woman (*phūhar*) that abound in male oral traditions.

²² The festival of Tij is celebrated in the month of Savan. At this festival women enjoy swinging on rope swings and singing special songs. I recorded many of these Tij songs in Pahansu, and they are probably the most subversive women's songs reported from northern India. See Raheja and Gold 1994:13-133, 142-45; and Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994.

*mhāre to rī lachchho vo bedoñ kī āñ
beḍ bañtāiyo apne bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Twisting a rope for us is ill-omened,²³
Go and twist a rope at your father's place, girl.

*jo to rī sāsū tere beḍoñ kī āñ
beṭā kañvārā kyūñ nā rakh liyā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
If twisting a rope is for your house ill-omened,
then you should have kept your son unmarried.²⁴

*sun sun re beṭā is lachchho ke bol
lachchho to bole hamēñ boliyāñ jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Listen, listen, son, to this girl's talk,
this girl is speaking harsh words to me.

*jhūṭhe to ri ammā tere jhūṭhe haiñ bol
lachchho nā bole tumheñ boliyāñ jī.*

[Husband speaking]
It's untrue, mother, your words are untrue,
this girl isn't speaking harsh words to you.

*jo to re beṭā tujhe ho nā yakīñ
koṭṭhe pe charhke beṭā sun le jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son]
If you don't believe what I say, son,

²³ *Āñ* is a word used to refer to a situation in which some unpropitious circumstance such as a death or a serious accident is associated with a particular activity or object, so that within the family that activity or object becomes ill-omened and thus to be avoided. Women in Pahansu explained to me that the mother-in-law is lying about the *āñ*, using it as an excuse to prevent her daughter-in-law from enjoying the pleasures of Tij.

²⁴ Celebrating the festival of Tij is apparently so important for the woman who speaks in the song that she regards it as an important prerogative of a married woman, and this is why she tells her mother-in-law that it would be better for her son not to have married than for her to be denied this celebration. I do not know of any other festivals that are spoken of in this way, as a celebration that women have a right to participate in.

Then climb up on the roof and listen to what she says.

*uṭh uṭh rī lachchho vo huī hai saver
chakkī pe rakhā terā pīsanā rī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son's wife]
Get up, get up, girl, morning has come,
There's grain at the grindstone that needs to be ground.

*phorūñ rī sāsū terī chakkī kā pāt
bagar bakherū terā pīsanā rī.*

[Wife speaking]
I'll smash the stones of your grindstone, mother-in-law,
and I'll scatter your grain all over the courtyard.

*āveñge to rī lachchho ve devar jēṭh
chug chug chābbeñ terā pīsanā rī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]
Your younger and older brothers-in-law will come along, girl.
[Wife speaking]
Let them pick up and eat from the scattered grain, then.

*sachche to rī ammā tere sachche haiñ bol
lachchho to bole tumheñ boliyāñ jī.
kaho to rī ammā ise man se bisārūñ
kaho to bhejūñ dhan ke bāp ke jī.*

[Husband speaking to his mother]
It's true, mother, your words are true,
this girl is speaking harsh words to you.
Tell me mother, should I forget this girl,
tell me, mother, should I pack her off to her father?

*kāhe ko to beṭā ise man se bisāro
bhejo to bhejo dhan ke bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking to her son]
Forget this girl, son,
pack her off to her father.

*uṭh uṭh rī lachcho tu bharle sīngār
tujhe ri bulāi tere bāp ke jī.*

[Mother-in-law, lying to her daughter-in-law]
Get up, get up, girl, put on all your finery,

your father is calling you back to his place.

*kaun to jī āyā mujhe lenehār
kaun to āyā vādā kar gayā jī.*

[Wife speaking]

Who has come to take me there,
and who has made the arrangements?

*nāī to rī bahū āyā tujhe lenehār
nauvvā chalaupvā vādā kar gayā jī.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]

Your family's Barber has come to take you,
and he arranged a nine-day visit.²⁵

*kyā yā to unke mis aur kāj
kya unke janame hain bālake.*

[Wife speaking]

Is there some ritual going on there,
has a child been born at my natal place?

*chhoṭe bhāīyā kā tere mis aur kāj
bare bhāīyā ke janame hain bālake.*

[Mother-in-law speaking]

Your younger brother has some ritual work [i.e., he is about to be married],
and your older brother has just had a child.

*ho lie jī rājā ke ghoṛe asavār
lachchho to le lī pālakī jī.
chhoṛī to jī rājā vo ban khañd ke bīch
ser dharukke lachchho ekī jī.*

[Narrator speaking]

Her husband-lord went with her, he rode on a horse,
the girl was taken in a palanquin.
The husband-lord abandoned her in the jungle,
a lion roared and the girl was all alone.

*kholo rī ammā vo chandan kivār
lachchho to āī terī pāhunī jī.*

²⁵ A man of the Barber caste often carries messages and arranges for such visits.

[Wife speaking to her own mother, having arrived somehow at her father's place]
 Open, mother, your sandalwood door,
 This girl, your guest, has come.

*kaun to rī beṭī gayā tujhe lenehār
 kaun to gayā vādā kar āyā jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Who went to bring you here, girl,
 and who has made the arrangements?

*nāi to rī ammā mujhe gayā lenehār
 nauvvā challauvā vādā kar āyā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
 Your Barber came to take me, mother,
 and he arranged a nine-day visit.

*kyā to rī lachchho mhāre mis aur kāj
 kyā mhāre janame hai bālake jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Do you think we have some ritual work,
 do you think a child has been born?

*chhoṭe bhāīyā kā mān mis aur kāj
 baṛe bhāīyā ke janama hai bālaka jī.
 kāhe binā ammā yo ghar sunsān
 kāhe binā yo ghar bhinbhinā jī.*

[Wife speaking]
 Mother, my younger brother has some ritual work,
 and my older brother has had a child.
 But why, mother, is the house deserted,
 and why is there only the sound of buzzing flies in the house?

*bahūoñ binā hai yo ghar beṭī sunsān
 bachchoñ binā hai ghar bhinbhinā jī.*

[The wife's mother speaking]
 Without a daughter-in-law the house is deserted,
 and without a child there is only the sound of buzzing flies in the house.

*ho lie jī rājā ghoṛe asavār
 ghoṛā to riṅgā se le baṛ tale jī.*

[Narrator speaking]

The husband-lord rode out on his horse;
the horse was tethered under the banyan tree.

*koṭhe pe chaṛhke tu ammā dekh
chalte musāphir āye pāhune jī.*

[Wife speaking]

Go up on the roof, mother, and have a look,
A weary traveler, your guest, has come.²⁶

*uṭh uṭh rī lachchho tu bhar le sīngār
tujhe rī bulāī terī sās ne jī.*

[Husband to his wife]

Get up, girl, get up, and put on your finery,
your mother-in-law calls you back to her place.

*vo din to rājā tum kar lenā yād
ser dharukke lachcho ekī jī.*

[Wife speaking to husband]

Husband-lord, remember that day,
a lion was roaring and this girl was alone.

*vo din to lachchho tu man se bisār
tujhe rī bulāī terī sās ne jī.*

[Husband speaking]

Put that day, girl, out of your mind,
your mother-in-law is calling you back to her place.

In this song the husband comes to regret the fact that he has taken the advice of his mother and sent his wife away. Although he tells his wife at the end that her mother-in-law has called her back, Pahansu women agreed that the *sās*, the mother-in-law, was not in fact eager to grant the wish of her son to be with his wife.²⁷ The song ends with the husband's entreaty to

²⁶ Here the wife first refers to the man as an unknown traveler, but then she realizes that he is her husband, her mother's *pāhunā*, which means literally "guest," but is used in Pahansu almost exclusively to mean "son-in-law."

²⁷ In other songs from Pahansu depicting efforts of a man's natal kin to prevent the development of a close, enduring intimacy between husband and wife, the husband comes to regret despairingly his complicity with those natal kin, and in three songs the voice of the husband is heard at the end of the song, shouting from his rooftop, "Oh men, don't listen to

his wife to return with him to the *sasurāl*, and we do not hear the resolution. We suspect that she is eager to be reunited with her husband; it is she who asks her mother to go up on the roof and observe the traveler who has come, but she nonetheless reminds him of her torment when he left her alone in the jungle. She does not go back silently, without voicing her discontent. Most importantly, though, the difficulties between husband and wife are represented, in this and many other Pahansu women's songs, as deriving from the tension between the ties binding a man to his natal kin and the ties binding him to his wife.

The words of these songs, sung from the differing positions of sister and wife, do not coalesce into an abstract and essentialized "female" voice, but mirror the possible perspectives of women positioned, simultaneously, in different ways within a system of relationships. And these voices speak not of the solidarity of the patrilineal group, and not necessarily of a solidarity of women, but of shifting solidarities that women may rely upon in their varied situations: now a solidarity between brother and sister that may aid a woman if her husband and his kin mistreat her or turn her out, and at another moment a solidarity between husband and wife that threatens the unity of male kinsmen but at the same time may render a married woman less isolated, subordinate, and vulnerable in her conjugal place. Both of these solidarities are devalued by the norms of patrilineal kinship, but celebrated in women's oral traditions and used by women in their everyday struggles for material and emotional resources. Moreover, as Ann Gold and I have argued (1994), these alternative moral perceptions map out a terrain from which women may practically as well as poetically counter those who would try to silence and suppress them. And yet it would be a mistake to read these songs as literal descriptions of women's quarrels with one another, or of mistreated daughters-in-law. These vivid depictions of sorrows and of sometimes violent reprisals (Raheja and Gold 1994:142-46) serve as commentaries on the contradictions in North Indian kinship and gender ideologies. Women need not fight every day with their mothers-in-law or be banished by their husbands in order to experience the hardships of being sent away as a bride to a "foreign place," and to experience the isolation there.

your mothers and your sisters, or your house will be destroyed." See Raheja and Gold 1994:ch. 4 and Raheja 1994.

Men's Oral Traditions and the "Character of Women"

Although varied stances are thus taken with respect to central tensions in North Indian kinship, women's song traditions do seem to differentiate themselves from male traditions in that such tensions figure prominently in the song texts, regardless of which perspective is adopted. Men's song and narrative genres, on the other hand, tend to portray kinship tensions and fractured solidarities as emanating not from contradictions in the kinship ideology itself, but from an essentialized "women's character" that is seen as dangerous to kinship solidarities centered on males. While this viewpoint may be somewhat less evident in oral traditions performed by males for audiences of both men and women, it appears to be very pervasive in songs that are sung when men gather on their own.

Men's Songs and Folk Drama

Men in rural western Uttar Pradesh often sing work songs called *malhār* at night during the rainy season, and during the rice harvesting season when farmers sleep in the fields to guard the piles of newly harvested grain. *Malhār* are also sung when groups of men work at village sugarcane presses.²⁸ They may sing as they prod a bullock to turn the press, as they stoke the fire beneath the boiling vat, or as they stir the boiling juice with long wooden poles. Or they may sing as they stop to rest and smoke a hookah together. Ved Vatak has commented that *malhār* sung on such occasions consistently depict desire and difficulties in male-female relationships from the purported vantage point of the woman, and very often in a female voice, framed in the first person with feminine verb forms.²⁹ Vatak suggests that this sort of portrayal is consistent with the fact that, although sexual exploits and sexual pleasure may be talked and joked

²⁸ Sugarcane is a significant cash crop in Pahansu. Most of the cane is marketed at cooperative sugarcane societies and processed far from the village, but a portion of the harvest is also processed at these village presses for use within the village.

²⁹ Vatak collected these songs in Meerut district, just south of the two districts (Muzaffarnagar and Saharanpur) in which I tape-recorded men's and women's songs. He points out that there is no doubt about the male authorship of these songs. He writes that in Meerut they are sung only at the sugarcane presses, where women do not participate in the work, and, secondly, that they are framed in the Hindi *dohā* meter that, according to Vatak, is characteristic only of men's songs and folk poetry of the Hindi-speaking region (1979:118).

about in men's casual banter, it is generally viewed as inappropriate and demeaning for men to admit to having desire and longing when separated from wife or lover (1979:118-19). But women's songs, as we have seen, do not hesitate to depict the longing of a husband for his wife. Vatuk also points out that another factor operating here may be the notion that it is women's sexual yearnings, not men's, that are uncontrollable, and that women are generally thought of as the dangerously aggressive sexual partners. He goes on to say that men's songs are seldom concerned with husband-wife relationships, but focus instead on the yearnings of a woman for her lover.

But whether they are concerned with spouses or with lovers, a further point may be made about these *malhār* songs from western Uttar Pradesh. In this genre of men's oral tradition, love relationships, as well as conflicts between men and women, seem most often to be depicted in a vacuum, without reference to the wider kinship context in which such relationships unfold. In women's oral traditions on the other hand, relations between men and women are seldom represented in isolation from the countervailing kinship loyalties that impinge upon desire. Thus, while the *malhār* songs supposedly represent a female voice, it is definitely not a local female perspective that one hears in these men's songs. These songs tend to depict separation from the lover³⁰ and not conflicting kinship ties as the primary difficulty, as in the following work songs recorded by Vatuk:³¹

Malhār 1

*sotī thī rotī thī, malātī thī do āñkh.
supne me pītām mile, kar na sakī do bāt.* (1979:118)

I was sleeping, crying I woke up; I rubbed and rubbed my eyes.
In a dream I saw my love, but could not talk to him.

³⁰ Long separation from the husband is a common theme in women's songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya as well, but, unlike the men's songs, women's songs focus almost exclusively on the tensions between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law that seem to erupt when the husband returns, as in a number of songs for the festival of Tij that I discuss in Raheja and Gold 1994. The idea of simple separation from the husband may come more to the fore in women's songs from regions where men are in fact often absent for long periods of time, whether serving in the army or employed in distant cities; see Narayan's essay in this volume for songs of separation from Kangra.

³¹ I have slightly modified Vatuk's translations, based upon the transliterated Hindi texts that he provides.

Malhār 2

*sāmmaṇ āvaṇ kah gaye, bīte bāra mās.
chhappar purāne ho gaye, tarṅkan lāge bās. (129)*

He promised me he would come in the month of Savan; twelve months have passed since then.

Thatched roofs have become old, and their bamboos are beginning to crack.

Only two other difficulties in male-female relations seem to be acknowledged in these *malhār* texts, the distress of a woman who has been married to a boy too young to satisfy her or who remains without a man at her father's house:

Malhār 3

*ratan katorī ghī jalāī, chūlhe jalāī kasār.
ghūṅghaṭ me gorī jalāī, yāne ho bhartār. (126)*

Butter burns in the jeweled bowl, pudding burns on the hearth.
The fair one burns behind her veil, if her husband is too young.

Malhār 4

*kallar sukkī kangaṇī, dherū sukke dhān.
gorī sukkī bāp ke, kele kaisī gabh. (126)*

The grain dries up in the barren land, and piles of paddy dry up.
The fair one, like a banana sapling, dries up at her father's house.

This fourth *malhār* is particularly interesting in its differences from the women's songs I have heard in Pahansu and Hathchoya. Whereas women's songs consistently use the imagery of birds being forced to take flight as they describe the sorrow of women leaving their natal place, or view the husband's place as a "foreign land," *malhār* songs see the father's house only as a place where a woman pines for a man, drying up like drought-stricken grain until she has a husband.

While in North India women may occasionally sing simply about separation or husbands too young to satisfy them,³² women's songs from

³² Songs of young husbands also occur in oral and written *barahmasa* ("twelve months") poetic texts from western Uttar Pradesh. Wadley (1983:62) has translated a version sung by a Karimpur farmer. Gold translates a "small husband" song from Rajasthan (Raheja and Gold 1994:57-58), and translations of several small husband songs are provided by Archer (1985:162). I have not heard any women's songs from Pahansu or Hathchoya in which this motif occurs.

Pahansu and Hathchoya almost always speak of vastly more complex sources of discord and unhappiness. Men's songs from western Uttar Pradesh seem to make no comment at all on what women there see as an inherently contradictory and problematic world of kinship solidarities. Thus, while both men's and women's songs may see love between spouses or lovers as something to be desired and sought after, men's and women's traditions differ in their understanding of the barriers that stand in the way and of the sorrows a woman must face in the pursuit of love.

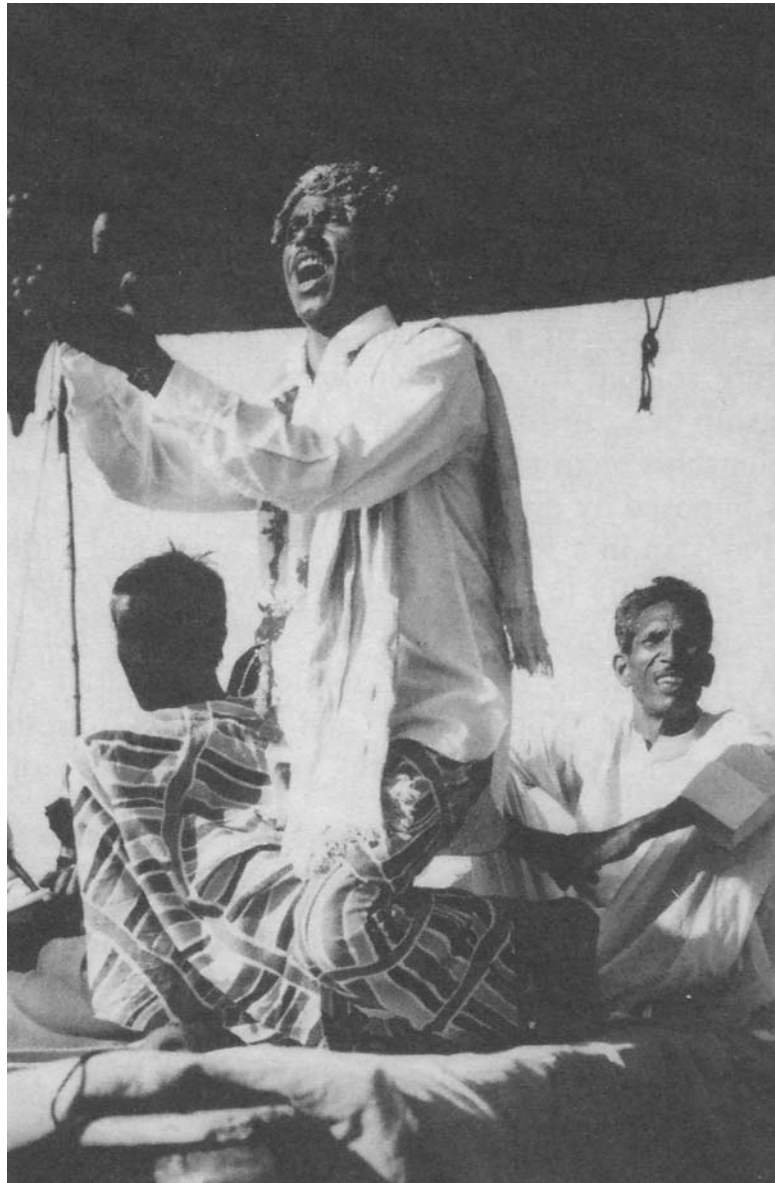


Photo 2: A *sāng* performance in Pahansu, March 1978

In Pahansu and Hathchoya, men sing songs called *rāginīs*, with or without simple musical accompaniment, as they sit in the fields at night; *rāginīs* are also sung by semi-professional local singers when men gather together, away from women, at weddings.³³ The *rāginīs* themselves are songs taken from locally performed *sāng* folk dramas, or from inexpensive chapbooks containing *rāginīs* from a particular drama.³⁴ *Rāginīs* are never sung in the presence of women, and men in Pahansu effectively forbid women from attending the annual *sāng* performances in the village, put on by itinerant troupes of professional actors. In fact the men of the house in which I lived were so disturbed my own attendance that I was able to witness only the first day of a five-day performance of *Hir Ranjha* in March 1978 (see photo 2).

Many *rāginīs*, and the *sāng* dramas from which they are taken, are concerned with male-female relationships, but their depictions of kinship and its instabilities are very different from those found in women's song traditions. As in the *malhār* songs, desire and longing are most frequently expressed in the voice of a woman, and here too conflicts in these relationships are seldom traced to tensions within the wider network of patrilineal kinship ties. In *rāginīs* and *sāng* dramas, difficulties in marital and love relationships seem generally to be traced to the workings of "fate," to separations imposed by distant political circumstances (e.g., the partition of India and Pakistan in a song of the lovers Caman and Lillo recorded in Pahansu), and especially to "the character of women" (*triyā charitra*) that inexorably prompts them to sexual voracity or the betrayal of their husbands. A particularly telling example of the latter occurs in the well-known *sāng* drama "Rup-Basant," and in *rāginīs* from the drama that are sung in Pahansu. Vatuk and Vatuk summarize the story as follows (1979b:196-97):

On her deathbed, the mother of Rup and Basant pleads with her husband not to take a second wife after her death, for the sake of their sons'

³³ Women are not supposed to be within earshot when men gather and sing *rāginīs*, and consequently I was able to be present only briefly at such sessions. Mahipal S. Tomar made most of the tape-recordings for me.

³⁴ *Sāng* dramas are performed by troupes consisting only of male actors, primarily for male audiences. As in the case of the informal performances of songs from the dramas, much disapproval is heard in Pahansu if women attempt to watch or listen to *sāng* performances (see Raheja and Gold 1994:xxi). See Vatuk and Vatuk 1979a, 1979b and Hansen 1992 for descriptions of the ethnographic contexts and predominant themes of these dramas.

well-being. He agrees, but some time later is persuaded to marry a young girl. This second wife is, however, housed in the palace in an apartment separate from that in which the young boys are living and they do not have any contact with her. One day they are playing ball and the ball goes over the wall into their stepmother's courtyard. Rup goes to retrieve the ball. The stepmother is struck by his beauty and attempts to seduce him. He refuses and manages to leave. Later, when her husband comes to her apartment, she accuses Rup of sexual assault. Chatur Singh does not believe the story, but is convinced when her maid corroborates the story. He confronts Rup, who denies the accusation but refrains from revealing his stepmother's attempt to seduce him. Chatur Singh orders Rup executed. Basant, loyal to Rup, accompanies his brother and the executioner into the forest. The executioner takes pity on Rup and kills a deer, whose eyes and blood he takes back to the palace as proof of Rup's death. The two brothers go on to have many adventures. After twelve years they return home. Their father comes to know the true story and has his wife hanged.

In this story, and in a number of other *sāng* dramas with plots involving a sexually seductive older kinswomen, it is evident, as Vatuk and Vatuk point out (1979b:218-19), that “women's character” is regarded as the source of the difficulties that unfold in the drama. It is the sexual seduction and the queen's false reporting of the events in her apartment that seem to be most elaborated upon in the dramas, and the *rāginīs* describing these scenes are the ones that appear to be most popular and most often sung by men. It is “woman's character” and the stepmother's attempt to disguise this character that are thus prominent in village renditions of the story. And the way in which this *triyā charitra* may disrupt the unity of patrilineal kin also comes to be depicted in the dramas and songs, as the queen tells a false version of the story to the king and thus tragically turns him against his own son, resulting in a twelve-year separation of father and sons.

A *rāginī* from this drama was recorded on a winter night in Pahansu in 1988 when a group of men, mostly Gujars, had gathered at a tube-well in the fields. They regaled each other with quite bawdy jokes, and then, without musical accompaniment, one man began to sing a *rāginī* perhaps suggested to him by the risqué stories of women's sexual proclivities that his companions had just been telling. Although the story of Rup-Basant is well-known among Pahansu men, he preceded his song with a brief recounting of it, for the benefit perhaps of my tape recorder. Because it focuses on the story that the queen fabricates, the song is most concerned with “woman's character” as embodying a dangerous and deceitful sexuality, and with the unfortunate disruption of the unity of men bound in patrilineal relationships, as the king listens to the untrue story of his son's

treachery. The words of the *rāginī* are the words the queen spoke to the king as she lied to him about his son:

Rāginī

*ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.
 ho re chor kī dhāl mere mahal ke meṅ ān baḍyā.
 jab main usko dikhī kyon chor bhor huā khaṛā.
 ho merī kaske le pakṛī kalāī ho terā basant.
 main bolyī re chālyā jā thāre paṛe mār kāle kī.
 vo bolyā main jāṭā kyonā dahashat na kisī sāle kī.
 merī būndī dashā banāyī.
 ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.
 main bolyī re jal ke mar jā ghar meṅ āg bhaterī se.
 vo bolyā main martā kyonā ishk karūṅga tere se.
 merī būndī dashā banāyī.
 ho terā basant baṛā badkār mere se lāgyā karan aṅgāhī.*

Oh, your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.
 He entered my palace like a thief.
 When I saw him I said, “Why are you standing there like a thief?”
 Oh, he grabbed my wrist, your Basant.
 I said, “Go away from here,” and I gave him a death-dealing curse.
 He said, “I’m not going, I’m not afraid of any *sālā*.”³⁵
 He made me all disheveled.
 Oh, your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.
 I cursed him, “Die by fire, there’s so much fire in the house.”
 He said, “Why should I die, I’ll go on seducing you.”
 He made me all disheveled.
 Oh your Basant is very bad, he put his hands all over me.

Thus, while women’s songs envision a web of relationships that is inherently unstable because of the power relations and contradictions within the structure of North Indian kinship, contradictions that seem inevitably to result in discord and disruption, men’s oral traditions seem to envision what Guha has termed the “rounded unitary world of kinship” fractured only by “fate,” or “woman’s character,” her inherent and dangerously eruptive sexuality. Women’s traditions contextualize marital discord within specific, shifting, and cross-cutting configurations of kin, while men’s traditions seem most frequently to offer essentializing characterizations of female

³⁵ *Sala* is the kinship term for a wife’s brother. It is often used as a term of abuse. Here the meaning seems to be that he is not afraid of anyone who might try to protect the queen, as her brother might try to do.

nature as the cause of disruption and conflict.³⁶

Kissā Totā Mainā: Representing Male and Female Perspectives in Popular Culture

These two perspectives on relations between men and women are graphically represented in “The Story of the Parrot and the Starling” (*Kissā Totā Mainā*), a printed text of the North Indian *kissā* genre that concerns itself solely with conflict-ridden and often violent relations between the sexes.³⁷ The story itself was apparently composed by one Pandit Rangilal about 1870, and has been in print continuously since that time; more copies of this particular *kissā* have been printed and sold than any other in this ubiquitous and cheaply available Hindi and Urdu genre of chapbook literature, and its popularity apparently continues to increase relative to other *kissā* titles (Pritchett 1985:79-101).

As the story opens, a male parrot, caught in a rainstorm and unable to return to his own nest, has alighted on a branch near the nest of a female starling. She angrily tells the parrot to leave her tree and take refuge somewhere else. When he asks why she refuses to let him stay, she answers that there is no species as lacking in compassion (*bedard jāti*) as the species of men. The parrot replies to the starling that it is the species of women that is lacking in human understanding and devoid of good qualities, and he

³⁶ The tendency of men’s song and narrative genres to depict women as the disruptive agents in patrilineal kinship is of course consistent with the way in which men in North Indian villages tend to place the blame for the break-up of joint families or dissension among patrilineal kinsmen on quarrels among the wives of brothers, or to attribute it to the existence of co-wives whose descendants are divided by the fact that “there were two mothers” in the distant past. In Pahansu, for example, a bitter rift between two closely related families had developed in 1988 over a land dispute associated with the current government-implemented land consolidation efforts (*chakbandhī*). Though the quarrel clearly had arisen among the men over specific issues concerning the valuation and redistribution of plots of agricultural land, the men involved nonetheless constantly prefaced their explanations of the case to me by speaking of the existence of co-wives several generations ago (“there were two mothers,” they would say) who rent the otherwise supposedly seamless fabric of patrilineal relationships.

³⁷ I was prompted to reread the 144-page Hindi text of *Kissā Totā Mainā* that I had purchased in a Saharanpur bookstall in 1979 by Sudhir Kakar’s discussion of it (1990). He uses his explication of the text to argue that relations between the sexes are viewed in India as inherently conflictual. I use it somewhat differently, as an illustration of some varied perspectives on kinship solidarities and the way in which conflicts between men and women are viewed in relation to those solidarities.

recites the following proverb:

*triyā charitra jāne nahīn koy
khasam mār ke satti hoy*

No one knows the character of a woman;
She kills her husband and then claims to be a *sati*.³⁸

The parrot then asks the starling what defects she has seen that have produced her hatred for men. The starling says that she will tell a story about a man that will explain her hatred, and thus the two begin a series of fourteen often very gory stories of the cruelties perpetrated by men against women told by the female starling, and of the cruelties inflicted by women on men told by the male parrot. While Sudhir Kakar's discussion of *Kissā Totā Mainā* focuses primarily on the fact that the stories represent male-female relations as conflict-ridden and lacking in intimacy, I wish here to focus on the differences in the stories told by the female starling on the one hand and those told by the male parrot on the other, and the differences in the perspectives on kinship solidarity therein.

In five of the seven tales told by the female starling, the factor that precipitates male rejection of or violence toward a wife or lover is a sudden conviction that he must place his consideration for his parents above his feelings for his wife.³⁹ The following is an abridged translation of the first of the starling's stories:

Ahmad Ali, the handsome son of a wealthy Muslim, stopped one day at a village and noticed the beautiful daughter of a Hindu Sweeper standing in a doorway. He was so struck by her beauty that he fainted and fell to the ground. The people of the village gathered round to revive him, and when he awoke they asked him what had happened. He sighed, and recited verses about how he had been struck with love at that first glimpse of the girl. The crowd tried to persuade him of the folly of this, since he was Muslim and the girl was of the Hindu Sweeper *jāti* (a so-called untouchable caste). But Ahmad Ali replied only that he could not live

³⁸ Kakar (1990:51) also finds this proverb to be important in understanding this *kissā* text.

³⁹ A principal motif of the remaining two stories is the cruelty of a man who would turn on his wife or lover after she has demonstrated that she values her relationship with him more than her relations with her natal kin. These two stories, then, in a sense mirror the other five, and all are concerned in a fundamental way with incipient tensions in North Indian kinship.

without the girl, and he insisted that the villagers go to her parents and ask them to arrange for the wedding, telling them that if this request was denied, he would go to their house and pound his head on the door until he was dead.

When the girl's father heard about this, he was astounded, and asked Ahmad Ali to think carefully about the proposal, stressing the difference between the occupations of their separate castes and the hierarchical considerations (*uñcī-nīcī bāteñ*) that made such a marriage difficult. But Ahmad Ali would take none of this to heart, and so the girl's father finally agreed to the marriage.

They were married, and lived happily for some time in the girl's village. Then one day Ahmad Ali began to think again of returning to his own country. When he made his wishes known, the girl's parents happily saw the pair off with gifts of wealth and jewelry. But when they reached the last stage of their journey, Ahmad Ali began to consider what his mother and father would think of his marriage to a Sweeper girl, and so he decided to stab her and throw her into a well. He returned to his parents, and lied to them about how he had spent his time while he was away. Meanwhile, the girl, still alive in the well, was discovered by a traveler. He helped her find her way back to her parents. Because of her loyalty to her husband, she told them nothing of what he had done, and explained her stab wounds by saying that thieves had attacked them and taken everything they had.

After a few months, when he had squandered all the wealth that had been given to him by his wife's parents, Ahmad Ali decided to return to the village and announce to the girl's parents that a son had been born to her; he hoped in that way to receive many more gifts from them. When he saw the girl alive and well there, he thought that he would not be able to escape alive. But when he realized that his wife bore no grudge against him, he was overcome with shame and begged her forgiveness. Because she had never told her parents the truth about what he done to her, they welcomed him. Several days later, when he announced that he would return to his own country, he was given much wealth and jewelry, and his wife set off with him once more. But his fears overcame him again along the way, and this time too he stabbed her and threw her into a well. Once again she was saved, this time by a Sweeper from her own village. She went back to her natal place and never again spoke the name of the husband who had twice betrayed her so violently and without remorse.

In the tales told by the female starling in *Kissā Totā Mainā*, there are no instances in which the starling comments on "men's character." Men may be characterized as untrustworthy or pitiless in the stories, but in each case the text seems to situate these qualities in relation to the conflicting loyalties precipitated by a marriage, and not in relation to a fixed and essentialized male nature. In story after story, troubles set in when men

honor their commitments to the requirements of patrilineal solidarities and refuse to acknowledge the importance of loyalty to the wife. Of course, one might argue that in this story told by the female starling, it is nonetheless the beauty of the Sweeper girl that sets the tragic story in motion, and that in some sense, still, the root cause is the power of female sexuality, but clearly it is the pressure of conflicting claims upon the man's loyalty and not the woman's beauty that is seen as problematic from the female starling's point of view.

The stories told by the male parrot are completely different. As Kakar points out in his discussion of the text, the proverb concerning "woman's character" (*triyā caritra*) with which the frame story begins resonates throughout all of the parrot's stories. This female nature seems to refer most specifically to her sexuality, as Kakar also points out (1990:50-51):

In the tales, the male perception of the woman as an erotic partner is of a sexually voracious being who is completely ruled by the dictates of her body. Especially vulnerable to the power of eros, the phrase *jab uske sharir ko kamdeva ne sataya* ("when her body was sorely troubled by the god of love") is used solely in connection with a woman, never a man. She is the initiator of sexual advances and loses all sense of proportion and moral constraints when in the grip of erotic passion. . . . When sexually intoxicated, the woman takes one lover after another without discriminating between young and old, handsome and ugly, rich and poor. . . . It goes without saying that women are also deceitful and unpredictable, with motivations that are an enduring puzzle to men.

The tales told by the male parrot reiterate this image of dangerous and unpredictable female sexuality over and over again, and it is this unfathomable and uncontrollable sexuality that poses the most serious threat to kinship solidarities. The following is an abridged translation of the twelfth story in the text, a tale told by the parrot:

A merchant married his daughter to a man from a distant city. The couple lived for a while in the girl's house. But soon after the marriage, the wife was "sorely troubled by the god of love" and she became enamored of the handsome son of a jeweler who lived nearby. Through a servant girl, she sent a rhymed note to him, telling of her desire for him: "The mangoes are ripe, the lemons are ripe, and the leaves still are green / But there's no gardener to tend them, and without a gardener to water it, the garden soon dries up" (*ām pake nībū pake, pat rahe sarsāy/ mālī uskā hai nahīñ jal bin bāg sukhāy*). They became lovers, and the husband learned of the affair. He decided to stay awake one night, and he saw his wife steal away to meet

the jeweler's son. He confronted her with evidence of her betrayal, but she tricked him into thinking that she still loved him, and begged for his forgiveness. He forgave her then and there, and the parrot interrupted his narrative at that point to comment to the starling that men have such merciful hearts that they can even forgive a wife who has behaved so wretchedly.

The husband took his wife back to his own city. But the girl kept on thinking of the jeweler's son, and he too could not be consoled. He became a renouncer and went away to the jungle, lost in his grief.

He wandered in the jungle for many days, and finally came upon the city where his beloved now lived. He camped there at the bathing pond and hoped to catch a glimpse of her.

He did soon see her, and when she recognized her lover she told him that she would think up some ruse to get him into her house. She returned home and pretended to be sick. Her husband called many kinds of healers and physicians, but their treatments produced no effect. Meanwhile the wife again deceived her husband, and made him think that she loved him. The parrot inserts his own comments at this point, saying that if the gods themselves can be tricked by the illusions and deceptions conjured up by women, how then could ordinary men be expected to have the strength to understand the "character of women"?

So, having by deceit brought her husband under her power, the girl told him that perhaps her life could be saved by the renouncer camped at the bathing pond, who had, she said, saved thousands of people. So the husband went straightaway and begged him to come and cure his wife. He was brought to the room where she was lying and made a show of curing her. The husband was so grateful that he asked the renouncer to come every day to their house to eat, and so the two lovers were able to resume their affair.

Thus they carried on until one day the husband had to go away to another village. They seized their opportunity and took all the jewelry and left the house at night together.

They settled in another town, but soon the girl fell in love with yet another handsome young man, and betrayed the jeweler's son just as she had betrayed her husband. The parrot ends his tale of female fickleness by asking the starling whether there is anything in the world so lacking in respect and loyalty as a woman.

In this and all the other tales told by the parrot, there is never an attempt to interpret women's actions in terms of their position within a set of kinship relations, or in terms of a set of conventions that may pose irresolvable dilemmas for men and women alike. Rather than the contextualizing strategies found in the female starling's stories of men's treatment of women, we find in the parrot's tales repeated assertions that it is only in terms of women's intrinsically and essentially deceitful,

capricious, and sexually voracious nature that their actions may be understood, and that men are helpless victims of the power women have to weave a web of illusion and deception. *Triyā kā charitra*, “the nature of women,” accounts for everything in tale after tale.

Perhaps one reason that “The Story of the Parrot and Starling” has enjoyed such popularity over the last 120 years is the fact that the author of the tales has shaped them in such a way that they resonate so well with the gendered perspectives on kinship solidarities and their instabilities that are found in women’s and men’s oral traditions in northern India. The contextualizing and essentializing strategies of the written *Kissā Totā Mainā* text seem to mirror the contextualizing strategies of women’s songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya on the one hand, and the essentializing strategies of men’s songs and narratives on the other.

Women’s songs, then, interrogate aspects of the essentializing portrayals of “woman’s character” (*triyā kā charitra*) found in the songs and stories performed by men for male audiences. From the several divergent kinship positionings evident in women’s songs from Pahansu and Hathchoya, they contest the very notion of a uniform female subjectivity that is posited in men’s song and narrative and in Guha’s analysis of Chandra’s death as well. Many songs also contest the notion that uncontrollable sexuality is an inherent and essential aspect of women’s moral disposition. In focusing so persistently on the widely ramifying fissures in the web of kinship in which male-female relationships are situated in northern India, and in taking up contradictory perspectives on these relationships, they articulate a resistant presence grounded not necessarily in female solidarity but in a reflexive awareness of the ironies of their own shifting kinship identities and in a critical perspective on the solidarities premised in patrilineal kinship systems. The alternative solidarities women propose are crisscrossing and always shifting solidarities, now among women, now between a sister and a brother, and now between husband and wife. And in constructing these critiques and in proposing their alternatives, women’s expressive traditions do not simply reverse the essentializing characterizations found in other kinds of oral texts and in so many everyday conversations. Rather, the words of women’s songs seem to acknowledge that the difficulties women face are the consequences of a particular set of social practices, practices they perceive as the contradictory “customs of a degenerate age.”

Nation, Gender, and Kinship in Oral Traditions and in the National Media

When I first carried out fieldwork in Pahansu from 1977 to 1979, the village had not been electrified; thus, performed representations of kinship ties and gender consisted primarily of songs, stories, and readings of a few printed texts (such as *vrat* ritual manuals) that made their way to the village. When I returned to Pahansu in January of 1988, electricity had been available for only two or three months, but there were already thirty televisions in the village. The most popular programs at that time were the weekly Hindi film broadcasts and Sunday morning installments of the *Ramayana*, the airing of which completely emptied the village streets, as nearly everyone settled themselves before one of those thirty television sets. My son Kevin, who was six at the time, managed to discover that “He-Man: Master of the Universe” made a weekly appearance on Doordarshan, but his enthusiasm for the American cartoon series was not widely shared in Pahansu.

Over the past ten years, television sets have become an important dowry item in northern India, and the periods of time people spend in front of them seems continually to grow. During a 1993 trip to western Uttar Pradesh, I spent a considerable amount of time watching the evening National Programme, a novel kind of participant observation for me, since there were far more broadcasts of interest to village people than when I had last been in Pahansu. Programming had meanwhile been transformed, as commercial sponsorship of a wide variety of serial programs produced in India has created new forms of popular discourse that may perhaps transform the nature of women’s songs and other forms of oral tradition.

Will studies like this one of women’s expressive forms have only a sort of antiquarian interest as television comes more and more to occupy the attention of men and women in urban and rural areas alike? Or are there significant continuities between discourses about gender and kinship in folkore and older forms of popular culture on the one hand and representations of gender in contemporary Indian television on the other, such that analyses of oral traditions and analyses of contemporary media representations can inform one another? This is of course an enormously complex question. In this conclusion to an essay that has examined rural women’s contestations of dominant representations of kinship solidarities, I wish only to raise some questions about the continuing relevance of such poetic critiques as televised cultural products come more and more to occupy the attention of both men and women in India.

Purnima Mankekar (1993) has recently analyzed television serials and

viewers' responses to them in New Delhi, focusing specifically on questions of gender and national identity. She points out that communal harmony and national integration are major themes in current Indian television, and that this project of nation-building is sustained by powerful state-appointed selection committees that are able to oversee the programs that are aired. Mankekar argues that gender issues form a critical subtext in these programs: gender representations and national solidarities are fused in the discourse of televised serials. In serials such as "Param Veer Chakra" and "The Sword of Tipu Sultan," she suggests, "the male protagonists' relationships with women are *constantly* posed against their devotion to the country, and the female characters' attitudes and behavior complement or serve as a foil to the men's heroic patriotism" (546). While women's heroic self-sacrifice and dedicated motherhood are understood as critical to the welfare of the nation, womanhood is also seen to be at odds with national interests: in serial after serial, and in male viewers' interpretations of the programs, women are depicted as holding back their men in a cowardly manner from exercising their "courageous" impulses to serve the nation, out of fear for their safety and out of a desire to protect only their own narrow kinship ties. Thus, national unity and resolve is seen to be threatened by women's creation of their own solidarities, the kinds of solidarities extolled in women's songs.

Television serials and male viewers alike see the role of women in the family as analogous to the role of women in the nation: women's duty is to protect and to sacrifice for the family and the nation, and to preserve the integrity of both by checking their impulses to value their own relationships more highly than the integrity of the larger set of solidarities defined by males (551). Thus, as Mankekar argues, "attempts to depict positive and progressive images of women are circumscribed by metanarratives of nation and family" (553). Mankekar goes on to analyze female viewers' oppositional readings of these discourses: women with whom she spoke repeatedly critiqued these representations of women's duties to the nation, saying for example that it is the women who suffer when men go off to war and place their own duties to the nation above their wives' interests.

Representations of gender and kinship in male-authored songs and folk drama on the one hand, and of gender and the nation in the televised serials on the other, may thus overlap in significant ways. In both cases, women are seen as posing threats to larger male solidarities of kinship or nation, and the "ideal woman" is one who restrains her own desires and gives priority to the preservation of a unit that may not serve her own interests. But as singers and as television viewers alike, women recognize that these discourses are perpetuated to the disadvantage of women and that

the representations of gender found therein are not unchallengeable facts of life.

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