

## **Performing the ‘Maternal’ Body: Unearthing Desire and Sexuality in the Folksongs of the New Mother**

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Gender has been an important tool of research and inquiry conflating folk studies and women’s studies. Construction of identity is inextricably linked to the process of gendered construction of self—a social and cultural process, which facilitates and sustains the hegemonic patriarchal structures and discursive practices. As Maggie Humm contends “patriarchal power is ubiquitous. There is deeply entrenched politics of sexuality, beginning with the reproduction of patriarchy, through psycho-social conditioning in the family, which operates in all economic and cultural structures” (Humm 11). Within the gendered categorisations of the female self, the maternal body becomes the locus of ritualised abstractions and construction of values that enable the “becoming” of the woman, in Beauvoir’s<sup>1</sup> terms, shaping certain dominant assumptions around the mother as a fertile, nurturing, self-sacrificing body.

Psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar highlights in *The Inner World*, while charting the journey of the young girl through marriage and motherhood, that in Indian (Hindu) social, cultural and mythological space, the “mother” is governed by the central emotional expressions of tenderness, where “many other psychic tendencies generally associated with the young woman’s life-stage now become subordinate... the wish to be loved can be transformed into the wish to love; hostility, especially towards her new surroundings, can be directed towards the protection of her child from the environment; the longing of her reawakened sensuality can be temporarily sublimated” (Kakar 78). Female sexuality is both legitimized and regulated in marriage with the ideal of ‘chaste wife’ as the most enduring image of a ‘good woman’ along with motherhood and reproduction as the legitimate female experience

wherein the female body is adequately de-eroticised. Patriarchal ideology generates an ambivalence towards female sexual potency which is considered as both essential in its procreative and nurturing function as well as dangerous, thereby effecting a split. Concomitantly, for women, neither marriage nor motherhood is intimately linked with sexual gratification. Regimentation of body and curtailment of desire happens in many contexts. Woman as the mother is pedestalsed for her procreative abilities, imaged as a sexuality that is non-threatening; woman as sexually dangerous leads to the emphasis on wife's chastity, sexual reticence and daughter's virginal existence. Female desire, in these regimes of control, is either underplayed—relegated to silence and abjection or projected as the deviant lustfulness.

However, culture is a lived space, brimming with voices and performances that warn us against establishing any univocal and rigid notions of self, opening up the possibilities of renegotiations of ideas and subversive reimaginings. This paper looks at women's folk singing tradition in Haryana to unearth the images of the new mother—*Jachcha*—as constructed in the folksongs sung in the context of childbirth. The attempt is to foreground the embodied voices of women as they emerge in the context of motherhood, in order to highlight the erotic embodiment of female self in the context of motherhood as a “counterimaginary to dominant metaphysics” of self, in Butler's terms (Meijer and Prins 279). These self-imaginings subvert the dominant patriarchal notions of the docile, chaste body of the mother that are constructed to manage the potentially threatening aspect of fertile, sexual female body. In women's figurations of *Jachcha*, we find neither the tender, nurturing “motherly” body nor the modesty, embarrassment or voicelessness so often identified as appropriate female behaviour. Women's performances portray the mother's body as appetitive, fleshly, lustful—craving for and demanding love, attention—very often conflating appetite for food with sexual appetite. These requests, and very often demands, may vary in

emotional pitch and elicit different responses from men in the songs. But what remains at the centre of these female genres is the potency and the legitimacy of female desires along with placing a strong positive value on their fulfilment.

Hence, what emerges from a reading of women's cultural forms is that they carry a very different understanding of 'maternal' body and sexuality. The songs disrupt the prevailing dominant polarised conceptualisations of the female body wherein the maternal body is often desexualised—assuming an incongruity between active sexuality and motherhood in a good wife. My contention is that it is through perversely positing a radical alterity of mother's body in its association with desire and sexuality, that an ontological animism is achieved. Women do not disclaim motherhood but it is through the recirculation and the resignifications of the ontological operators (Meijer and Prins 279) that women's agency can be traced.

Scholars who have worked on South Asia have challenged the perception of South Asian women as voiceless and passive. Women in rural spaces such as Haryana are popularly seen as veiled and repressed. Their silence is often (mis)read as a signifier of their powerlessness. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash argue that the overwhelming image of India's subordinate peoples, including women, produced in historical and anthropological scholarship has been that of "passivity" (5). Chandra Mohanty Talpade also reveals the flawed understanding and lacunae in western scholarship and its re-presentation of the third world woman, in its inability to hear and record contestatory voices.

In her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes", Talpade argues that the "average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized, etc.)" (337), with the West producing a set of universal

images of the third world woman as “*the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife*” (352) and that the third world woman is seen as someone who has never risen above their “object” status (351), erasing the possibilities of marginal and resistant modes of experience. According to Talpade, such a monolithic, coherent, homogenous construction of third world women as powerless and victims of structures of power is premised upon using “woman” as an analytical category which must be problematized.

Anthropologists Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold dispute the dualistic descriptions of the South Asian female nature perceived as “split images”, polarised between “an idealised purity and chastity set against a dread of ‘lustful and rampant’ sexuality” (33).<sup>2</sup> They argue that the dominant image of female nature that is culled from Sanskritic texts and patriarchal discourses appears as a totalising view which discounts the perspectives and narratives that emerge when we listen to women as they speak about themselves. Therefore, with these conceptual perspectives, the centering of women’s voices opens up possibilities for renegotiating meanings and gendered categories beyond the parameters of performance itself which allows for complexities and contradictions to emerge, thereby thwarting any possibility of a homogenizing women’s identity and experience.

### **Mapping the Performance Landscape**

Culture provides the context for our lives, the way we think and make sense of the world we inhabit, generating utterances and fields of interaction, evolving ‘bodies’ of meaning, that we bring to and take from them. Those points in the human life cycle that are recognised as important in a given society are marked by song and ceremony. These forms of expression constitute the inner life of structures, creating the life worlds that render those structures meaningful. Interacting with historically shaped traditions, customs and rituals, women in

Haryana evolve a variety of folk song genres which align with their life cycle events and attendant ceremonial contexts, especially related to marriage and motherhood, within which these songs are embedded/inserted, engendering a landscape of performance. In Haryana, almost every ceremony has a song suited to the occasion. The most significant occasions on which women sing are childbirth and wedding. Singing of songs on the occasion of death is relatively rare. Being particularly female song genres, village women sing for life-cycle events at various auspicious and ceremonial contexts linked to these events, which is a common thread across North India. Song genres are not inert ‘texts’, isolated linguistic units, or representational objects but are embodied forms, ‘utterances’ that take shape within a dialogic universe, concrete to the culture and location. Childbirth is a significant moment of transition wherein the interplay of rituals and women’s singing voices are generative of a performative landscape. The landscape of performance is primarily a gendered one, as the phase of motherhood, typically, defines and legitimises female self and body, fixing and normativising roles and destinies for women. Beliefs about gender shape this landscape, as gender as a category is performed and materialised in rituals, practices and utterances. However, songs have a performative universe of their own and the distribution of gendered sensibilities onto this landscape produces/generates voices which are not just evocative of the dominant values, but reveal women’s self-imaging of the body-in- transition.

According to Van Gennep’s theory of life-cycle events, life of every individual is a series of passages, shifts and the *samskaras* (i.e. rituals performed at significant life-cycle events such as marriage, death, childbirth) serve to mark the passage from one stage to another, wherein the essential purpose of ceremonies is “to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another”, taking on a collective dimension (Van Gennep 3). *Samskaras* as transitory, space of liminality, however, impact both the physical and the mental. Each genre of oral literature creates its own world, what can be called as its

semiotics, constituting and constituted within its own landscape of performance, as it involves ritual enactments, social interaction along with performative and affective dimension. There is also a certain materiality tied to these forms of expressions—imagination is tied to the ritualistic, the communal—making them material forms.

In order to construct the landscape of singing, it becomes important, first and foremost, to understand the spatiality of these cultural productions. In Haryana, the public narrative space has been hegemonised by men, as far as folk singing tradition is concerned. The realm of men's folklore is often more public and professionalised, something that is absent in women's folk singing tradition. Male singing takes place in public or formalised arenas, since men have a stronghold over the public space in which their performances are openly held, enjoyed and gain legitimacy and also tends to be more individualistic and competitive. However, women's voices are quite exuberantly heard during events tied to marriage and childbirth. There are no male singing genres associated with these moments, as women have been normatively tied to certain roles and destinies, wherein two most significant life-cycle events in a woman's life are considered to be marriage and motherhood. During fieldwork,<sup>3</sup> upon enquiring whether men also have any parallel singing tradition tied to any of these occasions, there was a common refusal, with women asserting that this is the space which is primarily 'female.'

Essentially, women have a segregated, gender specific and highly gender-coded way of life. Sex segregation has been integral to the functioning of modern as well as traditional India where cultural, social, religious and familial spaces are segregated by sex. One feature of gendered spatial segregation is the construction of gendered worldviews in which women and men perceive and utilize their spaces differently. Physical and territorial spaces are normatively segregated around gender binary. Although largely confined to the domestic

space or in the farm fields, women have curiously carved a space for their creative expression within it. During marriage ceremonies and childbirth, women often accumulate in the house or courtyard to celebrate various occasions along with young girls sit closely on the floor with faces generally uncovered. Normally, women gather at one spot, typically at the place of the individual where celebration is occurring, and sing in uproarious voice continually recollecting the lyrics, enjoying the activity, poking one another, provoking and flagging a missing note, expression or allusion, frequently bandying jokes among themselves. This underlines the participative and collaborative component of oral poetic exchange in women's singing convention.

In Haryana, as in numerous different towns across North India, such a collective singing is a typical and fundamental sight particularly on momentous events such as marriage and childbirth, which starts many days prior to the actual occasion as it is seen to issue forth good fortune<sup>4</sup>. The setting in which women articulate themselves creatively is central to the understanding of these oral texts since they underscore the spatiality of these utterances as exclusive. As highlighted above, women's singing performances in Haryana are often set in the arena of the domestic, the household which is understood as antithetical to the public, male arena. It is not to suggest that these singing performances take place in a totally private space behind shut doors. Such a marking and limiting of space can be interpreted as disempowering women by controlling their movements and confining their voice within the marked interiority of the space they are accorded. However, what emerges from an insightful understanding and ethnographic fieldwork is that the sex segregation allows women to bond freely with other women, wherein women lend and receive mutual support. There is minimal or no sense of removal between the performer-audience. Margaret Yocom posits in her article on women's creative spaces that the private sphere in women's folk tradition is not so much a space as it is "a mode of social interaction" (52) that bonds women together. There is an

environment of closeness and intimacy, as other ladies belonging to the family and relatives congregate in a circle, when they feel a sense of comfort with each other, and perceive that everybody will tune in and talk. This could be inside or outdoors, in any room or the courtyard. This sense of privacy may originate from their characteristic/natural disengagement from the “public” or could be specially constructed as women segregate themselves amidst the ongoing rituals and activities, turning towards each other shaping a circle. Women also gather together and sing while performing rituals, sometimes within the house or outside of it. Hence, the setting is not always that of shared privacy. It is therefore not really the location that makes a difference as much as the sense of togetherness, privacy and an exclusivity that those locations afford.

Women of all ages can be found in the congregation—from young girls, newly wedded to aged, elderly and widowed. There is no discrimination and hesitation as young daughter-in-laws engage in singing and performance which often turns into subversive banter along with the elderly women of the house, which is otherwise a faint possibility. Even widows participate in singing rituals and performance devoid of any sense of “shame.” In most settings, men are either not present at all as women get together and sing, or are at the peripheries of the performative space where they are made conspicuous by their absence. The positioning of menfolk with respect to women’s singing practices is very interesting as they can be seen as present yet absent. They are very well aware of what is happening, sometimes lurking in the margins, at others performing a ritual parallelly, neither a part of the performative space nor entirely outside of it.

During fieldwork, I attended some rituals around childbirth wherein the birth of a son was being celebrated. The birth of a son is the most coveted in North India, especially so in Haryana. When a son is born, for six consecutive nights women gather in the courtyard of the



house in which the birth has taken place to sing songs congratulating and celebrating the auspicious birth of a son and the happiness of the new mother, *Jachcha*, which is also the name of the predominant genre of songs sung on this occasion. A point that needs to be highlighted, at the outset, is that in this region, songs and certain rituals are only performed at the birth of a son. Right on the day the son is born, ritual sounds are made by beating metal plates and the *nain*<sup>5</sup> or *Brahmani*<sup>6</sup> visits all the households related to the celebrating family, within the village, and puts palm imprints of her right hand smeared with *geru*.<sup>7</sup> This is clearly a signifier of good fortune that they proudly wish to exhibit. Since the son will carry forward the bloodline, all the households tied in the lineage celebrate.

Women from all the households of the same patriline/patriline would get a certain quantity of grain (wheat) to the celebrating household and put it all together, which is called *Kera* and the entire huge quantity of that grain is then given to the *nain* or a sweepr. In this way, wedding and birth celebrations take on a communal level. Grain signifies fertility of earth, which is celebrated along with the celebration of birth. The female body is frequently regarded as the field, as the earth, therefore building an analogous relationship between the fertile female body, the womb, the ability to give birth to the mother earth-the fertile land.<sup>8</sup> The ritual performed in the above context also serves to highlight the child as the abundance grain and the female body as generating and sustaining life, thereby reducing female body to its reproductive capacity and relations, albeit passive. Cultural metaphors such as the Seed-Earth dichotomy serve to create ontological effects which function towards materialization of bodies as well as unequal relations of power, where woman is the *kshetra* (field) and husband as the *Kshetrajna* (knower of the field). The metaphor of production that parallels that of reproduction has significant implications in constituting the hierarchical and unequal relationship between the sexes as it underscores the passivity of the field, the female body and the generative powers of the seed, the male semen.

However, when a daughter is born, the situation is different—no merriment or celebration happens and instead it is lamented usually as a matter of destiny/fate. However, rituals and traditions are dynamic and evolving and there are shifts that happen with changing times. During field research, I was told that there are few families which celebrate the birth of a girl child now, though the number is still quite miniscule and it usually happens in families where the couple has been childless for years after marriage. A significant point to be underlined is the absence of songs celebrating the birth of a girl child in this region. Generally, Songs are not sung on the birth of a girl child. This distinction only serves to highlight the pervasiveness of the male and the female—the categorisation that pursues a person from birth.

What evokes a deep irony is the fact that while on the one hand a girl child is lamented, on the other, children are born with celebration of the ‘second day or third day’ (*nahaan baar*) and the ‘sixth day’ (*chhati*) with groups of women joyously singing and invoking the goddess first and foremost. A significant ritual that caught my attention during fieldwork was the figure of the folk deity *Bemata* who is the significant goddess figure invoked on the sixth day. Etymologically, *Bemata* means ‘one without a mother.’ She is imagined as the creator, protector and the writer of the destiny of the child, especially the male child. On the sixth day, women make the figurine on wall with cowdung and is worshipped as she is believed to write the *lekh, karam* or destiny of the child. *Bemata* is the maternal creative force, primordial force—creator—personified and animated as a wall inscription/figurine. *Bemata* can be understood as a fertility goddess, the mother goddess with generative powers. As V. Geetha argues that for all their devaluing of women, most of the religions are reverential and in awe of women’s ability to sustain life in their womb manifested in mother goddess worship and “worshipping women as mothers, while devaluing

them in every other sense, thus became a way of displacing as well as managing fears about female power and sexuality” (15).

Women’s songs are woven over time, passed on from one generation to another, where the dynamism of life as lived and everyday experience, worldview, beliefs, norms and value system of the community as well as the myths find expression. Hence, even if the performance setting is ‘private’, domestic, the stakes of narrative construction are communal. Women’s song genres taking shape within rituals, enactments, material practices. The aspect of poetics concerns itself with the production of affective dimension along with generating what Stephen Greenblatt calls “social energy” that is “manifested in the capacity of certain verbal, aural, and visual traces to produce, shape and organize collective physical and mental experiences” (6).

### **New Mother and the Female Body**

In the same way as marriage is seen as a woman’s destiny, motherhood is the female role most central to her existence. As V. Geetha asserts, each gendered body possesses and nurtures its own distinctive destiny. While intellectual and physical strengths are the assets of a man, it is motherhood for women. Many *Jachcha* songs largely centralise the voice of the new mother, foregrounding the woman and her body. In a huge variety of songs, there is a shift from the moment of birth or even from the new born child, to the new mother and her embodied experience. The songs sing of the female body in pregnancy, childbirth to desire. Women’s experience of birth is both corporeal, since woman’s body is the locus of all activities, as well as socio-cultural. Cultural constructions of birth and motherhood see womb as a site of transformation, as a second birth for the new mother. It is not just in songs but also in rituals that the new mother’s body is the signifier of values and cultural meanings. The new mother is given a purificatory bath on second or third day where water is especially

poured on her head and is considered to be tied to enhance lactation. Along with that, a significant ritual tied to new mother's body is the washing of her nipples and breasts by the sister-in-law.

On the one hand, this can be understood in terms of Wendy Doniger's observations on Hindu myths where she argues that female sexuality takes a more acceptable form in motherhood and worshipped as "goddess of the breast", also imaged as the "sacred or docile cow", as an unambiguously beneficent form of female power (90-91; 239-80), dominated and under the male control, refusal to acknowledge its threatening erotic longings. On the other hand, such a view is undermined by the song texts analysed below. What really emerges in these rituals associated with female spaces and rituals is women's own understanding of these bodily experiences. It is neither a valorisation of the female body or motherhood nor a devaluing or sense of shame associated with bodily processes. The new mother is supposed to be kept in *pardah* or a veil, under isolation and nobody is to venture in that space for some days. It is not just the notion of "polluted body"<sup>9</sup> that can define this univocally as the ritualistic norm constituting *pardah* or female seclusion can be recognised as poses, sometimes enforced by behavioural codes and at other due to practical necessities, but nowhere did the women appear to be fundamentally ashamed of bodily processes.

In the context of this research, the on-field discussions with women revealed the reasons to be very well tied to keep her and the child safe and healthy, allowing her time to heal as it is seen as a moment of rebirth for a woman in this culture, as in others. Although ritualised spaces do tend to become spaces of oppression, but the attempt here is to recognise and amplify the voices and perspectives that are usually not heard. Motherhood is also an experience that the female body feels in every pore of its corporeal being—so much so that the emotions, feelings and thoughts it evokes are not easily separable from the actual body

from which these emanate. It is no wonder that the song genre *Jachcha* encompasses these corporeal expressions and articulations in the form of various song types articulating her lived experience from desiring body to the pain of pregnancy, emerging as expressions of her very bodily reality and experience. This paper particularly focuses on the songs of desire tied to the new mother. These songs reveal a poetic imagination which is humorous, poignant and playful, traversing the mundane to the fanciful. The notion of *sharam*, which can be loosely translated as shame, or pollution is counterposed by the singing expressions where the *Jachcha* and her body/self is foregrounded in real human terms.

The *Jachcha* sing of the pregnant woman's demands, desires, cravings during pregnancy and such songs are also called *Ojane*, which is a sub category within *Jachcha*. *Ojana* literally means desire and refers to a category of songs where the pregnant woman's cravings are playfully depicted. The term *Ojana* itself creates a frame of reference, where the etymological meaning coincides with the thematic unity of the genre. These songs cater to fulfilling the pregnant woman's wishes and desires regarding specific food cravings. In these songs one can find the woman requesting, at times demanding, the men in the family to get her what she desires to eat. The most stable of the *Jachcha* frames is the constant repetition of the term *Jachcha* in these songs, which restricts their usage outside the 'traditional' context. This becomes crucial in a culture where women's demands are hardly recognized and valued exclusively female genres of singing create space for an articulation of poignant emotions.

### **The New Mother has a *Chatori*<sup>10</sup> Tongue**

The mother has a *chatori* tongue,

she is fond of *jalebi*<sup>11</sup>.

Mortgage her father-in-law,

lend her mother-in-law.

The new mother is hankering after *jalebis*.

mortgage her brother-in-law,

lend her sister-in-law.

The new mother is hankering after *jalebis*.

The culture inscribes meanings onto the body of the mother—the ideological moorings for a ‘useful’ body<sup>12</sup>—that requires a mother in the image of self sacrificing body. However, the greedy and excessively craving body is culturally sanctioned for an expecting mother, which in the *Jachcha* songs allows for a figuration of desiring, craving female body. The new mother is often fed with nourishing food, rich in *ghee* (clarified butter), to cater to the needs of the regenerating postpartum body, especially if she gives birth to a son. It is in this context that the figure of the *chatori*—the desiring, craving new mother gets constructed in these songs.

Women often create alternative perceptions in the domain of creative imagination which are not necessarily counter-identities but celebration of the very self which is negatively imagined and ascribed to the feminine in the phallogocentric order. While there is a disjunction between the real and the fictive script, in the domain of playful imagination they do create subjectivities through which women can talk about their desires and bodies positively, creating fulfilling scenarios. The songs also highlight the power dynamics that very much shape their worlds. The demands and desires for pleasures of the body are very often tied to claims to power within the household economy. One can perhaps argue that in women’s folk songs what gets revealed is both the reproduction of ideological and cultural norms which serve to create a structure of denial for women as well as an expression of resentment against it, in the subtext.

In the above song, women playfully refer to the new mother as a *chatori*, a woman who has an excessively craving tongue, as she is hankering after sweets. The impetus is on fulfilling the desires and cravings of early pregnancy for which one by one all the members of the family need to be mortgaged and bartered. Bodies are sites where relations of inequality are invested and played out. The norms, rules, hierarchies of a culture are writ large on the body creating ground rules for our behaviour as “culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (Bordo 16). The woman in relation to her body is dominated by culture through practices, habits, conventions and regulations that is crucial in creation of feminine identity and both awakens and channelizes her desires, mediated by patriarchal structures. The term ‘*chatori*’ is one such stereotype often attributed to women attacking and regulating their appetitive desires. In the socio-cultural economy of Haryana, the control of female appetite for food is the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of female body where gluttony in a woman is a marker of extreme impropriety and is perceived as dangerous. The Haryanavi society insists on certain norms of behaviour for men and women where a man’s bathing rituals and a woman’s meals should be promptly executed.<sup>13</sup>

In the song cited above, the term ‘*chatori*’ refers to the new mother which is on one hand a literal signifier of the state of pregnancy in which a woman tends to desire and crave for certain food items. On the other hand, the term ‘*chatori*’ is value laden and has layers of cultural connotations attached to it. Women who refuse to be curtailed are contained through stereotypical naming. A ‘*chatori*’ woman is considered as unviable for the household and perhaps a cause of its downfall. A popular saying that describes two kinds of vices in a woman goes like: “*chatori khoye ek ghar, batori khoye do ghar*” which loosely translates as a woman with a craving tongue and appetite destroys a house while a woman who is talkative destroys two. The song seems to be speaking to the ideological and cultural discourses that

exist in the mainstream where it seems to be repeating the accepted view that in order to fulfil the cravings of the woman, her husband's entire family needs to be mortgaged. However, the generic contextualization of the song in the category of *Ojhane* creates a certain frame of reference which suggests that the song sung by women here, is laced with irony, humour and sarcasm. It can be seen as obliquely attacking the in-laws for being too miserly and the suggestion is that they will not be able to provide for the pregnant daughter-in-law. It can also be seen as celebrating the '*chatori*' figure who is the transgressor in the household economy, where women are often accused of slyly eating more or pilfering.

Rules always create transgressors and the figure of the excessively appetitive body is certainly the deviant, especially in a culture where the differential distribution of food reflects and creates social divisions and conveys hierarchies of power and status within the household. However, since rules can be bent for the *Jachcha*, it is in this frame that women can enact forms of behaviour that might be considered deviant and threatening. Hence, far from being the self monitoring, self effacing, self ensuring docile bodies, the body of the mother as *chatori* gets celebrated here. The stereotype of the '*chatori*' is evoked only to be playfully repeated, parodied, only to revel in it and enact a fulfillment of her desires. And it is this desiring, craving, fleshly, appetitive body that becomes the agentive self in these songs that allow women to script alterations of power relations and expand their possibilities for action. Resistance, therefore, would mean how women reimagine selves, while being embedded in power relations, and creatively transform themselves and in the process supplanting the normalizing operations of power (Sawicki 160). The idea of moderation in food consumption for a woman is allowed to be upturned here, in the frame of *Jachcha*.

**I am fond of *Ber* from *Karaala***

I am fond of *Ber* from *Karaala*,

You get a kilo for a rupee,



I am craving for those *Ber*.  
I sent my father-in-law to fetch those,  
He lost his stature, in the orchards of *Karaala*.  
I sent my elder brother-in-law to buy those,  
He lost his mare, in the orchards of *Karaala*.  
I sent my younger brother-in-law to buy those,  
He lost his plaything, in the orchards of *Karaala*.  
I sent my beloved husband, to fetch those,  
He uprooted the whole tree and got it for me, from the orchards of *Karaala*.  
O fair one, eat plentiful, as much as you wish, he said.  
I ate all the sour ones,  
And threw away the sweet ones.  
My heart craves for the *Ber*.

These utterances in their playfulness undermine Kakar's assertions that in a Hindu woman's identity, "motherliness" is a dominant mode that is experienced more naturally and subsides/supersedes all other longings and tendencies. Tender caring from the husband is wished for in the songs where a woman asks her husband to fetch her things to eat, subtextually evoking a desire for intimacy. These songs shift the attention from child birth and its celebration to female body as the subject.

In both the songs above, women imagine alternative, wish fulfilling scenarios where they are triumphant in getting their desires fulfilled, especially at the expense of the husband's kin. In the fictive scenario a dialogue is established, where the woman is at the centre, controlling and shaping the action. In the above song, the wife desires the fruit from a specific geographical location which highlights her whimsicality. She sends all the husband's

male kin to fetch for her a tiny fruit *ber* which is not even very expensive, as she specifically highlights that you get a kilo for a rupee. This detail is cleverly incorporated in the song to highlight the incompetence of all the male kin and what becomes significant are the counters that the woman offers to highlight the lack of virility of husband's male kin. The father-in-law lost his elevated social stature, the elder brother-in-law lost his mare, whereas the younger brother-in-law is merely a child and lost his ball. While all the others lose their face and stature as they are unable to fetch the tiny, inexpensive fruit, it is the dear husband who emerges victorious and gratifies her. Quite interestingly, the husband doesn't just get the fruit, but the whole tree for her to get satiated. Women often create narratives where men cleave to their wives.

Motherhood in these songs allows women a measure of agency. Being a mother, in reality as well, has its familial and social compensations. Her status within the immediate kinship network is enhanced once she becomes a mother, especially to male infants, whose position earns rewards and authority as well. What is significant in these songs is the foregrounding and celebration of maternal body in its corporeality and excess. The pregnant mother's body, quite visibly, is the desiring excessive body which is positively valued in the figure of the new mother in song scripts. In these songs, there is an absolute playfulness and liberty with which women sing of the female body and its processes wherein the new mother's taste and craving for the food items can imply both a taste for sexual pleasure and the cravings of early pregnancy.

The song above makes oblique references to the wife's union with the husband through the metaphor of food. Food holds many meanings for women and is tied to questions of women's agency and embodiment as "the body suffers or flourishes according to the availability of food" (Sanyal and Kumar 10). If abstinence and fasting is tied to food piety, then a craving, consuming body signifies an epicurean excess and sexual mores. Helena

Mitchie in *The Flesh Made Word*, while examining the 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian representations of women, appetite and eating draws metaphorical connections between female eating and female sexuality. Female hunger, she argues, “figures unspeakable desires for sexuality and power” (13; qtd. in Bordo 183). This also seems relevant in this context as one finds in songs there is an inversion that celebrates female sexuality and power through images exulting in female eating and female hunger, depicting it explicitly, lushly and joyfully, undermining dominant cultural, ideological notions. In the song above, the wife’s cravings can only be satiated by the husband who gets the whole tree for her, perhaps, a phallic symbol. Culturally, sexual contact between husband and wife would not be acceptable during pregnancy and in postpartum period. The craving for food items which can only be fulfilled by the husband’s intervention and competence hints at the need for sexual fulfillment as well. The appetite for food flows into or allows for fleshly desires to foreground themselves, tying the hunger and hankering for a certain kind of food to sexual gratification.

These figurations which are an “integral part of the process of subject formation” (Braidotti 11-12), allows for alternative subject positions to emerge. The figure of gluttonous and sexually active new mother in its corporeality accounts for subjectivities emerging from a different location and embedded perspective, which is both transformational and disruptive. Such a figuration of the lustful, appetitive mother creates the desiring body-as-subject that evokes and mobilises creative possibilities in order to change the dominant subject position of the maternal body. Concomitantly, this figuration of maternal body as the desiring subject, which can also be understood as a refiguring of female embodiment in maternity, coincides with a process of becoming which disrupts the binarism implicit in the phallogocentric vision of the subject, thereby positing a counter-imaginary and going beyond that. It is not a reactionary opposition to patriarchy, but while being firmly rooted within the patriarchal

heteronormative, there is a certain ontological animism that must be accounted for in these self-becomings.

### **New Mother's Lover**

The lover of New Mother is a *Patwaari*,

Open the door, and come inside, unhesitatingly, she says.

Do not fear my father-in-law,

His consort is an ironsmith's daughter.

Open the door, and come inside, unhesitatingly, she says.

Do not fear my Elder brother-in-law,

His wife is from the cobbler caste.

Open the door, and come inside, unhesitatingly, she says.

Do not fear my younger brother-in-law,

His girlfriend/beloved is a potterwoman,

Open the door, and come inside, unhesitatingly, she says.

Do not fear my husband,

His girlfriend/beloved is from goldsmith caste.

Open the door, and come inside, unhesitatingly, she says.

In the above song titled “New Mother’s Lover”, the splitting of the woman into a ‘mother’ and a ‘whore’, the ‘fertile mother’ and the ‘erotic whore’ is totally undermined, highlighting chinks in dominant perceptions and imaging. One hears relaxed and humorous attitudes towards female sexuality, both playful and boisterous, procreative as well as erotic. In this song the *Jachcha* establishes both her erotic sexual desire and superiority over all other male kin in her marital home. The female body—especially that of the new mother—is authoritatively centralised, generating alternative ways of feeling. There is a frank expression

of sexual desire that is illicit. The young bride who is normally subordinated in the marital household, strategically negotiates her subservient position and inverts the hierarchies. All the other male kin, father-in-law, brothers-in-law have partners from a lower caste. Interestingly, the husband's infidelity is underlined in the end whose beloved is also from a lower caste. Although the song firmly establishes caste hierarchies, it allows her to negotiate a superior position for her as the other male kin along with her disloyal husband are put in an inferior position vis-à-vis the *Jachcha* by virtue of the upper caste/class position of her lover, who is a *patwari*.<sup>14</sup>

Laughter and humour become the frame within which such desires are exhibited. To find such a song as part of the *Jachcha* repertoire is interesting because authoritative texts would have us believe the dominant voice of patriarchy that stereotypes the female body as that of the 'mother'—maternal in ways that either valorise it or victimise it. She is not the hapless mother, or the sexually repressed wife, nor only depicted in terms of her *vatsalya* or maternal love. *Jachcha* songs create a variety of registers where in the body of the mother is a vortex of desires wherein the playful voice of the *Jachcha* manages to trespass many boundaries. She speaks in riddles, speaks in jest, speaks lovingly but successfully manages to claim power for herself. Her voice has a note of confidence. The fact that all the other men in the family are in a relationship with women from a lower caste, makes the *Jachcha* prominently in a superior position. Additionally, the husband is also involved in a dalliance with another woman which mitigates the enormity of the subterfuge planned by the *Jachcha*.

Similar to Irigaray's emphasis on revalorizing women's bodies by reconstructing their meaning which "invites women to consult our own individual diverse and multiple bodily experiences in order to reconceptualize the individual 'body and its pleasures'" (Fergusson 6), these songs also stage the female body only to re-signify and reinscribe. Hence, the body-

as-subject becomes the body-as-text which can be glossed, with desire inscribed on it. However, this desire is well within the heteronormative structures, unlike the french feminist politics that argues for an exclusivity where within the heteronormative female desire has no means of individuation. Tracking agency through its bodily locus while examining its intersections with desire and sexuality allow one to see how women experience the body-as-subject, effectuating a transcendence while remaining within the structures of immanence. Women do not actively pose a challenge to patriarchy and seek ontological positions outside the heteronormative. They do not speak from a patriarchal a priori as a precedent. However, it is through positing the very feminine body—signified as ‘the mother’, ‘the wife’—that they turn it into a site of meaning making. The subversive potency of these performances, then, lie in their very incidentality and affective investments, where an ontological animism is performed in the process of living and performing the body, thereby disrupting the patriarchally inscribed female body.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Simone De Beauvoir famously claimed that One is not born a woman but “becomes” one in *The Second Sex*, to highlight how women are conditioned into gender roles through socio-cultural conventions.

<sup>2</sup> Raheja and Gold also challenge the totalizing narratives on south Asian Femaleness, especially as posed by Kakar, Wendy Doniger, Lyn Bennet- in their ethnographic study on women’s narratives in U.P, Rajasthan. (*Listen to the Heron’s Words*, 33-34). They argue that the “split-image approach to South- Asian women derives largely from a male point of view”, claiming that these don’t offer “women’s view of women” (37).

<sup>3</sup> The songs referenced here are based on my fieldwork in two villages in Haryana- village *Khewra*, District *Sonepat* and Village *Kaljhad/Kharawad*, District *Rohtak* during 2017-19. These songs have been recorded, translated and transcribed by me from the regional dialect (*Haryanavi*) to English.

<sup>4</sup> Kirin Narayan in “Finding Form” (xix) asserts that in Kangra, as in many other villages across India, women’s group singing is thought to bring good fortune to happy events. As a gift of good-will, singing affirms relations with the celebrating family, and so women feel obliged to show up for rituals that involve songs.

<sup>5</sup> Wife of *Nai*- barber caste. This is listed under the ‘Other Backward Castes’ (OBC) in India.

<sup>6</sup> Wife of a Brahman; Chowdhury’s observation on Brahmin caste’s socially low position in Haryana seems to explain how the same ritual could be performed either by the woman of *Nai* caste or brahmin caste, bringing the two on similar level (42-43).

<sup>7</sup> A powder of Brick-red colour is mixed with water to make imprints.

<sup>8</sup> Leela Dube elaborates upon this idea dominant in Indian philosophical tradition in “Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological Reproduction and Sexual Relations of Production.”

<sup>9</sup> The new mother’s menstruating body is considered a matter of *sharam* or shame, associated with dirty bodily processes. Janet Chawla in her field work on traditional methods of childbirth and role of *dais* elaborates in great detail on this notion of shame and the connotations tied to it in *Birth and Birthgivers: The Power Behind the Shame*.

<sup>10</sup> Woman with excessive craving.

<sup>11</sup> A kind of sweet which is spiral in shape and dipped abundantly in sugar syrup.

<sup>12</sup> Following Foucault, Susan Bordo (1981) argues that the cultural conceptions of the body create notions of “intelligible body” which when practically manifested, through a “feminine praxis”, in social and economic life, becomes the “useful” body.

<sup>13</sup> A popular saying in this region insists that “Mard ka nahaana aur Beer ka Khaana jaldi hona chahiye.”

<sup>14</sup> *Patwari* is an administrative position in rural India who keeps an account of land ownership and tilling.

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