

An Analysis of Alternative Representations of Women in Kumaoni Narratives and Folklore, and Their Importance in the Preservation and Dissemination of Traditional Knowledge and Culture of Kumaon

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Abstract

While there is an abundance of analyses focussing on the representation of women in Kumaoni folklore, most focus on the hardships they face in their lives. This leads to two problems, firstly, it reiterates the subdued status of women in society and reinforces stereotypical characterization of women as weak and powerless. Secondly, it leads to a neglect of multidimensional personalities of women in society, obscuring their capacities, intelligence, and contribution to the building of a culture and society.

The folklore of Kumaon is replete with powerful female characters and is characterized by the presence of goddesses, female deities and spirits who hold great importance in the Kumaoni worldview. Also, there is an abundance of narratives that highlight not only the wit and intelligence of the women of the region, but also provide accounts of women's everyday-life activities.

This paper aims to focus on empowered representations of women, women's perspective on things, their negotiations in everyday life and how their actions and words can be seen as acts of resistance to authority. It would also look at women's narratives as means of knowledge preservation and dissemination. This paper also presents examples of women's speech practices as well as other cultural practices specific to women and highlight women's importance in the preservation of traditional knowledge and culture of Kumaon.

Keywords: Women's Narratives, Folklore, Kumaoni Language, Traditional Knowledge, Kumaoni Culture

Introduction

Women are regarded as the backbone of the economy as well as the sustenance and continuation of the Kumaoni society. Because of the prevalence of migration amongst the men for better work, agricultural work as well as managing of the family falls on the shoulders of

women in the region. Women do more work than men do in the region and take up task within as well as outside of the household. From the fields to care of the family, women in the region work tirelessly from dawn to dusk in the hills. It is a life of hardships and a few rewards for most of them. It would not be wrong if one were to say that without the women of the region, the life and economy of the region would come to a standstill.

Kumaoni people are a community of hill people who belong to the Kumaon region of the state of Uttarakhand. People are mostly Hindus and the society has a patrilinear setup. People are deeply religious and believe in the supernatural. Along with the Greater Gods of the Hindu pantheon they worship their own deities. The language and culture while bearing similarities to Garhwal has its own uniqueness and norms. Kumaoni yet has not been granted the status of an official language by the government of India, but it has a very rich oral tradition and literary culture. Kumaoni has been placed in the *vulnerable/unsafe* category by the UNESCO's Atlas of World Languages in Danger¹ and is recognized as a separate language in the Ethnologue².

As Kumaoni lacks a script of its own it has a very expansive oral tradition. The folklore, mythology, musical traditions, and traditional knowledge is vast and impressive. Although a lot of research has been done on the religio-cultural practices of the region as well as from a socio-economic perspective, research/studies focussed on women are fewer and limited in scope. A considerable amount of work has been done on women's perspectives in oral traditions within and outside of South Asia.³

Most studies of women's representations in the folklore and oral traditions are restricted to/more focussed upon traditional perspectives and imagery of women as without agency, without positions of power or the capacity for self-determination.⁴ From the orientalist accounts to feminist works have contributed to this voiceless and submissive view of women. Chandra Mohanty acutely critiques the construct of "third world women" by Western feminist authors and how they are considered as implicit in their own subjugation and socio-economic

¹ <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php>

² <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/kfy>

³ For example, see Abu-Lughod 1986, 1990; Caraveli 1986; and Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993

⁴ Also look at Stephens (1989) and Visweswaran (1994) for further insight into problems with Indian scholarship on women's voice and power.

discrimination.⁵ At the same time, we also see that conformist representations such as that of the dutiful wife/daughter or the sacrificing-selfless mother are more prominently given representations of women and have been popularized as ideals for women.

This paper aims to focus on the less popular representations of women and try to look at other aspects of the actually multidimensional personalities of women in these folklores and narratives. This would serve the purpose of firstly, present better and more balanced representations of women and secondly, provide alternative readings of women-centred/female-centred narratives of the region.⁶ Also this paper would aim to highlight the difference in women's speech practices from those of men. Examples of women-specific cultural practices have also been given.

1.1 Representation Of Women In Kumaoni Folklore And Mythology

The folklore and mythology of the region is very expansive and often elements overlap. It would be impossible to include a detailed account of the same, as a result only certain folklores and mythologies have been included focusing on those that are women-centric. Apart from these, there are certain oral traditions that are exclusive to women, like the *sagunānkhar*⁷ or *mangal gīt* and *mahilā hori*⁸ that are performed by the women only. Kumaoni folklore and mythos can be broadly categorized into two kinds: the religious and the non-religious. However, there is a considerable amount of overlap in the categories as themes, primary characters and storylines overlap or are interconnected.

1.1.1 Representation in Religious Folklore and Mythology of Kumaon

Religious Folklore and Mythology: this category includes the narratives on gods, goddesses and deities, origin of the universe and all kinds of religious songs/prayers etc. The religious is deeply associated with the socio-cultural and politico-moral aspects of the Kumaoni society. Kumaonis have a strong belief in the power of the supernatural and they believe in

⁵ Mohanty, C.T. (1991). "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. by Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 51-8

⁶ A number of works highlight the importance of women's oral traditions and performances as commentary, resistance and subversion; e.g., Narayana Rao 1991; Ramanujan 1991; Raheja and Gold 1994

⁷*sagunānkhar* or *mangal gīt* are auspicious songs sung specially by women at the start of important ceremonies like weddings and *nāmkaṛaṇ* or christening ceremony. The women who sing these songs are called *mangleru*.

⁸*mahilā hori* is one of the three major varieties of *Holi* performed in the Kumaon region. It is marked by singing, dancing and putting up satires and plays by women.

*Karma*⁹. An important part of their religious practices is the worshipping of local deities along with the greater Hindu deities. Apart from common Hindu rituals, people in the region also practice religious and propitiatory rites¹⁰ for the local deities and divinities.

Most female deities are regarded as *Sakti*¹¹ incarnate and are among the most popular deities of the region. These deities are very different from the calmer Hindu goddesses like *Sita* or *Parvati* or *Lakshmi*. They represent a more violent and malevolent aspect of the female energy. Their stories depict them as are fighters and warriors who slay demons and provide protection to the weak and suffering. Their characterization is in contrast with *Sita* who is regarded as the epitome of womanhood or *Lakshmi* the goddess of prosperity and fortune. *Goddesses Nanda-Sunanda, Gadh Devi, Doonagiri Devi, Garjiya Devi* are some popular regional female deities. *Nanda Devi* probably is the most important goddess of the region who is worshipped equally in the Kumaon as well as Garhwal region.

Nanda-Sunanda: A popular folklore related to Goddesses *Nanda-Sunanda* depict them as twins who were born to the Chand Dynasty. They were extremely popular amongst the subjects. Hence the traitors of the court decided to get them killed. One day when they were out in the forest, they had a mad bull charge at the young girls. The twins in order to save themselves hid behind a *kadli* (banana tree). But a goat ate the leaves and the girls were exposed. The bull charged and killed them. After this they reincarnated as *Nanda-Sunanda* and became the cause of the destruction of the traitors. *Nanda-Sunanda* are the ancestral deities of the descendants of the Chand Dynasty.

A number of such female goddesses are also worshipped as *kuldevi* (household deity) like *Sansari Devi, Anhyari Devi* and as village deities (*gramdevta*). *Gadh Devi* is the deity of the rivers and other water sources of the region. She is believed to be the regional version of *Kali*. She is associated with *pari*¹² and *anchari*¹³. It is believed that if called upon to inflict an enemy party and she can wreak havoc on the lives of the inflicted. People hold propitiatory rituals for spirits and other female divinities. The *pari* - are female spirits who may inflict young girls and are mostly regarded as the unsatisfied spirits of women and girls who died at

⁹ (Hinduism and Buddhism) the effects of a person's actions that determine their fate in this life and the next incarnation; destiny or fate.

¹⁰These include body possession rituals, worshipping of ancestral deities, propitiation of spirits etc.

¹¹ The female or generative principle; wife of Siva and a benevolent form of Devi.

¹² Eng. *Peri*: a supernatural being of folk belief of the East. Folklore depicts *pari* usually in the form of a beautiful maiden-sorcerer, sometimes demonic, sometimes well-disposed towards people.

¹³ *anchari*: is similar to *pari*. These are malevolent nymphs that inhabit forests and hills.

a young age. Their inflictions are marked by the presence of unexplained illnesses and lethargy in the victim. They are mostly propitiated in the month of *Chaita*¹⁴ and an entire genre of religious *jāgar*¹⁵ songs is dedicated to them and are called *Chaitwali*.

The Kumaoni goddesses provide extremely powerful representations of women and several stories are of fierce goddesses who are to be feared and revered. Most of these have a local origin story and the accounts narrate how they fought against demons and powerful enemies and defeated them to gain their status and possessed the capacities to perform miraculous tasks. There are a number of deities who were once believed to have been humans but turned into divinities upon death, a number of historical figures are also worshipped as deities. *Jiyā Rāni* is an example of one such powerful queen who upon death was elevated to the status of a goddess and is worshipped by people. There are a number of myths and folklores associated with *Jiyā Rāni*. According to one such folklore she was the queen mother of the *Katyurī* Dynasty circa 1400s. She died fighting off the attack of the Sayyad Sultan at Chitrashila who ambushed her while she was taking a bath in the river.

There is also an abundance of songs wherein the incidences are presented from a deity's perspective and express their feelings and emotions. Such songs and narratives create a stronger bond between the deity and their followers and render them human vulnerabilities that people easily associate with and relate to. This creates a deeper belief in the deity and also is a motivating and comforting thought for people, for they feel that when even gods have not been spared on this earth, they are mere mortals who are nothing when compared to the gods. Often, when narrating incidences about women suffering, a comment would be added, "when a great goddess like Sita had to suffer because of societal pressure, what better behaviour could you expect from this world towards you!"¹⁶. The comment is not a resigned one, where one is accepting of the abuse and discriminatory actions against women, it is rather a comment on the fickle, abusive nature of people, and the problematic structure of our societies.

1.1.2 Representation of Women in Non-Religious Folklore and Mythology of Kumaon

The non-religious folklore and mythology can be categorised into several kinds: historical, folktales and legends, anecdotes, and songs. These can vary in terms of themes, content, occasion etc. While, certain religious folklore and mythologies may be known only to

¹⁴ *Chaita* – the first Hindu calendar month; corresponding to March-April; also *Chaitra*

¹⁵ *jāgar* is a type of popular body possession ritual which is very popular in the region. It is done mostly to propitiate ancestral deities.

¹⁶ Refers to the banishment of Sita after Lord Ram is crowned the King and the ritual of *Agnipariksha* (trial by fire) that she underwent to prove marital fidelity.

the singers or performers, like the *jāgar*, the non-religious ones are known to common people and different versions of them are known to different people.

Women's representation in these narratives are not limited to traditional ideals of womanhood, where women are submissive, sacrificing, epitome of patience and love. They are also shown as flawed, human characters who can be selfish, fickle, or evil. At the same time there are depictions of the everyday life activities of women's lives, and everyday negotiations with others. These folklores show women in a different light and show that women are not necessarily powerless and within a male-dominated world, they have control over their lives.

A. K. Ramanujan¹⁷ discusses folklore in relation to voice and agency. However, a number of these narratives are not mere children's tales, they contain the grim realities of life and not everything is viewed through rose-coloured glasses. We see that several narratives depict women as capable of taking charge of their lives and manipulating situations to create balance in their lives. Most women-centric narratives show either that the heroine is already married or that she is married early in the tale, and then the women's troubles begin. She has to overcome marital harassment, and sometimes reform her husband and family, to achieve a happy married life. There are a number of narratives, with the primary theme of inverting established power structures through intelligence and cunning. Survival strategies are the essence of these narratives. For example, in certain tales we see the women committing acts of defiance to social norms not just as resistance to atrocities and non-cooperation to standards of morality.

Theme of the *Clever and Patient Maiden* is a recurring one in several of these narratives. We see these women using their wit and guile to prove themselves correct and e.g. "*The Clever Wife*"¹⁸ where the legendary pride and guile of the Kumaoni damsel is demonstrated with charm and whimsy. In this story a clever girl manages to prove her husband wrong and make him carry out the task of pouring pots of water at her feet. While the story "*One's Own Happiness*" bearing similarities to the story of King Lear, shows how a daughter despite her father's ill-treatment of her, manages to build a good life for herself and prove him wrong. Similarly, there are a number of anecdotes and sayings that also refer to the intelligence, street smarts and resourcefulness of the women. For example, there is an anecdote describing how a clever woman dealt with a greedy Brahmin: '*lobhi bāmana chaturā nāri*', which mean "greedy Brahmin (and) clever woman". It refers to the incident where a woman outsmarted a

¹⁷ Ramanujan, A.K. (1991). "Toward a Counter-system: Women's Tales." In *Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*. Ed. by Arjun Appadurai, Frank J. Korom, and Margaret A. Mills. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 33-55

¹⁸ Most of the examples provided here like *The Clever Wife*, *The Little Feather*, *One's Own Happiness* are from a collection of Kumaoni folktales called *Clever Wives and Happy Idiots: Folktales from the Kumaon Himalayas*. (2015, Yatra Books)

greedy brahmin who was known to make unreasonable demands from people as payment for his services. He told the woman that as payment he would accept an iron tool with a single hole in it, thus, indirectly demanding for an axe. She in return presented him with a single needle, as it fulfilled the criteria of his demands.

Traditionally, folklores and mythologies are regarded as mirrors to a society's worldview, social values, and ethico-moral standards. A number of these narratives also show the grey areas of human psyche where boundaries between the right and wrong is blurred and hard to determine. However, women are regarded as main custodians of moral and ethical standards of a society. As a result, they are also scrutinized through these impossibly high standards and hence when one falls of this pedestal, she is put through harrowing social ostracization, ridicule and condemnation. While, at the same time, similar actions by men are excused. Here, another point to be made is that often it is observed that women are more rigid than men when it comes ritual purity or breaking down of orthodox beliefs. This is not necessarily because they fear reprimand, but because a stringent following of norms helps them establish their own ritual supremacy over others in the society and within the household, specially the men. Even while they might hold a lower status within their household, outside of it, they will be in a more powerful position as compared to those of social statuses lower than theirs. This becomes of extreme importance in casteist societies. Such practices endow them with power and control and also helps them attain a certain amount of security and freedom. Hence they become complicit in their own subjugation and marginalization.

Marital Issues and Anxieties about Marital Fidelity is another theme that marks a number of these tales. A lot of them are about testing of the wife's loyalty and good judgement. But there are also a number of stories where women are instigators of affairs or willingly end a relationship or decide to escape terrible marriages. In this regard an interesting difference is the trope of the good prostitute against the bad wife. *Do Not Do Four Things* and the *Four Precious Things* are examples of tales where the prostitute is better than the disloyal wife and is depicted as not a lowly characterless woman, but as an important individual in the story. *The Little Feather* is another tale where a man leaves his wife for a *pātar*¹⁹ who claims him as her husband. They as a couple are better matched than the husband-wife who used to quarrel all the time. Moreover, as the husband sees that the *pātar* is well-off and rich, he becomes even more happier about his good luck.

While a very common reading of the tale could be one where the man has taken advantage of the women, I imagine the other interpretation for it is the *pātar* who claims the man as her husband. And it sheds light on traditional customs of the region, where women had the right to take a man as their husband and the man would live in the woman's house. It is to be kept in mind that apart from the proper Hindu weddings, other forms or 'weddings' were

¹⁹ *pātar* – the term can be used to refer to a prostitute, or a depraved woman or a woman of loose morals.

also popular, even when they were not considered ideal. But they were permitted and accepted by society. Another point here is that the term *pātar* often would be used to refer to women of loose moral values so, here a possibility is that the as the woman is willing to marry an already married man whose wife is alive, she is referred to as one. It might be a possibility, that she is not a prostitute which is another associated meaning of the word *pātar*.

The folktale by the name of *The Sepoy* is a very interesting story about an extra-marital affair between the wife of a merchant and a sepoy. As the woman falls in love/gets infatuated with the good-looking man, she convinces him to have an affair with her and even agrees to give him a coin every time he visits her. She manages to hide the affair from her husband and fools him even when he begins to suspect her and manages to thwart all his attempts to expose her. Eventually, she manages to save the sepoy's life and helps him escape. What is interesting is that unlike many other stories where the woman is depicted as an innocent or a foolish woman who is duped by the man, it is not so in this case. She knows what she's doing and exercises out of free will.

Another interesting story, which depicts another shade of a women's life and personalities is *The Unfortunate Wife*. The first wife of a man is jealous of his second wife, whom the man is partial towards as he loves her more. Circumstances force the first wife to run away from home and eventually she comes across a *fakir*, who helps her. He falls in love with her and decides to give up his vows and begins a new life. However, the woman desires revenge upon her first husband and the other wife. She convinces the *fakir* to use his magic and kill the husband and marry the second wife. The *fakir* agrees and befriends the rich man. They get rid of the man and he marries the second wife too. But after some time, he too falls in love with the second wife. This enrages the woman beyond reason and one night in her rage she murders the *fakir* and the second wife. The next morning, she claims that they were attacked and murdered by robbers and eventually flees. She then moves on to look for a third husband. Unlike a few other stories that typically depict the woman as accepting of their unfortunate situation, here we see a woman who is not willing to accept the status quo. To the extent that she is willing to commit a crime. She is not a submissive woman or an accepting one at that too. She desires revenge, power, and authority. The rivalry between women and the struggle for the higher status within the household is reflected in this tale. While, traditionally, Kumaoni society has been accepting of polygyny it was not without its reservations. Mostly it happened in cases where people could not conceive, or no sons were born. Within such households, wives held equal status and equal rights. It is no longer prevalent in the region.

The story depicts the sad reality of the unhappiness and discontentment that women feel in their conjugal lives. The practice of polygamy, especially polygyny was very common in the region. The story brings out not only the dark, unhappy aspects of marital life, but also depicts the kind of politics and intrigue that marks the married lives of women in the region. A lot of power-play is on, and the household is as complicated site of politics as is the king's

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court. It is not only the *saut* (rival, here the other wife) who is a problem, but at times the rival is a mother-in-law or a sister-in-law, with whom you have to constantly compete for position, status, authority and control.

Another, interesting aspect of this story, is its title, *The Unfortunate Wife*. By the time one is finished with the story, one realizes that the protagonist is not simply a hapless victim of a household conflict. Instead, she is a consciously conniving agent in the death of her husband and the second wife. One wonders if she really is *unfortunate* or not. She does not let her situation victimize her; instead, she takes revenge for her mistreatment. The story brings out the patriarchal setup of the society which forces one woman to stand against the other. At the same time the story also depicts the woman as an active subject, completely different from the generally projected image of the Indian woman as meek, submissive and powerless.

The Cynical Old Woman and the Gullible Simpleton Son is yet another popular trope in the Kumaoni folklore. Kumaoni society is a patriarchal as well as patrilocal society, yet within households it is seen that the eldest lady of the household (grandmother/mother-in-law) is at the helm. She is one who is in charge of the household and all household decisions are mostly made by her. In certain households, it is observed that their word is above that of the patriarchal head, who then seem to have a more of a nominal control. Such characters with years of experience in the world and street smarts are very common in the Kumaoni folklore. Such characters are often contrasted with an incompetent son who is a bumbling idiot. These women with their wit and cleverness manage to save their family and get themselves out of difficult situations. They know the way of the world and possess shrewd insight into the workings of the social fabric. Also, characters of such women are a contrast to the ideal mothers who are sweet, sacrificing and selfless. In the story *The Stupid Son and the Clever Mother* we see how a mother manages to make the best out of a risky situation and earn a free bag of gold for themselves that her simple son is willing to return. Similarly, in another tale, a woman saves her dim-witted son who has committed a murder.

In this aspect it may be pointed out that manipulation of household members (specially sons and husbands) and indirect control over decision-making within the household are crucial tools for women for survival at times, specially when it would be observed that the man of the house is a not socially competent or bad at decision-making. This stems in the generalized as well as financial/social dependency of women on the men of the household. The social status a woman holds is deeply affected by the level of ‘success’ of her husband/son/father and whether they do well in life or not affects the quality of life of women. Traditionally, men are the primary bread earners, and their failure may push the entire household into poverty. Additionally, being a socially successful man is also important as it affects the household status and the marriages of children etc. Thus, in a number of narratives, women may manipulate their husbands/sons out of necessity (as he might be a simpleton or a bumbling idiot) or they may be conniving women who wish things to go as they desire.

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The Good Prostitute and the Bad Wife The following two stories (*The Little Feather* and *Four Precious Things*) stories carry the trope of the good prostitute and the bad wife. The stories reveal about the Kumaoni worldview. They show the Kumaonis' belief in the concept of Karma²⁰ and how it affects one's existence and being. They reveal the belief of the people in the concept of reincarnation and the cycle of rebirth until attainment of Nirvana. The stories also show the belief that it is not just one's status by birth or one's social position which matters. A person's character and behaviour are also important. The stories are also a critique on the stereotyped image of prostitutes, who are often depicted as crafty, greedy, lowly women of a loose character. In these stories they have been depicted as good, generous, intelligent and with a sense of ethicality and morality. Further, these stories indeed, put the ideas of morality and ethics in a grey area of ambiguity and question the set codes of behaviour and conduct. We see the subversion and the inversion of the existent ideologies here.

Four Precious Things

A young prince seeks permission from his father to travel around and see the world. Before he leaves, he asks his wife what gifts she wants him to bring back from the trip. His wife asks him to get her four things: first must be something good from something bad; second must be something bad from something good; the third must be a dog of a *kotwal*²¹; and the fourth must be an ass from a throne.

The prince goes to Delhi and befriends a *kotwal* who rents a house for him. He pays the man a gold coin each day. Next, he befriends a *pātar*²², to whom he gives all his remaining money. He then marries the daughter of a poor king. He then tests her. He goes hunting and get a head of a she-goat home all wrapped up in a scarf. But he tells the princess that he killed a man and brought the head me. He tells her to never tell this to anyone. In this manner, he went hunting for seven days and gets seven severed goat heads.

The princess is afraid for her life and informs the *kotwal* who in turn informs the *bādshah*²³ about the murderer. The *bādshah* orders that the murderer should be hung till death. The *kotwal* arrests the prince and takes him to court. At the court the *pātar* comes to the aid of the prince and asks the *bādshah* if he had a thorough investigation done before announcing the death sentence. As the *bādshah* questions the *kotwal* again, the *kotwal* points out the princess as the informant and the truth of the goat-heads in the scarves is revealed.

²⁰ (Hinduism and Buddhism) the effects of a person's actions that determine their fate in this life and the next incarnation

²¹ A policeman

²² A depraved woman; a prostitute; a courtesan; a woman of loose morals

²³ Emperor

The *bādshah* asks the prince for the reason for all this. The prince then narrates the story about his wife's wish for four things. The prince explains that he has obtained all the four things: first, is the prostitute, who despite being considered untrustworthy and characterless as she sells herself for money, turned out to be actually good and saved his life. The second is the new wedded wife, who told the *kotwal* even, when told not to do so. The *kotwal* is the third, as despite taking money from the prince and being a friend, he did not bother to check the scarves and blindly believed the princess. So he is truly a dog of a *kotwal*. And the fourth is the *bādshah* himself, the ass from the throne, who knew nothing but gave a life sentence on the word of the *kotwal* alone. The prince, eventually returns to his home country, and tells his wife about his experiences, who is happy to hear that her husband accomplished what she had asked him of.

The Little Feather

Once, there was a Brahmin who had a wife and a daughter. The husband and wife were always quarrelling. When the daughter was of marriageable age, the wife asked the Brahmin to find a suitable match. His wife suggested that he should compose some poems and take it to some king or prince so that he could get some *baksheesh*²⁴ and then they could use that to get their daughter married. The Brahmin set off to visit the king. On the way he met a *bhoot*²⁵ who asked the Brahmin to bring him a corpse to feed on. He gave the Brahmin a feather to recognize a whole human body amongst the corpses. He did as the *bhoot* said, who gave him a lot of money as reward. The Brahmin returned home, and the daughter was married off.

The husband and the wife continued to quarrel every day. One day the Brahmin put the feather on his head and saw that his wife was a dog. Then he looked at himself in the mirror and saw that he was a tiger. It dawned on him that this was the reason why he and the wife were always fighting. They were utterly incompatible. She was a dog in previous life while he had been a tiger. He went to the market where he met a *pātar*. She told him: "this day onwards you are my husband, and I am your wife!" the Brahmin laughed at her. She showed him her wealth and he agreed to be her husband and cast off his first wife. The Brahmin put the feather on his head and saw that the *pātar* was a tigress! He told himself that they were a well-matched pair, and this was why she fell in love with me. Then they lived together in happiness till the end of their lives.

1.1.2.1 Women and Marriage Customs in the Region²⁶

²⁴ Tip; payment

²⁵ A ghost

²⁶ A detailed analysis of the marriage customs and its effects on women would be outside the scope of this paper. Hence a brief account is being provided here.

As marital issues, adultery and cowives are common and recurrent themes in the folklore of Kumaon it would be appropriate to understand the Kumaoni marriage practices and their impact on women's lives in the region. Kumaon region is a prime example of a society where the customary laws have undergone tremendous changes over the years specially with the advent of British rule in India which played a crucial role in the standardization of the Hindu Laws and what would it mean to be a good Hindu.²⁷ While the reformatory practices introduced by the newly awakened intelligentsia of the region did do a good bit to uplift women and empower them, yet the limited and prejudiced understanding of the local customary laws resulted in a number of damaging consequences for the Kumaoni society and particularly the women.

There is a marked difference in the current marriage practices and customs from those in the past. The Kumaoni society is a patriarchal and patrilocal society and hypergamy and isogamy are the norm. Hypogamy and marriage outside of caste is frowned upon and discouraged. Specially so in case of castes, where reactions may range from reluctant acceptance to outright social ostracization. Traditionally marriages are arranged by the parents through consultations with household members and *purohit*²⁸. Amongst the urban sections of the community 'love marriages' along with arranged ones are also common. Again, marriages outside of community are also more common in the urban populations than the rural Kumaonis. **Polygamy and polyandry:** the region does not have the practice of polyandry at all and there are also no historical records also which may present any evidence for it in the past. However, polyandry has been observed to have been practiced in some areas/communities in the neighbouring Garhwal region like the Jaunsar-Bhabhar and regions bordering the hill state of Himachal Pradesh.²⁹ However, with the modernization of the society, these practices have become almost redundant and have been largely abandoned. We see that in the past the practice of polygamy was very common in Kumaon. However, it seems that the financial strength of the man as well as social status played a role here, as men from the upper classes were seen to have more wives than those from more poorer backgrounds. At times, the practice was also validated on the grounds of necessity in cases where the wife was unable to bear children, or no sons were born or even in case of incompatibility between the married couple. This is corroborated also by the presence of a number of narratives and folklore themed on co-wives or where they play important roles.³⁰ One of the most popular tales is of the deity *Goel Devta*

²⁷ Pande, Vasudha (1996). "Law, Women and Family in Kumaun" in India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 3/4, Second Nature: Women and the Family (WINTER 1996), pp. 106-120

²⁸ A *purohit* is generally the family priest who performs all ritual ceremonies and religious services for the household. It is common to consult them for match-making services within the community and caste.

²⁹ Polyandry has been observed in a number of regions of Himalayas. For further details see Berreman (1963), Sax (1991), Fanger (1987)

whose mother *Queen Kalinara* was the eighth wife of *King Jhalrai* who became the centre of hatred of the seven co-wives and the mother-in-law as she was the only one to bear a child to the king.

In present times, polygamy has been abandoned as a redundant practice and monogamy is the norm in the rural as well as urban populations.³¹ In this regard, in case of polygamy the younger sister or other equivalent of wife is a potential marriage partner and at times the younger sister or cousin of the wife would be taken as a wife to save the household from breaking up and to maintain relations. The co-wives have equal rights, but still organizational hierarchy is there for ease of work. All children are also equal in status and hold equal rights in the property and assets.

As far as widow remarriages are concerned, we see that widow remarriages might happen more in case the woman is young. Levirate marriages also occurred in the region, wherein a woman may be married off to the husband's brother in case of the death of the husband.³² However, this practice has become less common now. I was informed of at least two such cases, one of which was of a lady who was married off to a boy-child whom she raised and looked after also. The other case was of a young man who had to marry his elder sister-in-law upon the elder brother's sudden death. While such a case is extremely rare and representative of the highly illogical and orthodox nature of such practices, often it would be explained that this was done as to keep the family line intact or to make life better for a young widow who would otherwise have to live a much harder life.

In the present times, divorces are still highly stigmatized and a big cause for 'losing of face' in the society. The stigma is high for both men and women and they would be regarded as the least potential marriage/life partners. The stigma attached with divorce can be contrasted

³⁰ Examples have been provided in the paper.

³¹ An interesting point in this regard may be also be the increased influence of the Hindutva propaganda which has largely focussed on polygamy amongst Muslims in a negative light and a major contrast to the good Hindu ideals they propound. This is even more so as Hindu kings have been historically known to have multiple wives, however, *Lord Rama* took an oath to never marry again or take another wife and vowed eternal devotion to his wife *Devi Sita*. The ideals of *Rama* then have been largely utilized to further the case of Hindus as better and the demonization of Muslims in the Hindutva ideology. These points are important as they highlight how a greatly sanitized and idealistic conceptualization of Hinduism has been implemented for the Sankritization of deviant/alternative Hindu practices.

³² If such a marriage were to occur, it would be generally arranged between a woman and her deceased husband's younger brother. Traditionally, the relation between the ego and husband's elder brother is taboo and they do not even stay together in the same room or come in contact. So much so that there is no direct term of address that a woman may use for an elder brother-in-law. They may refer to them as *jethan* but wouldn't directly address them. However, with time these restrictions have diluted and are more strictly adhered to by older generations. Such avoidance practices are also equally applicable to the men in relation to a younger brother's wife.

with that of a widow or widower who may be regarded with a bit of sympathy and remarriage might even be encouraged in their case. *dhāti* is a term which was used to refer to widows, divorcees or women who were abandoned by their husbands. Traditionally, a marriage to such women was called *dhāti byāh* and was devoid of any kinds of ceremonies, celebrations or fanfare. The payment of brideprice would be made and the woman simply escorted to her new conjugal home. While, these women might have held ritually lower status, the marriages and any offspring were legitimate children and had equal rights.

The traditional marriage customs provided escape hatches to women who were stuck in unhappy marriages or had affairs. As most marriages were based on the custom of brideprice, in case of women who had affairs, the ‘debt’ of her marriage could be paid off by the lover who could make the payment to the estranged husband. At times if a woman returned to her home, the amount could be paid by her family to finalize separation. However, the ideals of women’s chastity, morality and ownership of women emphasized upon by the British led to a popularization of *kanyādān* marriages which took away the limited choices women had. The customary practices like brideprice and payment given to the deceased husband’s relatives were criminalized as ‘sale of women’ by the British regulation enforced in 1823 which prohibited the sale of wives and widows.³³ Widow remarriage in the region was also practiced in the form of *tekwa* marriages wherein a widow had the right to have a “live-in” partner who could stay in the house of the deceased husband. They could also remarry with the second husband making the payment to the family of the deceased husband. However, these practices were also unacceptable to the British and their regulations deeply affected social views on widow remarriages.

Even as adultery wasn’t socially acceptable, it wasn’t deeply linked to the concept of female chastity except in cases of intercaste affairs where severe punishments were meted out as they led to a fall in ritual status as well. Traill also mentions this in his understanding of the stratification system of the Kumaonis into three castes: *thuljaats*, *khasa* and *doms*, where the former two formed the upper castes while the *doms* fell below the line of pollution.³⁴ As already stated above, affairs within the caste could be resolved by the payment of money by the paramour, but inter-caste affairs were handled by the king’s court.

1.1.3 Expressions of Female Sexuality in the Folk Narratives

In the Kumaoni oral traditions and narratives, constructions of women are reflective of the standardized or traditional conceptualization of the women, wherein they are epitomized as the selfless mother, devoted wife and the dutiful sister who are either desexualized or exhibit

³³ Pande, Vasudha (1996). “Law, Women and Family in Kumaun” in India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 23, No. 3/4, Second Nature: Women and the Family (WINTER 1996), pp. 106-120

³⁴ 4. Judicial Letters, Volume 37, 11th July, 1843

restrained sexuality. Innumerable stories, songs and lore sing praises to the devout mother and wife who prove their greatness through extreme sacrifices and successful chastity vows. However, there are a few genres of songs which explore aspects of feminine desire and sexuality and women are portrayed as desiring subjects who long for their lovers and husbands. Lacan's conceptualization of desire as a lack which constitutes subjectivity. A number of these songs and narratives are about the longing and frustration that subject feels towards her lover, who is absent. A number of *nyoli* songs of Kumaon are mostly on the longing and separation that the female subject feels.

As the society is mostly traditionalist, expressions of desire and intimacy are private and mostly restricted to the marital bed. However, the Holi songs form a special genre of songs as they are performed in public gatherings at the time of festivities and contain open depictions of woman's desire and sexual intimacy. Not only there are examples of song which describe the clandestine affairs that a woman has with her lover, there are also songs wherein women describe and share their sexual encounters to other women, at times through euphemisms.

शहर सितो जागो रसिया
 शहर सितो जागो रसिया
 जब रसिया आँगन पर आवै
 भूकत है दुश्मण कुतिया, शहर सितो ...
 जब रसिया देहरी पर आवै
 खाँसत है दुश्मण बुद्धिया, शहर सितो ...
 जब रसिया खटिया पर आवै
 चड़कत है दुश्मण खटिया, शहर सितो ...
 जब रसिया ने बाँह पकड़ि है
 छनकत है दुश्मण चुड़िया, शहर सितो ...

This song expresses the rather clandestine manner of meeting of two lovers who are trying to be as noiseless as possible.

Translation of the song³⁵:

The town sleeps, my beloved is awake
 (when) my beloved is at the courtyard
 the damned bitch barks, the town sleeps....
 (when) my beloved is at the door
 the damned hag begins to cough, the town sleeps....
 (when) my beloved is abed
 the damned cot begins to creak, the town sleeps...

³⁵ The translation is mine

(when) my beloved takes my hand
the damned bangles begin to tinkle, the town sleeps...

As most families stay in a joint family, it is very hard for married couples to be able to find quality alone time. And as the society is traditional, there is no display of affection in front of other people. In social events too there is a segregation of the men's and women's spaces. A number of Holi songs are also about separation from beloved, romance and playful interactions between partners.

अबे, हाँ रे गोरी चादर दाग कहाँ लायो?

O, fair one, where did you stain your shawl

अबे, हाँ रे सासू पनियाँ भरन सँ हों जो चली।

O, mother-in-law, I went to the water hole

उत, चिफलि पड़ो मेरो पाँव सासू चादर दाग वहाँ लायो।

There, I slipped and stained my clothes

अबे, अबे, हाँ रे गोरी पनियाँ दोष तु नाँ दीजो

O, fair one, do not blame the water hole, you!

उत वाँहि खड़ा तेरो यार गोरी चादर दाग वहाँ लायो।

There must have been waiting for you, your beloved, thus the stain on your clothes

अबे, हाँ रे सासू यार को नाम तु मत लीजो

O, mother-in-law, do not say that

उत पाँशो लगै मरि जाउँ सासू यार को नाम तु

I would die before that, do not say that mother-in-law

In the above song, the mother-in-law is questioning the daughter-in-law about her whereabouts and how did she get her shawl stained (that is she suspects that her daughter-in-law has a lover) to which the daughter-in-law replies that she had gone to draw water from the source where she slipped and hence her shawl has become stained. The stained shawl can be understood as a euphemism for an illicit affair.

There are also songs which describe the intimate encounters between partners and how women share their experiences with one another. In the following example a younger sister-in-law is telling to the older one that her husband is not actually a simpleton as elder one believes him to be. She then goes to explain that how their intimate encounter went by.

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जेठानी³⁶, तुमरो देवर न बोलो (elder sister, teach your brother-in-law³⁷)

न बोलो झखमार जेठानी, तुमरो देवर... (don't think him an idiot, your brother-in-law)

जेठानी, फागुन मास नयी ऋतू आई (elder sister, spring has arrived)

फूल रही बनराय जेठानी, तुमरो देवर....(flowers are blossoming elder sister, and your brother-in-law)

जेठानी, खोलि केवाड़ धसो घर भीतर (elder sister, broke open the door and entered)

गोपी दिल धड़काय जेठानी, तुमरो देवर....(scared the hell out of me, elder sister, your bother-in-law)

जेठानी, लिपट झपट कर दाइयाँ मरोड़ीं (elder sister, he captured me and got hold of my wrists and twisted them)

मरी मोहे पिचकारि जेठानी, तुमरो देवर.... (he hit me with a water-gun elder sister, your brother-in-law)

जेठानी, खटिया में ऊताण कियो है (elder sister, he romps around in the bed)

चरमर-चरमर होई जेठानी, तुमरो देवर... (making the frame creak and shake elder sister! your brother-in-law)

जेठानी, एकै चदरा दो जन ओड़ें (elder sister, we two share a single duvet)

खींचातानी होई जेठानी, तुमरो देवर....((as a result) struggle/tug-of-war with your brother-in-law)

जेठानी, घूँघट खोलि लुटो मोहि दिन में (elder sister! He pulled open my veil in broad daylight)

जुद्धा ले ले मचायो जेठानी, तुमरो देवर....(he's been warring with me, your brother-in-law)

जेठानी चोली-चदरा भिजि गयो है (elder sister! My blouse-shawl are all drenched)

सारी कसर निकालि जेठानी, तुमरो देवर....(your brother-in-law left no stone unturned)

1.2 Women's Narratives as Important Sources for Knowledge

In recent years there has been a shift in focus from mere recording of oral histories of women as capturing of women's voices or realities and has moved to look at these recordings as texts in need of analysis. As Joan Sangster emphasizes the need to ground women's histories "in a materialist and feminist context"³⁸. Some of the most interesting narratives, that shed very important light on the life, beliefs and perspectives that the women have in the region,

³⁶ *jethāni* – is the husband's elder brother's wife. She is elder in relation hence can be called an elder sister. She can be a confidant in the household as someone who has a similar status and position as daughter-in-law.

³⁷ Here brother-in-law is the singer's husband who she is addressing indirectly.

³⁸ Sangster, J. (1994). Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History. *Women's History Review*, 3, p. 5

were obtained through informal discussions and conversations that I had with the women during the fieldwork³⁹.

Even hearing them talk and discuss their lives, when they were young and how things are present times, provides a lot of insight into how women view themselves, other women, the society at large as well as provides their views on social norms and values. In this regard Joan Sangster (1994) relates the importance of putting forth questions of why and how women perceive themselves as individuals and as a part of a community and culture, stating that it sheds light on the social and economic structures within which they lived and which they faced. As she says: “Asking why and how women explain, rationalise and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex relationship between individual consciousness and culture.”⁴⁰

Again, it would be important to stress that it is necessary to look at these lived experiences through a balanced perspective which acknowledges the fact that they have lived difficult lives, but yet not trivialize it as normal or expected treatment of women, as it was in the past and that was the norm then. It is necessary to consider these narratives are important steps in understating the lives of women in extremely complex societies as ours. Not only are women affected because of gender discrimination, but also social and economic discrimination. These narratives would be helpful in creating feasible frameworks for their empowerment and would not blindly put them to standards set by Western feminism which has failed to address issues of the Third World women and women of colour. It sheds light on the importance and necessity of developing nuanced feminist stands that suit the complexities of Third World nations, where social hierarchies are far more complex than in the West.⁴¹

A fact that struck me the most was the surprise that a lot of women felt, when they learnt that I would like to know about their own experiences or about the daily lives of women. The first question was that how could that be of any importance? What aspect of their lives could be use in a project of this nature? Even when they could fathom the importance of religious myths or war ballads etc, they could not understand the importance of a woman’s life journey in such a work. Yet as they understood that the idea is to present their views and

³⁹ The fieldwork was done in Village Jalikhan, Block Sult, District Almora, Uttarakhand between 2017-2019 intermittently.

⁴⁰ Sangster, J. (1994). Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History. *Women’s History Review*, 3, p. 6

⁴¹ Also see Mohanty, C.T. (1991). “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Ed. by Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. pp. 51-8

perspectives and would provide a space for their voices to be heard, they became more excited and interested to talk. For them it was important to emphasize on the hardships of their lives, the lack of facilities in their lives and how the women of the region have had been making sacrifices all their lives so that their families could live well.

A very interesting aspect of women's circumstances that emerges through personal narratives is the contrast between their imagined representations and the realities of their lives. Women's lives are balanced between controlled or nuanced vocality and uninhibited expression of their thought. This extends to other parts of their daily lives too. Subtle or indirect means of getting their way is more common than direct demand. Within households and the society, control and power is contested and ambivalent.

Often conversations about the life of Kumaoni women would lead to comparisons along two axes: between the rural and urban life, and between life now and life earlier for the women. It seems that certain parallels are universal. For women of the older generations, they believe that life for women is far easier in today's times than it was in earlier times. They look at it in terms of ease of work and facilities that are available to women in today's times. At the same time, they also feel that women are more liberated now than they were earlier. They believe women have much more financial security, freedom of movement than they had in their times. An important point here is that, despite the hardships they faced in their youth, they today do not view their past in the context of misfortune. They mostly look back at their hardships as obstacles that they faced and overcame. They acknowledge and understand the problems and issues related to women and hence emphasize on the importance of perseverance, survival strategies and resistance for making your life better. It should not be mistaken that they take pride in the abuses they have suffered, rather they take pride in their capacity to have managed and survived despite a hundred problems. They see their capacities to negotiate and compromise as important and crucial to their survival. It marks their resilience and their resistance to the dominant patriarchal social structures, which they have faced, resisted, and survived in the best way they could have. However, it doesn't mean that they do not have fond memories of their youth. They feel that even while life was difficult, it was a happier, simpler life.

For example, Kunti Devi, one of the women who were interviewed told stories from her childhood and her growing up in a small village. She narrated an incident when how she stole a coconut/copra from her uncle's shop for a pregnant neighbour who was craving for some. It was not a simple matter of going and asking for some, as one could not eat whatever and whenever they wanted. Poverty was widespread. The entire story of how the stolen copra was smuggled under her frock and supplied to the woman who was waiting in the forest for her, is amusing, astonishing, heart-warming, a little saddening and fascinating all at once. It presents a myriad of aspects of women's lives in the olden times. She narrates the story with a lot of pride and excitement as she feels that it was extremely cleverly executed plan. It is pride

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in the ability to make the best of a situation. From their restricted lives, to the simplicity of the desire, each line of the story reveals tonnes about the everyday negotiations that women and girls had with their society.

Similarly, another old lady Anandi Devi, would narrate stories of her youth. Her experiences are amusing and funny yet very insightful towards unnecessary and superstitious beliefs and practices that were prevalent in the society. She narrated an incident that reveals malpractices associated with menstruation. Women of the neighbourhood would form a group and go far to gather fuelwood. They even had to cross a river to reach the forest lands. One such day one of the women started to menstruate and they all had to cross the river holding each other's hands. Now another woman's father-in-law was a *puchyār*, i.e., he could have a deity incarnated on himself and conduct interactions with the deity for people. Families of such people have to maintain a lot of ritual cleanliness and menstruating women are regarded as impure and coming in contact with a menstruating woman, is considered polluting. The old man claimed that he would be able to recognize even an indirect contact with a menstruating woman too. Thus, his daughter-in-law was scared to go back home, as she too had held hands in the entire group while crossing river. In fact, all the women were scared. But they decided that they will not tell anyone in the village about the incident. The old man's daughter-in-law went back home and continued to do her chores as she would normally do. The next day when all the women gathered and asked her about the old man and if he got to know, she said that all went well, and nothing happened. The entire group of women was relieved and happy at their good luck. She narrated another story, which emphasizes on the changed times. She would say that people were lucky in modern times. They never faced famines or crop failures or spreading of mysterious illnesses and diseases. She explained how in her youth, food, clothes, essentials, were all rationed. Even things like jaggery was a luxury. And the elders of the house were the only ones who could distribute it. Once a friend of hers stole a small lump of jaggery and brought it to the forest to eat it for lunch. However, as she had taken it without permission, she was too scared to eat it. Even when others told her to eat it, she could not gather the courage to eat it. Eventually she spent the entire day as a nervous wreck, did not eat the jaggery, kept it safe with her, went back home and placed it back in the container before anyone else could find out. It was only then that she could take a breath of relief. Even such a story of humorous incidents that happened with women, reveal a lot about the social and economic situation of the society at large and how the family/household setups functioned then. At the same time, it is a commentary on the kind of life that people lived in earlier times, especially women.

Such narratives evoke a myriad range of reactions within the listeners, from the expected amazement and sympathy to the agreeing "nodding of the head" indicating familiarity with the situation. It is not one rare tale of the past; it is one of many such similar ones. It is easy to discern the excitement in the voice of the narrator for she has been as witness to the story. Often such narrations would be marked with an occasional "well, that's how it was". These are not just stories, but powerful experiences that are regarded as significant events in

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personal historical experiences. As Barbara Allen states: “[b]ecause stories encapsulate and highlight significant and emotionally powerful experiences, recurrent narratives and narrative themes within a corpus of oral history interviews suggest what the narrators individually and collectively consider to be key aspects of their historical experience”.⁴² We see that rather than necessarily projecting themselves as victims, they present themselves as responsible, abiding members of the society, who have tried to make the best of their situation and with a lot of hard work and diligence worked towards building a better life.

1.2.1 Importance of Women’s Social Circles and Traditional Knowledge

A very important aspect of women’s lives is their social circle, and the role women play in each other’s lives. As the Kumaoni society is still conservative and traditional specially in the rural regions, the common practice of segregation of genders at social functions and events is followed. This sort of extends to daily life activities as well including performing chores together or in groups. For example, often women go to gather fuelwood or fodder in groups or go to the fields together and work together. There is no strict segregation of work or spaces as such between women and men, but seems a more natural organization of people into groups they would relate to or be comfortable in. However, the importance of a women’s circle cannot be refused or denied. Living amongst, growing up with other women/girls in the community is as very crucial part of the women’s lives. It defines how they view themselves and other women. Foremost, it provides them with that core space where they can be freer, express themselves and ask for emotional support that maybe absent in their marital relations and homes. Secondly, this circle is important in terms of learning, gaining and sharing skills with one another, including showcasing of skills that otherwise would not be of worth in the male-dominated social spaces. Thirdly, the women’s own circles provide them with that space where they feel that they are being heard, acknowledged, appreciated and where they can share experiences regardless of differences of age, social class and economic class.

In most societies, women’s knowledge has been side-lined as old women’s tales or superstitious beliefs and has been regarded as useless. But it is to be realized that women’s traditional practices are important not only as cultural practices but also as life practices, which are crucial in terms of sustainability and earning of livelihood. This becomes more important in today’s times when environmental degradation and calamities are making survival harder. Certain women’s practices are deeply linked with the biodiversity of the region. For example, the observance of *Vat Savitri Puja*⁴³ is very common in Kumaon. Sacred groves of the *Vat* or Banyan tree (*Ficus Benghalensis*) are worshipped and considered holy. They are maintained and looked after by women. These sacred groves have come to be recognized as important

⁴² Barbara Allen (1992). Story in Oral History: Clues to Historical Consciousness, *Journal of American History*, 79, September, p. 607.

⁴³*Vat Savitri Puja* is fast is observed by women for their husbands and prominently followed in North and West India

biodiversity sites which are crucial for environmental sustainability. Similarly, traditional water sources called *naulas* are also regarded sacred and maintained. In a number of places *Mahila Mangal Dal*⁴⁴ have worked on the revival of these traditional water sources.

Many women also have a lot of knowledge about the flora fauna, traditional agricultural and forestry practices, medicinal plants in the region and are the primary repositories of traditional medicine systems.⁴⁵ Specially, regarding knowledge about women's health and childcare practices. This knowledge is passed down from one generation of women to the next not through formal lessons but through daily interactions and observation. Women's knowledge is not limited to women's health and childcare. It also extends to knowledge about animal husbandry and cattle care, weather and climate, agriculture and farming. They are the primary care takers in the households as well as work the fields and farms.

Health and Childcare Practices. As modern medical facilities became popular, traditional health practices and methods were regarded as redundant and incompetent. But it is seen that a lot of remedies and treatments from traditional medicines are effective and beneficial. A number of these are in the form of food or movement restrictions or certain necessary inclusions which have been traditionally followed. Because of years of experience in the fields and the familiarity with forests and wilderness, women have knowledge about a lot of medicinal plants and herbs that they use for treatment at home. Specially in case of minor injuries and illness. Apart from such natural remedies, alternative practices are commonly used.

An example in this regard is the practice of getting rid of the evil-eye effect or *nazar utārnā* which is called *hāk lagnā* locally. It is a very common practice in the region. It is done in case of cranky-crying babies or when someone falls unexplainably ill. The practice is also carried out as a precautionary measure at times. It is performed more by women than men in everyday life. Everyone has their own version of it, but is generally performed by moving a bowl of *rai* (black mustard seeds) and salt around the ill person's head and a chant is said. Another such example is that of *juk lagnā*. Stomach issues in children are referred to as *juk*. To heal it, women use warm ashes from the hearth and rub it on the child's abdomen and speak a chant. Not everyone knows how to perform it and it is believed that it is a special ability that a few have.

Women's Health, Pregnancy and Natal Care. Traditionally matters related to pregnancy, labour and natal care came under the domain of women, specially midwives. But

⁴⁴ *mahilā mangal dal* are women's groups who work within the villages to coordinate all kinds of village activities, including social events and social work activities.

⁴⁵ Agrawal, R. (2008). Small Farms, Women and Traditional Knowledge-Experiences from Kumaon Hills. *Indian Journal of Traditional Knowledge*. 65(5): 69-80.

with the emergence of modern medicine and health systems and specially with an increased reach of medical/emergency services, this traditional knowledge came to be side-lined as auxiliary systems⁴⁶. Because of this a large portion of women's traditional knowledge came to be regarded as useless. There exists an extensive system of practices, prohibitions, and instructions that women are required to follow during and after a pregnancy. While some portion of this knowledge could be regarded as semi-specialized that was known to those who were professional midwives, some of it was commonly shared knowledge that was shared amongst women or passed down through generations⁴⁷.

For example, traditionally in Kumaon, there is the practice of providing an isolated room for the new mother and child from birth to the 11th day. Movement is restricted in and out of the room, and visitors are required to sprinkle a bit of mixture of *gangājal* and *cow's urine*⁴⁸ before entering and after leaving the room. In terms of practicality, it can be understood as a means to reduce infection and disturbance. There were a lot of food restrictions also for new mothers which were to be diligently followed till the prescribed time period. The following of the regulations was overseen by the older women in the household. However, nowadays, women do not heed much to such traditional regulations but rely more on their doctors for guidance.

Postnatal care is taken up by the grandmothers or other more experienced women of the household and the new mothers learn hands on. Thus, we see that, despite the presence of doctors and nurses the help from experienced mothers is a very important aspect of a new mother's capacity building and is an important part of women's shared skill sets and knowledge.

There are also several old wives' tales that are popular. For example, during pregnancy it is said that one should not eat peaches for they result in birth of hairy children. Women are asked to control their diet and avoid certain things because it is believed to have an adverse effect on the child. Another example is that it is believed that if a child salivates too much, it means that all the cravings during pregnancy were not fulfilled. Consumption of jaggery is prohibited in pregnancy. It is considered to be harmful for the child. Or women can help other women in dealing with pregnancy related problems like nausea, swollen feet etc. The

⁴⁶ Zionts, S. (2015). "*Ouch, That Hurts: Childbirth-Related Pain Management and the Inappropriate Replacement of Traditional Obstetrical Knowledge in Kumaon, Uttarakhand, India*". Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 2081.

⁴⁷ See also Negi, T.; Solanki, D. (2016). *Indigenous Postpartum Practices Followed by Rural Women of Kumaon Region, Uttarakhand*. Asian Agri-History. Jan-Mar 2016, Vol. 20 Issue 1, p41-48. 8p.

⁴⁸ Water from the River Ganges. It is generally stored in Hindu households as the River *Ganges* is the most holy river and its waters are believed to have purifying properties. *Gangājal* is often used to purify things from ritual pollution. Similarly, as cows are considered holy in Hinduism, their urine is also regarded as purifying and used for ritual purification.

realization that others as well have gone through similar experiences helps women cope with their own.

Traditional Art of Aepañ and Rangwāli Pichorā are of special importance to the women of Kumaon. Both are primarily practiced by women and passed on through generations. *aepañ* is a decorative form of wall and floor painting in which traditional designs are painted upon the walls and the floor of the household using all-natural ingredients like *geru* (red mud) and *biswār* (white paint made from ground rice). It has a number of types of styles and designs and different designs are drawn on different occasions. It is considered to be auspicious. It is an important part of housekeeping along with the practice of *ghar līpnā* (spreading of a mixture of cow dung and red mud on the floors and white chalk mixture on the walls for maintenance of walls and floors). As housekeeping is the domain of women, they are the creators of this art form. The *pichorā* is a stole/dupatta worn by married Kumaoni women at special and auspicious occasions. It is a symbol of auspicious wifehood. It is made by dyeing a white dupatta yellow and then small red dots were painted on it using a coin. It was further decorated with *aepañ* like art using. It was a unique piece of garment, each of a kind as no two would be similar. Traditionally it was made by women and gifted to the new bride as an integral part of her trousseau that she would bring to her new home. Nowadays, however, readymade printed ones are more popular and mostly a small piece is created at the wedding as a symbolic gesture.

1.3 Women's Speech and Social Behaviour and Difference from Men

Traditionally, women have held lower status in the social hierarchy, and this is reflected in the social segregation of the genders and the difference in accepted norms of behaviour for women. In general women are expected to be more controlled, speak less, be modest and discreet. Loudness, talkativeness, and outspokenness are regarded as improper behaviour. Specially in public. These rules are stricter for daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters of the household. Even in cases where the control of the household is under the woman, an outwardly pretence of the man having control and the last word will be maintained. However, we do see examples where women's speech and behaviour may be unregulated and yet socially acceptable. Also, we see that there are certain terms that may be used in the context of women alone and are not applicable to men.

1 *jāgar* Ritual

This is one of the most important ritual ceremonies of Kumaoni people. It is a body possession ritual conducted to worship ancestors, lineage deities and village deities. It can be held at the household level as well at the village/community level. Women generally, have smaller and background roles in religious rituals and specific areas are marked for the seating of women and men.

We see that there is a greater active role that men play in the *jāgar* than the women do. There is lesser reprimand and patrolling of men's behaviour and such is also extended to regulations and restrictions about participation.

Women will mostly sit quietly and fulfil the duty of a good spectator. Talking, gossiping is avoided, and respect and deference is shown. However, women who are mediums are treated differently from women in the audience. Amongst mediums that are vehicles for deities there is no differentiation on the basis of gender. Women *dangariyā*⁴⁹ are at an equal status as the other *dangariyā* are. They treated equally and there is a generic similarity in body movement and speech of male and female *dangariyā*.

There is spatial restriction in the sense of the arena where the deities dance and non-mediums do not go there. During *jāgar* any possessions/incarnations that happen outside of the *dhuni*⁵⁰ area restricted. or it is attempted that they be pacified or controlled. Also, they are restricted in terms of area and location as these people's movement is limited to that space/spot while it is not so for the *dangariyā*. If they wish to move about the audience or go to the temple or move about, they are allowed to. Women in the audiences who get affected by the proceedings are controlled and asked to restrain themselves. However, the female *dangariyā* is not restricted in this manner.

Another important point is the breaking down of the accepted women's behaviour in case of women mediums. Close bodily contact with men and loud behaviour that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate between men and women is acceptable in case of female mediums. For example, hugging and touching, dancing, and embracing which would be otherwise inappropriate is not considered so and is accepted. The second point in this regard is the breaking down of the regular social and family hierarchy in terms of deference and stylized use of age and gender appropriate language in such scenarios. For instance, no matter the age difference, the deity/medium is always accorded higher deference and addressed appropriately even while there will be a role reversal in other social situations. As a deity a woman has greater voice and agency as she is heard and listened to and her word is the law. Her behaviour will not be considered out of line or inappropriate. She will either address her elders by their names and without the use of honorifics or will use the term *syonkār* for them.

Gendered self and expressions of femininity in *jāgar*: from the perspective of being a woman, possession by a deity grants women medium immense command and control over the gathering. They are the centre in the proceedings and are free to express themselves in whatever

⁴⁹ The medium is called *dangariyā* and the term can be used for both men and women mediums.

⁵⁰ The sacred fire that is lit, around which the deities dance.

way they like. There is a marked change in attitude, behavior, body language, and language use etc. also there is a marked extension and subversion of social protocols. It is observed that women embrace men, have physical contact with them forgoing restrictions which generally are applicable, especially towards the father in law and elder brother in law⁵¹. It is not to say that also, they can directly address a crowd, and would not be interrupted. They also have the freedom to express whatever views they have on all kinds of issues, personal, financial, displeasure, anger, happiness. There is a remarkable freedom achieved in terms of freedom of body movement and posture and body language. Most observable is the much freer body movement in the form of dancing and moving around in circles, extended uses of hand gestures and lot of head-banging. All movements are uninhibited, unlike in regular social settings where women are expected to be well behaved and not exhibit any kind of rowdiness, loudness or brashness. Another aspect that can be looked into this the change in speech. Women, who are under possession of a male deity, use the male markers in speech and make use of direct address to concerned people, especially elder men, whom they otherwise might not address like that, also there is complete reversal of roles as the men address these women in respectful, referent manner/speech, and use of honorifics is made. Instead, if the women, persuading and coaxing men to listen to them, it is the men, who are pleading their case to these women and seeking advice, help and assistance. They speak with a milder manner, with a difference in their body language.

2. The Practice Of *wahāṇ* ⁵²:

This speech act involves a public rebuking or lambasting of a wrongdoer. It is done by women who go out to a common village area and delivers their tongue lashing without addressing the accused/culprit directly. The accused is not named, but the public rebuking is understood to be directed towards a specific person who is generally is aware of it too. it is a publicly performed act of cursing and criticizing someone who has done you wrong or caused you damage in some way⁵³; for example, some causes damage to your crops or steals your harvest or fruits or refused to assist. the rebuking follows a particular sequence:

1. The speaker rhetorically questions who dared to cause them damage. E.g., “who was this evil soul who dared to enter my fields and damage my crops?”
2. The speaker then proceeds to provide in great detail the description of their crops or goods or whatever has been damaged and how they hard they had worked for it.

⁵¹ The taboo nature of the relationship with husband’s elder brother can be understood from the fact that there is no term of address that women may use for their husband’s elder brother. The kinship term is *jethan* which is a term of reference but not of address.

⁵² It can be seen in contrast to *dhāt*, which is the practice of calling someone aloud or hollering to get someone’s attention. It is commonly practiced by everyone. Whereas, very rarely would one observe a man indulge in a *wahāṇ*

⁵³ *ujjyād* is the term used for the damage caused.

3. The speaker then with a lot of anger and chiding curses the wrongdoer and his family/clan etc.

This practice is limited to women who take this opportunity to take out their anger and frustration in a non-confrontational manner. A direct conversation with someone could result in feuds and further deterioration of relations. Also, frequent indulgence in direct confrontations could result in bad-mouthing of the woman as a quarrelsome woman who likes to fight. However, such a practice is an acceptable cultural practice and is seen as a rightful act on the part of the speaker.

3. The *hāk* or Evil-Eye and *juk*

People in the region believe in the concept of evil eye. Women are more prone to believing in this than men are. The evil eye can be intentional or unintentional. It is believed to stem from conscious or unconscious jealousy as well as pride one may feel. It affects a person's general health causing unexplained illness, lethargy, irritability, nausea etc. Thus, it is believed that even your own parents can affect you with it unintentionally, if they see you doing well or praise you or admire you. Evil eye affects all people, households, cattle and produce as well. Women are mostly the ones who do the ritual to get rid of it in the house. Or another woman who is known to be powerful in this regard will be approached. There are certain chants and prayers that one says while performing the ritual and it is mostly women who do it and have knowledge about it. It is mostly done by waving whole red chillies over the patient's head and putting them in the fire to burn. Women may have special amulets and special charms to ward off evil eye. Treatment of *hāk* is mostly done by women and – can be seen as a subversion of medicinal systems which have traditionally regarded women as incompetent and incapable of treating ill people. It also is an example of how women can take control of their lives and practices which are gendered and find alternatives for the practices which have generally excluded them. Additionally, we also see that it forms an important part of the traditional knowledge of the Kumaoni society and women. Similarly, the practice of treating *juk* is also performed by women, who know the details of the words and the prayers that are used in the chant for the treatment.

4. Women's Social Functions and Events

There are a number of social events/practices that are exclusive to women or predominantly performed by women. There is a highly gendered nature of work in the region with a segregation of spaces and hierarchical division of status and tasks. But here only women's events/practices focusing on women's speech are being elaborated upon here.

1. Social life-cycle functions: Women are the primary workers in a number of social life-cycle events and hold important roles.

- a. Women singers called *mangleru* sing auspicious songs at rituals like weddings (including wedding-subevents), tonsure ceremony for toddlers, christening/naming ceremonies for newborns. They sit alongside the main participants and sing while the rituals are being performed. They sing songs extending invitations to all gods and deities seeking blessings and good luck. They also sing songs for a successful completion of ceremonies and happiness of all. This singing tradition is passed down through generations through observation and practical learning and doesn't involve any kind of formal training. Most women learn these songs from mothers/grandmothers/aunts/sisters whom they observe singing and attend functions with them.
- b. Weddings predominantly are women-oriented functions. Women are the main participants in the festivities and men hold more background roles and handle the logistics. *mahila sangīt*, *ratvāi*, *sungal pathāi*, *mangal snān* and *samdhi lāru* are events associated with women.
 - i. ***mahila sangīt*** is a women's only party held a day or two before the wedding. It is mostly held in the afternoon or evening. Women gather together and sing and dance to popular songs and wedding songs. It is marked by a freer, informal speech along with joking and banter. Women may also indulge in some jesting role-play and mimicry of men or other women. However, it is a more large-scale event wherein neighbours or outside guests may be invited.
 - ii. ***ratvāi*** is also a similar event but is held in the house of the groom on the night the wedding procession leaves for the bride's place. It is a more private affair with the men being absent and is a means of passing time as they wait for the wedding party to return with the bride. Traditionally, women were not a part of the wedding processions (*bārāt*) and stayed back. A *ratvāi* is similar to a *mahila sangīt* but more informal and hence includes sexual role-playing and mimicry of husbands and men and women dressing up as men and dancing acting.
 - iii. ***sungal pathāi*** is a women's ritual/ceremony wherein married women kin of the bride/groom gather together to prepare a special kind of thin unleavened bread called *sungal* which are used as food-offerings to gods and later distributed to all attendees. Women sing ritual songs and hold a small prayer service at the event. They also dress up in a fully traditional attire for the ceremony.
 - iv. ***mangal snān*** is a ritualized bathing given to the bride/groom where the women of the household apply a 'blessed' turmeric paste on the bride/groom who is seated in a huge brass plate. It is marked by the presence of *mangleru*-women who sing auspicious songs.

- v. *samdhi lāru* are a special gag gift made by the women kin of the bride/groom and is presented to the parents-in-law of the bride/groom. Imitation dolls of the parents-in-law are made out of a specially prepared sweetmeat balls. Often the parents-in-law are depicted or dressed in insulting manner. For example, a cigarette or a miniature alcohol bottle might be placed in the hand of the father-in-law. Or the mother-in-law would be dressed in an excessively fashionable manner or garishly. Or at times an inappropriate or excessive age gap may be shown between the parents-in-law etc. These are exchanged between the wedding parties and everyone waits to see who has a made a better doll set. It is way of lightening the mood and is a good means of breaking down the ice between the families.
- c. *mahilā hori* – the Indian festival of Holi is marked by a special tradition in the Kumaon region where there is a special categorization of the festival in the form of *mahilā hori*, i.e., women’s *hori*. *mahilā hori* only has women participants who gather in large groups and sing *hori* and dance. They sing all kinds of popular and religious songs and *hori* songs. *hori* songs as important examples of women’s expression of sexual desire have been discussed earlier in the paper in a previous section. In recent times, the *hori* tradition in certain regions has been incorporating presenting of organized cultural programs/social events by women in the community wherein different kinds of cultural performances like group singing, dancing, dance dramas or plays and skits. They conceptualize and execute these events as well as the plays and skits. The themes may range from humorous and religious to social issues aimed at spreading awareness amongst the audiences. For example, one such satirical play was based on the demonetization implemented by the Government of India in the year 2016.

5. Women Specific Terms in Kumaoni

Women also are the main workers in the region which is reflected in the use of certain Kumaoni terms which are used to refer to certain skill sets particular to women. And to be addressed as one is a matter of pride and respect. Examples:

1. The term *kirsān* is used only for women who is extremely hardworking and dedicated.
2. The term *bhyokhuli* is used for a woman who is a highly skilled mountain/cliff climber and can reach highly inaccessible parts of mountains for gathering grass.
3. The term *ḍaukhuli* is used for a woman who is a skilled tree climber and can reach the topmost branches of trees for cutting down fuelwood and cattle fodder.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of alternative perspectives on women’s representations in the Kumaoni folklore, mythology and oral traditions and regards women’s

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narratives and lived experiences as important sources for the same. The folklore of Kumaon is replete with multidimensional representations of women and presents to us great insights into the Kumaoni worldview, culture, and society. At the same time, we see that these tales are a window into the world and these windows are mirrors that reflect to us or lives and being. Women's folklore of the region presents to a different view of the Kumaoni women, one that breaks down the stereotypical image of women as submissive and powerless. The centrality of nature, land and human relations is primary in women's lives. Women's narratives also show the importance of one-on-one relations and shared experiences amongst women in the creation of knowledge and preservation of knowledge about the region and the culture of Kumaon. Another aspect looked at is the impact of these alternative representations on imagined identity of Kumaoni women. It provides insights into women's agency, subjectivities and self-determination. It also shows how as a more disadvantaged gender/section of society, women present challenge to authority, and resistance to existing dominant structures of society. Another important aspect was to create a space for the expression and voicing of women's histories and stories; to highlight women's lived experiences as traditionally they have been not been considered important or credible sources of knowledge. Highlighting women's knowledge, intelligence and skills and how they formulate a legacy that is passed down from one generation to the next, through the mothers to daughters and then granddaughters. This would help us better understand our societies and also create better ones. In this regard focus on women's relationships with other women as individuals and as a community are also shown to be of importance. Often representations of women's relationships and associations are presented in a negative manner and they are pitched against each other as rivals or enemies. Here it has been attempted to bring out other narratives where women have supported each other and helped each other out.

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