

Hidden Desires: Analyzing Sexuality in Rajput Folk Wedding Songs

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Abstract



This paper is based on the thematic study of Rajput folk wedding songs that are sung at weddings and express sexual content which otherwise is a taboo among Rajputs living in Bhakkar, Punjab. Through an analysis of their lyrics, and symbolic representations, this research elucidates the dual function of folk songs: as entertainment and vehicles for sexual knowledge dissemination among the Rajputs. The research is a qualitative study employs the snowball sampling technique, recording of folk wedding songs from Rajput household women, and one professional singer. This research concludes that these folk wedding songs are characterized by entertainment and humor aligned with prevailing moral standards, however the interpretation of the songs in Rajput cultural context reveal that girls through imagination and education via folk wedding songs also express their desires of sexuality. In contrast, men however, socially allowed and are acceptable in facilitation of their hypersexual activities even through their wives.

Keywords: Rajputs, Folk wedding songs, Sexuality, Gender, Pakistan

Introduction

Folk wedding songs within Rajput traditional society serve many functions. Rajput folk wedding songs showcase a vibrant tapestry that weaves together themes of love, sexual desire, intermingled in cultural traditions. The multifaceted significance of folk wedding songs within Rajput society is rather apparent as they are carriers of oral tradition, preserve Rajput history, reinforce cultural identity, and celebrate the ideals of honor and chivalry upheld by Rajput warriors. Folk wedding songs serve as a form of cultural expression, entertainment, and offer resistance against cultural loss, ensuring the continuity of Rajput customs and values across generations. They help keep the Rajput culture intact by ensuring that the younger generations are aware of their cultural heritage and feel pride in it.

Folk wedding songs reflect the emotions, aspirations, and joys of the community. These wedding songs sung on weddings become a source of entertainment and celebration in Rajput society adding vibrancy to social gathering. These songs often depict romantic yearning, the joy of companionship, and the anticipation of marital union. They may use poetic imagery and metaphors to convey the intensity of emotions between the bride and groom, celebrating their physical and emotional bond.

These songs, through their lyric's express emotions and desires which otherwise may not be allowed to converse. Rajput Folks wedding songs specially give a discourse of gender resistance to Rajput women who are considered as voiceless and less resistant against patriarchal mindset. Sexuality is one of the prominent themes in folk wedding songs which is part and parcel of the songs. These wedding songs not only accompany the rituals of marriage but also reflect and reinforce societal attitudes towards sexuality. The portrayal of sexuality in Rajput folk wedding songs is often influenced by gender dynamics and societal expectations. These songs may reinforce gender roles, with men depicted as assertive and romantic, while women are portrayed as nurturing and virtuous. However, these roles are not static and can be subverted or challenged through lyrical innovation and performance.

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The diverse ways in which sexuality is expressed and celebrated through folk wedding songs, examines their cultural significance and the insights they offer into man and woman relationships. Through their lyrical narratives and musical expressions, these songs capture the essence of sexuality as a fundamental aspect of marital union and societal cohesion. Sometimes through these wedding folksongs, women ridicule and challenge the ethos of an ideal Rajput woman who is expected to control her sexual desires for the honor of her family (Butler, 1090).

In many cultures like Rajputs, direct references to sexuality in wedding songs may be veiled in symbolism and metaphor. Metaphorical and allegorical expressions play a very essential part in conveying subtle messages through folk wedding songs (Ortner, 1973). These kinds of dissenting strategies can be a form of “feminist coding” (Radner and Lanser, 1987) a “hidden transcript” (Scott, 1991) or “veiled sentiments” (Abu Lughod, 1986) which women may learn and use through folksongs. Nature imagery, such as flowers and color, is often employed to depict the beauty and fertility associated with marital love. These symbols not only convey the sensual aspects of relationships but also connect love to the natural world, highlighting its universality and timeless appeal.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this study lies in its examination of Rajput folk wedding songs contain sexual content and serve as a rare cultural medium for discussing sexuality among Rajput women. These songs perform a dual role: providing entertainment and disseminating sexual knowledge, despite the cultural taboos surrounding open discussions of sexuality. By analyzing the lyrics and symbolic representations, the research highlights how these songs allow women to express their sexual desires and gain education on sexual matters in a culturally acceptable manner.

In a society where women’s sexual expression is often restricted, these folk songs offer an imaginative and socially sanctioned outlet for exploring sexuality. The study also underscores the gender disparities within the Rajput community, revealing how men’s hypersexual activities are socially accepted, while women’s sexual expressions are confined to these songs. This contrast sheds light on the societal double standards and provides a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in the community.

Additionally, this research contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage by documenting and analyzing these traditional songs. In an era where oral traditions are at risk of disappearing, this study ensures that future generations can access and appreciate the rich cultural heritage of the Rajput community.

Statement of the Problem

The problem addressed in this study is the exploration of how Rajput folk wedding songs serve as a means of expressing and disseminating sexual knowledge among women in Bhakkar, Punjab, despite the cultural taboo, and the contrasting social acceptance of hypersexual activities among Rajput men.

Objectives

There are two objectives of this research.

1. To examine the role of Rajput folk wedding songs in disseminating sexual knowledge among Rajput women.
2. To explore the expression of sexual desires in folk wedding songs, contrasting with the socially accepted hypersexual activities of Rajput men.

Research Questions

Research questions of the study are under.

1. How do Rajput folk wedding songs function as a means of disseminating sexual knowledge and expressing sexual desires among Rajput women?
2. What are the cultural and social implications of the gender disparities in the expression of sexuality as reflected in Rajput folk wedding songs, particularly contrasting the accepted hypersexual activities of men with the imaginative expressions of women?

Theoretical Framework

To analyze sexuality in folk wedding songs, a robust theoretical framework with interdisciplinary nature may be used. This research draws its analysis based on folklore studies, cultural anthropology and gender studies. The theoretical framework involves Judith Butler (1990) Gender Performance Theory that emphasizes how folk wedding songs are performed and construct gender and sexual

identities. The other framework employed is of Sherry Ortner (1973) essay on 'Key Symbols' explains how cultural symbols multiple meanings for people have living in a cultural context.

Review of Literature

The cultural tapestry of Rajputs is reflected in its rich tradition of folk wedding songs, investigating not only themes when sexuality but portrayal of sexuality also. Jain (2012) explores how Punjabi wedding songs, particularly the "Suhag" and "Ghodian" songs, articulate notions of femininity, sexuality, and matrimonial ideals. These songs often emphasize the bride's virginity and the groom's virility, reinforcing traditional gender norms while also celebrating the joyous aspects of sexual union. According to Chatterjee (2015), Bengali wedding songs known as "Biye Geet" use symbolic language to convey sexual themes. Flowers and natural elements serve as metaphors for the bride's purity and the fertility expectations in marriage. Chatterjee's (2015) work highlights how these songs blend sensuality with societal expectations of chastity and modesty.

A study by Roy (2018) examines how modern influences are reshaping traditional wedding songs in India. With the advent of digital media and globalization, contemporary wedding songs increasingly reflect more progressive views on sexuality and gender roles. However, Roy (2018) notes that traditional elements persist, maintaining cultural continuity.

Srilata (2020) analyses Tamil wedding songs, or "Kalyana Paatu," highlighting their dual role in celebrating sexuality and reinforcing societal norms. These songs often include playful and explicit references to sexual relationships, balanced by a reverence for marital duties and familial expectations.

Rodriguez (2017) work on "The Erotic in Folk Music: Changes in Expression from 2000 to 2018" examines how modern folk songs approach erotic themes, often adopting more explicit language compared to the subtle treatment of eroticism in traditional songs. Similarly, Brown (2018) in "Lyricism and Sexuality: A Content Analysis of Folk Songs (2000-2018)" presents a comprehensive review of sexual themes in folk song lyrics.

Thompson (2013) in his "Field Notes on Folk Music and Sexuality in Rural America" combines interviews and observations to explore local attitudes towards sexual content in folk music. Additionally, historical contextualization through comparative studies highlights changes and continuities in the portrayal of sexuality. Walker (2011) research study "From Past to Present: The Evolution of Sexual Themes in Folk Music" compares folk songs from different eras to trace the evolution of sexual themes.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study focused on Rajput household women who could sing or narrate folksongs through in-depth interviews and informal conversations. These women had learned folksongs informally from relatives during their youth, rather being formally trained. An exception was a "doomni", a professional singer known as *dadi*, who had a long history of performing at Rajput family events but was no longer invited due to changing social and religious norms. These folk wedding songs are part of the PhD fieldwork (2020) commenced in Bhakkar and was preferably in the singers' homes involving multiple visits to various household Rajput women singers.

Sampling Technique

Snowball sampling technique was employed, relying on referrals to identify participants, particularly given the rarity and difficulty of finding suitable subjects. The sample size was intentionally kept small to facilitate detailed qualitative analysis and due to the limited number of Rajput women available and willing to participate.

Five (5) folk wedding songs were selected that contained sexuality theme explicitly. They are recorded, documented and analyzed according to the themes by help of the key informant and Rajput women who sang these wedding songs. The interpretation of the wedding songs by native Rajput women ensures the original cultural context.

Discussion and Analysis

Sexuality has always been a significant topic in folk wedding songs, reflecting the intimate and often complex aspects of man -woman relationship and social norms. Its importance stems from various cultural, historical, and psychological reasons.

The taboo surrounding sexuality among Rajputs is a multifaceted issue rooted in a complex interplay of traditional values, patriarchal societal structures, historical experiences, cultural norms, and religious beliefs. The emphasis on honor and reputation, the regulation of female sexuality, the

historical practice of Jauhar, conservative cultural attitudes, and religious teachings all contribute to a social environment where sexuality remains a private and sensitive matter. Understanding these factors provides insight into why sexuality continues to be a taboo topic among Rajputs and highlights the deep-seated cultural and historical influences that shape their attitudes towards this subject.

However, expression of sexuality is different for men and women. The disparity in how male and female sexuality is treated reflects deep-seated cultural, historical, and institutional biases. Men's sexuality is often normalized and valorized, while women's sexuality is subjected to stricter controls and greater scrutiny (Srilata, 2010). This imbalance is perpetuated by traditional gender roles, patriarchal structures, religious teachings, and societal norms, which together reinforce the notion that men's sexuality is less taboo than women's. The folk wedding songs which are going to be discussed here show the disparity in how male and female sexuality is treated reflects deep-seated cultural, historical, and institutional biases. Men's sexuality is often normalized and valorized, while women's sexuality is subjected to stricter controls and greater scrutiny.

In Rajput cultural context, folk wedding songs become the only way in which men and specially women sexuality explicitly is talked about with sanctioned social approval. Rajput folk wedding songs capture and convey attitudes towards sexuality and relationships of wedded and courtship couples. By examining these wedding songs, one can discern the implicit and explicit messages about acceptable behavior and social mores regarding sexuality (Walker, 2011). Singing about love and sexual desire allows individuals to express and process complex emotions. Folk songs provide an outlet for the emotional turmoil associated with sexuality. (Brown, 2018). These songs can be instrumental in self-understanding and in fostering a sense of belonging and identity among listeners. Folk wedding songs about sexuality can challenge taboos and promote discussions on important issues. Protest songs addressing gender inequality and sexual freedom have historically been part of social movements (Smith, 2010).

Folk wedding songs of this research study have been categorized in 3 subthemes where sexuality is the major theme. the subthemes are as below.

Theme 1. Courtship Fantasies

Courtship rituals and ceremonies are portrayed in the folk songs, illustrating the structured and formalized approach to romantic relationships within Rajput society. Expressions of love and exchange of gifts are key aspects of courtship depicted in the songs. Courtship in Rajput folksongs serve not only as a means of romantic expression of women but also encapsulate the ideals and aspirations associated with courtship (Jain, 2012).

Women who live in a conservative society are not allowed to go outside their home without a male family member and would not get any chance of meeting stranger men. Therefore, the imaginary romantic encounter remains in her mind as an unfulfilled desire. The lyrics of the folksong below narrate that bride to be is desperate to meet her groom before formal wedding to fulfill her desire of courtship. Besides gratitude and praise, this song expresses romantic and sexual desires of the bride and groom which otherwise are hard to vent out. The lyrics from such a song is as under:

Aa jao rey mera banra aa yu rey

Ahey... main bulaya ikla dukla

Haye... baaje gaaje layla ya

Translation

Come on (friends) my groom has arrived

I asked him to come alone but he brought (wedding) band with him

This wedding song portrays a bold and daring bride-to-be, who invites the groom to meet her secretly before the wedding day, but he brings the wedding band and relatives with him. Therefore, the bride makes fun of him that he does not have the courage and confidence to meet her alone and mocks him for his cowardice however, the deeper theme that lies therein is that she is subtly instigating the groom for a secret meeting before marriage to enjoy some romantic time in privacy. In traditional Rajput culture where couples live in extended family system, they find little to no time together¹. The new bride remains under the watchful eyes of her mother or sister-in-law and spends her time serving and meeting the guests. Therefore, the desire of the young bride to spend time with

¹ The opinion is based on the women's interviews, in which they shared their marital life experiences.

her husband remains unfulfilled. Therefore, in her courtship fantasy she wants to spend her romantic time alone with her groom before the wedding.

Theme 2. Navigating Social Norms and women Sexual Desire

Folk wedding songs also communicate obscure references to ‘illicit’ relationship, which generally is considered a deviation from Rajput social norms. It may be assumed that this kind of expression may solely be a reaction to the unfulfilled marital and romantic desires of the newly married couples living in joint family systems. A song narrates wishful thinking of a woman who has desperate sexual desires.

Jub ree jawani meri taloon pe otre
Mali ka larka harami, abhi tou meri nae rey jawan
Gande ka fool asmani, abhi tou meri nae re jawani

Translation

When a youthful girl (like me) goes to the garden
Gardener’s boy is very alluring, and I just got my full youthfulness
Marigold flower has come from the sky, I just got my full youthfulness

This song, the girl boasts of her youthfulness and beauty and expresses her discontented desires of romantic love explicitly. The lyric of the song repeatedly refers to the men belonging to lower social caste who try to allure her when she goes to different places like wells, roads, palaces, and gardens. In this song, the referred symbols are manifested in various cultural traditions. The Rajput girl knows that there is no possibility of meeting a man inside her home as it is guarded. Therefore, the young girl talks about embarking on a precarious journey (which might put her own self and her family’s honor in jeopardy) about going to potentially ‘dangerous places’ that come in public domain and are occupied by men, since these are the only places where she can meet strangers (men). Although, comprehending the situation very well, the girl still believes that these places are where she might meet the man of her dreams and start a romantic relationship with.

The most interesting aspect of this song is that despite her own ill-intentions, the girl does not fail to curse the man for luring and tempting her; when she is the one trying to seduce them through her youthfulness and beauty. The girl, due to her perpetually unfulfilled sexual and romantic desires, faces an emotional dilemma. She wants to show respect to her traditions and customs while at the same time, wishes to meet men and have a relationship with them. Keeping the social reality in mind, she cannot voice such emotions openly but through the medium of folksongs, expresses her unethical emotions.

The wish of Rajput women to have illicit relations with socially low- caste men servants (washerman, gardener, tailor and sweeper) who work in the homes of the Rajput families has been explained by Singh ji (1994). Historically speaking, Singhji (1993) does not negate the possibility of relations between Rajput women with their servants and claims that Rajput women may have had warm feelings for the home servants. There was a time when Rajput landlords used to take opium and other drugs. This practice might have resulted in ignoring their wives and a greater possibility that the Rajput women, might have developed romantic links with the servants. Along these lines, it may be reasonable to presume that such practices became part of the Rajput history, thus following their way into the folksongs.

The other most significant aspect reflected in the song is the expressed sexual desire through symbolism. For example, symbols of *gajinda* (marigold) flower denotes fertility and has been frequently used rather than directly communicating sexual activity. Sex is a taboo and hardly allowed to express openly especially by the Rajput women. Nonetheless, in the song mentioned above, the girl is seducing men through her youth and beauty.

In another wedding song, the women explicitly talk about a young man who has a strong physique that arouses her sexual desire. the songs narrate as below.

Topi wale jawan apni topi ko sanbhal
Terey panthoon² pey aaj mori jaan jaey gee
Kankeryan na maar mohey lag jaey gee
Jis ki moti kamar wo tou seh jaey gee
Meri patli kamar hey bal kha jaey gee

² Muscles

Translation

Young man with turban, take care of your turban

I will die for your muscular physique

Don't throw pebbles on me

A fat woman may be able bear this pain

But my smart waist will be twisted with pain

The woman in this song addresses a Rajput man to take care of his turban and muscular physique. The woman also says that he should not throw pebbles to attract her (she knows that he is around and looking for her). She is already infatuated by his well-built personality and handsome features. She also admires herself as being smart and beautiful. The woman also subtly conveys sexual signals, that since she is a delicate woman, so he must behave like a gentleman while spending the night with her. Throughout the song, the woman/bride admires the man's physical traits (strong muscles, moustache, beady eyes, powerful gait, sexual prowess and big genitals) and cultural traits such as his dressing sense (turban and *dhoti*) and his lifestyle in the past.

In the Rajput cultural context, the most important part of man's attractiveness lies in his physical strength because having a strong physique implies that he will be able to control his land and his possessions including his woman. Recurringly, I heard the word "*mard*"³ and "*mardangi*"⁴ in routine conversation with Rajput men and women whether talking to them informally or conducting interviews with them. Chowdhury (2015:18) defines these words in the *Haryanvi* background of East Punjab (India) and describes that *mard* is associated with power, a man who has status, land and authority and has influence on other people around. While *mardangi* refers to man's virility, sexual prowess and his ability to procreate. The vigor of Rajput men has been metaphorically related to his strong sexual drive and physical strength. For Rajput men to prove his sexual prowess, he must procreate at least one son to prove his sexual competence. Such proverb in Bhakkar confirms this argument "*wo marrd bhi ka jo chora na jamein*" (if a man is unable to produce a son, he is not a man at all). Therefore, getting married and producing children (specifically a son) is proof of *mardangi* in local context.

Minturn and Kapoor (1993) present an interesting analogy between the 19th century America and Europe and the Rajput culture, both restricting the sexual expression of women. According to Minturn and Kapoor (1993) it was often believed for the middle-class women with no or less sexual desires is honorable and respectful. In comparison, lower social class women were assumed to have a high sex drive and considered socially less noble. The same tradition also acknowledges that men have more and stronger sex drive than women. Therefore, the nobility of women was the detrimental factor for family honor with less or controlled sexual desires.

Similarly, since the Rajput considered themselves among the noble clans, the family honor was associated to women's sexuality. Rajput cultural ethos have been markedly influenced by Hindu beliefs which warn about the power of sexual prowess of women named as *shakti*⁵ and stresses the need to control the sexual expression of women. This psychic sexual power (*shakti*) is exclusive to upper or upper-middle-class Rajput women, thereby putting them under the pressure of guarding their behavior and attitude which should not disgrace them or their family.

Theme 3. Cultural Construction of Hypersexuality in Rajput Men

Rajputs culturally believe that men have stronger sexual drive than women and it is reflected in folk wedding songs (Chowdhury, 2015). Ruiter and Shefer (1998) conducted interviews on women and men's sexuality and recorded the respondent's views. Their views are in some way like my respondent's comments about the promiscuous nature of the Rajput men. For instance, the participants under study believed "men are focused on sex", "need more sex", "are always ready to have sex" and the most common one being the 'have a strong sexual drive'.

The wedding song below conveys hidden message of groom to the bride's female relatives exposing his hypersexual attitude. The song narrates.

Bana ree mera butna manga badan manga sath

Bana ree mera butna manga nayan managa sath

³ Masculine man

⁴ Maleness

⁵ Power

Translation

My groom asks for badan⁶ along with butna

My groom asks for the barber's wife along with butna⁷

The song reflects upon the subtle sexual sentiments of groom towards the bride's female relatives. The bride boasts off her groom's strong sexual power and mischievously speaks about her husband sexual need who may require her female relatives along with the bride. Here, it might be needed to mention that a strong sexual drive is one of the traits of the Rajput manhood and can be expressed openly. A man also does not have to face negative social sanctions if he wishes to have or has more than one sexual partner. Rather having strong sexual drive is boasting off for manhood.

Besides, Rajput men are considered hypersexual as reflected in couple of folk wedding songs. One of the interesting features i.e. facilitation from the wife who arranges for her husband 'hypersexual nature. This feature is unique and has been narrated in a wedding song in which a wife becomes facilitator of her husband for having extramarital relations with the other women (which she chooses herself) if she is unable to have physical relations with him. This kind of suggestion through folk wedding songs is conveyed to the new bride, that this may happen or if this happens to her, she must select women of the socially low-caste for her husband sexual need. The folk wedding song narrates as below.

Raja kissi malan sey milna ho gaa

Mere Raja ke din hen bahar ke

Malan tera kia jae gaa

Merey raja ka dil reh jae gaa

Main tou chug aae daaney annar ke

Mere raja ke din hen baahaar ke

Translation

My king! I have to meet a gardener's wife

These days are my king's youth days

Gardener's wife! you would not lose anything

My king will have some good days

I have taken some pomegranate seeds (I got pregnant)

These days are my king's youth days

In this song, the wife is linking up a woman of lower social class like a gardener's wife for a temporary sexual liaison with her husband. It would not cost the gardener's wife anything, but the king husband will have a good time as he is very young and sexually active. The lyrics of the song further reveal that the wife is pregnant, which is symbolically explained as eating pomegranate seeds. In the description of the song, it seems that the wife is substantially influenced by the existing social belief that men have strong sex drive than women and cannot restrain themselves from sex for a long time. The wife knows that her husband is young and would not stop seeing women due to his strong sex drive. Realizing this assumption, she does not want him to have extra-marital relations with a woman who would be equal to her social status as she knows this would create domestic and social problems for her.

Therefore, she herself takes the responsibility of finding a lower-class woman for a temporary sexual liaison. In this way, she may have her surveillance as well as control over the women and on her husband. The selection of a socially low-caste woman for her husband suits Rajput wife as a lower social class woman would not dare to claim inheritance from the family. Besides, this woman would be easy to get away from and would not prove to be a threat to Rajput wife status and family's position. Therefore, the situation presented in this folksong has a deep history to refer. Detha (2015) explains that the elite/royal Rajputs, used to have many servants/maids for their household service. Sometimes, women of lower social class were sexually molested and exploited by their masters. Many maids in the house of the royal families were forced to have illicit relationships with the elite men of the family.

⁶ A woman who prepares colorful chair on which groom sits for rituals

⁷ Butna is a prewedding ceremony

Conclusion

The exploration of sexuality in Rajput folk wedding songs offers a rich tapestry of cultural expressions and nuances within Rajput society. By delving into the representation of love, desire, and sensuality, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the cultural dynamics of Rajput folk wedding songs. The lyrics of these songs reveal that the expression of sexuality differs significantly between men and women. While hypersexuality in men is often socially approved and even celebrated, the expression of courtship, romantic love, and sexuality by women is generally not tolerated.

However, the platform of folk wedding songs during weddings provides a unique opportunity for women to express their own unfulfilled desires as well as comment on men's sexuality. These songs become a subtle yet powerful medium through which women can voice their feelings and experiences that are otherwise suppressed by societal norms. The wedding context, steeped in tradition and celebration, allows for a temporary suspension of usual restrictions, giving women a rare chance to articulate aspects of their inner lives and desires. Through the lyrical content of these songs, we can observe a dual dynamic at play: the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and the subversion of these roles through the candid expression of personal and collective experiences. Rajput folk wedding songs thus serve as a fascinating cultural artifact, reflecting both the constraints and the creative agency within Rajput society.

Recommendation for Future Research

Future research could explore whether similar patterns of sexual knowledge dissemination and gender dynamics are present in folk wedding songs of other Rajput communities across different regions of Pakistan and India, revealing regional variations and commonalities in cultural practices and gender norms. Additionally, examining the intergenerational transmission of these songs and their role in shaping the sexual education of younger Rajput women, as well as the impact of modernization and globalization on these traditions, would provide valuable insights. Cross-cultural comparisons with other patriarchal societies, investigating men's perspectives on these songs, studying the role of professional singers, and assessing the psychological impact on Rajput women would offer a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and personal significance of these folk wedding songs.

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