

Women of Garhwal: Re-conceptualizing the idea of being a woman

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Abstract

How women belonging to Uttarakhand Garhwal, during contemporary times, have attempted to re-define, re-formulate and ultimately fix their identity? The research paper will carry out an analysis of one of the famous mythical folklore of Uttarakhand, "Nanda Devi Raj Jaat", (which is being practiced even today) in accord with the revolutionary Chipko movement of state which was primarily carried out by women. It will thus take into consideration the traditional concept of a woman and how the women in contemporary times have made attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal notion of binary (depicted in the traditional folktales or mythical stories of the area of study). Thus, the aim of the research paper is to uncover women's culture by re-thinking and re-evaluating the traditional concept of a woman. This will be achieved by exploring the bonds of sisterhood among the women belonging to the area of study, which serves as the source of their strength and their personal experiences, which are a source of awareness and knowledge for them, as well as for the rest of the women in the community. The study will argue that women's culture has the traits of both male as well as female culture, and therefore, the women's culture is a part of general culture and not a subculture. In other words, women fit into both the roles in the society— the role of a 'nurturer', which is traditionally accorded to women, as well as the role of a 'redeemer', which is traditionally male's domain.

Keywords: Woman, Garhwal, Nanda Devi Raj Jaat, Traditional role, Identity, Women's culture

1. Introduction

'Woman', as commonly understood and generally accepted in our society, is a term in the English language or any other language with different phonetics, to define a particular group of Human Beings. The general and the most common interpretation of the term evolves from the biological sex of a person and then goes on further to set norms of behaviour, lifestyle, social conduct and family responsibilities. These norms are set by society and are to be followed by that particular group of humans. However, an in-depth analysis of the same term concludes that it should not be confined to the aforementioned connotation. A woman is not just a term, and rather it is an entire concept; a concept that has been read through the glasses of different ideologies and has passed through a very conflicting range of transformation over a period of twenty centuries. This transformation from mere a term to a social concern, academic discipline and research interests of many is a result of long political and social struggle by various social reformers with equal participation of women themselves. These efforts are also visible in the Constitution of Independent India, which provides equality to women before the law. In spite of all these efforts, there still have been immense social barriers that restrict women liberation. The reason behind this can be understood by diving into the past, going through the pages of history, and analyzing it with the social standing of women in contemporary times.

A woman, since time immemorial, has been, in almost every part of the world, identified and represented from a man's point of view. Simon de Beauvoir in her book *Second Sex* says, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 2011). From the time Human Beings have formed communities and brought up their own families, specific gender roles have been assigned to the biological males and to the biological females. These roles are assigned by taking a man as the norm and a woman correspondingly the aberrance. As described in *The Hindu Code of Manu*, "In childhood a female must be a subject to her father,

in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent" (Manusmriti in Sanskrit with English translation, 2016). The social conventions that are present in the society put a lot of pressure on a woman to conform to this traditional role assigned to them. Basanti Bisht, a famous folk singer of Uttarakhand in an interview with DD News says that "After my marriage, I wasn't allowed to sing. My mother has strictly refused me to continue singing at my in-laws house. The only role assigned to me was to work for the household and take care of my children... We [women] were like bonded labourers" (Bisht, 2017). The problem of concern is that this traditional role, which is assigned to biological females, has not been challenged much by the women themselves.

This research paper carries out an analysis of one of the famous mythical folklore of Uttarakhand, "Nanda Devi Raj Jaat", in accord with the revolutionary Chipko movement of state, which was primarily carried out by women. The paper thus takes into consideration the traditional concept of a woman (as depicted in the folktale) and at the same time explores how women are making attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal notion of binary, prevalent in our society.

The objectives of the study are:

- To explore and challenge the traditional role of a woman as portrayed in the mythical folktales of Uttarakhand.
- To uncover the idea of women's culture as a part of general culture and bring into perspective a comprehensive description of the concept of woman.
- To explore how women in contemporary times make an attempt to re-define, re-formulate and ultimately fix their identity.

Nanda Devi Raj Jaat is mostly studied, analyzed and understood as a traditional, cultural and religious practice of Garhwal and Kumaon. *Jagars*, the traditional folk songs of Uttarakhand, give an overview of the myths associated with the folklore, makes the reader aware of the life of Nanda Devi, describe in detail her problems and struggle at her in-law's place of residence and also illustrate other rituals and traditional practices associated with the Jaatra. As described in the *Jagars*, Nanda Devi Raj Jaat corresponds with Nanda Devi, who is the presiding deity of Uttarakhand. It is a royal journey of around 280 km, which is undertaken by a large number of devotees to escort Nanda Devi, who is worshipped as *Dhyan*— the out-married daughter of the village, to her in-laws' abode. This cultural and religious journey,

which will be referred to as Raj Jaat from now on in the paper, is generally taken up in every twelve years. The journey of Raj Jaat yatra begins from village Nauti, Chamoli Garhwal. All the traditional preparations of decorating the *dolis* (palanquin), making of colorful *Chhantolis*¹ and *Chausingha Khadu*² These preparations are the responsibility of native priests of Nauti village and the Kunwars of Kansua. *Dolis* and *Chhantolis* from other villages join the main Jaatra/Yaatra coming from Nauti as it passes through the different villages of Uttarakhand. There is no historical evidence regarding when exactly did this tradition come into existence. A general belief is that in ancient times it was the royal class of Garhwal on whose shoulders lay the responsibility of organizing the Jaatra/Yaatra.

Many writers and scholars like Ramakant Benjwal, Laxam Singh Negi, Shankar Singh Bhatiya, Chandramohan Thapliyal, and others have published their works discussing the traditional practice and narrating the past few Jaatras in which they have participated. Their study portrays the image of Nanda in particular and women as a whole, as akin to Goddess Gaura/Parvati.

Chandra Singh Negi, in his book *In the Garb of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat* makes an attempt to 'render the myth/s that surrounds the principal deities, around whom Nanda Devi Raj Jaat is woven' (Negi C. S., 2013). While doing so he brings into light the perspective of the superiority of men, as portrayed in our myths, which are associated with culture and the inferiority of women who are associated with nature. Further, in the book, he goes on to draw a parallel between the life of Nanda Devi and the common women of Garhwal and Kumaon, who are all the time engaged in their domestic work and continuously crave to be with their natal family. He writes, "...I have reasons to believe that a major half of folktales and folk songs sung throughout the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya depicts this sorry state of women, her wanton desire to be her *maitwalas* (natal ones). These same miseries experienced by the female lot find expression in the form of Nanda Devi lore" (Negi C. S., 2013). "Needless to emphasize here, 'the goddess Nanda Devi has a particular significance for the women of Garhwal, for she is, like many of them, a *dhyani* or 'a bride who left her village'" (Negi C. S., 2013).

¹ Chhantolis are highly decorated umbrellas made for the goddess. A special umbrella brought by the royal class of Kansuwa – Ringal-ki-Chhantoli which serves the purpose of placing the idol of Nanda.

² Chausingha khadu is a four-horned ram, whose birth is seen as an indication by the goddess to undertake the jaatra. This four-horned ram is also brought by a royal class of Kansuwa to Nauti village from where the Jaatra begins.

The review of literature of the mythical folklore, Nanda Devi Raj Jaat, suggests that from ancient time *dhyani* is viewed as a wife, a docile wife who will always be available at the service of males of the family, who could be her husband, father or brother, having all the social and political power. Rama Kant Benjwal, in the editorial of his book *Nanda Devi the goddess of Uttarakhand*, mentions a popular shloka of Indian Vedas, '*Yatra nayarstu pujyante ramante tatra devtaha*' which means "God is present where the woman is adored and taken into high esteem" (Benjwal, 2013). Thus, women since ancient times have been given the status of Goddess in our society. By doing so, an attempt is made to provide women with a superior status within the society, and then they are left just to take care of the moral regeneration of the family. This confines women to the role of a nurturer while the status of protector/saviour still remains with males of the family.

How women of Uttarakhand, during contemporary times have made an attempt to challenge the traditional role to re-define, re-formulate and ultimately fix their identity? In order to answer the question that this research work hopes to look into, an extensive study, reading of literature (both primary and secondary sources included) is undertaken. The study is qualitative in nature. The methodology used is both theoretical as well as empirical. The theoretical part will deal with the ideas of the Feminist School of thought, while the empirical part of the research will include collecting data in the form of interviews and personal testimonies of the women belonging to the area of study. Thus, the aim of the research paper is to uncover women's culture by re-thinking and re-evaluating the concept of women presented in the above-mentioned folktale. This will be achieved by exploring the personal experiences of the women belonging to the area of study, along with the bonds of sisterhood grown among these women. The personal experiences of the women serve as a source of awareness and knowledge for all of the women who are a part of the community, while the bond of sisterhood serves as their source of strength. The study will argue that women's culture has the traits of both male culture and female culture, and so, women's culture is a part of general culture and is not a subculture. In other words, women fit into both the roles in the society— the role of a 'nurturer', which is traditionally accorded to women, as well as the role of a 'redeemer', which is traditionally male's domain.

The feminist theory employed in this research work incorporates the ideas of Elaine Showalter, a twentieth-century American literary critic and feminist. Showalter in her essay *Towards Feminist Poetics* coined the term Gynocriticism. According to her Gynocritical

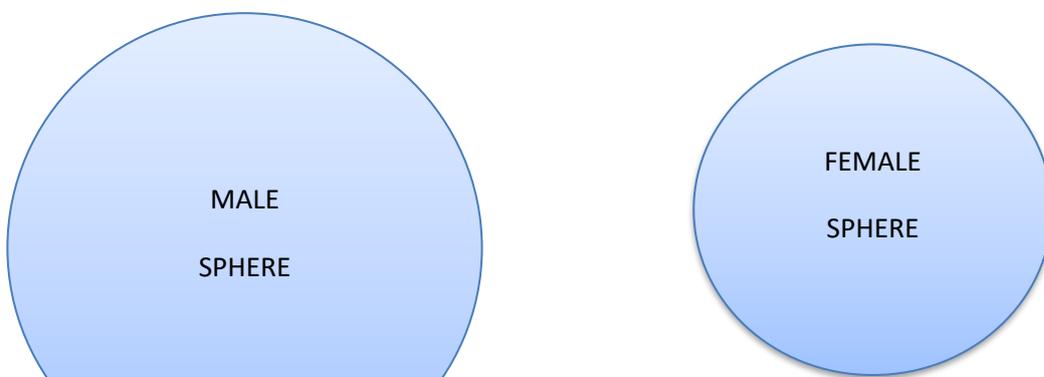
study “construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience rather than to adapt male models and theories” (Showalter E.) Thus the Gynocritics, “begin at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture” (Showalter).

Showalter identifies two approaches to Feminism: women as a reader (Feminist critique), where she is the consumer of literature produced by males and women as a writer (Gynocritic), where she herself is the producer of the meaning of the text. Comparing the two approaches, she says, "The feminist critique is essentially political and polemical, with theoretical affiliations to Marxist sociology and aesthetics; Gynocritics is more self-contained and experimental, with connections to other modes of new feminist research" (Showalter).

Her theory of Gynocriticism is based on four models: The Organic or Biological model, The Linguistic model, The Psychoanalytic model and the Cultural model. These four models are the four aspects to analyze the concept of women.

The Organic or Biological model is based on the bodies of the women-- how they see themselves in bodily relation to society. The Linguistic model explores the reasons for the difference in the language of men and women to address female discourse. The Psychoanalytic model focuses on the link between gender and creative thinking, and lastly cultural model deals with how society shapes the perspective of women. The last model, or the Cultural model, is the focus of study in this research work. This model explores women's culture and incorporates the other three models—the Biological, the Linguistic and the Psychoanalytical.

While writing about women's culture, Showalter draws from various feminist critics and how they interpret women's writings. She takes from historical and social contacts in the making of gender subjects. She explains the Victorian model of male and female culture as represented in the Victorian and Jacksonian era, which had a subordinate female sphere and a dominant male sphere, and two hardly overlap.

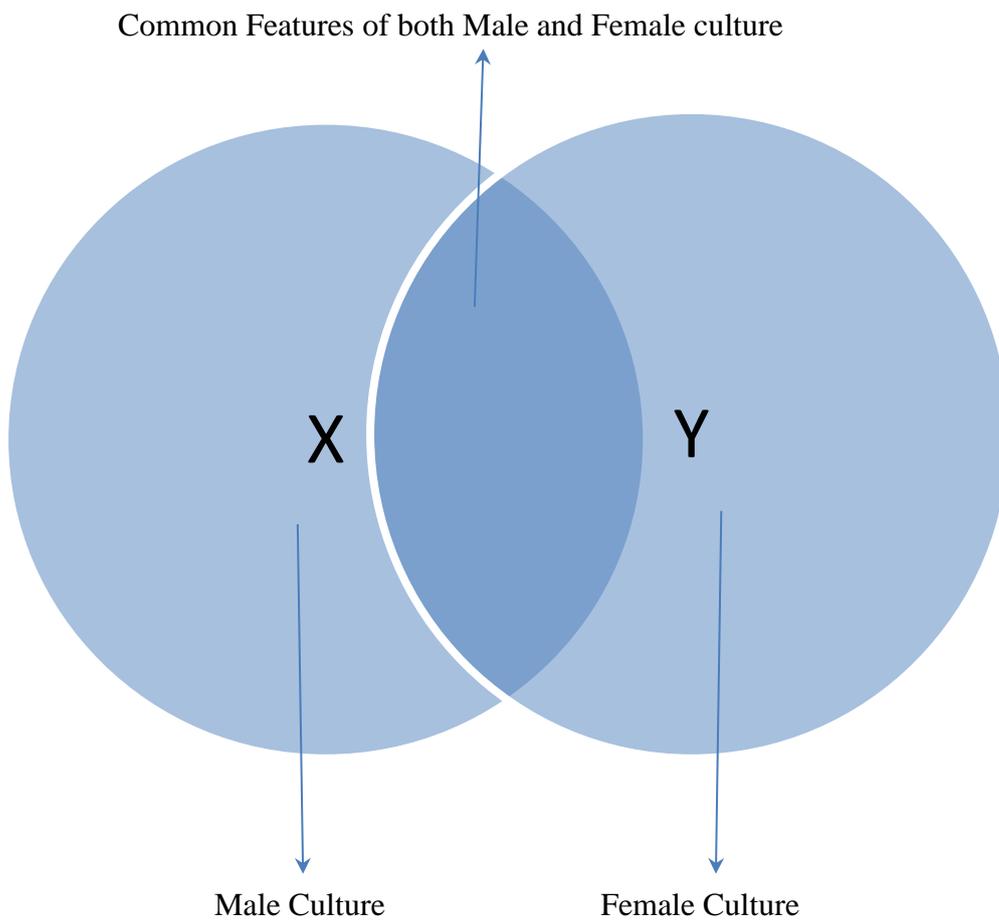


A). Dominant Group

B). Muted Group (Subordinate)

The Victorian Model

Through the Venn diagram, as drawn by Edwin Ardener in her book *Perceiving Women* Showalter then explains how this model is inaccurate and male and female spheres overlap.



Cultural Model of Gynocriticism

In the above diagram, a significant part of male and female culture overlaps. There is a small X crescent that is available solely for men and a small Y crescent solely on women's territory. This Y crescent is exclusively women in three ways—spatially, experimentally and metaphysically. Men also have a spatial and experimental male-only zone that is not available to women. The territory of men has been vastly explored while the territory of women still remains obscure. It is thus necessary to explore this territory to understand women's culture. This territory belonging to women is often termed as the wild zone. Some feminist writers of French school believe that women writers write from this wild zone which is a dark continent.

This women's culture, however, for Showalter is not limited to the wild zone alone, as she calls it 'idyllic enclave' or 'Amazon Utopia'. According to her, while men's books are 'fathered', as Harold Bloom and Edward Said pointed out, women's writing is not just mothered, but are 'parented'. Women's culture is not exclusively women's or subculture, but a double-culture. Women are thus a part of the general culture.

There are some features of the women's culture that are specific to a particular community, while others are universal. Universal features include being weak, dependent, redeemed, and the nurturer of the family. They are thus confined to the role of daughter, sister, wife and mother. These roles of women predominate in the folklores of Uttarakhand as well. However, this research work is an attempt to tie up the folklore, the empirical details collected from the area of study (Garhwal), with the Cultural model of Gynocriticism to bring into light that the above-mentioned role of women is not the sign of weakness but a sign of their essence. These roles play an important part in re-defining and re-formulating the concept of women.

2. Nanda Devi Raj Jaat: Representing the Traditional Role/Image of a Woman.

Rishasau³ mai hveyegye, jaat ki tayari

Myetn batigaye jaat ko, samana

Panchbha tvopulya, hukum lguna

Dhyani ki jaatra, Nanda ko souryas

Rishasau mai hveyegye, jaat ki tayari. (Jan Kavilas le (Nanda Dhyani Ki Bide), 2017)

³ Birthplace of Nanda Devi

The preparation of the pilgrimage has been done in Rishasau

All the things required for the pilgrimage are gathered

The five brothers are giving the orders

It's a pilgrimage of a married daughter, Nanda, to her in-law's place

The preparation of pilgrimage has been done in Rishasau.

Nanda Devi, according to local lore, is believed to be the reincarnation of Goddess Gaura, consort of Lord Shiva. She, as a Devi/Goddess, is common to both—the Garhwal and the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. For the local inhabitants of both these regions, Nanda is their *Isht Devi*⁴, who occupies the largest territory in Uttarakhand— starting from Johar valley and extending up to Vilanghana Ghati. Historians believe that there are three folklores of Garhwal and Kumaon that run parallel to Nanda's Raj Jaat. The first and the most ancient one is the story of Nanda herself, while the other two are the story of the Raj Jaat and the story of Nanda and Sunanda, in the context of the Nainital and Almora region of Uttarakhand. The latter two were added later on to the folklore of *Jaatra*.

Nanda, in Uttarakhand, is worshipped as *dhayn*, the out-married daughter of the village. Youngest among the seven daughters in the family, she is believed to have been born in Rishasau, to Rishi Hemant and Maina. At a very young age, she got married to Lord Shiva, whose abode was on a high Mountain named Kailash. The life of Nanda changed drastically after her marriage. Kailash was strikingly different from her natal place and she had to face a lot many problems there. It was not only difficult and challenging for Nanda but also filled with sorrows. To add up to her sorrows, her parents for almost twelve years made no efforts to meet her or invite her back to her *maid*⁵. With tears in her eyes, Nanda complains about her life at Kailash. She says:

Mani dili buoban ucha Kailash/ Yeh Kailash su kaka ni basan/ Hyunwaryon ko dnkar bes ki funkar/ Hyunvo ku va dsyan, Hyunvo ko dkyona/ Bhang ghoti ghoti myara hathgulai bshyegyey/ Dhunu fuki fuki myeri btunni fulige/ Beti, buari sabi si matudi aagye/ Me rah gaye su sauraas buari (Kukreti, 2013)

⁴ Main Deity

⁵ Garhwali vocabulary for the natal place of an out married daughter.

My father has given me off (married me off) to High Kailash/ Here in Kailash there is not even a single bird who sings/ Here it is like a waterfall of snow and venom/ We are sleeping on snow and using snow as our blanket/Preparation of cannabis have resulted into ulcer on my hands/ All the daughters and Daughters-in-law have gone to their natal place/ And here I am, left alone at my in-law's residence.

Nanda was very disappointed and hassled. Surviving in a place that was covered with snow all throughout the year was difficult. It was turning out to be more difficult for her because, at her natal place, she used to live a very comfortable life. Though Lord Shiva loved Nanda dearly, she was still unhappy in her new home. Lord Shiva was always found in deep meditation, and Nanda had to cope up with all the difficulties alone. This disappointment and hassle turned into anger after she got to know that all her sisters were married better off by her parents and were also invited to their natal place from time to time. In her anger, she cursed her family and relatives for her unfortunate situation.

The curse of Nanda, also known as *dosh lagna* in the local language, resulted in a famine at her natal place. Fortunes of Rishasau started to fade off. Thereafter everything in the life of the people of Rishasau went wrong, and people were suffering a lot. There was nothing to eat for the residents as there was no produce neither in their fields nor in the form of any dairy product. To restore the *dosh*, on the advice of Narad, Rishi Hemant (father of Nanda) organized a sacrifice in the name of Nanda and sent his sons to Kailash to escort Nanda back home. When Nanda received the invitation, she rushed to tell it to her husband, who at that time was in deep meditation. He went furious at Nanda for disturbing him and in anger, forbade her to visit her natal place. Somehow, she managed to please him and finally sought his permission.

She was not only called back home but also given due importance and respect in her *maat*. After spending a good time she was escorted back to her *souryas* with dignity. When Nanda was being escorted back to her *souryas*, she started to mourn and complained about her lifeless life in Kailash. She wishes she had some alternative instead of going back to her in-laws' place. At that point in time, to reduce the grief of Nanda, her father, Rishi Hemant, promised her that every year she will be invited back home. An annual Jaatra will be organized in her name every year and in every twelve years Nanda Devi Raj Jaat will be undertaken.

Nanda Devi Raj Jaat is thus a traditional, royal as well as a cultural pilgrimage of Uttarakhand. It is almost 280 km long journey which begins from village Nauti, Chamoli Garhwal and passes through different villages of Uttarakhand gathering the *dolis* and *channtolis* of their local deity. Raj Jaat is supposed to take up every twelve years. However, this time period varies. It is believed that when it is time to escort Nanda back to Kailash, somewhere in the region, *Chausingya Khadu* is born. The journey is organized only when the news of the birth is received, though it might take a time period of more than twelve years. Apart from this Raj Jaat, an annual Jaat, also known as Nanda-Kurur Jaat is undertaken every year.

In History there is no written evidence regarding when this tradition came into existence. However, Pandit Dev Ram Nautiyal, resident of village Nauti, who in the past has actively participated in the various Raj Jaat has made an attempt to assemble the details and particulars through the different documents available to him. The information concludes, on knowing that Nanda Devi, their family deity, is somehow displeased, the Kunwars of Kansua, after taking a pledge to please her, came to Nauti along with *Chhantolis* (umbrellas/parasols) and a male goat for sacrificing in the name of the deity. In Nauti, a meeting was held in the courtyard of Shaileshwar Temple to decide the auspicious day for holding the Raj Jaat and the amount of contribution to be borne by each of the devotee's concerned. The priests of Devi of Kurur temple were informed, and the District Collector and the local government authorities were also informed for making the necessary arrangements on their parts.

Based on the historical references available at Nauti and Kurur Mr. Bhatia divides Nanda Devi Raj Jaat into two phases – The first phase is that of traditional Raj Jaat, which was purely under religious restrictions. During this phase, women, foreigners, heretic and lower caste people were not allowed to join in the royal pilgrimage. The second phase or the modern phase, which started in the year 1987, is when in spite of various restrictions, women, foreigners, and lower caste people started to actively participate and undertook the Jaatra. Nanda Devi Raj Jaat, organized in the year 2000 is perceived as a historical Raj Jaat as there was massive participation by the women of hills, leaving behind all the so-called restrictions against their participation.

Every single person who is a resident of Garhwal or Kumaon region of Uttarakhand is emotionally attached to the folklore of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat. However, scholars and writers believe that the emotional attachment shared by the women belonging to the region is very

different from that of others. The reason they give is that the Devi Nanda and her Jagars serve as a representation of the common women of Garhwal and Kumaon. In an interview with DD News, Basanti Bisht, a famous folk singer, says, “*Jagars* of Nanda is a representation of women's character; the way women should be during the different phases of their life” (Bisht, 2017).

A general observation about the folklore of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat is that there is a transition in the life of women after getting married. She customarily has to leave her natal home and settle down with her husband in her in-laws' place. Her role in her *Souryas* is confined to that of a *buwari* (daughter-in-law), who is believed to be working all day for the daily domestic needs of the family. Being with her beloved ones, in her natal place, is what she keeps craving for. Only sometimes she gets an opportunity to visit her natal place, that too for a very short period of time or maybe when there is some special occasion. Ultimately she has to return back to her in-laws' place, to her same routine. It is believed that she, as a woman, is doomed to live such a role for the rest of her life.

In reference to the common women of Garhwal and Kumaon, their life in their in-laws' place is very similar to that of Nanda Devi— difficult and challenging. After getting married, they are confined to their new family in their *souryas*. Women are mostly engaged in either household work or fulfilling the needs of the family. Even the society as a whole, their community, in particular, expects and accepts this as the duty and responsibility of the women. The one who is submissive, respecting, always engaged in domestic activities is quoted under an 'ideal *buwari*', and she serves as an example for the rest of the girls in the family and the community.

2.1. Case study 1

Describing her life in the hills, Sakumbari Devi, an 80-year-old woman, resident of Uniyal Moxan, Pauri Garhwal says living in the hills is not an easy task. Life is laborious, and conditions are unfavourable. Women are the ones who have to struggle the most. In her family, she says, she and her *jeythani*⁶, were the two daughters-in-law and on their shoulders lay the responsibility of entire household chores. Their day used to begin before sunrise and end up late at night. Apart from the indoor chores of the household like house cleaning, cooking food for all the members, taking care of their children and elderly members in the

⁶, the wife of her husband's elder brother

family, they had to look after their domestic animals like cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep. These animals were almost 50-60 in number. They also had to walk miles to get grass as fodder for the animals, fire sticks from the forest for their *Choolha* (earthen stove) and fetch water for the daily requirements of the family.

While they were out, to get the required things from the forests, they used to get a little chance to meet their women friends from different villages. It was that time of the day when they used to be a little relieved from work and talk to each other, sing, laugh, share their sorrows and happiness and spend a good time.

The attachment of women with the forest was like attachment to any other family member. This was because firstly, these forest lands were a source of their existence and protector to their mountain areas. Secondly, it also served as a place of recreation for these women who were overburdened with work the rest of the day.

Thus, the story Nanda Devi and common women of Garhwal and Kumaon reflect similar attributes in their lifestyles. In the words of Chandra Singh Negi, "...Nanda Devi Raj Jaat, in fact, remains symbolic of the life led by the hill women..." (Negi C. S., 2013). "... 'History' of the goddess Nanda closely parallels the life of local women. For these and other reasons, it may fairly be said that the songs of Nanda Devi embody a female perspective; that they are songs for and of the hill women." (Negi C. S., 2013).

3. Re-conceptualizing the Idea of being a Woman

Ellis in her book *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, says, "But the women do know what their sex was formed to suffer; and for this reason, there is sometimes a bond existing between sisters, the most endearing, the purest and disinterested, of any description of attention which this world affords" (Mermin, 1983). Although the author is referring here to biological sisterhood, her tendency to address her readers as "my sisters" suggests that she views "sisterhood" as sexual identification as much biological kinship" (Mermin, 1983). Thus, the sufferings of women become an important aspect in establishing a 'sisterly' bond among themselves.

The idea of sisterhood lies in the involvement of the united groups of women (which is the result of the sisterly bond explained above) in recognition and assertion of their existence and value of their own individual self. The essence of women sisterhood can be procured from elucidating women themselves. Thus, the term sisterhood is used as an embodiment of

women's strength. It unveils an elementary idea the role of women in society is much beyond patriarchal binary thought (women as nurturer and men as nurtured).

Nanda Devi and the common women of Garhwal also share a sisterly bond among themselves. A close examination of their lifestyles reveals that the life they live is essentially identical. However, Nanda is believed to be the princess of Rishasau, the reincarnation of Goddess Gaura. Nevertheless, she is presented and worshipped as *dhayan*. "What if, she is viewed as a royal princess, the goddess remains as ordinary hill women who must work the treadmill of depressing custom honoured by the theory of traditional respect but abused in the everyday expression of the common hill womenfolk" (Aitken, 2000). Their life pattern is so similar to each other that both of them can be identified with one another and can be treated as a single entity. Thus, the women of Garhwal and Kumaon can be referred to as present-day Nandas.

The term sisterhood examined here in the context of women strength serves as a medium to uncover women's culture. This strength of sisterhood made it possible for the present-day Nanda's to fight the patriarchal notion of binary prevalent in the society and manifest that the role of 'redeemer', which is traditionally accorded to men.

In order to understand women's culture, it is important to analyze the experiences of women. The experiences of present-day Nanda indicate that women may implicitly act as 'redeemed' as well as 'redeemer'. Their identity as the nurturer of the family and their bond of sisterhood is the source of strength for them. They ultimately utilize this strength in revealing the essence of their identity to the entire world.

3.1 Case study 2

26th March 1974 is seen as a significant day in the history of Uttarakhand. It is the day when the women of a small village Reni, in district Chamoli, under the leadership of Gaura Devi, a 49 years old woman, stood up and fought back for their forest areas as well as their rights.

Gaura Devi was born in 1925, in a tribal *Marchaya* family in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand. She never attended school and customarily was married at a very young age. This was a very common practice during those times and thus was never questioned. After her marriage, as traditional practice goes, she had to shift to her in-law's abode, which was in Reni Village. Her husband passed away when she was 22 years old, leaving the responsibility of the entire family and their two-year-old son on Gaura's shoulder. To sustain her family,

Gaura continued with the family business of wool trade. The unfortunate situations that Guara has to go through in her life served as an experience for her as well as the other women in the village. Her struggles made her aware, and she started to respond to events and incidents in the village. She actively participated in the Panchayat meetings and all other initiatives taken by their community, including calls for protecting and saving their forest area. She also headed Mahila Mangal Dal, which was formed to ensure cleanliness in their village.

The Chipko Movement originated somewhere around 1973 under the leadership of environmentalist Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Gaura's contribution until 1974 was to create awareness among the nearby villagers. When the government gave the authority to the contractors to fell 2500 trees in the belt of Reni Village, huge demonstrations were being carried out in the form of retaliation by the villagers to drive off the contracts.

26th March 1974 however, turned out to be a big day for the villagers, especially the women residents. The contractors involved in forest logging, along with the government officials, drove in their vehicles and tried to reach out to the forest areas above the village to chop off the available trees. They were under the impression that since all the native men were out to receive the compensation, as promised by the government, no one will be able to stop them. However, Gaura Devi assembled and mobilized all the women (they were 27 in number), and they all marched up the hill. The women hugged the trees and asked the contractors to hit them before they hit the trees. The contractors tried to threaten them by violence, but the women refused to move back. The sheer determination of the women turned out as a blessing and the contractors had to leave empty-handed.

After this incident, women, in various other regions of Himalaya like Gopeshwar, Bhyundar Valley and Dungri-Paitoli, during different time periods, 1975, 1978 and 1980 respectively, came forward and fought to protect their forest lands.

3.2 Case study 3

The Dungri-Paitoli incidents gave a new direction to this movement of saving forest areas, also known as the Chipko Movement. During the incident of Reni Village, the women rebelled against the authorities in the absence of male to protect the forest area. However, the women in Dungri-Paitoli rebelled against the males of their own family (who are considered to be the redeemer/protector as per the traditional role) to protect their forest area, moving

ahead of their traditional role of a nurturer and assigning themselves the role of a saviour. All the men of the village were ready to give almost 60 acres of the Oak forest area for the purpose of a horticulture farm. They believed that roads, schools, hospitals, electricity, which were promised to them as compensation, were far more vital than the trees. The women, however, disagreed with this decision and fought to save their forest areas. They not only fought against the loggers but also the men (dominant group) of their own community to save their forest land. Since women were the ones who collected all the required goods from the forest for household purposes they also demanded their representation in the forest management committee. They not only saved the forests but now they even started working towards afforestation in the hills.

The two case studies bring into light the power of women to take control of the situations in the absence of men and be successful in their attempt. It also showcases the courage and determination of the women in facing the opposition by the dominant group, holding on firmly to their opinion. This power and strength are achieved by forming united groups of women in the form of Mahila Mangal Dal. The formation of these groups also reflects the bond of sisterhood among these women.

The triumph of these women over the big logging companies was a big achievement. This achievement of saving their territory not only gave them recognition worldwide but also gave recognition to their role of daughter-in-law in their community. They proved that being a daughter-in-law, working the whole day for family, and the association of the females with nature does not make them inferior rather, it is a sign of their identity and their essence. Although the dominant group had made all efforts to subdue and suppress the so-called muted group, this muted group created their own worth and norm to establish them.

This entire action of the government, along with logging companies, made the women of Garhwal realize that awareness gives way to bold actions. The forest areas of Garhwal always have and still serve as a saviour for the entire community residing there, providing them with the basic amenities for their survival as well as protecting the mountain areas from landslides and further destructions. The women belonging to the area are well aware of this fact. Gaura Devi addressing the men, says, "Brothers! This forest is a source of our livelihood. If you destroy it the mountains will come tumbling down onto our villages" (Chopra, 2019). This awareness of women from their personal experiences and bond of sisterhood among themselves gave them strength to fight and emerge victoriously. The women took up the role

of a redeemer and were ready to sacrifice even their own lives to protect their forest areas. Gaura adds, "This forest nurtures us like mother; you will be able to use your axe only if you shoot me first" (Chopra, 2019)

Radical feminist theories, as well as anthropological studies, have laid much emphasis in critically analyzing the notion of associating women with nature while men are associated with culture. This association confined women to the role of taking care of their children, cooking, cleaning up of home, while men take up tasks like war, hunting animals and other works that require much more consumption of energy. The defined gender roles create a binary between men and women. However, Showalter defied this binary and discussed women culture being 'parented'. She firmly believes that women's culture is not a subculture but a culture that has aspects of both the traits of men and women. By saving the forest areas, a territory that belonged to the women of Garhwal, though they played the role of a 'redeemer' in the process, they kept their identity, of being associated with nature, intact. This puts forth the idea of women culture as a part of general culture. Representation of this notion of women as a 'redeemer' is reflected in the folklore of Nanda Devi as well; however, it still remains unexplored by scholars and researchers.

After getting married to Shiv when Nanda, customarily, was being escorted to Kailash, in the middle of their journey at a place named Gauruli Patal, a huge army of Devils wanted to pursue her. All the *Devts* hid in caves out of fear, and Nanda was left alone. Nanda, however, didn't get frightened and made up her mind to confront them single-handedly. Her exemplified courage and determination not only helped her to face them but also successfully defeat them.

"Nanda ley dharo kali ko roop/ Bayaan maaro dayeton daaya dhakalo/ Daaya maaro dayeton bayaan dhakalo/ Paapli dayettyo ko sanhaar karriyalo" (Bisht, Nanda ke Jagar, 2013).

Nanda transformed herself into Kali / Picked up weapons on all four hands/ And then killed all the devils.

Women are mostly accorded with nature and thus considered as weak and the one who is to be saved but this successful attempt of Nanda Devi, saving herself single-handedly and the women of Garhwal, saving their territory in the form of forest lands, illustrates that when the

need arises women can even play the role a 'redeemer' for herself and for the rest of the society as well.

Women thus can be comprehended as an 'androgynous human' who inherit the traits from both the males and females. The experiences of the women discussed above defied the 'strict' gender roles where women are treated as passive, docile, compliant, obedient and submissive while males are treated as active, mobile, energetic, dynamic and vital. These incidents and events, in fact, prove that women are a mixed combination of both the traits of males as well as of females. The women just need to reclaim their spaces and explore their cultural experiences to deconstruct the male-dominated patriarchal hierarchy. Women herself, being a woman, can be as active as the traditional role of males and as passive as the traditional roles of females.

4. Conclusion

This research work attempted to examine the folklore of Uttarakhand— Nanda Devi Raj Jaat uncovering women's culture in contemporary times. Uncovering women's culture exploits the traditional image of a woman as 'redeemed'. This image is represented in the Jagars of Uttarakhand, through *Dharti Maa* (Mother Earth). When *Dharti Maa*, who was created from the soul of Vishnu (representative of males in our society), and was disconcerted by her duty of firmly holding the Earth, Vishnu took hold of the role of saviour and promised to arrive whenever any problem would arise. Thus, males in our society akin to the role of the 'redeemer' or saviour and females the role of 'redeemed'.

The patriarchal thought, as discussed by Cixous, co-essentially is binary in nature. This is a skewed and unequal binary where women are considered inferior and weaker while men make superior and stronger gender. This study, however, argued that the folklores of Uttarakhand have an underlying feature of women's culture, as discussed by Elaine Showalter, the twentieth-century feminist critic. Showalter, in her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* describes women's culture not as a subculture but as a general culture that ascribes to the attributes of both male culture and female culture.

Discussion of the mythical folklore of Nanda Devi Raj Jaat in detail takes into consideration all the aspects: historical background, mythical associations, and the reflection of the lore in the contemporary world. This is done to analyze the representation of women and their role

and further use this image to bring into the picture a different perspective about the concept of women. So far, these folklores were interpreted by the scholars and writers in a way where women were confined to the role of daughter, wife and mother. These roles were associated with being weak, dependent, redeemed and nurturers of the family. However, the women of Garhwal undercut this traditional notion in the contemporary world. They use this image of being the nurturer as their indispensable quality and not as their weakness. The bond sisterhood established among them and the personal experiences of the women serve as a source of strength and awareness respectively for all the women in their respective communities. As Christina Rossetti in her poem *Goblin Market* says, “For there is no friend like a sister” (Rossetti, 2015).

The stereotypical image of women, where she is seen just as a nurturer, is very much deep-rooted in our folklore. When one grows up listening to them, one starts to accept this as the reality, which leads to gender hierarchy in society. These stories are so embedded in the hearts of local residents that it is almost impossible to change the story. According to the Cultural model, as Showalter discussed in her essay *Feminist Criticism in the wilderness* the aim is, “to get away from the masculine systems, hierarchies, and values and to get the primary and self-defined nature of female culture experience” (Showalter, 1981). Thus, when women interpret these images as the source of their strength, it helps them to re-define, reformulate and eventually fix their identity in the society, deconstructing the patriarchal binary thought.

Analysis of the folklore Nanda Devi Raj Jaat reveals that the image of women as daughter, wife and mother is one of the aspects of the women's culture depicted in the lore. However, only this aspect is much discussed and analyzed by scholars and researchers. The other aspect of women's culture is depicted through the experience of Nanda Devi while she was being escorted to Kailash after her marriage with Lord Shiva. During the journey, the Devi fearless faces the army of devils who pursue her and successfully defeats them single-handedly. Her victory over the evil, exemplified by the devils, is an example that illustrates that women are not the weaker side of the dichotomy; rather, female culture includes the traits traditionally accorded both to men and women. A reflection of the same is witnessed in contemporary times when women came forward and fought during the Chipko movement in order to save their territory of forest areas from the dominant group (males) of the society.

Elaine Showalter, writes in her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, "One of the greatest advantage of women's culture model is that it shows how female culture can be a positive source of strength and solidarity as well as a negative source of powerlessness; it can generate its own experiences and symbols which are not simply the obverse of the male tradition" (Showalter, 1981). Similar interpretative patterns emerged in the folklore examined. The idea of the domestic life of women investigated in this paper puts forth an important perspective— it does not make the women voiceless as their experiences speak. The experiences help them to establish their identity in society. On the other hand, it gives the power to become the creative space where a woman finds an identity for herself. Thus, the power of domestic life lies in bringing order in a chaotic situation.

The image of women, which is interpreted as their weakness, is actually the essence of their identity. Their individual identity cannot be and should not be dislocated from their respective position in the domestic realm. Any attempt of doing so will further mute them and take them away from their own selves. However, women's identity should not be confined to the image of the women represented in the folklore. Women have access to both the roles: role of a redeemer as well as the role of redeemed, and potentially as and when required, they can act or access any of the roles and dissolve the traditional male and female dichotomy.

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