



Ritual as Resistance in Amma Raj Joshi's *A Night's Drama*

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Abstract

This study examines the Ratadi ritual portrayed in Amma Raj Joshi's short story *A Night's Drama* as a performative space through which women negotiate and challenge patriarchal authority in rural Nepal. While existing discussions of ritual in Nepali literature have largely emphasized cultural continuity and social tradition, limited attention has been given to the ways ritual performance functions as a form of symbolic resistance and gendered self-expression. Drawing on the theories of Merelman (1969), Goffman (1967), Foucault (1977), Schechner (2003), and Butler (1990), this study employs close textual analysis to investigate role reversal, performative masculinity, catharsis, suspense, peripety, and unmasking within the ritual drama. The analysis demonstrates that Ratadi temporarily inverts gender hierarchies by allowing women to enact male roles, critique domestic power structures, and collectively express experiences often silenced in everyday life. The ritual not only produces emotional release and communal solidarity but also exposes the socially constructed nature of gender identity and authority. The study concludes that Joshi's story presents ritual performance as a culturally embedded mode of resistance that simultaneously preserves tradition and creates opportunities for questioning patriarchal norms.

Keywords: dramaturgy, patriarchy, gender performance, resistance, female agency, Ratadi

Introduction

Rituals occupy a significant place in South Asian societies, functioning not merely as cultural celebrations but also as sites where social values, identities, and power relations are negotiated and reproduced. Embedded within collective memory and tradition, rituals often reinforce dominant ideologies while simultaneously providing opportunities for alternative forms of expression. For women living within patriarchal social structures, ritual spaces frequently become important avenues through which experiences, frustrations, and

aspirations can be communicated indirectly. Amma Raj Joshi's *A Night's Drama* presents one such ritual known as Ratadi, a wedding-night performance enacted exclusively by women after men have departed from the ceremony. Within this female-centered space, participants perform dramatic scenes of marriage, sexuality, domestic labor, authority, and family relationships. Women assume both female and male roles, creating a temporary world in which conventional gender expectations are suspended and reimagined. Although the ritual appears entertaining on the surface, it simultaneously serves as a subtle commentary on the realities of married life and gender inequality.

Despite its literary and cultural significance, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the dramaturgical mechanisms through which Ratadi functions as a form of resistance. Existing discussions of ritual in Nepali literature often emphasize cultural continuity and communal identity but rarely examine how ritual performance enables women to negotiate power, perform alternative identities, and challenge patriarchal structures. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Ratadi as a theatrical and ideological space where gender norms are temporarily inverted and contested. The study argues that Ratadi operates not only as a cultural performance but also as a symbolic arena of resistance where women expose the constructed nature of gender roles and create opportunities for collective expression and empowerment.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions of ritual and performance have increasingly emphasized the ways cultural practices function not only as expressions of tradition but also as sites of social negotiation and identity formation. Performance theorists argue that rituals are dynamic processes through which communities reproduce, contest, and reinterpret cultural values. Schechner (2003) conceptualizes ritual as “restored behavior,” suggesting that ritual performances involve repeated cultural actions that are continually re-enacted and reinterpreted. Similarly, Turner (1982) views ritual performance as a liminal space where participants temporarily step outside ordinary social structures, creating opportunities for reflection, transformation, and social critique. These perspectives highlight the capacity of ritual practices to serve both conservative and transformative functions within society.

Within South Asian and Nepali contexts, folk rituals have long been recognized as important cultural institutions that preserve collective memory and reinforce community bonds. Studies of Nepali ritual traditions often focus on their religious, social, and cultural

significance, examining how rituals sustain local identities and transmit cultural knowledge across generations. However, much of this scholarship tends to emphasize ritual continuity and communal cohesion rather than the potential of ritual practices to challenge dominant power structures. Consequently, the performative and resistant dimensions of folk rituals remain relatively underexplored within Nepali literary and cultural studies.

The relationship between gender and performance has received considerable attention in feminist scholarship. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not a fixed or natural identity but rather a socially constructed role produced through repeated actions and performances. This perspective has influenced literary and cultural studies by demonstrating how performance can expose the instability of gender categories and create opportunities for alternative forms of identity. Scholars examining women's ritual practices have similarly argued that female-centered performances often provide symbolic spaces in which women can express experiences, frustrations, and aspirations that may otherwise remain silenced within patriarchal societies. Through role reversal, parody, and dramatic enactment, such performances can function as subtle forms of resistance against established gender norms.

Although Amma Raj Joshi's *A Night's Drama* is recognized as an important representation of rural Nepali culture, scholarly analysis of the story remains limited. Existing discussions generally focus on its depiction of folk traditions, village life, and cultural practices. Few studies have examined the dramaturgical dimensions of *Ratadi* or explored how ritual performance operates as a mechanism for negotiating gendered power relations. Moreover, the intersections of ritual, performance, and feminist resistance in the story have not received sustained critical attention. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing *Ratadi* as a performative and ideological space through which women temporarily invert gender hierarchies, articulate collective experiences, and challenge patriarchal assumptions. By integrating performance theory, ritual studies, and feminist perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how literary representations of ritual can function as sites of cultural resistance and social critique.

Theoretical Framework: Ritual, Performance, and Resistance

The analysis draws upon theories of dramaturgy, identity, power, gender, and ritual performance developed by Merelman (1969), Goffman (1967), Foucault (1977), Schechner (2003), and Butler (1990).

Merelman (1969) conceptualizes drama as a vehicle through which ideological tensions and social conflicts become publicly visible. He argues that dramatic performance achieves its greatest impact when emotional release coincides with thematic conflict (p. 224). This notion is particularly relevant to *Ratadi*, where emotional expression emerges alongside critiques of patriarchal social arrangements.

Goffman's (1967) concept of face-work illuminates the relationship between social identity and performance. Individuals maintain socially acceptable identities through carefully managed performances, but these identities become vulnerable when the performance is disrupted (p. 8). The ritual's climactic unmasking exemplifies this process by exposing the instability of gendered social roles.

Foucault (1977) challenges the notion that power is exercised solely through centralized institutions. Instead, power circulates throughout social relationships, making resistance possible within everyday cultural practices (pp. 94–95). *Ratadi* illustrates Foucault's concept of resistance through concrete actions such as collective laughter, role-playing, and the public enactment of intimacy, practices that become possible only within the temporary female sphere created by the ritual.

Schechner (2003) describes ritual as restored behavior—repeated cultural practices that are continually reinterpreted by participants (p. 615). Each performance of *Ratadi* reenacts inherited cultural scripts while simultaneously altering their meanings through female reinterpretation, exemplifying Schechner's concept of restored behaviour. To deepen the analysis of gender construction, Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity is also useful. Butler argues that gender is not an innate essence but a social identity repeatedly enacted through culturally regulated performances. This perspective helps explain how *Ratadi* exposes masculinity and femininity as performative rather than natural categories. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for understanding ritual performance as a site of identity construction, emotional expression, cultural continuity, and resistance.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach based on close textual analysis. Such an approach is appropriate because *Ratadi* is represented primarily through narrative description, dialogue, symbolism, and performance. Close reading enables the identification of dramatic structures, recurring motifs, and ideological tensions embedded within the ritual.

The analysis focuses on key dramatic elements, including identification, catharsis, suspense, role reversal, peripety, unmasking, and resistance. Rather than comparing *Ratadi* with other ritual narratives, the study concentrates on the internal dynamics of Joshi's text and examines how specific scenes generate meanings related to power, identity, and gender relations. The interpretive framework is informed by performance studies, ritual theory, feminist criticism, and cultural studies.

Staging Subversion: A Thematic Analysis of *A Night's Drama*

Textual analysis, especially within literary and performance studies, involves close reading and interpretation of a text to uncover deeper thematic structures, symbols, and ideological frameworks. In the case of ritual-centered narratives like *Ratadi*, textual analysis allows scholars to unpack how embodied practices are encoded in language and symbolism, revealing how collective cultural performances serve as both expressions of identity and tools for resistance. In this context, the story “A Night’s Drama” is treated not merely as a narrative but as a performative and ritualistic text that encodes social resistance and cultural commentary. The following analysis identifies key themes and dramatic elements—such as unmasking, catharsis, peripety, and role reversal—that reveal how the ritual performance in the story critiques patriarchal norms and constructs an alternative space for female expression and empowerment.

Identification and Catharsis

The *Ratadi* performance evokes a deep emotional connection among the female participants. The elderly women, young brides, and unmarried girls see their past, present, and future in the dramatization. The narrator describes the audience as including “old women with thousands of wrinkles on their cheeks and foreheads,” as well as young girls who “dream of someday being clothed in the beautiful dress of a bride” (Joshi, 2008, pp. 1–2). These women observe the performance in silence, with their eyes “shining like wet pebbles,” indicating the emotional impact (Joshi, 2008, p. 2). This shared emotional investment creates catharsis, offering temporary relief from their repressive domestic realities. Merelman’s idea that catharsis emerges when thematic conflict and emotional release align is clearly demonstrated in the women’s reactions (Merelman, 1969, p. 224).

Suspense and Dramatic Irony

The story builds suspense through the narrator's innocent perspective. As a child, he is unaware of the nature of the event, and readers share in his curiosity. He is puzzled when Rame's mother announces that the children must "go up to the top floor" because guests are arriving (Joshi, 2008, p. 3). The narrator's inability to recognize the performer exposes how masculinity is constructed through recognizable cultural signs rather than biological sex. The Bhaktapur cap and buffalo bell function as theatrical symbols of masculine authority, suggesting that gender itself is performative rather than natural (Joshi, 2008, pp. 4–5). As the narrator watches the man embrace Rame's mother in front of all the women, he reflects: "I had never seen such a ghastly public act before, yet nobody seemed disgusted" (Joshi, 2008, p. 6). This illusion is resolved only when the actor is unmasked as a woman.

Peripety (Reversal)

The concept of peripety, or dramatic reversal, appears in two interconnected ways. Yet the reversal does not necessarily dismantle patriarchy; instead, it reveals how patriarchal authority is often reproduced through generational succession, with formerly subordinated women eventually occupying positions of control within the same hierarchical structure. Her husband character tells her she will no longer need to work because the daughter-in-law will take over household duties: "Now you don't have to go to the kitchen. Your daughter-in-law will handle it" (Joshi, 2008, pp. 6–7). This moment dramatizes a shift in her identity and responsibilities. Simultaneously, the apparent male actor is revealed to be a female performer, subverting gender expectations and roles.

Unmasking and the Fragility of Identity

The climax involves literal and symbolic unmasking. Goffman's (1967) idea of "face" is apt here—the performer, once unmasked, loses her authoritative role and becomes vulnerable. The narrator describes the moment vividly: "To my amazement, the man lying there was a young woman, with breasts as big as golden apples from Mustang... she jerked, stood up and covered herself shyly, pulled her moustache and threw it away... it was Rame's sister" (Joshi, 2008, pp. 7–8). Her long hair falls over her shoulders as she loosens the Bhaktapur cap, completely shedding her performed male identity. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a useful framework for interpreting this scene. The performer's masculinity is produced through costume, gesture, voice, and social recognition

rather than biological sex. The removal of the moustache and cap therefore exposes gender as a repeated social performance rather than a fixed identity.

Power, Resistance, and Female Agency

The women's collective laughter, silence, and emotional participation demonstrate what Foucault (1977) identifies as localized forms of resistance. Rather than directly confronting male authority, participants temporarily create an alternative social sphere where dominant gender norms can be rehearsed, questioned, and symbolically reversed. By adopting male roles and re-enacting taboo subjects, they resist patriarchal impositions. The public performance of intimacy, although shocking to the young narrator, is liberating for the female audience. Although the narrator remarks it as a “ghastly public act,” he notes that there was “no sign of pain and disgust” on the actors or the observers (Joshi, 2008, p. 6). The women laugh, sigh, and observe silently, participating emotionally in the drama. The narrator adds that the women seemed to know the performance intimately, suggesting a deep-rooted cultural familiarity with the ritual (Joshi, 2008, p. 5). The repeated enactment of Ratadi across generations exemplifies Schechner's (2003) notion of restored behaviour, whereby inherited cultural practices are continually reproduced while simultaneously acquiring new meanings through performance. Thus, the ritual preserves cultural continuity while also providing women with opportunities to reinterpret social roles and challenge patriarchal assumptions.

Conclusion

A Night's Drama demonstrates how ritual performance can function as a powerful site of social commentary and symbolic resistance. Through Ratadi, women create a temporary space in which conventional gender hierarchies are suspended, questioned, and reimagined. The ritual enables participants to express collective experiences, negotiate identities, and critique structures of authority embedded within everyday life. Drawing upon the theoretical perspectives of Merelman, Goffman, Foucault, Schechner, and Butler, this study has shown how Ratadi combines catharsis, suspense, role reversal, peripety, unmasking, and performative resistance to expose the constructed nature of patriarchal power. The ritual does not merely entertain; it educates, empowers, and creates opportunities for collective reflection. The story ultimately reveals that resistance need not occur outside tradition. Cultural rituals themselves may contain transformative possibilities. By dramatizing women's experiences and temporarily disrupting gender norms, Ratadi becomes a powerful example of

how performance can preserve cultural heritage while simultaneously challenging the ideologies embedded within it.

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