

# Holi Dance as a Performance for New Beginning in Rimal's *Silu*

- Ganga Maharjan

## Abstract

*This paper analyzes holi dance entitled Abiraya holi in Pradeep Rimal directed Newari movie Silu (1987), the first ever ethnic movie made in Nepal, as a seasonal folklore that signifies the arrival of the New Year. Holi provides a context of social interaction for young men and to present themselves in front of the elders in among Newar community in Kathmandu Valley. My inquiry into the Newari culture through the movie is how holi celebration marks the beginning of new life for a newly married couple. As holi is a harbinger of New Year a giving them chance to familiarize with new ones. Not only that, it further examines that celebration of holi at the dawn of New Year bring families, relatives and young people from different clans together. Thus, holi becomes a basis for strengthening the relationship between protagonists in the movie and people in the society. In order to highlight holi dance as popular folklore among Newar community and it as an enactment of sharing a cultural tradition of Newars in Silu, this paper brings cultural studies on board to study the intersection of holi, New Year and newly married couples.*

Keywords: Holi, Dance, Folklore, Newari, New year, culture, ethnic, relationship, community

## Introduction

Dance as a celebration is a performance and visual art in which movement of the body speaks with the help of music. For example, Holi dance entitled *Abiraya Holi* in newari movie *Silu* is a celebration that signifies the arrival of New Year which is very famous among Newar youths. The New Year is an annual celebration that traditionally falls at the end of the year. Dance performed on the holi song in *Silu* wearing typical Newari dress is the symbol of New year celebration. As people have to marry inside their own clan, during this occasion, young Newar males and females get chance to meet their potential marriage partners. In *Silu* the hero, Hira (Jay Shrestha), and the heroine Tuyu Maicha (Late Nabina Shrestha), a newly married couple grabs the chance of familiarising each other on the occasion of holi dance. It is an occasion or the event when marriageable young men and women present themselves in front of the community dressing attractively in order to attract positive evaluations of character and appearance from the opposite sex and their families among Newari community. Annete Lynch in her book *Dress, Gender, and Cultural Change* focuses in this regard, "Marriage partners are lifelong companions and they must fulfill not only the attractive function with someone they have sexual desire for, but also must be able to succeed within the culturally determined gender roles of the community" (33). Celebration of holi as a marker

of new life and renewal within the annual celebration of the New Year infuses vitality and becomes the means to maintain historical and religious linkage to the past. It implies that past is the memory to be treasured and protected. This way, holi celebration as an ethnic festival celebrated by different characters in *Silu* is a ritualistic symbol which not only expresses the concerns and values of the past, but also of present of people living in Kirtipur and Kathmandu.

In the movie, holi dance performed in the movie as a folklore performance implies specific Newari community sharing a rich cultural tradition of Newars living in Kirtipur and Kathmandu. It also signifies costuming, music, destiny and the reconciliation of life and art. The body remains a key visual category in the movie and continues to organize religion and culture that motivates and shapes narrative action. A sense of self-consciousness arises as a community or even a nation developing into a cultural product through these films. The holi dance performances among Newar community in *Silu* is promoted on the national and international market through the film. Not only that the domains of knowledge and inherent responsibilities kept alive mainly by oral transmission is also made popular through the film.

Dance and music, the most universal of the performing arts is an integral cultural heritage including rituals, festive events or oral tradition found in the most diverse contexts: sacred or profane, classical or popular closely connected to work or entertainment may also be a political or economic dimension to music. Dance costume *Haku Patasi* (sari), *Misa Lan*:(Cholo) and Ga:(Shawl) worn by female dancers and Daura Surruwal and coat worn by male ones in the movie in a holi dance sequence has a traditional design which is designed to harmonize with the dance and not to hinder the movements of the dancer. They are designed to expose or enhance the lines formed by the dancer's body or to express the artistic vision or to engage the audience, or combinations of these. It portrays or relates to some characteristic mood or theme of the dance. It is also designed in accordance with aesthetic requirements.

Clifford Geertz addresses cultural aspects of religious life in his book, *The Interpretation of Culture*, "Ritual is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form" (89). By means of ritualistic holi dance practice in the movie, Newari people's experience in everyday life is shared among other people beyond Newars through this film. The western popular technology like camera, light, television, projector are when used to tell the everyday stories of Newars which is their personal experiences of the particular Newar community, the two cultures of which men and women perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward life. In this sense ethnic Newari dance in *Silu* as a form of symbolic behavior has a power to fuse cultural models of everyday reality with models for

transcendent or idealized reality transforming the participants by helping them imagine or experience “transcendent or transformed” versions of everyday life. The coming together of real and ideal in a single set of symbols creates transformation and heightened consciousness in *Silu*.

In *Representaion: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall defines, “culture as a shared values transmitted by the medium of language, visual or non-visual, through which individuals make sense of objects and experience, and meanings produced and exchanged” (1). Culture shared in a given community operates as the textual site in new areas of the humanities of which popular culture is a significant branch. Human actions and behaviors are considered their identity markers. As film, video and television mediate people's actions and materials they use, and thus, making them popular across the world, the movie *Silu* has made Newari holi dance entitled *Abiraya Holi* (meaning holi of color) global crossing the border thus making it popular all over the world. Through movie, the ethnic Newari dance reaches all over the world. It becomes fluid when mingling with another culture, and making it hybrid, it becomes a popular culture. Actors, producers, directors, script writers, camera persons use the western technology in their own way in their periphery to make money. Thus, getting the things from outside, making their methods different from westerners and relating it with money, the movie helps in making the ethnic Newari dance popular.

### **Public Square as site of Performance**

The chowks, squares, temple shrines, where this performance takes place during holi are popular places for gathering varieties of people. Involvement of people as performers and audience is a very good example of communality and a very special feature of Newari community. Spending time in such activities taking a momentary break from their routine life denotes the prosperity and profundity of newars and their civilization. Breaking the hierarchies between male and females, youths and old, traditional and modern, rural and urban, rich and poor, high and low class, they function as a bridge between past aesthetic codes associated with mythical and folk dances and its representation in present cinema that functions for ushering the new understanding of culture for newer generation. Here, gender and sex collapse. Differences collapse, unity is strengthened that becomes possible due to dance culture.

Holi dance has been historically associated in the movie with agency, joy and fulfillment on the one hand and melancholy, death, perversity on the other. In *Silu*, holi dance as a double moment of representation in which bodies at once produce and are produced by wider cultural discourses of gender, nationality, ability and age are profoundly expressed. It represents an alternative separate sphere of satisfying and enjoying work and associated familial relationships based on choices, shared goals among Newari community. It has been means to stretch

and reinvigorate cultural representation and identity. In this regard, Adrienne L. McLean in her book *Dying Swans and Madmen* writes, "Dancing body can help us understand the complex negotiations between somatic experience and cultural representation between the body and identity" (15). During holi dance in *Silu*, the dancers display artistic expressions in which specific footsteps and movements and hand postures are used as modes of expression saturated with meaning. Pallabi Chakraworty writes:

"Practice" is an important analytical node in dance scholarship. Practice refers to both social theory and the corporeal actions of the body. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "habitus," drawn from a phenomenological understanding of practicum has been important in movement scholarship. It enabled bodily meaning to be located outside discourses of representation in the realm of experience and emotion. (170)

In the context of Newari dance, the cultural rootedness of practice is embodied by the Newari people wearing Newari dress and dancing in different forms and occasions that is filmed in the movie *Silu* by the movie director Pradeep Rimal. Newari dance and their embeddedness in traditional system is reformulated to construct the authentic Nepali identity of then and present Nepal. The dance performance among Newari community has been able to capture the new global market through a new mediatized, technicized, and commercialized practice i. e. *Silu* movie. It is marked by indeterminacy of the body in modern media world as it exists in flux between the experiential-subjective and objective continuity. Newari dances have been important and integral feature for Nation building and fostering a sense of collective national identity being the important part of Nepali cinema. Both dance and cinema have used similar cultural and aesthetic codes for meaning-making, affect and identity construction. Both genres have drawn on mythoi-poetic narratives and traditional aesthetic forms of establishing a deep sense of cultural identity.

Holi dance in *Silu* is a folklore since it focuses on the cultural interest of Newari people living in Kathmandu valley. Folklore captures people and their daily performances, as Ray B. Browne argues in his book *Folklore to Poplore*. He argues "People in any culture other than their own, wish for the imagined good old days, places and societies. Folklore is a yearning to return to yesteryear, yester place and yester culture. People may or may not feel a stirring in their blood for the beauty and magic of some elements of folklore but they feel they can hold onto the past through the reenactment of its lore" (24-5). The experience becomes "appealing when society" becomes polyglot.

The dance and the dress in the movie signify the culture of Newari people living in Kirtipur and Kathmanudu and the storyline, the songs and the performances

of holi were existed in the past and still at present in verbal or non-verbal form and that is being transferred from the older generation to the newer generation. Presentation of these folklores in the popular means film, has helped to reinforce the stereotypical beliefs and ideologies of Newari people that hold certain meanings as the truth. The folk holi dance presented in the film has referred to the cultural aural beauty of Newars and their resourcefulness to recognize in the unique way.

Representation of dance in *Silu* addresses the dancing body as a 'popular image'. The popularity of the film lies on various dance sequences shot in the films in different time and space and its successful box office collection. Their appeal continues as they have been relocated into YouTube.



Figure 1. *The man urging a girl to enjoy holi celebration by joining him and the girl feeling ashamed of accepting his offer*

(Source: <<http://www.youtube.com>>)

The holi dance sequence takes place in the middle of the film which is depicted in the form of holi celebration in the movie after the marriage of Tuyu Maicha with Hira in *Silu*. It is very significant here as it marks the arrival of New Year just as Hira and TuyuMaicha begin their new life as newly married couple in the scene. The environment is joyous and exciting in between the image of young girls and boys who participate in celebration and singing songs like *Abiraya Holi....* and

dancing in classical Newari steps. Camera repeatedly focuses on the smearing of different colors from young boys to the young girls. These representations construct a notion of dancing body as means of expressing people's inner feelings and emotions. Set in a shrine near Swoyambhu Nath temple, the dancers dance in classical Newari tune. In a song, the man asks a woman if his act of smearing Abir (red color) towards her makes her angry or not. The same tune and lyrics is repeated by the chorus in the following lines. The camera briefly cuts to a close-up of the dancers to highlight their dance but then returns to a long shot to reveal that they are in group and united. The men and women turn by turn sing and dance with the beat of different musical instruments.



Figure 2. *Girls pouring color upon the boy during holi celebration*

(Source: <<http://www.youtube.com>>)

New Year as a time of celebration in community bring families and young people from differing clans together to eat, to perform rituals, and to play games. The central figure of the New Year is singing and dancing that shows the formation of their relationship that is resulted in marriage. The idea that the New Year is also a time of spiritual renewal is further emphasized by the Holi celebration by singing Holi song and dance performances in the movie *Silu* which becomes the base for strengthening the relationship between Hira and Tuyu Maicha after marriage.



Figure 3. *People singing and dancing on holi song*

(Source: <<http://www.youtube.com>>)

Furthermore, holi, the festival of color, signifies the victory of good over evil. Different color signifies different colors of life. Feeling of love, happiness, joy, victory, friendship, forgiveness is different colors of life. In many ways, this dance sequence offers the audience a wealth of narrative information. Singing song, smearing colors in each other's face and drenching colorful water are the activities done during holi celebration. In the movie, camera cuts close-up to the dancers highlighting these colors of life. Popular especially among youths, holi has been the time for youths to express their love towards their beloved. In this dance sequence, the man pulling the hand of a woman asking her to play holi with him when the camera focuses the two only placing them in the center signifies the importance of holi among youths in the film. The woman then covering her face as if she is ashamed of accepting the man's request of smearing color towards her implicates that it is time for a girl and a boy to choose their life partner that suits their color of life. Holi, as it signifies ending of winter and the beginning of spring, symbolizes time for beginning new life for couple. The presence of Tuyu Maicha and Hira, a newly married couple in that celebration also resemble with the significance of harvesting and fertility time of holi. In the middle of the song, the camera taking the shot from overhead cutting to group of people who circle round the square in

danced manner alludes to the universal nature of humanity i.e. friendship , love, sharing and caring without which no human beings life is possible to sustain.

This construction of film reflects Hindu mythical discourses that promote the dancing body as culturally significant. This stereotypical conceptualization has been used to value dance and song through the body's links to tactility, sensuality and spirituality which are used to attract the partner in the song. Although this sequence does not explicitly announce the association between the body and sensuality, the way in which it clearly draws on this convention celebrates the popular image of the dancing body as a site of evocative feelings. It also suggests that the film nevertheless implicitly devalues the dancing body in that, although it is about dance and song, the sequences are shot by an abundance of close-ups, numerous reaction shots and repetitive choreography.

By the use of narrative convention and cinematic codes, holi dance is constructed as a site of cultural spectacle. It can be argued that holi dance is a celebration that gives an opportunity to young men and women to express their inner feelings towards each other signifying the beginning of new life. The playing of different musical instruments to give company to the dance, the decoration of their body with colorful cultural dresses, wearing of heavy antique ornaments by them, bare foot, their dancing movements reflects the notion of body as a site is carefully presented. During different cultural occasions, Newari men and women present themselves for fascinating the voyeurs of Newari culture. In Nepal fascination with Newari culture i.e dance among Nepali as well as foreign people and artists and writers results in a more open embrace of Newari culture and art. Filming of Newari culture related activities have featured Newari men and women as inspirational embodiments of an exotic ethnic worldview. By bringing Newari beauty through holi dance in film, *Silu* plays a significant role in culminating a wider appreciation for Newari beauty and arts both in Nepal and abroad among national and international audience making it popular. Newari men and women get platform to expose their culture via films growing its popularity and importance.

The movie conceptualizes dance as a manifestation of body and its contours. The energetic body with required attire of bangles and necklaces, colorful dresses, the virtuous movement content, classical dance styles signifying various postures, and personal and economic struggle required achieving success, all contribute to this perception. Much of the imagery is derived from stereotypical framework: the dancing body as culturally rich and aesthetically beautiful.



## Works Cited

- Browne, Ray B. "Folklore to Poplore". *Popular Culture Studies Across the Curriculum*. McFarland and Company, Inc., 2005.
- Chakravorty, Pallavi. 1998. "Remixed Practice: Bollywood Dance and the Global Indian". *Dance Matters*, edited by, Pallabi Chakaraworty and Nilanjana Gupta. Routledge, 2010.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*. Perseus Books Group, 1973.
- Hall, Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage, 1997.
- Lynch, Annette. *Dress, Gender and Cultural Change: Asian American and African American Rites of Passage*. Berg, 1999.
- Mclean, Adrienne. *Dying Swans and Madmen: Ballet, The Body, and Narrative Cinema*: New Rimal, Pradeep, dir. Silu perf. Jay Shrestha and Naveena Shrestha. Nepal: Filmcraft, 1985.