

**Bon Voyage: A Peer-Reviewed
Journal of English Studies**

- Open Access Journal
- Indexed in NepJOL
- Print ISSN: 2382-5308

Published by:

Department of English

**Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan
University, Kathmandu, Nepal**



Ghātu: Femininity and Indigenous Aesthetics

Raj Kumar Gurung, PhD 

Department of English, Ratna Rajyalaxmi Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu,
Nepal

Article History: Submitted 03 March, 2024; Reviewed 08 Jul., 2024; Revised 23 Jul., 2024

Corresponding Author: Raj Kumar Gurung, E-mail: gurung.rajkumar@gmail.com

Copyright 2024© The Author(s). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/bovo.v6i1.68264>

Page 107-114

Abstract

Ghātu is a cultural capital that explores the esteem of femininity and Indigenous aesthetics. Despite its aesthetic value, the main theme is sati custom, the over-exploitation of females. This tribal festival does not only belong to Gurung or Magar. Its horizon is up to Tamang, Dura, Darai, Baram and Aryal Kshetri in central and mid-western Nepal. All of them observe with almost similar methods and rituals. Except for Aryal Kshetri, other Indigenous groups claim that it is their hereditical cultural activity. The slow-motion meditative trance dance and melodious verses of songs represent the aesthetic beauty of Nepali folk music and folklore. The study concerns why ethnic groups adopted Ghātu and the significance of implications of this cultural activity. The ethnic groups adopted it for its zeal for music. The study's implication is to internalize this folk dance as a source of social integration, human relations, teamwork, music and folk literature, and a goldmine of cultural studies research works. Now, Ghātu is a common cultural capital and a central stone of indigenous aesthetics and cultural studies. This study aims to project how this cultural activity represents a common cultural heritage like the Chhath festival. The findings of the study show that maintaining integral human relations is impossible until or unless society respects femininity and cultural values. So, culture, language, rites and rituals, and dresses are common, if the mass accepts it. Gender discrimination is another focal point, and there has not been research on how Ghātu

has been the archive and cultural heritage. The study employs document analysis and feminist theories.

Keywords: cultural heritage, exploitation, femininity, *Ghātu*, indigenous aesthetics

Introduction

The study explores the esteem of femininity and aesthetic beauty of *Ghātu*, as it is classical music. The slow movements of dancing girls with the music of melodious verses of song reverberate in the air creating an atmosphere of death ritual. The performance creates a tragic moment in which the audiences feel so sorry for Queen Yemphawati, who is saying goodbye to her maternal and in-law relatives and those staff and workers of her palace leaving her breastfeeding baby son of two and half years in their charge. *Sati* is not a matter of interest but an obligation in this custom. *Sati* custom does not have any other benefits except male domination. According to this custom, the queen jumps into her husband's funeral pyre. The ruling class people followed this custom despite its too inhumane custom. There are several views about how long Gurungs have been practicing this tribal festival but "history and common sense says that *Ghātu* is being practised by the Gurungs for over five centuries or so . . . or from the time of Kulmandan Shah" (Gurung R. K. 279). Gurungs have been practising this tribal festival for more than five hundred years from the time of Kulmanda Shah. The *sati* custom is the Aryan theme, the over-exploitation of females, whereas the indigenous people always have high esteem for femininity.

Mostly, the females are the family heads among indigenous families. Therefore, respect of females in indigenous families is unquestionable. They do not use derogatory words against females but *sati* custom means burning the widow with her husband's funeral pyre. *Sati* System is a cruel action of the wife's immolation after her husband's death. No indigenous people follow this hateful custom. They just observe it for its zeal for music. "The ancient Hindu tradition called *sati*, wherein a widow would throw herself on her husband's pyre and burn to death, was initially a voluntary act considered courageous and heroic, but it later became a forced practice" (Jain n. p.). The male-dominated society would encourage the widow to perform such hateful work of suicide. To be *sati* was considered courageous and heroic work. But when some widows did not want to be *sati*, people forcefully pushed them into the burning pyre. Except for Aryans, none of the above-mentioned ethnic groups practised this custom. This system shows that the wife has no alternative except to jump into her lord's burning pyre. What an obligation. The widow or any woman was supposed to be the weakest animal in the world.

There is a good context in the story "The Lottery" written by Shirley Hardie Jackson in which an unspeakable woman called, Tessie is stoned to death as a canker in society. This ritual is performed annually and all the children gather stones to hit one who draws the black-spotted lottery. Therefore, the context of *sati* custom in *Ghātu* is close to this story "The Lottery". In the story, there is a ritual in which every year one person is selected through a lottery system and that person is stoned to death. This lottery system is performed for the sake of good harvest. This sacrificial ritual is performed in June. "In the story, Tessie Hutchinson draws the black spot and, despite her protests, is stoned to death. The lottery is

described as a tradition whose origin is unclear and whose meaning has lost whatever significance it originally held” (Freimuth and Jamieson 235). As all the villagers talk about the person who is going to be the victim of the black spot lottery. Different people guess different most unlucky ones among which people buzz Hutchinson’s family name.

This is the story of one of the villages of America and one helpless villager who goes to draw the lottery in the late hour draws it but she does not accept it as fair. But the villagers do not listen to her and immediately attack her with stones to death. It was against her wish. Similarly, Queen Yemphawati is forcefully asked to jump into her husband’s burning pyre against her wish. She must have wished to survive for her breastfeeding baby son, Balkrishna. But because of this cruel cultural activity and the conservative society, she becomes *sati* reluctantly as Tessie is stoned to death. *Sati* is nothing but a ritualistic human sacrifice. This reluctance is in Tessie Hutchinson, too:

Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery,” which was first published in *The New Yorker* during the summer of 1948, describes a ritualistic human sacrifice which was presumably conducted annually in a village of a little over three hundred inhabitants.

The rationale for the existence of the village lottery is summarized as follows: *Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon*. The lottery culminates in a stoning to death of the selected sacrificial victim by the other members of the villa (Williams 543).

“The Lottery” is about a ritualistic human sacrifice conducted annually in a village in the presence of over three hundred inhabitants of the village. This inhumane ritual is performed for a better harvest. This shows that agriculture was the major occupation or the major source of income. *Ghātu* is also performed for this purpose. Like Tessie, Queen Yemphawati is supposed to be the sacrificial victim. Because of the *sati* custom, her family members strictly implement this custom after her husband, King Pashramu, is slain on the battlefield. His death seems to have been planned, whereas Yemphawati’s death has been forced. In the name of the religious belief system of having a heavy harvest, someone’s offering is just a kind of crucifixion though it is Hindu practice. Tessie Hutchinson is doubly marginalised as a poor and helpless female and Yemphawati is marginalised as a female and her unspeakability. This study focuses the equality and femininity. Thus, *Ghātu* performance promotes the performing art and indigenous aesthetics. The indigenous people observe this tribal festival not to enhance the *sati* custom but to heal some kind of diseases and promote folklore. Like in “The Lottery”, the villagers of Baikuntha of Makawanpur district observe *Ghātu* for good harvest as well as for security and to ward off the evil spirits.

Are women as weak and helpless as the thought of a male-dominated society in which the *sati* system was? How justice is this to ask the helpless poor person to draw a black spot lottery and stone him/her to death? This paper also advocates for the voice of marginalized females who are suffering from another form of *sati*. *Sati* custom was abolished but its impact is still ongoing implicitly. And stoning to death in “The Lottery” is not the same but it has another form. Othering or discriminating is an ongoing process. The hang of *sati* is going on and discrimination against women, the weak and the poor is still going on. *Sati* was abolished

but other forms of *sati* are still well-established and permanently deep rooted in our society. Only burning and stoning to death is not demeaning, there are several other forms of *sati* in which many women are burning live. That is more torturing than self-immolation. Who cares about this? The fascinating buildings, well decoration inside, delicious food, wearing very expensive dresses, and travelling in a car do not guarantee female happiness.

There are other things which determine their happiness. They have to bear the tension or high pressure from their males. Does anyone care about this? The rich women have tears within their laughter. They might be sleeping on the mattress of thorns of male-domination. Yemphawati and Tessie are just exemplary characters. Several women have been suffering from discrimination and domination even in this ultramodern age. For some personal benefits of male chauvinism, this custom came to Nepal from India. The ancient ruling class people would observe this system to dominate as well as exploit the females.

History says that Bhuvan Laxmi Malla was the *sati* when her husband, Bhim Malla died after he was slain at Basantpur Durbar. The ruling class people were following this *sati* custom reluctantly. But Chandra Shamsher realized this was a bad culture and he abolished it in his time that it was a direct murder or suicide of a widow. When the *sati* system was at its peak level, a powerful time swept it away forever. For this, Britisher's contribution is unforgettable. "In 1850, the British hardened their rules against the practice. Sir Charles Napier ordered to hang to death any Hindu priest who presided over a widow burning" (n. p.). From that day onward, this practice was abolished in India. The British ruler realized that the *sati* custom was an inhuman activity. They decided that it would be abolished at any cost. Then they hardened their rules against this practice. Immediately, Sir Charles Napier, the British ruler ordered to hang to death any Hindu priest who presided over a widow burning. This stopped this cruel system of murdering the widow. Richa Jain claims:

Historical records tell us that *sati* first appeared between 320CE to 550CE, during the rule of the Gupta Empire. Incidents of *Sati* were first recorded in Nepal in 464 CE, and later on in Madhya Pradesh in 510 CE. The practice then spread to

Rajasthan, where the most number of *sati* cases happened over the centuries. (n. p.) The *sati* custom was practised in Nepal when the Lichhavi dynasty (450-750 CE) had just begun. But it was practiced in India first. Later on, the ruling class people, the Aryans, continued it for a long when they benefitted from it. It was a kind of over-exploitation of women. This system, in Nepal, lasted for about fifteen hundred years, that is, from 464 CE to 1863 AD. It started from the Lichhavi dynasty and to the Rana dynasty. In addition, Raj Kumar Gurung states, "The theme of *Ghātu* is *Sati* Practice, the self-immolation, which was in practice until the time of Chandra Shamsher" (xii). Chandra Shamsher realized that the *sati* system was a kind of suicide or murder. He decided to abolish it "on his 58th birthday, 8th July 1920 AD, enforced a legislation abolishing the longstanding horrible custom of *sati*. In this way, the custom of *sati* ended in Nepal" (Das 1). It was necessary because the deaths of many kings caused widow's death untimely and reluctantly. For example, "Pratapmalla's death in 1674 AD caused his nine queens to become *sati*" (Das 3). There are several incidences and pieces of evidence of *sati* custom using which thousands of young widows lost their lives

untimely. This is Hindu custom but Gurung and other ethnic groups do not fully follow the Hindu custom though they continued this cultural activity for a long time with the zeal of music. This is how the *sati* custom was abolished from Nepal.

The study advocates dismissing the man-made hierarchy between males and females and between the high and lower classes. Females are never below the males nor are the males ever above them only because of males. Both males and females are equal in every aspect. Because of male chauvinism, females are considered the weakest animals. There is a provision of certain privileges given to females. The women entertain this privilege as their right but it makes them weaker. This provision does not lead feminism to its destination. “A girl should not expect special privileges because of her sex, but neither should she “adjust” to prejudice and discrimination. She must learn to compete then, not as a woman, but as a human being” (Friedan 361). Giving privileges to women has been a kind of so-called promotion. Most women seem to enjoy this but they have to protest this provision. They are equally capable of competing with any male in any field in the world. Female quotas and indigenous quotas weaken them instead of promoting them. All females can compete with males, not as women, but as human beings. No woman is the character of a male’s excuse. No woman needs male protection. They are capable of protecting themselves.

Males’ supposition of female inferiority is always negative. Today’s male mentality is not different from the males of a hundred years back. *Sati* mentality has not gone out of male’s minds yet. Yemphawati was just once burnt and Tessie was just once stoned to death but several women have been burned and stoned to death time and again. Can their pains ever be accounted? There is no difference between making Yemphawati *sati* and stoning Tessie to death. *Ghātu* is a unique performance and a great cultural practice though it has not been recognized in the mainstream discussion of literature and the arts of Nepal. Similarly, “The Lottery” is a tradition of domination of a poor female. *Ghātu* is the unwritten epic in which one can read the history of the cruelty in the *Sati* System, a kind of widow-murdering custom “about ongoing problems of gender discrimination” (Haraway 107). This is the optimum point of discrimination against Queen Yemphawati and she is urged to immolate into her husband’s funeral pyre. This is an example of extreme gender and class discrimination.

The culture is compelling in that every man follows the same trend and they forget their strength. Similarly, female thinks that they are more powerless than male as their mind has been automatized by the male-dominated trend. There are several societies in which women are regarded as second-class citizens. Only a few males do not want to tag them as commodities for consumption. “But now that woman is seen only in terms of her sexual role” (Friedan 54) in affluent society. This is the age of the anti-slavery society, egalitarian society, integrity and equality. Queen Yemphawati’s condition is not different from this prospect. After her husband’s death, her life is supposed to be meaningless.

Most women are guided by an inferiority complex and a defeated mentality. As a result, they are losing several winning games. Because of this weak mentality males rule them as the tiger easily hunts the elephant. Therefore, a male-dominated society supposes

that “women’s interests in society are weaker than those of men” (Friedan 108). What a judgment! This is all male supposition. This practice of *sati* is entertained in *Ghātu* although no indigenous people ever follow this cultural practice. Such cultural practices would be the source of entertainment in the past but the present generation has adopted many European cultures as a fashion. Jain tells a brief story of *sati*:

Sati was frequently practised in Rajasthan, more specifically by the women of royal families. A *sati* stone was created, which was a memorial of all the wives of the kings who died this way. Before giving up their lives, the queens left their handprints on the wall, to be remembered as valiant and devotional wives. (n. p.)

All the widows were not fully interested in this system. Many of them did not want to be *sati* but the society encouraged and urged them to be so against their interests. If they immolated, their history would have been made. For this, a *sati* stone was created, which was a memorial of all the wives of the kings who died this way. The queens who were about to give up their lives would leave their handprints on the wall, to be remembered as valiant and devotional wives. This is how society encouraged queens to give up their lives. This shows that the wives would have to be submissive, valiant and devotional, loyal, why not husbands? There is no history of committing immolation by any husband immediately after their wives’ death. If there was a history of a husband’s burning in his wife’s pyre, it would be equality. Thus, this is a total discrimination against innocent and unspeakable women. It is a “[s]ubtle discrimination against women, to say nothing of the sex wage differential, is still an unwritten law today” (Friedan 177). Those who implemented the *sati* custom were males who wanted to use females as their possessions, objects, and commodities. There is still a female-dominating unwritten law. The pressure that modern females face has not been accounted for.

Ghātu culture is about the Royal couple and *sati* custom is the custom that the ruling class practiced. The high-class people prioritize observing *Ghātu* to continue dominating the females. This shows that the position of women in the past was not good. The male-dominated society wants to continue the same. A general knowledge of the position and status of women in the main civilizations of ancient and modern times, both in the East and the West, is necessary to get a proper perspective for the evaluation of Hindu culture concerning its attitude towards women and their problems in the different periods of our history. (Alterkar ii)

The position of women both in the East and the West is not satisfactory though several women’s rights campaigners claim that they have promoted the female status. A certain kind of domination has gone out but their situation has not been changed.

Another piece of evidence is that most high-class people do not use their respective words to address their wives yet, and they seem to treat the females not as humans but as commodities or objects. So, the *sati* custom is to dominate and exploit females for males’ benefit. People want to follow the narratives of history and culture for personal benefit. History, of course, is written only of the victors and powerful people but not of the victims and powerless people; history is made of the winners but not of the defeators and history is

recorded only of the predator or hunter but not of the prey or the hunted, and history is made of the authoritative communities but not of the marginalized ones. But there is the possibility of having false truths in the victor's history that are intentionally polished but not in the victim's and marginalized ones because they don't need to colour their history. *Ghātu* and "The Lottery" are the histories of how females were treated as animals. Yemphawati and Tessie are the representative characters of how females were exploited in the male-dominated society.

So, *Ghātu* and "The Lottery" are the history of victims and victors, predators and prey or hunter and hunted as they symbolize the universality. Although it is the Gurung mythico-cultural spectrum, it represents the whole of humanity. It is universal that human perceptions and pains can always be the same even if there is variation in language, religion, culture, colour, and geography. The tragedy of King Lear is moving as he has been detached from his palace in an old age. Likewise, the tragedy of Queen Yemphawat is heart-cracking because she immolates leaving her breastfeeding baby son not because of mismanagement but because of the misfortune that a male dominated society has imposed. So is the reality of Tessie who is stoned to death as soon as she draws the black spot lottery. Lear's mismanagement of his three daughters caused his downfall, [but ill fate befalls Yemphawati and Tessie on no account and their tragedy seems higher than Shakespearian tragedy. It was a male-dominated society and male chauvinism which caused their ill fates. Therefore, the narrative level of *Ghātu* and "The Lottery" is universal though the actor, theme, style and dress are local. Any human is bereaved for his/her best-loved one's death. There is no difference between the tears of Yemphawati and Tessie, and Juliet nor is there any difference in the smile of Mona Lisa and Yemphawati. Thus, the implication of *Ghātu* and "The Lottery" is always universal.

Conclusion

The study was carried out to explore *Ghātu* as an esteem of femininity and indigenous aesthetics. Simultaneously, it carried out to analyze "The Lottery" as the extreme exploitation of females and the poor. The male-dominated society in Nepal burnt Queen Yemphawati in the name of *sati* custom and American society stoned Tessie to death in the name of good harvest. Males or male-dominated societies always seek such nonsense excuses for their ease. *Ghātu* is an archive of cruel cultural activity that reflects the ancient culture of male domination of the ruling class of Nepal. Tessie was doubly marginalized but Yemphawati. Here, Tessie represents the poor class and Yemphawati represents the high class. This proves that both the high class and lower class extremely dominate females knowingly or unknowingly. Therefore, the undercurrent suffering of females in high-class families is unfathomable. For example, in the story of Kate Chopin, "A Respectable Woman", Mrs Baroda, the protagonist of the story, cannot do the things she likes because she is a respectable woman. Similarly, many high-class women must have suppressed their desires in their families. So is the situation of poor-class women. They are badly suppressed but they do not express their pains. This is how this study raises the female voices.

Ghātu was analyzed from a feminist and aesthetic point of view. According to the feminist approach, femininity has been a great question. Its theme, the *sati* custom, lasted in

Nepal about fifteen hundred years. Thus, *Ghātu* is a cultural spectrum which explores how elite-class culture followed *sati* custom for the benefit of dominating females and ignoring femininity. But the positive aspect of *Ghātu* is that it is a goldmine of indigenous aesthetics. Except for theme, the performing art of indigenous people has always had high value. The classical music of *Ghātu* and its way of slow trance dance movements reflect the beauty of indigenous aesthetics. Modern people follow the cake culture and baby shower culture as civilized cultural practices. As a result, people ignore the *Ghātu* as it is the archive for several sources of knowledge. *Ghātu* and “The Lottery” represent several universalities despite the purely local cultural activity of Nepal and America. This study has not covered every detail. Femininity and the *sati* custom are only two aspects. There are several aspects and themes like spiritualism, human relations, teamwork, integrity and unity, shamanism, history of ethnomusicology, narratology, dance performance and performing art, culture and religion and many further research topics, whereas “The Lottery” is a good example of how bad culture rules society.

Works Cited

- Altekar, A. S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilizations*. Motilal Banarasidas, 1959.
- Baral Magar, Keshar Jung. *Magar Culture of Palpa, Tanahu and Syangja*. Nepal Academy, 1993.
- Das, Basudevlal. “*Sati* Custom in Nepal: A Historical Perspective.” *Academic Voices: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, vol. 7, Oct. 2018, pp. 1-7, doi:10.3126/av.v7i0.21359.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 1963.
- Freimuth, Vicki S., and Kathleen Jamieson. ““The Lottery”: An Empirical Analysis of Its Impact.” *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1977, pp. 235–43. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170828>. Accessed 15 July 2024.
- Gurung, Chandra Bahadur. Telephone interview. Conducted by Raj Kumar Gurung, 25 Oct. 2014.
- Gurung, Jagman. *Gurung Community and Culture*. Nepal Academy, 1977.
- Gurung, Jang Raj. Telephone interview. Conducted by Raj Kumar Gurung, 9 March 2024.
- Gurung, Raj Kumar. *Ghātu Performance: A Study of Symbols and Images*. 2014. Tribhuvan University, PhD Thesis. Central Library, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.31218.11207. Accessed on 7/13/2024.
- Haraway, Donna Jeane. *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. Female Man ©_ Meets _ Onco MouseTM*. Routledge, 2018.
- Jain, Richa. “The History behind *Sati*, a Banned Funeral Custom in India. 27 December, 2023.” Accessed on 14 June, 2024. <https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/the-dark-history-behind-sati-a-banned-funeral-custom-in-india>.
- Williams, Richard H. “A Critique of the Sampling Plan Used in Shirley Jackson’s ‘The Lottery.’” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1979, pp. 543–44. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3831296>. Accessed 15 July 2024.