
Narrating the Beauty Myth of Feminine Body Aesthetics in Classic Nepali Songs**Jiwan Kumar Rai, PhD**Assistant Professor of English,
Mahendra Multiple Campus, Dharan
jiwan2032@gmail.com (9842102613)**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/jodem.v14i1.57568>****Abstract**

This paper analyzes the most celebrated classic Nepali songs of all time – “Gaajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, “Lolaaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale”, Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu”, and “Rhritu Harumaa Timee – the former two songs are penned by M.B.B. Shah, the next one is by Dipak Jangam, and latter one is by Rajendra Rijal. These songs are sung by Gulam Ali, Narayan Gopal, and Arun Thapa respectively. This study aims to explore the mythical narratives of the mainstream feminine body aesthetics embedded in the songs – large and deep black eyes, long black eyebrows, long black blond hair, thin lips, delicate, white skin complexion, attractive, shy, and etc. – that are guided and constructed from the frame of the aesthetic standard that is set by mainstream patriarchal culture. The researcher has used the textual analysis method to analyze the selected texts. Roland Barthes’s concept of myth has been applied as a theoretical tool for the critical analysis of the selected songs to achieve the set objectives. As Barthes argues, myths are meta-language through which dominant and ruling power communicates its ideological standpoints and attempts to naturalize them. They function as a complex hierarchical semiotic register where the signifier transfers from first order referents of meaning to second order. As the songs are fabricated cultural products and myth narratives, they not only entertain the audience, but also innocently impose and disseminate the contingent ideas or ideologies that they carry. At the same time, they marginalize the feminine body aesthetics of minority groups who do not belong to the mainstream community. This study helps look critically at Nepali songs and any cultural products leading to rethinking and redefining the dominant body aesthetics and standardization.

Keywords: aesthetics, beauty myth, culture, feminine body, ideology, myth

Introduction

Cultural artifacts articulate the socio-cultural values and political ideologies since they are not independent and autonomous entities. Rather, they are cultural products that are shaped in particular social and cultural contexts. Works of literatures, songs, advertisements, or any other man-made objects incorporate into cultural artifacts. These artifacts are the products of day-to-day experiences of human life in a particular society. They are shaped and shape everyday life and behavior. In this regard, Raymond Williams argues, popular culture like songs tell “how we should feel and what we need to be, what we need to do and have in order to lead fulfilling lives” (175). Artifacts like songs articulate human feelings, needs, and everyday lives. More than this, the socio-cultural values and beliefs that exist in specific societies are reflected in the artifacts including the songs as they are, too, cultural ones.

Since the songs are cultural products loaded with specific socio-cultural values, they function as modern myths that narrate politically motivated ideas and ideologies. The ideologies which are disseminated through the songs have to be advanced and they produce a specific form of political and cultural hegemony that the ruling groups always try to maintain in a particular place and period (Williams 179). In this sense, the songs not only express cultural values, beliefs and stereotypes but also they help shape, reinforce and change them. As Ann McClintok claims, people internalize the message or ideas into their subconscious mind that cultural artifacts like songs disseminate in melodious tune (158). Since the songs function as myths, they not only provide merely entertainment but also, in addition to it, they propagate specific cultural values and beliefs that they carry.

Myth is to be understood as having two meanings – firstly, as its ancient Greek etymology that literally suggests a legend. Secondly, it is assumed in its mythological version of consumer culture. In other words “myths are cultural constructions. They may appear to be pre-given universal truths embedded in common sense. Myths are thus akin to the concept of ideology, which, it is argued, works at the level of connotation” (Barker and Jane 90). In this sense, myth is a lie, a mystification by which human society exists as it serves “to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives” (Abrams and Harpham 230). The culturally constructed songs, as a form of myth and myth-narrative, express every facet of human life and the way how people conduct

their lives. The songs as myth narratives can be used as an appropriate tool to deliver specific ideologies and socio-cultural values that prevail in a particular society.

In this study, the most celebrated classic Nepali songs entitled – “Gaajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, “Lolaaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale”, Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu”, and “Rhritu Harumaa Timee” – are selected aiming to explore the dominant ideologies and cultural values that they carry and disseminate. These cultural artifacts function as myth and myth-narratives. Functioning as myth, particularly beauty myth, the songs narrate mainstream feminine body aesthetics more than they provide entertainment to the audience. They disseminate the beauty of the feminine body that is guided and constructed from the frame of aesthetic standard, ideologies, and cultural values established by the mainstream patriarchal culture. On the one hand, the songs give entertainment with their beautiful selection of words, arrangement of rhymes, and melodious tune for listening. On the other hand, they carry and disseminate dominant ideological standpoints while expressing the physical beauty of the feminine body. The external beauty of the female body in parts has been highly focused on. Moreover, the songs concern only the mainstream feminine body aesthetics excluding and marginalizing the aesthetic values of the minority groups.

The above-mentioned problematic issues embedded in the selected songs obviously raise some specific questions. What implicit ideological standpoints and meanings do the selected songs carry and disseminate while reflecting the feminine body aesthetics? Why do the lyricists focus only on the external physical beauty of females in the songs? How do the songs exclude and marginalize minority groups’ feminine body aesthetics? This study attempts to answer these questions by concentrating on the major argument: since the selected songs are cultural artifacts or myth narratives, they transmit dominant ideologies and values of a patriarchal society that define the qualities of women (femininity) and their body aesthetics by making such ideological standpoints and values self-evident and true. Similarly, the selected songs as myths disseminate patriarchal ideas or the message that the female body is not more than a sexual object to be consumed and entertained by taking this belief and idea as natural and universal. To substantiate these arguments and analyze the selected songs, Roland Barthes’s concept of myth has been used as theoretical stand. Barthes argues that a myth is a meta-language, a second order language through which the dominant power communicates its ideological standpoint and attempts to naturalize it by making its message seem self-evident and true. For him, myth is a system of

communication that transfers or imposes the idea or cultural values constructed by the dominant power, and they wish these values and ideologies to be accepted as natural and true.

For Barthes, everything can be a myth when they are conveyed by a discourse. It means that each object becomes a myth when it conveys or “utters a message” that is deeply rooted in a particular place and time (Barthes, *Mythologies* 107). He explains that myth is a system of signification and connotation that expresses ideologies and cultural values of the dominant social groups without using force as Gramscian idea of cultural hegemony. Myth functions as second order semiological system as Barthes argues, “a myth is a second order semiological system”, “a meta-language in which the sign, which is the final term of the first semiological system (the linguistic level) becomes the first term, a signifier, of the myth system” (*Myth* 57). Clarifying Barthesian notion of myth, Graham Allen further explains, “Myth is a meta-language, a second order language which acts on a first order language, a language which generates meaning out of already existing meaning” (44). Myth as a meta-language changes first order meanings into second order ones. It means that the connotative meaning of the language or object depends on the denotative ones. In short, Barthes considers myth as the system through which historical and intentional ideas or ideology is perceived as universal, natural, and true. Looking from this idea of Barthes, the selected Nepali songs, the myths, function as a system of communication, a meta-language or a second order semiological system that conveys the idea of virtuous women, aesthetics of the feminine body, and objectification of women’s physical body and beauty which are constructed and established by the mainstream culture in a patriarchal society.

Disseminating the Aesthetic Standards of Feminine Body and Beauty

The selected songs – “Gajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, “Lolaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale”, Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu”, and “Rhritu Harumaa Timee” – function as myths that narrate and disseminate the standards of feminine body and beauty constructed by mainstream culture, since they are cultural artifacts. In the first song “Gajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, the lyricist or the singer expresses his intense feelings and love towards the each physical part of a female body and beauty. The lyrics of the songs go like this:

Gaajalu tee thulaathulaa aankhaa, tira bani pase yo dilaimaa

Kaalo laamo pareli kasha, chhaala pare kaleelo maayaamaa

Paatali tyo madhura otha, swaada bani pasyo yo dilaimaa

Milekaa tee daatakaa pankti, moti bane kaleelo maayaamaa

Nidhaarako tyo raato tika chhaapa bani basyo yo dilaimaa

Jhalkeko tyo naakko phuli, jyoti banyo kaleelo maayaamaa (lines 1-6)

Those large eyes with black eye laces entered into my heart as an arrow, long and black eyebrows and hair raise waves in tender love

Those thin and sweet lips moved in my heart as taste, symmetrical line of teeth became diamond in young love

That red *Tikaa* on the forehead remained in my heart as an imprint, that glittering *phuli* on the nose became a light in young love' (my trans.)

In the songs, the singer's heart is touched by the 'large eyes with black eye laces', 'the long and black eyebrows brings waves in his tender love', and 'the thin waist and sweet lips' move into his heart and give a sweet taste. Similarly, 'the symmetrical line of white teeth' enriches his young love, 'the red *Tikaa* on the forehead of his beloved' remains imprinted in his heart, and 'the glittering *phuli* on the nose' brightens his tender love. All these expressions are the denotative meanings or first order meanings that the songs communicate to the audience. At the same time, the songs provide pleasure and entertainment to the audience.

The signification and connotation that the songs express are not limited to the expression of the lyricist's love and praise to the beauty of physical parts that his beloved possesses. Since the song is cultural construction that is guided and shaped by socio-cultural values and beliefs, it functions as a myth, "a type of speech" or "a system of communication" that transfers or imposes aesthetic norms of feminine body and beauty set by the mainstream culture (Barthes, *Myth* 107). The song as a myth in modern narratives, narrates the aesthetic standards of feminine body and beauty. The song conveys the message that a woman must possess 'black eye-laced large eyes', 'black, long and silky hair', 'thin lips and waist', 'sweet voice', 'symmetrical line of white teeth', and must put on red *Tikaa* on the forehead to be a virtuous and ideal woman. In other words, she must have a feminine body possessing all these qualities to

be beautiful. On the contrary, those women who do not have these feminine qualities are known to be ugly and wicked. This message which is a politically and ideologically motivated idea is conveyed as if it is natural, universal and true. It is because, as Barthes argues, “myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (*Myth* 58). This very beauty myth “is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” that help retain patriarchal superiority (Woolf 13). Hence, the song in its connotative meaning disseminates standards of feminine body and beauty which are constructed by the mainstream cultural norms and values in order to maintain male-domination over women.

In the same way, the songs entitled “Rhritu Harumaa Timee” and “Timeelai Ma Ke Bhanu” expresses the lyricist’s description of his beloved’s physical beauty and his passionate feelings of love towards her saying that “*Rhritu harumaa timee, hariyaali basanta hau/Nadee harumaa timee, pavitra gangaa hau/phula harumaa timee, komala gulaab hau*” ‘you are greenery spring among the seasons, you are pure Ganga among the rivers, you are soft rose among the flowers’ (lines 1-3; my trans.) The denotative or first order meaning of the song is simply produced as the comparison of beloved to the greener spring season, pure Ganga River, and soft and delicate flower, particularly rose. This comparison gives immense aesthetic pleasure and amusement to the audience. But, this song not only provides pleasure and entertainment, but also it disseminates ideologically motivated messages and ideas regarding the feminine qualities that an ideal or a good woman must own. Functioning as a myth, the song articulates the qualities of feminine body, behavior and beauty, i.e. an ideal or virtuous woman must have the qualities of fertility and productivity, chastity and purity, and peacefulness and softness. This message and ideological standpoints of patriarchy are disseminated and imposed to the audience without uttering even a single word about them as Barthes claims; myth as a system of communication, conveys the message in such a way that “goes-without-saying” the intended ideas and ideologies (*Myth* 58). The song, therefore, tells about the aesthetics of the feminine body and the qualities of virtuous women by making them self-evident and natural.

In the song “Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu”, the lyricist compares his beloved to the flowers and moon. At the same time, he reveals his uncontrolled drunken condition as

he gets intoxicated by the mind-altering physical beauty of his beloved. He expresses the comparison of his beloved and his uncontrolled state through the lines:

Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu, phul bhanu ki juna bhanu?

Yo saanjhako shital vataavaranaama, yo manalaai kasari samhaalu ma?

Napiee behosa behosa bhaye ma, kahile nachhutne nashaa bhanuki?

Kehi jhuke jhukekaa najara, kehi bolna khojdaa kaapekaa adhara. (lines 1-4)

What shall I call you, either flower or the moon?

How can I console my heart in this environment of cool evening?

Shall I call you everlasting intoxication as I became drunk without drinking?

Some nodding gaze, the trembling lips as try to say something'. (my trans.)

The sweet lyrics of the song not merely express the feelings, emotions, and passionate love of the lyricist, but also, in their connotative meanings, they propagate the virtues of women that are set by mainstream culture in the patriarchal society as the song is culturally constructed myth of feminine beauty and body aesthetics. So, the song circulates the message that only those women are assumed to be beautiful and ideal who have owned feminine norms standardized by the patriarchy. They must be 'as soft and delicate as flower', and 'as calm and cool as the moon'. Furthermore, the phrases 'nodding gaze' and 'trembling lips' communicate the mainstream cultural values set in the patriarchal world. They suggest that beauty lies in the shyness and submissiveness of women. This patriarchal worldview has been articulated since the song functions as a myth that "is an expression of a historically specific ideological vision of the world" (Allen 34). The song entitled "Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu", thus, as a myth-narrative disseminates the feminine body aesthetics and virtues more than it expresses passionate love providing pleasure and entertainment to the audience.

Since the selected songs entitled – "Gaajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa", "Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu", and "Rhrithu Harumaa Timee" – are cultural artifacts that function as myths, they not only provide aesthetic pleasure and entertainment, but also, in their connotative or second order meanings, they convey the message about the norms of aesthetics of feminine body, beauty, and qualities that are set by mainstream culture in the patriarchal society. The songs as myths – a system of communication – convey the message that those women are assumed to be ideal, virtuous, and beautiful

who possess physical traits like large eyes, long and black hair, and thin lips and waist; and moral qualities like chastity, purity, passivity, calmness, and softness. They would be ugly and wicked otherwise. Functioning as a myth, the songs disseminate these cultural values and ideologies as if they are self-evident, natural, and universal. However, the songs exclude and marginalize the aesthetics of minority ethnic groups' bodies, their cultural values, and norms of beauty since the songs are constructed by the mainstream culture.

Objectification of Women's Body

In the selected songs – “Gaajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, “Lolaaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale”, “Timeelaai Ma Ke Bhanu”, and “Rhritu Harumaa Timee”, the lyricist has focused only on the description and praise to the external physical beauty in parts, not in whole. In the song “Gaajalu Tee Thulaathulaa Aankhaa”, the lyricist praises the physical parts and compares them to the objects in the outside world as he expresses his emotional feelings and passionate love for his beloved. He describes external physical beauty such as ‘the large eyes with black eye laces’, ‘long and black hair’, ‘thin lips and waist’, and a symmetrical line of white teeth’. Likewise, the lyricist compares the physical beauty of his beloved to ‘a flower’ and ‘the moon’. In the same way, he compares his beloved to the ‘greenery spring season’, ‘pure Ganga River’, and ‘soft rose’ in the song “Rhritu Harumaa Timee”. The praise and description of the physical parts of the beloved denote the external beauty of women.

In the denotative or first order meanings, the lyricist's description and praise to the physical parts of his beloved suggest that his beloved is extremely beautiful as she has possessed the qualities of feminine body parts and beauty. But, this praise and description convey more than these denotative meanings as the songs are myths of feminine body and beauty. As a myth, the description of physical body parts and their comparison to the physical objects in the outside world disseminate the message that a woman's body is not more than an object to be praised. Moreover, the songs as “a type of speech” or “a system of communication” communicate the connotative meanings (Barthes, *Myth* 54). The descriptions of external physical parts and beauty connote the stereotypical images of women and their feminine “beauty-without-intelligence” (Wolf 59). Hence, the songs, on the one hand, express the lyricist's passionate love towards his beautiful beloved who has owned the physical beauty. On the other hand, the songs

propagate historically and ideologically determined idea or image of women which is not more than objects to be praised and used.

In the same way, the song entitled “Lolaaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale” expresses the intense desire of the lyricist to see the physical beauty of his beloved. In the whole song, the lyricist describes the physical parts and beauty of his beloved to which he wants to be close forever. He expresses that he does not need any other things except to possess her beauty. Some lines of the songs go like this:

Lolaaekaa Tee thulaa dui najarale heridiye malaai chaahinna arko kehi

*Sundar muhaara timro chandramaa sarmaaune ek palta dekhna paaye
chaahinna arko kehi*

*Chhineko tyo katimaa jalako ghadaa sari bhai taasi rahana paaye chaahinna
arke kehi*

*Kaalaa ghataa bhadaukaa jastaa tee keshamaa chhayaa bhaye malaai
chaahinna arko kehi (lines 1-4)*

I do not need any other things if you look at me by your shy couple of large eyes

I do not need any other things if I have a chance once to see your beautiful face that outdid the beauty of moon

I do not need any other things if I stick on your thin waist as the pot of water

I do not need any other things if have a shadow of those hair as the black cloud of *Bhadau*’ (my trans.)

At the denotative level, the song shows that the lyricist has described the physical beauty of his beloved and his desire to have all those things forever in his life. He does not have any other wishes except to own his beloved and her beauty. Since the song is the product of particular socio-cultural and historical contexts, it is politically and ideologically shaped. In other words, the song carries specific ideologies and cultural values that it conveys since it is a myth. As a myth-narrative, the songs disseminate patriarchal beliefs in which women’s body and beauty is taken as objects to be possessed and consumed. Regarding this patriarchal ideology and cultural values, Simone de Beauvoir argues that “. . . she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called ‘the sex’, by which meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For

him she is sex - absolute sex, no less" (209-210). In the song, the lyricist wishes nothing else except to consume the body and beauty of his beloved as Beauvoir argues, "He [man] wishes to conquer, to take, to possess; to have a woman is to conquer her. . . . Woman is her husband's prey, his possession" (*Second* 170). Here, women's body has been treated as sexual object to be consumed and entertained.

The lyrics of the song are deeply rooted in the culture of beauty myth in which women are expected to possess feminine body and beauty like 'a large and shy couple of eyes', 'bright and beautiful face', 'thin waist', and 'long and black hair'. This myth of feminine body and beauty assumes women's body as sexual object that is presumed to be tasted and consumed by men. In this regard, Naomi Wolf rightly explains, "The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called "beauty" objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it" (12). The songs narrate the same story of beauty myth in which the lyricist wants to possess and consume his beloved's body and beauty as an object. He gets attracted and intoxicated by the physical beauty as he says, 'I get drunk without drinking' in the song "Lolaaeka Tee Thulaa Timraa Dui Najarale". The beauty myth tells a message that women's physical beauty is "a form of power This power is always conceived in relation to men; it is not the power to do but the power to attract" (Sontag 269-70). Likewise, the same beauty myth is found in the line "*prakritile malaai janma dieki timro Siudomaa Sindura Bharna*" 'the nature has given me birth to put *Sindur* on your *Siudo*' (line 5; my trans.) from the song "Rhritu Harumaa Timee". In Hindu-Aryan culture, putting *Sindura* on the *Siudo* of a girl suggests becoming wife of a man, a property of the man. Connotatively, it suggests the possession of a woman as an object. It is a "sexual objectification in male-dominated and heteronormative society functions to reduce women to objects to be used at the discretion of men" (Sheila Linttot and Sherri Irvin 29). In the song, therefore, the beloved has been taken as an object to be possessed as his own personal property.

The selected songs as the myth of the feminine body and beauty not merely present and describe physical parts and beauty of the women's body, but also, disseminate the message that women do not have both beauty and intelligence. The aesthetic of the feminine body is supposed to be 'beauty-without-intelligence'. More than this, women's body and beauty is assumed to be an object – sexual object to be possessed and consumed.

Conclusions

The selected songs are cultural artifacts that are constructed from the perspective of mainstream culture. As socio-cultural products, they function as the myth of the aesthetics of the feminine body and beauty. Functioning as the myth of feminine body and beauty, the songs not merely provide aesthetic pleasure and entertainment to the audience, but also, in connotative and second order meanings, they disseminate the message that those women are assumed to be ideal, virtuous and beautiful ones who possess the qualities of feminine body and beauty. They must possess physical traits like ‘large eyes’, long and black hair’, ‘thin lips and waist’, and ‘bright and beautiful faces’. Likewise, they must own the moral qualities like sweetness and softness’, ‘calmness and coolness’, ‘passivity and chastity’, and ‘submissiveness and tolerance’. They would be ugly, wicked and monstrous otherwise. In the same way, the songs as the myth convey the ideological standpoints of a patriarchal society in which women’s body and beauty is taken as the property of men and as sexual object to be possessed and consumed to fulfill the desire and wishes of men. These occurrences and ideas seem to be self-evident, true, and universal as the myth naturalizes them though they are ideologically and historically determined ones. The mainstream patriarchal ideologies and normative values that the aesthetics of the feminine body and beauty disseminate help maintain male-domination and superiority over women. However, the songs exclude the aesthetics of those feminine bodies and beauty that belong to minority ethnic groups since they are the products of mainstream culture. This study gives insights to explore the ideological and political motivations behind the constructions of literary and cultural artifacts. It also helps see the cultural artifacts like songs, paintings, the movies critically and redefine the dominant norms and cultural values that are set by the dominant social groups in the society.

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