

Teej Songs: Narrative Performance, Resistance and Healing

Pimala Neupane¹

Assistant Professor, Bhaktapur Multiple Campus,
Bhaktapur, TU

Rajendra Neupane²

Lecturer, Nagarjuna College of Information
Technology, Shankhamul, Lalitpur

ARTICLE INFO

Pimala Neupane

Assistant Professor, Bhaktapur
Multiple Campus, Bhaktapur, TU

Rajendra Neupane

Lecturer, Nagarjuna College
of Information Technology,
Shankhamul, Lalitpur

Email

pimalaneupane@gmail.com

Article History

Received: 2 August 2025

Reviewed: 5 September 2025

Revised: 14 September 2025

Accepted: 25 September 2025

Abstract

This research paper argues that contemporary Nepali Hindu women challenge patriarchal norms and Hindu ritual practices, which dominate them and marginalize them, through the narrative performance of the Teej songs. This paper examines four contemporary Teej songs, which narrate the traumatic experience of married Nepali Hindu women, and their performances in accompanying music videos, recorded, produced, and uploaded on YouTube in 2024 and 2025. Drawing on the duo of performance theory and scriptotherapy, this paper conducts an analytical and interpretative study of the selected songs, discussing how the women dramatize their individual and collective traumatic experience, not only as a form of resistance to patriarchal and cultural norms, but also as a process of healing. In the process, the duo explores and analyzes both the performance and the lyrics of the selected songs, where Schechner's performance theory focuses on women's performance, and Henke's scriptotherapy focuses on the narrative/storytelling of the lyrics of the songs. This paper addresses an existing research gap and contributes to scholarship in the area of study. This qualitative research offers a novel perspective to future researchers for their scholarly engagement in the field of literary and cultural criticism.

Keywords: Teej songs, rituals, performativity, scriptotherapy, resistance, healing

Introduction

The performance of Nepali Hindu women in contemporary Teej songs on the special occasion of the Teej festival plays a significant political role as a form of resistance to patriarchal norms and Hindu ritual practices that dominate and marginalize the women, fostering the process of healing from the women's collective suffering. The celebration of this festival occurs once a year, which begins on the day of Bhadra Krishna Janma Astami and ends on the day of Rishi Panchami. The Hindu ritualistic performance in Teej songs is based on the belief that worshipping Lord Shiva will help women find or keep a devoted, righteous, and benevolent husband. They are made to fast on the days of Haritalika Teej and Rishi Panchami, and follow the strict ritualistic practice to purify their bodies and engage in the prayers for the longevity of their husbands. The cultural or traditional aspects of the Teej festival prove biased towards women since the married women are even made to follow the ritual of drinking water from their husbands' feet. Therefore, contemporary Nepali Hindu women observe, perform, and celebrate the festival as a form of resistance, claiming their independent spaces that initiate the process of healing. The performance establishes the unity and togetherness of the women, who offer and enjoy delicious food, and fasting has been an optional choice in the contemporary decade.

It has been a ritual to compose, record, and produce music videos on Teej songs and upload them through online platforms, especially YouTube. The male-dominated societal structure marginalizes women,

restricting them from living their independent lives and enjoying equality. The performance of the artists in the produced videos, and the performance by other women in Nepali communities, playing such videos, are considered to be a good source of entertainment and the continuity of Hindu tradition. But more importantly, such performances function as a medium of resistance and liberation of Nepali Hindu women from patriarchal, social, and cultural domination. For this, the researchers have selected "Nariko Bedana" [The Plight of Women] (Gharti et al., 2024, our translation), "Bilauna" [The Lamentation] (Rimal and Pangeni, 2024, our translation), "Chhoriko Shir Aama" [Mother, Your Daughter's Pride] (Chauhan, 2025, our translation), and "Ma Ta Narauri" [I am not Beautiful] (Majhi, 2025, our translation), as the primary data from YouTube. This research uses the duo of narrative performance (Schechner, 1988) and scriptotherapy (Henke, 1998) as a theoretical lens to analyze the lyrics of the selected contemporary Teej songs as well as the performances in the produced music videos, discovering the women's resistance and the process of healing. This is a qualitative study, and the researchers analyze and interpret data thematically.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research comes from Performance Theory (Schechner, 1988), aided by scriptotherapy (Henke, 1998). In his theory, Schechner incorporates "the narratives" and "the bodily actions of drama," which refer to storytelling and the stage performance, respectively. This

allows the researchers to study the lyrics as well as the performance of the songs in the analysis of the performance of the Teej songs chosen as the primary texts for this paper. As Schechner finds the expression of “crisis, schism, and conflict” through ‘the narratives’ and ‘the bodily actions of drama,’ the lyrics and the performance of the songs expose trauma experienced by the women in the Nepalese societies. Acknowledging Barba’s note, Schechner argues that the “performers specialize in putting themselves in disequilibrium and then displaying how they regain their balance psychophysically, narratively, and socially” (p. xi). His reference to psychophysical, narrative, and social disequilibrium reflects the emotional turmoil as the reaction of physical events, experience of rift in the storytelling through scripted narrative, and social protests that challenge the existing societal structure, flowing in the pattern of narrative performance, resistance, and healing. This theoretical lens resonates with Henke’s theory of scriptotherapy, which talks about how writing the experience of trauma helps people reenact the traumatic experience that leads them towards healing. Scriptotherapy, for Henke, is “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment” (p. xii). Although Schechner’s performance theory gives a special space to the lyrics/scripts, he is more concerned with performance, whereas Henke’s concern centers on scripting/writing as a medium to express the emotional turmoil resulting from trauma.

The present study focuses on the performance, where the audience is dominant, functioning as both the performer and listeners. Schechner, taking the people as “participants in larger social units” (p. 114), helps analyze the performance in Teej songs, where the audience too becomes participants, and they are affected and moved by the spirit of performance. Drawing on this argument, the present study tries to explore the possible transformation in the status of Nepali women contributed by the performance of the Teej songs, for which Schechner’s inclusion of “direct political action, performance in everyday life . . . psychotherapy, and other manifestly efficacious kinds of performance” (p. 120) functions as the theoretical support. This inclusion is useful and effective in the discussion of resistance and healing as proposed by the present study. As Schechner considers ritual process to be performance (p. 271), it has been a ritual to draft the lyrics of the Teej songs, record them, create music videos, and upload them on online platforms like YouTube in contemporary times. Such rituals are “restored behavior” for Schechner, which are “repeated,” and “rehearsed” (p. 271). In this context, he argues that the repeated behaviors of “dance, and music could as well be healing” (p. 248), carrying Henke’s spirit of “the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing” (p. xii). Both Schechner and Henke talk about the repetition and reenactment of disequilibrium and traumatic experience that respectively foster healing.

Literature Review

Poudel Chhetri (2012) employs Schechner's performance theory to analyze Janga Bahadurko Belait-Yatra, an anonymous narrative, published by Dixit (1954), and discovers Janga Bahadur's diplomacy. Poudel Chhetri's study functions to "shape a tacit understanding of performance and diplomacy," where he considers diplomacy to be "one of the most performative arts, involving various arts, techniques, lies and tactics" (p. 7). Similarly, Gautam (2012) also uses the theory of performance in his study of life-ritual performances of the Santhal Tribe from eastern Nepal, but his employment of performance theory establishes a nexus between nature and culture. He finds the rituals and various cultural practices of Santhals, and "their performance acts . . . are carried away through attending . . . performativity," having a strong "interrelationship between nature and culture" (p. 14). Departing from Poudel Cheetri's nexus between performance and diplomacy, and Gautam's nexus between nature, culture, and performativity, the present article employs the theory of narrative performance with the aid of scriptotherapy to argue resistance and healing of Nepali Hindu women through the contemporary Teej songs that expose domestic violence, a societal and cultural ill suffered by married women.

Scriptotherapy for Henke is a reenactment and revision of the trauma, where writing / narrative fosters healing. Neupane and Neupane (2025) use the theory of scriptotherapy, paired with the theory of intersectionality, to analyze *I Know Why*

the Caged Bird Sings (Angelou, 1969). This analysis examines Angelou's individual suffering, which represents the collective suffering of Black women during the 1930s and 1940s in the US, and fosters their resistance and healing. But the present article employs scriptotherapy paired with performance theory to explore the contemporary Teej Songs, which are rooted more in the collective suffering of married Nepali Hindu women. It highlights the lyrical narrative as a medium to reach healing. In the process, it focuses on the reenactment of trauma, which proves a strong support to justify performance theory. Possible counter question about Henke's preference for autobiographical writing for the application of scriptotherapy is addressed with the support of Pokharel (2022), who employs "scriptotherapy" (p. 30) as a theoretical lens to analyze Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013), an autobiographical writing, and Butler's *Kindred* (2003), a fictional narrative to discuss the recovery and healing from the experience of traumatic suffering. The way Pokharel crosses the disciplinary boundary to analyze purely fictional writings, the researchers also use the Teej songs as the primary texts for the application of scriptotherapy. But this study focuses more on 'reenactment' of the collective suffering through performance than solely on the individual narratives.

As the narrative performance of the Teej songs is multidimensional, different researchers have studied Teej songs from diverse perspectives. Niraula (2023) has analyzed Teej Songs from the rhetoric of consumer culture. He emphasizes that the

“influence of consumer culture is suggested by the setting, costume, and musical instruments in the song” (p. 9). Teej celebration in this context becomes a medium for the promotion of consumer culture. It focuses on consumerism, like wearing new themed clothes and ornaments, consuming varieties of food items, etc. This study does not talk about the possibility of resistance and healing through the performance of Teej songs. Accordingly, Mishra (2011) scrutinizes the Teej songs that concentrate on women’s empowerment, which is “a process of enabling them to take charges of their own lives and escape from poverty” (p. 81). She claims that the narrative performance of Teej songs functions as a form of resistance, which helps women to gain independence and get rid of poverty, developing their abilities for economic independence. Getting together at the Teej festival, they share, learn from each other, and educate themselves on their sustainability. Although Mishra discusses women’s resistance and empowerment through Teej songs, she limits her study to their economic independence, overlooking the possibility of healing from the long-term trauma of Nepali Hindu women. Similarly, Dahal’s (2010) study aims to capture the issue of politics, arguing that Nepali Hindu women suffer patriarchal domination. The study concludes in a pessimistic tone, arguing women perform in Teej songs, being aware of the ongoing domination, but they fail to “come out of the web of the patriarchy because whatsoever the mode they adopt, they are singing, dancing, and worshipping for their husbands.” She argues that Teej becomes a “means of politics to dominate women by

men, covering the veil of religion and culture” (p. 62). Her study of performativity in Teej songs remains insufficient to give justice to the women victimized by patriarchal and cultural norms.

In the aforementioned studies, the researchers have found Niraula’s emphasis on consumerism, Mishra’s women empowerment, and Dahal’s performativity in Nepali Hindu women’s Teej songs. However, those works are not concerned with the issue of resistance and healing from trauma that originated from patriarchal domination under the veil of religion and culture. So, the present research employs Schechner’s theory of performance, with the aid of Henke’s scriptotherapy, to explore and argue narrative performance, resistance, and healing through Nepali Hindu women’s Teej songs. As Dahal (2010), among many other scholars of this area, has established the fact that Nepali women are suppressed by patriarchy, it is necessary to address the existing research gap, which draws the attention of the women to the possibility of resistance and healing through the narrative performance in the contemporary Teej songs. The discovery of new knowledge serves as a foundation for future research in the related field.

Narrative Performance of the Teej Songs

Nepal is rich in performance culture. The narrative performance during the Teej festival is one of the rituals exercised by Nepali Hindu women. It has a mythic, religious, traditional, and cultural background. Celebrating through the Teej songs is one of the most important aspects of the festival.

It helps Nepali Hindu women tell their story based on bitter reality caused by patriarchal norms and social and cultural practices. The women practice individual and collective sharing of the hardships they experience in their day-to-day lives. Through the Teej songs, they raise the unheard and unaddressed voices of the suppressed women. This paper analyzes the narratives of the four Teej songs and the performance in the music videos, recorded, produced, and uploaded on YouTube in 2024 and 2025. These songs dramatize and expose the patriarchal, social, and cultural limitations of Nepali Hindu women who suffer traumatic experiences in their marital relations.

The concept of narrative performance covers two dominant aspects of the Teej songs: the lyrics of the songs, composed and sung by the artists, and their accompanying performances in the music videos, mostly by the women with the participation of men as well. The term narrative addresses the script/ lyrics, through which the women tell their stories of the plight, which is suggested in Schechner's discussion of "the narratives," and performance addresses the tangible action enacted as suggested in "the bodily actions of drama" (1988, p. xi). Henke's scriptotherapy functions as a strong support to argue and justify the narrative as a medium to storytell the shattered lives, where her reenactment of traumatic memory (1998, p. xii) supports the discussion of performance. Since the Teej songs follow the rituals of Hindu tradition, they are performances, the way Schechner argues the ritual process to be the performance itself (p. 271). In this context, Chhetri and

Jalan's (2024) Teej song dramatizes the life of a married woman shattered by her addicted and abusive husband through the lyrical narrative of the vocalists Gharti et. al., which tells the story of the plight of the woman to her brother, arguing she would not return to her husband's home even at the cost of her death. "Bidi bhanne kulatama raichha phaseko" [He was a bidi addicted] (03:57-04:04, our translation) narrates about the husband's lifestyle, and the wife's decision not to go back to her husband's home as stated in "Marnai pare mardinxu, janna tyo ghara" [If I must die, I will die, but I won't go to that house] (00:57-01:08, our translation). The lyrical narrative of the song exposes the shattered life of a married woman prevalent in Nepali societies. With the support of her caring brother, the victim woman quits her marital relationship and prepares to open a new chapter of her life.

The visual performance of the song, directed by Prem Thapa (2024), features Prakash Saput and Muna Thapa in the roles of the brother and sister, respectively, who reenact the emotion of the shattered life of a married woman. The visual performance runs in the pattern of changing scenes from the narrative of sorrow in a group dance. It helps to represent the individual woman portraying collective suffering, which comes from patriarchal domination. Although the perpetrator is a male, the husband, the researchers are aware that this is not purely a patriarchal domination, because when a husband is a perpetrator, a brother is a savior. This is the failure of the institution of marriage to keep hold of the problems as discussed by

Neupane (2018), who argues that domestic violence and breaching the marital roles by the partners lead to the deinstitutionalization of marriage (p. 173-74), which shatters the life of both partners, specially making it harder for women to continue their peaceful live ever after.

The discussion and interpretation of the narrative and visual performance exemplify Schechner's notion of disequilibrium in the performance, exposing crisis and conflict in the marital relations between a husband and a wife. Multiple other Teej songs exemplify the dramatization and exposure of the systemic failure to protect the status of married women in Nepali communities. In a soft, but satirical tone, Bishnu Majhi dramatizes the discriminatory position of a daughter that begins from her mother's home itself. A daughter is given the least priority in comparison to a son in Nepali society. The song on Sundar Mani Adhikari's lyrics, "Tainle dherai padhera po kyarchhes" [What would be the worth of studying much] (Majhi, 2025, 08: 46-09:00, our translation). This lyrical narrative tells the memory of a married woman who did not get the opportunity to study before marriage, as her parents interpreted that she would be married to somebody else, so she had to learn household chores to run her future husband's home smoothly. Not only the lyrical narrative, but also the visual performance under Sundar Mani Adhikari's direction, gives meaning to the words of the lyrics, capturing the emotion and spirit of the song. The music video begins with the memory of the marriage ceremony, following Hindu

custom in a Nepali rural setting. The scene then shifts to display the group dance performance in the present context. Continuous changing of the scenes employing the technique of flashback and return to the present repeatedly captures the spirit of a woman's shattered life as represented in the medium of sharing the collective suffering of Nepali Hindu women.

Majhi exposes the differential treatment in the family that a daughter is primarily deprived of educational and economic rights. The unfair treatment shatters a daughter/woman's life, which compels her to declare that she is not as decent as her brothers are. This hegemonic sense of domination suppresses the emotional state of a woman. The song and the performance in the video expose the disequilibrium prevalent in marital relationships in Nepali communities.

Resistance and Healing through Teej Songs

The lyrical narratives and physical performances function as the medium of resistance that fosters healing. The concept of resistance is fighting back against any form of power or system that tries to dominate and marginalize anyone. It, for Henke (1998), comes from life writing that functions to reinvent the shattered self, resulting from trauma (p. xix). Henke's reenactment of the traumatic self is a part of resistance that fosters healing, as reenactment is therapeutic for her. Her theorization of the authorial effort to reconstruct the traumatic story resulting from disequilibrium fosters healing (p. xii). Schechner also believes that the repeated performance of singing and dancing proves

healing. Healing, for this paper, is not an immediate cure (Bird & Warner, 2020, p. 130). They take it to be the process towards betterment, but not the destination (p. 86). In the context of the present paper, through the lyrical narratives and physical performances, the women, with the support of men, expose the societal and systemic ills, the factors that dominate the women, which is their resistance that fosters healing. The Nepali Hindu women's shattered shelves get recovered through these narrative performances, which is healing. As discussed in the narrative performance section of the analysis, the songs *The Plight of Women* (Gharti, et al., 2024) and *I am not Beautiful* (Majhi, 2025) resist the dominant patriarchal system by exposing the familial private affairs to the public. They show and justify the failure of the patriarchal system to protect the rights of women, and fail to protect the institution of family and marriage. This resistance opens the gateway for the women to move towards healing, as reenactment of such traumatic experiences of the women, for Henke, proves therapeutic.

In the list of the Teej songs that resist surrendering to the system, *The Lamentation* (Rimal & Pageni, 2024) exposes the cultural customs of Hindus in Nepal, where immature girls are compelled into marriage and made to suffer domestic violence. The song reenacts the trauma suffered by a married Nepali Hindu woman in a dominating and abusive family. The elder brother comes to take his younger sister back home to celebrate the Teej festival. The sister takes the opportunity to share her marginalized status with her brother. She

shares how the family mistreats her because of her maternal family's poor economic status. She is also considered to be the symbol of bad luck since her father-in-law died six months after her marriage. Rimal shares, "Alachchini yei ho bhandai mailai piteka" [They beat me, saying I was wretched] (05:45-06:00, our translation). Her exposition of the familial and cultural ills to her brother and the group performance functions as the reenactment of the traumatic memory, which leads her towards healing. Since the song is performed in a group, the individual suffering becomes part of the collective suffering. This draws the attention of the public, drawing on sympathy and empathy. This also encourages other survivors to expose their suffering, ultimately leading to collective healing.

Mother, Your Daughter's Pride (Chauhan, 2025) is a Teej song that dramatizes and exposes the traumatic memory of a married Hindu woman in a Nepali society. The daughter of Nepali Hindu parents falls in love with a boy and compels her parents to convert their relationship into marriage. The husband turns out to be an abusive person who restricts her freedom. Domestic violence exercised regularly traumatizes her. The lyrics "Babale puja gareko goda bajriyo chhatima" [The feet worshiped by father struck my chest] (03:07-03:15, our translation) clearly narrate the scene of domestic violence suffered by a Nepali Hindu woman as suggested by the worship of the daughter-in-law's feet. The music video of this song (Bhandary, 2025) features Smarika Dhakal and Suresh Kohli as a married couple. Their cinematic performance

helps the lyrics get a concrete meaning. Dhakal tells the traumatic story of the memory of marital life, which serves as a channel for women to be conscious of choosing a man to marry. It functions as a resistance by making the shattered private life public. Because of the experience of the frequent abuse, she quits her marital life, a strong evidence of resistance, and goes back to her maternal home, where her loving parents welcome her back.

The songs selected for scrutiny are available on YouTube, so they are easily accessible to the public. The audience plays the videos and performs singing and dancing, which functions as a vehicle to transform the dominated and marginalized selves of the married Nepali Hindu women into mature and independent selves because the repetitive behavior of singing and dancing, and reenactment of the trauma through storytelling, not only heals the singers and the performers in the videos, but also heals the audiences who listen to and perform on them.

Conclusion

The narrative performance of the Teej songs dramatizes and exposes the societal and cultural ills that are traumatizing to the Nepali Hindu women. The selected four Teej songs as the primary texts under scrutiny tell the stories of the women who suffer marital discord, a case of disequilibrium, which creates tension and conflict in the relationship, shattering the lives of the women. The songs by Gharti et al. (2024), and Chauhan (2025) show the bold form of resistance that they quit the marital relations, hoping to begin a new independent life, where the songs by Rimal

(2024), and Majhi (2025) show the continuity of their life as married women, but without failing to resist making their private suffering public. The emotional reenactment of the traumatic experience in the song by Rimal and Majhi, and the daring performance in the song by Chauhan and Gharti et al., expose the ills under the institution of marriage. These songs show the failing status of the institution of marriage, but the women are not responsible for that, as narrated and performed in the songs. The patriarchal ego and cultural limitedness work together for this. But this does not mean the healing process of the women is possible without the support of men. The brothers and the fathers play positive roles in the empowerment of women, helping them heal from the trauma. The songs and their performances stand for a social cause, a respectable inclusion of women in families and societies, and for the establishment of change. Although change is not an overnight action, the storytelling of the songs and their performances helps the sufferers, as Nepali Hindu women, to develop a sense of self and create their identity. This identity formation contributes to healing, finding coherence and meaning in the scattered stories of their lives.

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