

## Performance of Superstitious Practice: Resistance of Gender and Class Roles in *Deuki*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of gender and class roles in the Nepali cultural film *Deuki*, which highlights the contemporary practices and rituals prevalent in Far-Western Province of Nepal. The primary objective is to analyze the performance of superstitious beliefs and practices associated with the 'Deuki'<sup>[1]</sup> system, focusing on the injustices faced by girls who are auctioned under the guise of 'Deuki Pratha'<sup>[2]</sup>. This research reveals that these girls experience severe oppression and mistreatment, often being denied agency and basic rights. However, it posits that through empowerment, even the most marginalized individuals can resist such injustices. The study employs theoretical frameworks from performance studies and feminist theory to explore these issues. The findings underscore a critical need for continued discourse on the socio-cultural implications of the 'Deuki' system, emphasizing that while awareness and advocacy have led to some decline in this practice, significant challenges remain. The conclusion advocates for further research and policy recommendations to address the evil cultural and ritual practices in Nepal.

**Keywords:** performance, superstitions, resistance, gender, class, Deuki

### Introduction

'Deuki' is a traditional performance in which economically poor and young girls are auctioned in the name of religion. This traditional practice is common in some districts of the far western region i.e. Doti, Dadheldhura, Baithadi, etc. In this custom, 'Deuki'; a server of gods and goddess, becomes the victim of upper-class people. In the 'Deuki' system the guardians of an innocent girl vend their young daughter to the rich people. After they are auctioned, the innocent baby girls are offered to the shrine of different gods and goddesses. They should be sheltered in the temple throughout their entire life becoming slave of deities. The upper-class people sacrifice the young girls to God for their betterment. The young girls spent their whole life in the temple as a server of God.

Deukis are commodified, humans. They are treated as valueless objects by the public and upper-class people called 'Malik'. From these facts, it is clear that a traditional performance called *Deuki* displays the intersection of gender and class identities. In this sense, the body of the 'Deuki' is the site of double oppression at the same time: patriarchy and capitalism. 'Deuki' is not the by-born profession and they are not the institutional servers who are paid wages based on their skill as in the industry or factory rather they are the servers of God for their whole life when a rich person buys the girl by paying a certain cash amount. Moreover, they are also the means to satisfy the burning sexual passion of the rich and landlord group. For example in the movie, 'Malik' (landlord) express his burning sexual desire with small *Deuki*. He orders, "*Pujari yo ful lie nekai ramro sanga phulna denu hai[.....]Fakrena lageko phul tipna maja huncha*" ( Priest, let this flower bloom with nice fragrance [...] It's so wonderful to pluck the blooming flower). (My Translation)

The movie version of *Deuki* shows that 'Deuki' is not only the mode of oppression but also the mode of empowerment and resistance against oppression. It is hypothesized that the 'Deuki' tradition is not only a mode of oppression but also a tool of resistance against patriarchy and capitalism. In this performance, we can notice their ambivalence complicity and resistance, love, and hatred, at the same time. The present paper analyzes the performance of gender, and class roles in the tradition called 'Deuki.' This paper focuses on performance culture in a Nepali movie called *Deuki* whose script is written by Manbahadur Mukhia and directed by Banni Pradhan. Malla) and her agency is Prakash (Rajesh Hamal). The above-raised issue is analyzed from the perspective of traditional performance theory and third-world feminism.

Priya Ghimire in her review "Performance and Power in *Deuki*" talks about the bold presentation of the main character with the struggle to sustain in the oppressed society of the contemporary time. In this review, Ghimire contains that the presentation of the main character as a 'Deuki' exposes the internalized trauma and psychological wound of the real victims in the name of 'Deuki' (Ghimire 1)

Similarly, Maya Gurung in *The Feminist Review of Nepali Cinema*, opines that "*Deuki* is more than just the film-it reveals the bad 'paratha' which has been rulling in the remote part of our country for centuries" (28). She contends about the bad cultural and religious practices of Nepalese societies.

Rajesh Adhikari in "The Silent Suffering of the *Deuki*: A Review" from *Himalayan Film Studies* analyzes this film as a perfect example that exposes the deeply rooted cultural practices of the far western part of Nepal. He opines, "The film successfully captures the emotional and psychological burden carried by the protagonist, who represents the silent suffering of women under oppressive social norms" (92). Numerous critics and reviewers have discussed this film and its cinematography but the issue of its cultural performance pedagogy is a virgin territory to explore.

### **Performance of Superstitious Practice: Resistance of Gender and Class Roles in *Deuki***

Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick talk about the wide scope of performance "Performance studies has moved well beyond [...] performance practices ranging from stage to festival and everything in between film, photography, television, [...] performance art, political demonstrations, health care, cooking, fashion, [...] ritual" (173). From this extract, we came to know that tradition like 'Deuki' is performance and is a subject matter of performance studies. In this regard, Victor Turner defines ritual as performance: "I like to think of ritual essentially as performance as enactment, and not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules frame the ritual process, and ritual process transcends its frame" (129). Turner opines that though there are certain rules for ritual, the ritual cannot merely be confined by rules. The ritual performance can add something. It is because "ritual [...] crucially involve[s] liminal events and processes and ha[s] an important aspect of social metacommentary" (Universals of performance 8).

Marvin Carlson, in his essay "Resistant Performance," insists on body politics or resistance in performance and especially postmodern ambivalent resistance. He evokes, "The central concern of resistant performance arises from the dangerous game it plays as a double agent, recognizing that in the postmodern world, complicit and subversion are inextricably intertwined" (310). In this regard, the actants of tradition like 'Deuki' have both complicity and subversion towards it.

Likewise, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin assert that the body of the actants in ritual performance can not only become the site of oppression but also the tool of resistance. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick opine that "discursive constructions of race, sex and sometimes class are intricately interlinked" in tradition and ritual performance" (290). In the third-world context, gender issues cannot be studied in isolation because the problems of

third-world women are different from those of Western women as Weitbrecht points out the otherness of Indian women. He opines, "The daughters of India are unwelcomed at their birth, untaught in childhood, enslaved when married, accursed as widows and unlamented at their death"(qtd. In Price and Shildrick 393).

*Deuki*, a film directed by the Nepali director, Banni Pradhan, and script written by Man Bahadur Mukhya, is about the enactment of gender and class roles performed by a poor and innocent girl Puja (Mausami Malla). This film places the female protagonist Puja in her historical situation and provides a socio-economic context and conservative tradition that focuses on her problems and suffering that are common to others from her class, and gender. Different forms of oppression such as patriarchy, capitalism, and compulsion because of bad tradition make the victim of direct and indirect oppression. To make us aware of the different superstitious traditions and rituals of our country.

Pradhan directed this film which is based on the real suffering and plight of the innocent poor girls of the far western region. Pradhan, to show the intersection among various forms of oppression in the third world context, talks about the triple marginalization of his protagonist Puja; she is dominated by the landlord because she is not only female but because she is a poor working class, female and 'Deuki' as well. She is treated as a common human object because God is a common invisible power. Innocent young 'Deukis' are the prey of the landlords and the patriarchal society. A 'Deuki' is the flower Offered to God which is also a common thing for the visitors of the temple. It shows how the issues concerning gender, class, and superstitious beliefs overlap or intersect with each other in the third-world context.

In the third world context, women from low caste and working class are destined to face more challenges than females from upper caste and class. So, Pradhan attempts to present the plight of third-world females and their activities to demystify the monolithic, simplistic, and homogenous image of the voiceless and agency third-world female constructed by universalist or essentialist Western feminists. By directing this film Pradhan tries to convey the message about the awful situation of third-world poor females who are not only suffered by the side of superstitious traditions and rituals related to females but also they are the actual victim of patriarchy via upper-class same sex. In this regard, Uma Narayan, the third-world feminist says:

Many mainstream Western feminists' perspectives have been criticized by third-world feminists for excluding or marginalizing from their analysis and agendas, interests, and concerns of women who are additionally marginalized in their class, race ethnicity, and sexual orientation. (44)

In these lines, Narayan suggests the situation of third-world feminists and why they are critical of Western feminists on the issue of Gender, race, and ethnicity. Banni Pradhan in *Deuki*, visualizes working class and innocent girls' specific problems.

Young girls who are unaware of the different rituals of society are auctioned by their parents in the name of God. Their parents auctioned them not because of any specific cause but to survive by selling their daughter who is a real burden for them. As Weit Brecht points out the otherness of third-world women "the daughters of the third world are unwelcomed at their birth, untaught in childhood, enslaved when married" (Shildrick 393). In *Deuki*, a poor girl is auctioned and becomes the property of a rich landlord. He offers that innocent girl Pooja to the temple of Doti district. By offering the innocent girl to God, he wishes for the betterment of his daughter who belongs to the representative of upper-class females. The landlord sacrifices the poor girl for the healing of his daughter. The poor girl Pooja is commodified in the name of conservative tradition. There is no agency to support her. In her childhood, he is suffered from her parents and patriarchal society, when she grows into a young and mature girl; she suffers from the landlords of the same society and becomes the

means of entertainment for them. Landlords treat her as a prostitute. He took control of her interests and private rights. She does not have any freedom in her society. She has to dance according to the music of the Landlord.

In certain cases, because of abject poverty, and lack of agency and opportunity, females such as Pooja are destined to suffer in their whole life. Rather than romanticizing the traditions like 'Deuki' through film and documentary, it would be better to analyze why they are destined to perform such roles despite their bitter unwillingness. What may be the possible way to rescue them from such a conservative tradition? However, such females who have been socially, economically, and sexually exploited by rich landlords can revenge on the landlords and such superstitious traditions if they will get agency and are empowered with their voice.

Ritual is not limited to being scared; it is something more in Hanne M. Bruin's words, "Special, sacred power is highly ambivalent and dangerous. Its manifestation encompasses both the divine and demonic, the mundane and the sacred" (198). Richard Schechner talks about the liminal role of the ritual performer. "Rituals carry participants across lines, transforming them into different persons" (193). Regarding the same issue Gilbert and Tompkins have similar notions on ritual performance as they opine that ritual performers can use ritual creatively: "Ritual is always efficacious for the community and enacted for a particular audience to preserve the order and meaning of anything from harvest to marriage, birth to death. For them ritual and traditional performance is changeable: "Ritual is not static [...]. It is molded and remolded by creative performers/interpreters" (58).

It is relevant to compare Pradhan's presentation of 'Deuki' with H. M. Bruim's view where Pradhan tries to show the similarities between 'Deukis' and prostitutes based on their common experience of suffering, exploitation, pathetic condition, and view of society towards them because, in the third world context, prostitutes are treated as the lower status, characterless, voiceless, others and poor. Poor and agency-less girls like Pooja of *Deuki* are exploited in one way or another by the same upper-class rich landlords. Even the superstitious tradition like 'Deuki' is the mode of rich landlords' domination over the poor and innocent lower caste girls. In the epigraph of this film, the narrator narrates this system in this way:

*Yo katha ho Nepal ko sudoor pashchim doti, dadeldhura, baitadi jilla ma dharma ko naam ma hamra chelibeti mathi gariako soshan, annyaya, atyachar ra kupratha ko parampara ko bidroha ho. Chalchitra deuki haru mandir mai basepani ishwor ko abhishap paeka ani dharma ko thekedar bata cheer haran garieka abhagi nariko katha ho. Tesaile, yo pratha pani manav sabhyata ko pachcheuri ma lageko euta daag ho. Estai euti deuki arthat Pooja ko sangharsha chitrit garne katha ho chalchitra Deuki. (Deuki 00:15:30-00:20:00)*

This story belongs to the district of the far western region of Nepal i.e. Doti, Dadeldhura, Baitadi, etc. where Nepali virgin girls are discriminated against, dominated, and badly treated in the name of superstitious rituals. It's a revolt against the bad treatment of innocent girls. The movie, *Deukai* visualizes the suppression and injustice on Deukis from so-called upper-class agents of religion. Deukis are called the servers of God but they don't get any blessing from the same God. This system is one of the black stains in the social fabric of religion where Deukis are forced to stay in the temple as a server of God for their whole life. In the film *Deuki*, the major character, Pooja is acting as one such Deuki. (My Translation)

The dialogue highlights the intersection of religion and social injustice in the remote western regions of Nepal. It refers to the 'Deuki' tradition as a form of "*soshan, annyaya, atyachar ra kupratha,*" which translates to oppression, injustice, abuse, and superstition. This framing

suggests that the practice is not merely a cultural artifact but also a perversion of religious values. The term "dharma" implies that these practices are misappropriated in the name of religion, leading to a critique of how religious institutions can perpetuate harm rather than uphold moral values.

By stating that even when "*Deuki haru mandir mai basepani ishwor ko abhishap paeka*," it emphasizes that these women, despite being associated with sacred spaces, are cursed by their circumstances. The reference to "*dharma ko thekedar*" (the guardians of religion) indicates a betrayal by those who are supposed to protect and uphold ethical standards within society. This critique suggests that religious leaders and institutions may exploit their authority to justify harmful practices, thus perpetuating cycles of abuse.

Judith Butler opines that resistance is possible via performativity of the ritual role: "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body" (23). So, identities are constructed iteratively through a complex citational process. She associates imitation and repetition of norms like mimicry with subversive potentiality.

The above-mentioned dialogue of the movie underscores Butler's view on how cultural and superstitious beliefs can lead to systemic oppression. The phrase "*yo pratha pani manav sabhyata ko pachcheuri ma lageko euta daag ho*" (this tradition is a stain on human civilization) reflects an acknowledgment of the negative consequences of superstition on societal progress. The Deuki tradition is steeped in superstition, where girls are often seen as offerings to appease deities or bring good fortune, reinforcing their objectification and lack of agency. In the same token, "*abhagi nariko katha*" (the story of unfortunate women) illustrates how these superstitions contribute to the marginalization of women. By framing their narrative within the context of struggle against such traditions, the film seeks to challenge these outdated beliefs and advocate for change.

In *Deuki*, Mukhiya (the head of the society) conveys the message that if third-world females get agency they can resist every sort of operation for social change. In this context, Mukhiya is empowered, conveys voice, and provides agency for the helpless and voiceless pooja who is performing the role of *Deuki*.

Therefore, Mukhiya brings the reference of educationally aware student Prakash (Rajesh Hamal) who represents the modern generation and means or agency to fight against contemporary superstitious beliefs and traditions. When Pooja got the agency to fight against the superstition, oppression, and cruelty of the patriarchal society, she radically protests against the operation. In the beginning, she was voiceless but after being accompanied by Ram, she raised her voice strongly against the male brutality of the then society.

Spivak claims that the subaltern characters speak in their voice with the help of good agency. When she got the support of Prakash to fight against the conservative society, she subverted the very tradition by becoming the wife of her agency. In the 'Deuki' tradition, a 'Deuki' is not permitted to get married. Throughout her entire life, she has been committed to serving God and staying in the temple. In the movie, Mother of the 'Deuki, suggests her daughter pooja about the plight of 'a Deuki' and very sadly says, "*hami ta vaghya le thagiyeka haun, hamro karma ma maya, grihasthi ra bihe ko sukha lekhiikai hudaina*" (*Deuki* 00:50:30-00:60:00.)

We are deceived by our destiny. Love, marriage, and household is not written in our fate. (My Translation)

Superstitious beliefs are made by so-called upper-class 'Malik' (Sunil Thapa) to exploit the 'Deukis.' When Pooja got help from Ram, she challenged contemporary beliefs and married him. Through the empowerment of Prakash, she uses her rights freely. She challenges the operation and becomes a modern girl and wife with many responsibilities.

After her marriage, she didn't remain 'Deuki', (commodified human object) but got her real existence and identity.

Moreover, they are also the means to satisfy the burning sexual passion of the rich and landlord group. For example in the movie, 'Malik' (landlord) expresses his burning sexual desire with small *Deuki*. He orders, "*Pujari yo ful lie nekai ramro sanga phulna denu hai[.....]Fakrena lageko phul tipna maja huncha*" (*Deuki* 00:1:25-00:1:28). (Priest, let this flower bloom with nice fragrance [...] It's so wonderful to pluck the blooming flower). (My Translation)

The above dialogue of the film *Deuki* encapsulates the exploitation of women, particularly in the context of traditional practices. The phrase spoken by the landlord (Malik), metaphorically compares a young girl to a flower, indicating his view of women as objects of desire meant to satisfy the sexual appetites of the wealthy and powerful. This dialogue encapsulates the broader theme of the film, which addresses the 'Deuki' tradition; an age-old practice in which young girls are dedicated to temples and often end up being exploited sexually.

Furthermore, this dialogue also points to the socioeconomic dynamics at play. The rich and powerful, represented by 'Malik', exploits their status to fulfill their desires at the expense of those less fortunate. This reflects a broader commentary on class disparities within Nepali society, where wealth affords certain privileges that can lead to moral corruption. Elizabeth Bell argues that "Performativity is a political practice [...] that people can resist and change oppressive structures and ideologies in everyday life" (192). Besides, Patrick Johnson gives a pragmatic approach to performance: "Performance is a strategy for survival in their day-to-day experiences" (qtd. in Bell 192). In Pradhan's *Deuki*, also "Deuki" serves as a critique of cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality. By portraying Malik's character as someone who embodies these exploitative tendencies, the film sheds light on how traditional customs can lead to the marginalization and suffering of women. The use of floral imagery is particularly poignant, as it evokes beauty while simultaneously underscoring fragility and vulnerability of the contemporary patriarchal society. Pradhan's *Deuki* is the real representation of the plight and experience of far Western tradition. It shows that each oppressive system is self-deceptive and calls it a downfall because of blind spots inherent in them. *Deuki* is such an intersection of the trio of patriarchy, capitalism, superstitious tradition, and the plight of poor innocent girls. But the paradox in it is that it is the same ritual that provides the poor, innocent, voiceless, and agency-less female the opportunity to fight against that trio of domination in the name of superstitious performance like the 'Deuki' system, patriarchy, and class domination. Metaphorically, the innocent, poor, and agency-less female body becomes the ambivalent sight of oppression and resistance at the same time. The oppressors' superstitious belief is artistically used as a tool of resistance against the same oppressor by the oppressed. The oppressed use it creatively.

### **Conclusion**

*Deuki* as a superstitious performance performed the intersection of class and gender roles enacted by poor innocent, and helpless women like Pooja. On the other hand, as superstitious traditions of the rich and upper class, it is the mode of patriarchal and upper-class oppression over innocent and poor women. The movie, *Deuki* reveals about superstitious tradition performed exclusively by the poor and voiceless girl Pooja, and the very tradition ironically turned to fight against such beliefs and superstitions. So, Pradhan's movie *Deuki* is not only a mode of oppression but also a tool of resistance. Therefore, the actants of *Deuki* should perform their class and gender roles positively. The performance of this film is the mode of empowerment. It is because this superstitious performance provides the opportunity to resist patriarchy, capitalism, and superstitious belief in the name of different traditions and rituals. While increased awareness and advocacy have contributed to

a decline in this harmful practice, substantial challenges persist that require immediate attention. This study advocates for further research and comprehensive policy recommendations aimed at addressing the detrimental cultural and ritual practices associated with evil practices. By fostering a collaborative approach among stakeholders, we can work towards dismantling these ingrained injustices and promoting a more equitable society for all, particularly for the vulnerable girls and women affected by such practices.

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Deuki [1]: The term "*Deuki*" refers to an ancient cultural practice in certain regions of Nepal, particularly in the far western parts of the country. In this tradition, young girls are offered to temples as living priestesses, often as a way for families to fulfill religious vows or seek blessings. Once dedicated as *Deuki*, these girls are expected to serve the temple for the rest of their lives and are not allowed to marry or live a normal life.

"Deuki Pratha" [2]: The *Deuki system* is an old Nepali practice in which young girls are offered to temples as religious servants or priestesses. These girls, once dedicated, are not allowed to marry or lead a normal life, often resulting in social isolation and exploitation. The practice has been outlawed, but its effects still linger in Far Western parts of Nepal.