

Tribhuvan University

Somatic Abjection in Nepalese Hindu Ritual *Rishipanchami*

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U.
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

By

Sujata Acharya

Symbol No: 6192

T.U. Regd No.: 6-2-487-27-2011

Central Department of English

Kirtipur, Kathmandu

April 2019

April 2019

– Sujata Acharya

Somatic Abjection in Nepalese Hindu Ritual *Rishipanchami*

Tribhuvan University
Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences
Central Department of English

Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Somatic Aabjection in Nepalese Hindu ritual
Rishipanchami” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan
University, by Sujata Acharya has been approved by the undersigned members of the
Research Committee.

Members of the Research Committee

Internal Examiner

External Examiner

Head

Central Department of English

Date: _____

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to the respected supervisor Shiva Rijal, for making constant supervision and guiding me with regular inspiration, encouragement and insightful suggestion throughout the study. Whose sincere effort, guidance, encouraging criticism and instructions made this work complete. I am also indebted to Prof. Dr. Anirudra Thapa, Head, Central Department of English for the valuable directions in concluding the research. Likewise, my gratitude goes Mr. Diwakar Upadhyay and all the members of thesis viva committee. I am very much grateful to all the faculty members of the Central Department of English for their valuable suggestions and encouragement during their lecture classes.

In addition to this, I would like to offer my respect to my parents who directly and indirectly support to complete my academic research. Similarly my research work would not have completed without my husband's continuous help and encouragement. Moreover, I would like to thank my friends and other who provided valuable suggestions during my research.

April 2019

Sujata Acharya

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand why Nepalese Hindu women experience somatic abjection in the ritual Rishipanchami. This ritual regards that Hindu women are trained to develop a certain type of bodily gestures, mode of thoughts and faiths in order to serve the existing patriarchal values. To explain this issue further, this research has made a close study of Rishipanchami that usually falls in September. This is a contextual study of one of the most celebrated Nepalese Hindu ritual called “Rishipanchami” from the perspective of feminist theories mainly formulated by Julia Kristeva and Helen Cixous. Ritual scholars like Catherine Bell and Victor Turner’s ideas regarding ritual and human behavior are also explained. It uses Dinanath Pandit’s book Haritalika tatha Rishipanchami Poojabidhi and its performances as research materials. Rishipanchami is the last day cultural ritual of the festival ‘Teej’ in Nepalese Hindu society. A female celebrates ‘Teej’ after she enters into her puberty. It is a part of the women’s festival and it creates bodily abjection for women themselves. Rishipanchami is conducted for the purification of the female body on the basis of religious myth which regards menstruation as a curse. This research paper affirms that this religious ritual is not merely a ritual practiced for purifying female’s body but it is a portrayal of bodily humiliation that Nepalese Hindu women are asked to perform to support existing patriarchal values.

Key words: Rishipanchami, somatic abjection, patriarchy, Nepalese Hindu women

Somatic Abjection in Nepalese Hindu Ritual *Rishipanchami*

This research paper examines Rishipanchami ritual as a bodily humiliation in the context of Nepalese Hindu society. This research paper also explore cultural and gender aspect of the ritual with the spectacle of feminist and anthropological theories. *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* is a primary text used by Nepalese Hindu priests to conduct Rishipanchami ritual. The ritual of Rishipanchami is regarded as preparatory ritual for womanhood. However, when a teenage girl reaches puberty for the first time, performing this ritual for her will not be a pleasant experience. There is a story listening process in the Rishipanchami ritual.

In the story, explicitly presents Hindu women's bodies as impure due to their monthly bleeding. In the story, there is a woman named Jayashree who touches the things which a woman is not allowed to touch during the menstruation period. Jayashree then becomes a dog as a curse. The whole Rishipanchami ritual is regarded as a purifying process of the female body in Nepalese Hindu society. In this regard the *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* tells:

... by following Brahmin's order all four caste groups should make menstruated female away every month. It is said that on the first day of menstruation female becomes 'Chandaali', second-day 'Brahmaghatini', third-day 'Dhobini' and on the fourth day, she becomes pure. Therefore, within three days if female touch prohibited things, she may suffer from a big curse.

Rishipanchami fasting should be taken to eliminate that curse. (my trans.; 95).

Females are given multiple derogatory names during the menstruation period such as Chandali, Brahmaghatini, and Dhobini. 'Chandali' means a woman having a cruel

heart and nature. 'Brahmaghatini' generally means one who kills a Brahmin.

According to the myth, Indra killed Brahmin but women were charged for the murder of Brahmin eventually. Likewise, on the third day of menstruation women are given a name of 'Dhobini' and it means the wife of a laundryman who traditionally seems to be economically unsound. Giving these disparaging names to females during the three days, the ritual book is explicitly expressing a negative opinion on women's reproductive significance.

Rishipanchami is not only a ritual but also fasting that is supposed to purify the female body and forgive mistakes females happen to commit during their menstrual period. Females are not supposed to touch to any male member in the family and they are made exempt from household work. Thus in the name of pollution and purity, the female body is negatively interpreted. This is done in order to create a fear of abjection in the mind of females. Hindu women experience somatic abjection during the period.

The term Somatic means 'physical' and the term Abjection' is taken from Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror* an essay on 'Abjection'. In the psychological aspect, the term abjection means human reaction to a threatened situation differentiating the self from others. Julia Kristeva defines 'abject' in the following way:

If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject. (5)

When a particular subject or a person differentiate him/her from another object or

person, he/she either becomes like the other or stays away from the object. After staying away and calculating the vast differences with another object, the subject cannot identify itself with the other. Then there comes the feeling which Kristeva calls abject. In the position of abjection, the subject seeks a different identity apart from others or the object. This notion of abjection can also be applied in Rishipanchami ritual. Those women and girls who accept the belief that their body is impure follow the mass. Other women or girls who have a lot of interrogation in connection with the ritual feel abjected. The abject is what we are not and others are. This is the mantra of making women serve the existing patriarchal values.

Kristeva's notion of abjection has been very useful in solving the dynamics of oppression. She explains abjection as an operation of the psyche through which subjective and group identity are made by excluding anything that threatens one's group's line. She further states, to construct one's identity one must choose to stand abjected. When the concept of abject comes in the mind of a person, he or she does not find any similarities instead he/she begins to differentiate to others and stays away from the group. Thought of abjection regarding menstrual taboo is something revolutionary.

According to another myth written in *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi*, Indra was cursed for slaying a Brahmin. According to the curse, such act of Indra has been referred to as women's monthly bleeding. It is written:

After getting suffered from the curse of Brahmin's murder curse, Indra went to the abode Brahma. Oh gentleman! Four-faced Brahma divided Brahmin's murder into four pieces. First to burning fire, second to flooding river, third to mountains and fourth to female's monthly bleeding. (my trans.; 95)

Indra, the king of the gods went to the place of Brahma. According to the website of

British Broadcasting Company BBC, it is stated “Brahma is the first god in the Hindu triumvirate or Trimurti. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, and destruction of the world.” Brahma is known as the first god among all. He is the creator of the human beings and all living creatures in the world. In this sense, Indra being afraid of killing a brahmin goes to the place of Brahma. Brahma then being the creator of the world divides Indra’s curse to the burning fire, flooding river and to the mountains. It is said that in every sparkle of the burning fire Indra’s murder is shown. Similarly, flooding river, and mountains are also dangerous to human lives. These natural dangers show deep regret of Indra’s execution of the Brahmin. Those who accidentally experience these perils become part of Indra’s curse. Eventually, the last remorse of Indra’s curse is given to women’s monthly bleeding. Women become weak and most of them do suffer from menstrual pain in their body parts. The flow of the blood from women’s bodies again exemplifies Indra’s curse. In the name of religion, such myths derogate female bodies and devalue female physically and psychologically.

Similar mythical story of Indra is firstly found in Rig Veda (one of the oldest books of Hinduism). Janet Chawla in her article ‘Mythic Origin of Menstrual taboo in Rig Veda’ presents Wendy Doniger O Flaherty’s critical views as follows:

The Rig Veda is a book by men about male concerns in a world dominated by men; one of these concerns is women, who appear throughout the hymns as objects, though seldom as subjects. (9)

Being highly recommended book of Hindu religion, *Rig Veda* concerns only about male and its significance. Women are presented as objects in *Rig Veda*’s hymns. Similarly, most of the hymns found are songs of praise for the male gods. Whereas female gods are given less attention. *Rig Veda* itself devalues female body

for instance sweeping female's bodily function is connected with Indra's curse. The outline of menstrual prohibitions and beliefs linked this practice to the Vedic myth of Indra slaying a Brahmin named Vritra. There is merely any textual or historical source which would give information about the Rishipanchami ritual other than the *Rig veda*. Being crucial book of Hinduism and having some informations about the menstruation it also share negative remark.

On account of the female's condition French feminist Helen Cixous in *The Laugh of Medusa* writes:

The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative. (875)

Cixous is showing her worry about the effect of the past in the current time. The mythical stories were written years back in books like *Rig Veda* and *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* to have an effect on their impingement upon the female. What Cixous suggests is that those mythical stories confuse us biologically and culturally. Rishipanchami rite is also based on old myth produced by males. It hurts feminine sentiments and makes the females believe that they are biologically disgraceful. Not only biologically but at cultural level, such mythical stories have an impact upon the female. One of the major damaging things that happened to women thorough the long history is constant oppression passed from generation to generation throughout self-body shaming.

In that way, Cixous suggests that women should celebrate their body by rewriting their own old myths. Nepalese Hindu women need to consider the oppressive old myth which prevents women from self-love and body celebration.

Cixous strictly shows her refusal to strengthen the ancient myths favoring male and their bodies. For her writing is the only way to achieve the freedom that has been refused throughout history.

Rishipanchami ritual story and its character Jayashree both are ancient but is heard with the same enthusiasm in modern days like many years before. Women of today act more like Jayashree who doesn't question patriarchal values. Jayashree easily accepts that for the welfare of her husband and family her body is responsible. She pays the price of touching the household works. Similarly, even at the current time, women who are participating in the ritual going into the river cleansing the bodies show that women still somewhere put themselves in the place of Jayashree.

Participants of the Rishipanchami follow the book in the context of Nepal which consists of myths, menstruation disciplines, and the Rishipanchami process:

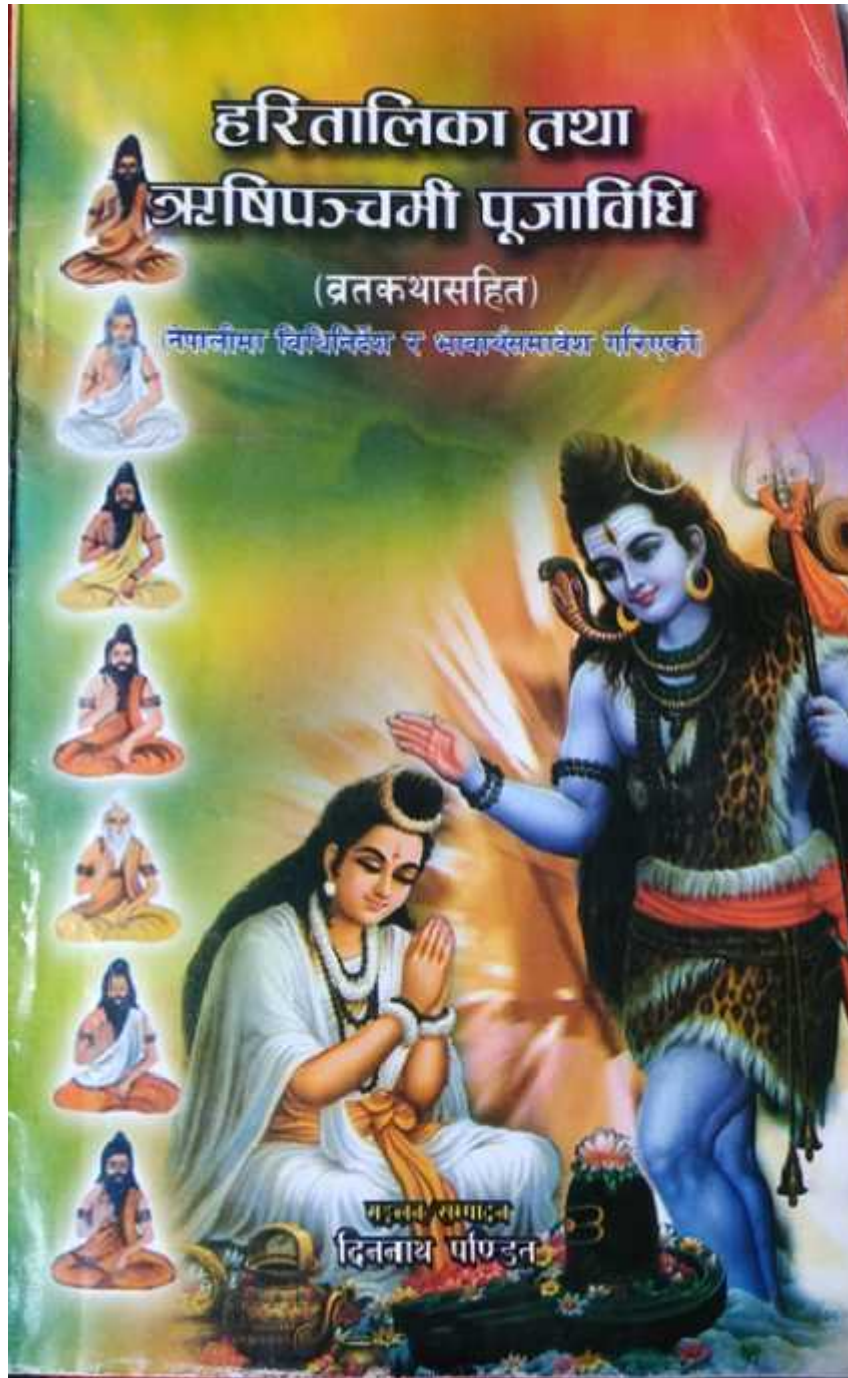


Fig.1. Rishipanchami Ritual Book

In *Hritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi*, mythical and religious character Indra frees himself from Brahmin's murder charge by passing his curse to women. Thence female's monthly bleeding is said to be Indra's curse. People in the past put upon the story to produce the false belief about menstruation as being impure. As Cixous argues if we still do not pay attention to old male-dominated myths we will also be

affected in future. Rishipanchami mythical stories and ritual itself would make women more like patriarchal men because they will learn to think as patriarchal men have been trained to think. In *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* story two mythical characters Jayashree and Sumitra were given second birth at their own home as bitch and ox respectively. Their son goes to a sage to know more about his parent's curse. The Sage explains:

In previous birth, your mother touched things in your home knowingly or unknowingly during her menstruation period. Your mother became bitch because of that curse. Your father touched your mother during the period so he became plowing ox. For the welfare of them, you have to do fasting that will bring goodness to you. (my trans.; 102)

The aforementioned story revolves around the curse upon the female character Jayashree. Jayashree touched things which a woman is not allowed to touch when she was in her monthly period. The reason behind each character's suffering is directly associated with Jayashree's curse. This mythical story is very patriarchal in the sense that it blames a woman's body to be impure. Sumitra's son gets to know that his mother came in touch with his father during her monthly bleeding. Impact of being in touch with menstruated wife made Sumitra into a plowing ox in his home. Similarly, it also causes a negative impact on Jayashree herself who becomes a dog in the same family. Now the son wants to release the curse of his mother and father by taking fasting of the Rishipanchami. Staying away from usual household work and not being in touch with male members are some typical Hindu female performances found in most of the houses in Nepal.

The way a female tends to show or behave like other girl is taught by society from an early age. Judith Butler argues, "gender" is performed within certain

dominant discourses of society”. (8) She states that “all identity practices are the effect of institutional practices”. (8) For instance, in the mythical story from *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi*, the central character Jayashree unknowingly performs opposite to her gender roles. For example, Reading of this mythical character’s story and not doing the mistakes as Jayashree did is the perfect female gender role. Butler states, “sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed gender.” (Judith Butler10)

The very idea advises an individual to challenge the established discourses and it’s certain meaning such as biologically it is a girl and her monthly bleeding is impure so she is supposed to stay away from certain things. If a woman like Jayashree accidentally touches prohibited things then she is the victim of a curse and her family also has to pay for it. The practice of Rishipanchami ritual, reading its mythical stories compels women to act in a certain way connecting them with their biological bodies.

What Judith Butler opines is worth noting here:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions- and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (140)

Gender is constructed according to a particular society’s desire creating an agreement to perform and produce certain roles. For instance, Nepalese Hindu women perform the Rishipanchami ritual which is performed since ages and want their next generation to follow the ritual accordingly. Women bleed, this is natural and biological, it happens all around the world. But getting excluded and being bodily humiliated

during the menstruation period, happens in specific societies only like in Nepalese Hindu society. Butler further argues, “gender is something which comes in cultural fiction”. (12) Cultural fiction like Rig Veda’s slaying of Indra story to Rishipanchami ritual story of Jayashree written in *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* compels and threatens female gender to act in a certain way as if naturally bleeding is something evil. People are afraid of not obeying the cultural fiction because they want to be accepted by the mass. Our mindset is already constructed according to the previous generation’s action and cultural collective agreement. For instance, making women away from regular household work and male members is a kind of belief which is already rooted in society.

Shanti Kadariya and Arja R Aro Unit for Health Promotion Research, University of Southern Denmark have cast a shadow over on Nepalese Hindu impact upon females known as ‘Chhaupadi’ like this:

Chhau is considered to be of two types, major chhau and minor chhau. In minor chhau (monthly menstruation) women have to live in these sheds for up to 5 days and in major chhau the stay lasts up to 11 days, which is mainly the period after childbirth and menarche. On the last day the women take a bath, wash their clothes, bedding and return home. (54)

This is an example of menstrual taboo practiced in the name of religion in the western part of Nepal. Staying away from home more than ten days is life-threatening risk because a menstruated girl or woman is not supposed to see and come in touch with her male family members. Actually, they are supposed to sleep in a hut with an unsafe environment because there is a risk of beasts. Women face general health problems like uterus infection and vaginal inflammation due to the unhygienic and filthy environment. Regarding the health and hygiene holding a long historical practice is

risking the lives of women and girls. This is the severe condition resulting from Nepalese Hindu religious ritual and the ritual stories practiced every year on the day of Rishipanchami.

Names are different but all such chhaupadi practice and Rishipanchami ritual practice disgrace female physical and mental strength. These restrictions are imposed more by the community than the family to continue the practice. During the monthly bleeding putting a girl in a hut far from family in the name of religious practice is none other than bringing down respect for the female body. During those days although women are forbidden from going inside the houses, they are still expected to do more physical work outside the house, for instance, digging, collecting firewood and grass. Even the mothers who have recently given birth are also compelled to follow the restriction on their menstruation.

Chhaupadi is common in the far western part of Nepal which isolates women and girls from their home. Isolation of menstruating female for more than four days shows the pathetic condition that women are facing for a long period of time. This ancient Hindu practice is being followed for hundreds of years. This practice of purity and impurity of the female body can be explained as one of the world's most cruel forms of discrimination. This develops a sense of body humiliation from the very teenage in the mindsets of females. Females start to believe that their bodies are inferior and dirty which needs to be punished by being away from regular comfort every month. There are also strict rules on water which is highly considered as pure in Hinduism. Women and girls practicing Chhaupadi are not even allowed to bath or wash clothes from communal water sources.

Nepal's Supreme Court banned Chhaupadi in 2005 calling it a human rights violation. However, even after the ban, these practices are flourishing not only in far

western sides of Nepal but in most of the parts of the country because of fear of outcomes for breaking menstrual taboos. Even in urban areas, women are excluded from family to stay alone in a separate room.

All these kinds of female body exclusions are an outcome of the highly practiced Rishipanchami ritual. This ritual is celebrated in both rural and urban areas. The exclusion of the female body can be found in both the places only the nature of exclusion is rigid and nonrigid.

Nepalese Hindu society has long been practicing female body humiliating cultural ritual Rishipanchami. So, the researcher focuses her research process to seek an answer for How Rishipanchami Ritual present the female body as impure? Why do women experience somatic abjection in Rishipanchami ritual? Rishipanchami ritual is related to the worship of the Saptarishies (seven saints in Hindu religion). It is also a fast followed by married or unmarried women and girls who have reached their menstruation period.

Male and female bodies are produced in the same way but the female body is seen to be impure and male is seen to be pure. Naturally, both bodies have different functions. Females' monthly discharge of blood from their bodies is conferred as an unchaste process. This can be applicable in ancient days because there were no sanitary materials available to cleanse the blood from the menstruated female body. Therefore, females might have been taken apart from food and household work. On the contrary, in this age of science and technology, no one has to live a difficult life.

Menstruation is a natural process without which human existence can go no further. This very natural and biological process is formed to fit women psychology to counter with their own physical ability. Women and girls feel dominated on a physical and a mental level because of the cultural ritual like Rishipanchami. The very ritual

demanding certain purification process tying with religious myth creates abjection on female's psyche. In the Nepalese Hindu community, most of the families express the need for purification of their daughter's bodies suddenly after they start having menstruation. Females are supposed to go to their nearby pond, river, and lake to sanctify their body. This is done on the last day of 'Teej' (festival). On this day women look tired and pale because of the fasting from the previous day. In spite of their exhausted body, they go to the pond with a big smile on face.

Similarly, women before reaching the pond or river sing many songs. Generally, these songs are composed to share women's emotional pain because women have to leave their birth place and live with their husband's family. Women dance and sing aloud to release psychological pain. These songs emerge from the tradition of singing sad songs, often to friends and women's maternal family from religious songs. Women dance in the nearby temple, pond, and river with big enthusiasm. Most of the women stop dancing and singing after the sun sets. Before going to the river and pond girls and women wear previous day's night clothes because they think new clothes before Rishipanchami bath on the riverside is impure. Women have to have new clothes after their ritual bath. Generally, women prefer red traditional clothes like sari and kurthi. Red symbolizes blood and strength. Wearing red on the Rishipanchami day indicates courage. Women show the courage to celebrate women body though their body is regarded as an impure entity when they bleed monthly.

American scholar of religious studies Catherine Bell shares her view on the ritual body like this:

Some have seen the body as mediating the simple dialectical interaction of the individual and society; others have explored how the construction of cultural

reality focuses on the body, which in turn experiences that construction as natural. Still, others see the body as the "foremost of all metaphors" for a society's perception and organization of itself. Certainly, a consensus of sorts has emerged granting the body a critical place in the social construction of reality. (95)

Bell sheds some lights on people's perception regarding the body with multiple functionalities and uses. Some view it as a connector between the individual and society. On the other hand, bodily expressions are social in nature and adopted through practice. Bell's perception is that the body is no longer a physical entity to perform rituals but in reality, it is a social body that connects to society. Likewise, Bell further states, the ritual body is put in a critical place in the social construction of reality. Bell's thought regarding body can be applied to women's bodies practicing Rishipanchami. Women and girls' bodies can be considered as a link between the individual girl and society.

Some may view the construction of Rishipanchami purification process as a natural process whereas some people may argue saying the Rishipanchami process as a contradicting idea that holds some illogical arguments. Biological bleeding is connected with a natural process which is regarded as impure. But there are people who disregard this thought arguing the monthly bleeding process of a woman is not impure rather it is a socially constructed belief.

Bell further argues:

The ritual construction of authority is stabilization of power and therein a specific augmentation of power. For if power is demonstrated as bestowed on the proper person by external sources, such as ancestors or deities, that power comes to be seen as vast, legitimate, and accessible only to those in the

appropriate offices. In describing the perfection of such a form of "rule through ritual" in Asia, Lucien Pye characterizes this delineation of power as "the highest kind" in terms of sheer scope, justification, and limited accessibility. (211)

As argued by Bell, the ritual is constructed by a certain group which can be considered an authority and that authority stabilizes power and also helps in increasing power. The very power of constructing the ritual is given by ancestors or deities. This can be connected with Rishipanchami ritual too. The Rishipanchami ritual story is bestowed by external sources like Hindu ancestors and Hindu gods like Indra and Sapta Rishies. Mainly Brahmin caste Purohits hold the power on the regulation of the Rishipanchami ritual arguing this ritual as a compulsory process without its negative consequences.

The sole reason for bad happenings in the family is considered due to women and girls. For instance, in *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* book the mythical story it is written,

... both of husband and wife died. Oh Gentleman! That woman named Jayashree born as a dog in her own home because she was the victim of curse. Oh Yudhisthira ! That brahmin named Jayashri born as a dog in her own home because she was the victim of the curse. Oh Yudhisthira! That brahmin named Sumitra also born as an ox in the same home because of his wife's curse. Oh king's king both husband and wife got victimized for touching things during the menstruation period. (my trans.; 98)

Mythical character Jayashri was not supposed to touch prohibited things like touching any male members in the family, touching household objects and so on. When she mistakenly touched the prohibited things she was blamed for the bad happening in her

life and her husband's. Because of wife's mistake her husband was also cursed along with her. She was born as a dog in her family and her husband was born as an ox. They were born at their own home so that their son and daughter in law could shout and hit to the couple. This myth of Jayashree is heard with great interest in Nepalese Hindu society. Hindu women get scared hearing the story of Jayashree. Women's monthly bleeding, in this sense is directly connected with family's well being. Women after committing mistake in her menstruation discipline again gets chance to release it by participating in the Rishipanchami ritual. It is written in the same book that,

Ox said, Oh lady! These all happened because of the curse. What do I do I am also unable, I carry loads. Today for the whole day, I had to plough at my son's fields. Son hit me by covering my mouth. Both husband and wife gave tortures because of the curse. Dead remembering ritual is also waste. I am feeling uneasy today. (my trans.; 101)

Jayashree comes to her husband when she has been beaten. Jayashree being a dog laments about her faith in her own home. Then her husband Sumitra is also sharing his pain of being cursed as an ox and living a life of hell. Sumitra showing his inability to solve her wife's pain, shares his own. Sumitra says he has to plough at his son's fields for the whole day but his son hits him instead. Both son and daughter in law give them physical and mental torture. There is dead remembering ritual going on but that halts because Jayashree being a dog touched the sacred food which are meant to be served to purohitas (male brahmins). The day becomes really tough for them because they wanted to solve the problems and they become the ultimate victim eventually. This excerpt shows how a family's mental peace and physical comfort is determined by the menstrual discipline. There is a fear and regret of not obeying menstrual discipline though it is not the intentional one. Now these fictional

characters are tired of all the tortures and sees no hope for it's way out.

Bell also has taken the term 'rule through ritual' to clarify her argument of ritual construction and power play. Individually girls and women participate in the Rishipanchami ritual because of the fear that society has created calling their biological bleeding as impure. Ruling through ritual has become common in Nepalese Hindu society. Bell borrows the term 'the highest kind' to describe the power portrayal of ritual in a society coined by American scientist and sinologist Lucien Pye. Rishipanchami ritual is the highest kind of all the lady's ritual happened in Nepalese Hindu society. Hindu women do not have power and authority. People in power like the Hindu priest makes them follow the ritual with their supervising power. That supervising power comes from the ancestral story of the god Indra and other deities in Hinduism.

Here in the same book *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi* ritual's significance and it's process is explained in the following way :

Oh decent brahmin! You do Rishipanchami fasting along with your wife for seven years and conduct fasting cease ritual at last. During the fasting day, eat leafy vegetables with one leaf only, eat natural food which is not grown up by plowing. At the Vadrashukla Panchami (according to Nepali calender) go to pond or river at noon time and use dattiwon(shrub) for energy, wealth, long life and long generation. Praise the shrub and brush well and clean all bad smell of the body. (my trans.; 103)

Aforementioned lines are the suggestions of a sage who is showing the importance of conducting a Rishipanchami fasting. These things are suggested to mythical character Jayashree's son Sumati. Jayashree and her husband are not living the life of human so Sumati devotes his longing on freeing his parents from the lives of animals. At least

seven times Rishipanchami fasting is required for releasing the curse of his parents. This has to be done along with his wife. Fasting of Rishipanchami requires pure foods even after the completion of Rishipanchami pooja. Women are allowed to eat one leaf vegetables like taro leaves. Similarly bamboo shoot is also preferable on the Rishipanchami ritual. All those food and vegetables grown up by farmer using plow are considered to be unsacred. Likewise on the very day of Rishipanchami women need to go to nearby pond or river and conduct the ritual process starting with brushing their tooth for three hundred and sixty five times. They have to brush their tooth using natural shrub called Apamaarga. The shrub is also worshipped. It is said that the shrub is the metaphor for wealth, energy, long life and long generation. In this regard, the mythical character Jayashree is suggested with all these instructions about Rishipanchami fasting and its ritual process. It is believed that all the bad smell of the body will be cleaned by the use of the Apamaarga (shrub). Rishipanchami ritual like this has to be done by the female body because it is a kind of ritual conducted because of not following menstrual discipline by females themselves. But the punishment is given to entire family. In this sense women's monthly bleeding and discipline is directly connected with a family's well being.

Rishipanchami ritual highly regards female body as impure so it requires to clean each of the female body parts by various natural things. This is written in the same book of Rishipanchami;

.....use yellow clay to wash the body. Sesamum indicum and gooseberry should be used for washing hair. Wear two pieces new clothes and worship Arundhati(god) and worship seven sages Kashyap, Atri, Vardwaj, Vishwamitra, Gautam, Jamadagni, Vashistha and virtuous wife Arundhati with full belief. Oh Brahmin! Doing Rishipanchami fasting only clean the

curse created during menstruation period by touching prohibited things. There is no doubt on that. (my trans.; 104)

Using yellow clay while washing the whole body is considered to be sacred in Rishipanchami. Yellow clay not only make the body clean but it also gives moisturizing effect on skin. Similarly sesamum indicum and gooseberry are also required to wash hair. After the ritual bath wearing new cloth is the must because the whole rishipanchami is considered as body cleaning process. Worshipping seven sages Kashyap, Atri, Vardwaj, Vishwamitra, Gautam, Jamadagni, Vashistha and virtuous wife Arundhati is also one significant part of the ritual. They are known as the leader of the enlightenment after gods. So taking forgiveness from the seven sages and worshipping them are also the crucial part in the Rishipanchami process. Rishipanchami fasting only diminish the curse created after the intentional or unintentional disturbance in menstruation discipline.

British Cultural Anthropologist Victor Turner has introduced the concept of liminality in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* which is worth to put here:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (" threshold people ") are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions.(95)

As Turner has argued liminality is an in-between situation or state where individuals are in the verge of personal and social transformation. In a sense, the liminal stage

means neither here nor there. People involved in certain cultural, religious ritual feel ambiguity and uncertainty which can be observed through various symbols. Relating Turner's term participants of the Rishipanchami also go through the liminal phase where they do not feel they are impure as before their religious cultural ceremony in the bank of the river nor they feel pure. This is the condition which can also be known as the transitional period. Women and girls' attributes like feeling ambiguous about their identity during the period of body purification can be analyzed via multiple symbols. For instance, women using red colors on large scale evoke strong emotion. Red indicates the strength and intensity of women. Though they involve in a body purification process they also pose the idea of their body's significance and strength by wearing red clothes and red tika on their forehead. Red tika is put after the termination of the whole purifying process. Similarly, Red tika in the forehead is taken as a blessing of god too. A liminal entity like adult girls and women are represented as possessing nothing masked with red on their bodies to demonstrate that as liminal beings, they have no status. Participants in the Rishipanchami do not have anything that may distinguish them from other new participants. Liminal beings or let's say women in the Rishipanchami must obey their instructor known as Puret Ji (male brahmin). Women accept mythical impulsive punishment without any complaints. This term of liminality shows the connection between human behavior and ritual in society. Women following the ritual show their doings creating their identity. A girl tends to establish the idea that after the menarche period one becomes impure and needs to involve in such ritual to stay away from any danger relating to their menstrual discipline. Rituals like Rishipanchami create certain behaviors with each other. Turner again establishes a term named 'communitas' to explain the connection between human behavior and ritual. Turner prefers 'communitas' term

than 'liminal' to explain human behavior in a society. He writes in the same book, "I prefer the Latin term "communitas" to "community," to distinguish this modality of social relationship from an " area of common living." (96)

Simply Liminality brings a state which is communitas. Communitas, as explained by Turner, is a structureless society which is based on equality and solidarity. Women participants in the Rishipanchami feel equal with each other because they all come to the bank of the river to purify their physical body. Women sing song and dance with each other brings solidarity. Rishi Panchami is a women's ritual which is also a time of unity. All women are covered in red from head to toe means this is a different gender-based women society. On this note, as Turner's preferred term 'communitas' helps better understanding Rishipanchami ritual in Nepalese Hindu society which not only poses the idea of body purification but also creates women bonding.

Another American anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport defines ritual as performance, "I take the term "ritual" to denote the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers." (24)

Ritual is a performance performed by a certain group which is absolute with no change. Performers do not verbally explain their performance or act in a gradual manner rather new performer follow an old performer and learn. Similar is the case in Rishipanchami. Participants of the ritual go to the river do various tasks one has to do like brushing tooth and washing various body parts with various natural things like soils and cow's dung. Nepalese Hindu women only participate in the ritual because they believe in it. People of other religion do not have any idea about it.

Here are a few pictures of Rishipanchami participants which gradually presents

Rishipanchami ritual and its process. The ritual begins with women distributing soil of different places to wash their body parts at the bank of the river. Women takes soils from their homes. The different soils are soil taken from holy basil's root, soil taken from gooseberry's root, soil taken from the ploughed field, cow dung and mustard powder. A Hindu female is obligated to use collected soils and cow dung from head to toe. Each body part is supposed to be washed for three hundred and sixty-five times. Women and girls then start brushing their tooth three hundred and sixty-five times.

Nepalese Hindu women use 'Apamarga' stem as their toothbrush. They are supposed to clean their tooth for three hundred sixty-five times. Likewise after brushing the tooth women bath with cow's milk and 'Gomutra' (cow's urine). This is also done for three hundred and sixty five times. Gomutra is believed to be pure and holy in the Hindu religion. Similarly, cow's milk is used to whiten the body. A mixture of both liquids with water is applied to wash the body pouring from head to toe at the river. This is also done for three hundred sixty-five times to incorporate all days of a whole year. It is believed that if a girl or a woman happened to forget the menstruation rules last year, she is forgiven if she cleanses her each body part on the Rishipanchami day.



Fig.2. Hindu women collecting stones to worship

Each woman collects seven stones at the bank of the river just after their bath. They worship those stones considering them as their sons. Women also sing songs and make seven revolutions around those collected stones. At the time of worship, women are not supposed to wear sandals. It is believed that while worshipping those stones women's hair should not be dry. Similarly, women are obliged to put lipstick, tika, and kajal (makeup materials).



Fig.3. Hindu women after finishing the ritual bath thanking water for making them
pure

After the completion of taking bath and worshipping stones Hindu women come back to river, put chandan, tika, flowers in a taperi (leaf plate), and let it flow on the water. This is the time when half of the purification work is done.



Fig.4. A Hindu woman making Saptarishies (seven sages) conduct the pooja and other girls following her

This is the main pooja where women and girls ask to forgive their mistakes from the last year if they have touched any forbidden things. All women and girls are required to take a fast until the pooja is over. After cleaning the whole body and tooth with stems of Apamaarga (medicinal plant) and taking bath with cow's dung and various soils Hindu ladies gather in a temple and conduct this pooja. All the girls and women seem to be drained at the Rishipanchami day as a result of their strict fasting (which involves not even a drop of water in their mouth) on the Teej day. Next day is called Mangal Chauthi or half fasting day. Few girls and women who are physically weak take lunch (and nothing else after that) on that day because they need to participate in the ritual next day which is Rishipanchami day and they are not supposed to eat until the ritual is finished. On the very day of Rishipanchami, women are allowed to take one-time plain food after the ritual. It is very surprising to see women wearing red dresses and doing all the ritual bath on the bank of the river with big enthusiasm

without proper diet in the previous days. After getting tired of doing so many rituals in the river with an empty stomach, they still perform the main pooja ceremony with all the graces and joy. Lord Ganesh, Saptarishies, and Arundhati (the epitome of conjugal bliss who is the wife of Vashista rishi) are worshipped. Women then offer 'Prasad' (sweets and fruits) to gods and ask gods to forgive their sins regarding mistakes on menstruation discipline. After this pooja, the priest tells the mythical story on women's monthly bleeding. Similarly, the priest preaches ladies on why to participate in Rishipanchami ritual.

In a scholarly journal published in *Journal of Sex Research* by Deborah Schooler, L. Monique Ward, Ann Merriwether, and Allison S. Caruthers write:

Although menstruation is a natural, reproductive process, it bears a strong cultural taboo that commands that it not be seen, discussed, or in most ways, acknowledged (Kissling, 1996a; Robert, 2004). This desire to keep menstruation secret is often paired with an attitude that menstruation is dirty and disgusting (Martin, 1996; Roberts, 2004). Many girls report shame about being seen with a menstrual product or, worse yet, about bleeding through clothing, and some adolescent girls report that they are embarrassed simply by the fact that they menstruate. (324)

Menstruation is an under-discussed subject. It still exists as a confusing experience. In a sense, it is a kind of belief which compels women and girls to make the process hide it though it is a natural and biological process. Simply because menstruation is considered as dirty many girls feel ashamed about this. Girls feel embarrassed with their natural biological process not because they bleed but because of the strict rules and rituals around period.

Philosopher Michel Foucault's ideas are significant in the Nepalese religious

context of the female. Foucault in his book *The Archaeology of knowledge and the Discourse on Language* suggests:

We must question those ready-made syntheses, those groupings that we normally accept before any examination, those links whose validity is recognized from the outset; we must oust those forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man with that of another; they must be driven out from the darkness in which they reign. (22)

Ritual practices like going into the river washing all the body parts for three hundred and sixty-five times and asking for forgiveness for the mistakes they did is something that has been existing because we do not try to refute it. Those stories and myths relating them with the religion have no validity at all in the current world. As suggested by Foucault, our male ancestors created a discourse that women's monthly bleeding is a curse and women should feel sorry for it. There is a need for of both male and female bodies to continue generation. Then how could one's body be degraded and another's graded? Without monthly bleeding human race can't go further. Thus, menstruation is something not to be ashamed of. People in power make discourse and that continues until one dare to question its cogency. Rishipanchami ritual and myths connected to it only question upon the female body as if women were born impure. Maybe if Rishipanchami ritual myths were written by females, they wouldn't write against their own bodily function. It was less possible because people in power (usual males in the ancient time) make rules and people with less power has to follow them even though it is unfavorable to them. As Foucault mentioned, one must question the ready-made discourse one in power creates. Women and girls did not dare to question the reliability of the discourse which directly attacks their monthly cycle which is as natural and necessary as any other natural phenomenon in

the world. Still, today when each person is free to share his/her ideas, most of the women are promoting a hundred years old discourses even if it hurts feminine sentiments. Women are afraid to give up on the ritual because it is connected to religion. Religion is something which is rarely questioned and people do not inquire upon its rationality.

Purifying female body means degrading it. Hindu religion pays high priority to purity and there are multiple rules to keep up the purity of the body. Especially, when it comes to Hindu females in the period of menstruation they are not allowed to cook, touch male and take part in any religious practices. The entire Rishipanchami ritual from bathing in the river to taking fast and conducting Saptarishies pooja is performed in order to seek forgiveness for any mistakes they (women) might have committed during the menstruation period. The main purpose of the Rishipanchami ritual is to purify the female body and ask for forgiveness if they did anything against the discipline during menstruation.

Rishipanchami ritual can be seen as menstruation taboo which creates a hierarchical line between male and female physical significance. Nepalese Hindu girl from her early age believes that her body is impure because she bleeds every month. There is no point in seeking forgiveness because menstruation is not a negative thing or a sin. Instead, menstruation is the celebration for a girl to enter into womanhood.

How does Rishipanchami ritual present the female body as impure? And why do women experience somatic abjection in Rishipanchami? These are questions this paper tried to look answers for. And the reason is that this ritual is the means established dates back by ancestors who taught females that their monthly bleeding is a curse so their bodies need to be purified each year. Purification of the body means dishonoring it. The ritual creates pity and shame on women in society because their

bodies need to be purified, unlike male bodies. Hindu women and girls go to the river and pond with different soils and plants to cleanse their body parts. They cleanse their body parts for three hundred and sixty five times thinking if they have touched any forbidden things during the menstruation period. So the ritual is also known as forgiving ritual in the Hindu society.

To put things in gist, ritual-like Rishipanchami has been a means of patriarchy thought to the abject female body. Menstruation is just a biological process but it is constructed in a way that menstruating women are ritually impure and given rules to follow. The somatic abjection of the female body on any grounds even religious and cultural is unconstitutional behavior.

Work Cited

- Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, 1999.
- Cixous, Helen. *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Trans. Cohen, Keith and Paulo Cohen. Chicago Press, 1976.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the discourse on language*. Trans. Smith, Sheridan A. M. Pantheon Books, 1971.
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/brahma.shtml>
- Janet Chawla. "Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 29, no. 43, 1994, pp. 2817–2827. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/4401940.
- Kadariya, Shanti and Arja R Aro. "Chhaupadi practice in Nepal – analysis of ethical aspects" *Medicolegal and Bioethics*, 29 June. 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282447220_Chhaupadi_practice_in_Nepal_-_analysis_of_ethical_aspects
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. Trans. Roudiez S. Leon. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Pandit, Dinanath. *Haritalika and Rishipanchami Poojabidhi*. Bagalamukhi Dharmik Prakashan, 2071.
- Rappaport, Roy A. *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Schooler, Deborah, et al. "Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making." *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2005, pp. 324–334. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3813785.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process*. Cornell Paperbacks, 1977.