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The Performance of *Jhumra* as the Tharu Folk Ballad: A Study in Angst and Eco-Romance*

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Abstract

This paper critically unravels the themes of Jhumra folk dance-songs of Dangaura Tharu of Nepal. On its interpretation, it discusses the imaginative representation of nature and human relationship in Jhumra songs appropriating the notions of the folklore performance of Richard Schechner and Alan Dundes. The paper appropriates Tharu Jhumra dance songs: Chhaila To, Jone Panah Gaili, Baigam Ture and Karam Lage Aag voiced by Mani Ram Tharu. The songs reflect the romantic fantasy and the suffering of the folks. Jhumra serves as the distinct dance repeatedly performed by the community throughout the year. Along with this, the brief reference of Robert Burns has also been fetched to spell out the modern revival and revisualization of folklores by the medium of YouTube and other commercial online platforms. Jhumra songs comprise the lyrics that romanticize and de-romanticize nature with the human–nature union. I have used Schechner's idea of performance as the way of life to signify the eco-centric romance of Tharu community. Schechner believes that performance is embedded in everydayness of each activity that a folk performs. This research will help to assimilate the eco-friendly nature of Tharu ethnicity and other different ethnicities of Nepal urging us to be more eco-conscious individuals.

Keywords: Eco-consciousness, Jhumra, revisualization, Tharu-Folklore.

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***Jhumra* as the Archetype of 'Being a Tharu'**

Folk dance as a performance imitates the daily affairs of the performers. Tharus in their folk dances reflect on how their day starts during harvest season. Richard Schechner in his performance studies explores dance and ritual as an imitation of social action (29). In defining the imitative quality of performance, Schechner derives the ideas from Aristotle. He defines, "Art always comes after experience. The separation between art and life is built into the idea of mimes"(qtd. in Schechner 28-29). He finds ritualistic dance more inspired by social actions (98). Further, ritualistic dancing that involves serious moves may be instigated by the spirit (40). On defining, the ritual as performance, Victor Turner states, "Ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects, performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (Deflem 5). For Turner, the ritualistic performance reveals the crucial social values of a community. The values of the community comprise the ecological conscience embedded in their lives and occupation.

Jhumra involves varied aesthetic forms of dance, songs, and attire. The shared performance harmoniously comprises the dance, songs, body movements, musical instruments, dress, and make-up to reflect the varied emotions of human life. The celebration becomes a pious occasion for community to mutually share the hardships of their agrarian lifestyle and rejoice in the blessing of life. These include the separation of a lover, initiation of love affair and joy of spring, and numbness of winter. In this paper, I have attempted to study *Jhumra* folk dance performed among the Tharu community of Western Nepal. Therefore, the paper aims to exhibit the romantic fantasy and suffering of the Tharu folks embedded in *Jhumra* dance songs. The songs of the performance possess the ability to arouse the aggressive instincts as well dreadful worries of toilsome occupation. The projection of ecological conscience explains the effect of ecology and environmental change on their occupation. In return their performance encompasses the sufferings and celebration and praying for better livelihood for the community.

***Jhumra* as the Lore of Tharu Ethnic Agency**

Social rules and philosophical ideas behind the society's functions are inherent in the rituals of a community. Clifford Geertz finds that interpretation of cultural

performance is necessary to understand the meaning of a complex cultural web (Yengoyan 270). He synchronizes the interpretation of the text with the interpretation of culture since the text is the production of a certain culture. Thus, for him, a specific description of culture is necessary to interpret the symbols in that cultural performance. The textual interpretation of Tharu folk songs signifies the annual life cycle of a Tharu peasant whose life in the past and to some extent still in the present remains around the peasantry. Carol Rosen in her review of Schechner's performance theory finds performance as the study of the use of aesthetic perspective in social psychology (253). She interprets Schechner's notion of performance as an art whose subject, structure, and action are a social process. She interprets Schechner's performative theory as the approach that studies everyday life as the art form.

Since humans possess the capacity to develop concepts and are physically more privileged to produce their concepts into practice, they have culture, art, and innovations. Bruce McConachie critically examines Schechner's performative theory that differentiates *Homo sapiens* as more sophisticated than animals in art and aesthetics. He asserts: "Humans can make conventions for dancing, ritual, and other folk performances. They can step in and out of their roles as dancers, beauty queens, and musicians in order to rehearse and platform for others. Performance by humans is possible due to the presence of conceptual integration among them" (42). McConachie finds performance aesthetic possible in humans since humans possess the capacity to form and conceptualize ideas into the exhibition. Deborah Kapchan reveals performative arts and rituals as the mediums of certain messages. She argues: "To perform is to carry something into effect –whether it be a story, an identity, an artistic artifact, a historical memory, or an ethnography" (479). Tharu *Jhumra* songs carry the themes of their peasantry, displacement, family relations. *Jhumra* songs transmit the participants from their hierarchy to the mass. These performative occasions, as Turner's idea of liminality, reflects the hierarchy of the community and at the same time end that hierarchy.

Folklores are mainly considered to have originated from primitive society. They have been conceptualized as the behavior of the rural communities. Such practices are major occasions to keep such rural communities organized. E. Phillips Barker in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines folk dancing as: "Dancing which has evolved among

the peasantry and is maintained by them in a fluid tradition without the aid of the professional dancer, teacher or artist and is not at least in the observed, practiced in towns, on the stage, or in the ballroom" (Buckland 317). Theresa Buckland on tracing the definitions of folk dance asserts the birth of such dance performances from the peasantry life. Stetson Kennedy also observes folk dance as natural and profoundly spontaneous (Buckland 318). Buckland catches the improvised structures of folk dance in rural communities.

Similarly, on interpreting the ontology of folk dance, Nancy Lee ChalfaRuytes distinguishes the existent of folk dance on two bases. First, she finds folk dance solely produced by and for the folk community themselves. Second, she finds folk dance existing for diverse purposes. She asserts: "They can exist as the content of research, fun, sport, hobby and larges communication" (269). For her, folk dance holds diverse means to entertain the participants and observers. She asserts, " Folk dance refers to a genre comparable to other dance genres such as ballet, modern jazz, tap, and so on" (269). Thus, folk dance should be appreciated and studies with the genre having multiple qualities in them.

Folk performances embody the history of a particular community since they have been practiced from times immemorial. Folklores blend myth, epic, history, and cultural values of the communities. John Greenway interprets folk songs as the socio-historical approach. For him, understanding folksongs help any scholar, researcher, and observer to dwell deep into to socio-historical values of a particular community. The findings ascertain that such folk ballad intensely signify the community feeling. The rural folks routinely perform them as such ballads suits their stories. The ballad style performance intensely affects the performers' and participants' cognizance as this form of performance blends the poetic rhythm with the most intimate emotions. Moreover, such folk dramas could also function as a medium to convey morals of their community to children and observers. Rita J. Martin also finds folks quite useful for children to develop their language power. She argues, "As a result of singing, hearing and reading folk songs, expressive ad receptive vocabularies increase" (326). Thus, the expressive quality of folk performance aware the children of the community about their social values, ethics and morals. As history and identity get interweaved in such

performance, the performers and participants come across the channel where they get visually guided instruction about their way of life.

Folk dances combine diverse themes ranging from romance, comedy to concernment. All these genres emanate from social behavior and practice. In a true sense, social actors' actions are being imitated as the performance categorizing them into different genres. Philip Barry differentiates folk ballads into two types: ballads of the situation and the ballad of introspection. For him, the ballad of situation impresses the listener and observer by the realism of action whereas the latter one by the centrality of the chief character. They may represent misfortune and lamentation. Barry defines the folk song as "a treasure – house of the events of human experience in all possible phases, of all the lights and shadows of human fancy, and furthermore, of all that by common consent of the folk is beautiful" (274). Tharu *Jhumra* songs as well narrate the diverse emotions and fancies of the participants explicating their daily turmoil and ecstasy. Similarly, R. L. Tongue explores the motif and symbols in folksongs. He finds the folklorists often use very common and abundant objects around them as particular symbols, such as flowers for women, trees for protection, and birds for good and bad signs. For instance, for him, flowers are professed most by the women and in the past. They used to keep and nurture such herbs with them for medicinal purposes which ultimately provided them the sense of protection (Tongue 293). In *Jhumra* songs, references of flowers, birds, and trees are found in abundance which can be interpreted from the thematic perspective of love, family bond, goodwill, and miseries of life.

This study has primarily focused on Tharu *Jhumra* dance songs from the perspective of Nepal's indigenous ballad of fantasy, romance, and worry. To explore the textual meaning of the performance, the notions of Schlegel, Schechner, and Turner have been invested with reviews from performance theories. The research does not involve direct interview citations. However, the information received by the folksingers: Maniram Tharu, Shantaram Tharu, and Manmati Bakhariya have been emphatically thought of while applying the hypothetical experiences into the content. For the copyright consent, CS Films allowed their authorization to utilize their content. Therefore, the visuals produced by the media houses: *Hamar Music Bagiya, RKC Digital, Hamar Music Angna* have been textually analyzed blending their themes with

performative behavior. Thus, the study focuses on answering "What are the popular dance songs in Tharu community? Why the community's performance primarily brings the reference of nature to allude their emotions? And how the narratives of the folk performance of Tharu community connect their history and identity?"

***Jhumra* as the Ritual of Carnavalesque Rich with Nature Symbols**

Jhumra comprises abundance of nature imageries in its narratives: jungle, river, wild animals, pagan gods and crops. Such imageries allude the emotions of jubilation and woes. In the past, Tharus did not have musical instruments to entertain themselves. After working in the fields daylong, they would drink *Jaanr* (locally made alcohol wine) in circles to enjoy themselves. Thus, the name *Jhumra* etymologically sticks to Tharu's behavioral performance of rolling drunk after their hard physical labor in the fields. The romantic and tragic expression of human desires and pains are well versed in *Jhumra* songs. It expresses Tharu's way of living a convivial life in drinking, dancing, and singing. Thus, *Jhumra* refers to systematic movement of dance in rhythm of music, and in my translation of the term it embodies an ecstasy after intoxication. It also signifies that one gets lost in it when one performs it with the corresponding co-performer of one's age. *Jhumra* could be performed throughout the year based on the situation. They are often thematically related to the divinity, nature, and love expression between boy and girl. Thus, nature's spell of spring and fall in the performance resonate the folks' celebration and hardships.

American folklorist Barre Toelken defines the folk song as a shared cultural attitude. He declares, "A song becomes a folksong when it begins to be passed along and rephrased or used by others for whom it also functions as a way of articulating shared attitudes or feelings" (147). The vitality of the folk song connects immediately with those who ever sing it focusing more on its performative value rather than its creative writer. Thus, it functions as the medium of connectivity and learning process (36). Folklores are the space performance that needs space and calls its members for the union. The togetherness reconnects the pagan lifestyle which stimulates social functioning, understanding, and mutual co-operation. Similarly, John Miles Foley calls performance 'the enabling event' in which the referents supplied by tradition are brought to life by the skilled articulations of speakers, singers, builders, weavers, and other vernacular artists (117). Folklore performances give life to the culture and entity

around which folklorists live. Peasants perform folklore to connect themselves with nature and transcend themselves from mere boredom of very prosaic life.

Jhumra and all other songs performed by Tharus are bonded with nature and environment around which they reside. Since Tharus are agrarian folks, their lifestyles, rituals, social moral values are reflected through the verses of these songs. Especially, after 'Hareri Puja' in July after the rice sowing, they perform these songs to rejuvenate their leisure time. In the Nepali context, it is celebrated mostly during September just before Dashain when the climate remains temperate and favorable for a carnival; the season of moderate temperature with less rainfall and less heat in the plains of Tarai. *Jhumra* dance indicates the youths' readiness for socialization and family planning. The whole village participates, some as observers and others as the performers. Performers mainly include four lead dancers including solely from female, and rest working as the chorus. Two males play the *madal* with the rhythm of "tung-dhung-dhung-dhung-dukna-dhung" (my quote) and their co-lady dancers revolve around them with the moves reflecting the theme of the song supported by the chorus guarding them. Along with these other major instruments include *Jhal* and *Kaswar*. These musical instruments are typically made of wood, bamboo and animal skin and are prepared by the performers themselves.

The performers of *Jhumra* have unique attire. Moreover, the performers even use their unique attire in various other celebrations. Male dancers wear traditional Tharu dress *dhoti*, white shirt, and they generally keep *anguchha* (hand towels) over their shoulders to make them comfortable anytime for hygiene. They can add a half coat over their shirts to enrich their look. Similarly, females wear lehenga, blouse, and various traditional ornaments: *tauk*, *mangouri*, *gataiya*, *tikaha*, *necklace*, *bala*, *bijaithariya*, *lagrahi*, *coin rings*, *chhapahi*, *ghungroo*, *kara*, *bichhuwa*, *taraki*, and many others. Along with *Jhumra*, Tharus also perform *Sakhiya* dance, *Mungrahauwa* dance, *Laththaiya* dance. They also perform different dance songs throughout the year like *Sajna*, *Maangar*, *Dhamaar*. *Sajna* is performed during the summer season, *Dhamaar* during the winter season, and *Maangar* during the wedding function. The community owns different songs dedicated to different time periods with notable differences in their themes and performances. The community's enriched ornamental garb enhances the scenic environment and space of the performance.

When we look through the perspective of Schlegel's romantic representation of nature, *Jhumra* songs can be well understood. *Jhumra* songs are inscribed with the theme of nature, environment, and human nature relations which are very common to the surroundings where we reside. Schlegel adores the romantic representation of nature which will eventually elevate the personal and moral intuition of the poet. Here, in the case of *Jhumra's* performance, we can situate the poet with singers. Schlegel argues, "The proper business of poetry is to represent only that eternal which is at all places and in all times becomes significant, timeless and beautiful which is known as eternity" (Selden 22). The aesthetics of art must collide together to form a divine bond with the spirituality of nature.

The select *Jhumra* songs typically use nature imageries to channel the human sorrows and happiness. In the *ChhailaTo* (Oh Boy!) song, a girl speaks to the boy that he grasps her hand very strongly that it pains her, "Oh dear, you hold my hand, twist it/ You don't feel my pain/ Please leave my hand brother-in-law." She romantically urges her brother-in-law to free her hand which describes the skirmishes of love affair. The fantasy of romance expressed through the repetition of the same line shows the soft corner for the opposite emotions mingled at the performance of sexuality. Songs of angst in *Jhumra* narrates separation of lovers, women's married life challenges and absence of cordial conjugal relationship. Songs of happiness includes adulthood of girls and boys trying to be intimate with each other. The occasion acts as an initiative towards match making and romantic socializing.

In the context of the composition of a good poem or any piece of literature, Plato in *The Republic* elucidates: "Good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject and that he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet (Selden 18). Plato here asserts the mode of imitative representation in art. He actualizes the logic of imitation in art from the surrounding around the poet. The poet in a general sense imitates and represents them in her art in her best possible way. At the beginning of the romantic conversation, it evinces the intimacy between the boy and the girl. Both of them are overwhelmed with the joy of romance. In a reply, the boy also sings teasing her, "Yes, my dear I hold your arm tightly and you will be unable to rest peacefully." On decoding it, we find that the boy is trying to hold the girl from fleeing to another one. He asserts his masculinity and expresses his desire to elope with her. The relation between them gets addressed by 'brother-in-law' and 'sister-in-law.' This reflects that

Tharus have a romantic and very proximate relationship among their brother and sisters-in-law.

Jhumra exploits the abundance of feminine imageries to exhibit the similarities between the serene calmness of nature at its recluse alluding it with feminine beauty and innocence. The girl further remarks: “In summer, the sweats flow from the body and I have a problem in wearing my blouse.” This notion implies the girl's body growth and her implication that she is ready for mating. For Schlegel, “Nature and human beings are the proper and immediate subjects of poetry” (21). For him, the poet should choose the common things as the subjects of his poetry which are available everywhere on earth. The songs of *Jhumra* manipulates the contextual notions of nature and environment. The heat and dryness of summer exhibit the increasing infatuation towards the opposite sex and the absence of ideal youth romance in her life. With the enrichment of nature's valorization, the girl again describes the flower garden, “We went to pick the flowers in the garden and I fell in love with your charming face in the very garden.” The boy also replies that they are playing on the bed of flowers. In the end, the girl requests the boy to take her to his home. This song describes the initiation of a romantic affair through the beautification of nature. Thus, the beautification and dreadfulness of nature in the performance symbolically represent the two facets of human emotions.

Jhumra songs are fast-paced. The beat suddenly leaps up just after the repetition of the same line twice, once by the girl and the boy, the third and the concluding line first stanza leaps high. For instance, song *Chhaila To* has lyrics like:

Girl: The flowers were scattered like the bedsheets.

Boy: Yes, dear the flowers were scattered like the bedsheets.

Girl: Oh, the same bed of flowers, we exchanged our dream emotions of love.

All the above sentences are formed in the past actions reflecting the dream-like fantasy of blissful romance. Since *Jhumra* songs are imaginative representations of trans-romance, Schlegel's idea of the past having the space of remote and timelessness seems to come into effect here too. For Schlegel, the past occupies the value of “sublimity and greatness” (21). *Jhumra* songs are primarily about crafting the nature of nature with varied human day to day performances ranging from organic life to anxiety of livelihood.

Similarly, on account of the second song *Jone Panahi* (The Way My Beloved Walksby), performed by Mani Ram Tharu, the roads, the garden of a dream, and the natural elements are used metaphorically. The boy says he would plant the whole road with a beautiful garden by which his beloved walks: “The way my dear walks, I would raise the whole garden there.” The boy further proposes to have their own world. He says his youth has passed waiting for her but he is good at wooing her: “The spider knows how to make its web; he will surely catch the prey.” The girl brilliantly replies that their love also deepened into perfection like the spider webs its cob. The boy compares himself with the tricky spider and the girl responds that she has actually fallen in the trap of that insect.

The narrative of the song contains metaphors of spider and its trap to embody the boy and the spider web. Alison Stone believes that Schlegel re-comprehends nature as inherently creative as consisting of participation in natural creative processes (3). She further writes that for Schlegel romantic poetry points to what is higher, the infinite, holy fullness of the life of creative nature. Romantic poetry enchants nature whereas modern songs may disenchant nature with the digression of rationality. *Jhumra* does not have complex syntaxes. It has only two-three sentences and the same sentences are often repeated by the girl and the boy after a certain interval. Traditionally all the connotations of love are expressed through nature's entities.

Similarly, if one looks into the song *Manme Karam Lage Aag* (Bad Fate Burns My Soul), one can feel the pathos of a married woman trying to soothe her pain going into nature's shelter. She goes to her maternal house after she receives the ill-treatment at her husband's house but to her grief, she didn't get any relief there, either. When she returns to her mother's home, her sister-in-law is not happy with her at all. Filled with pain, she resists accusing no one but her bad karma; she regards her karma responsible for her suffering. She visits the river to ease her pain by assimilating herself in the lap of nature but the river has dried and she could only find desert there. “To ease my suffering, I went to the river but the river too had dried up and now only the desert could be seen there.” Her intuition deceives her to perceive nature as a friend which as argued by Schlegel, “Humans disenchant nature if they perceive it not at all mysterious but completely intelligible by reason” (4). He condemns modern culture partly since it encourages disenchanting notions of nature. He finds modern culture as over rational filled with reflective thinking which degrades human-nature relationships. To

understand nature as the spiritual power, Schlegel's, romantic poetry could be the best solution.

Even nature's power of healing doesn't seem to work in her favor. She then visits the trees but alas to her, their all leaves have dried down. They simply appear naked, bare, and pitiless to her. The barrenness of autumn can always be compared with human grief. Her perpetual grief has no rest and minimization. She could not find any healing anywhere. She could be felt as the vagrant in search of emotional therapy. She even visits flowers, but they too all have already dried up. "To ease my suffering, I visited the flowers but all the petals were dry/ I felt my Karma is bad, whom should I accuse?" Stone writes, "Schlegel believes modern culture has disenchanted nature by educating its members to seek rational logic in nature" (5). The problem with modern human beings is that they try to see rationality in nature. Instead, they should seek spirituality in it. She brings Schlegel's inference of Greek folklore which was filled with the faith of divinity. As Schlegel argues, those Greek poetries reflect the presence of divine beings in nature rather than concrete rationality. So, he writes that modern art creates antagonism between emotion and intelligence, between impulse and logic (Lange 291). For him, impulse oriented poetry is more traditional and spiritual in perception. *Jhumra* transgresses the romance of the couple to the romanticism of nature and the couple. Schlegel's romanticization of nature and the ecstasy derived from the tranquil meditation of nature as always motivating and character elevating.

As I have expressed my plan of discussing commercialization and revisualization of Tharu folk music through *YouTube* and other platforms. As argued by Robert Burns commercial processes have enabled the elements of continuity, which are apparent through the promotion and marketing of folklores (198). Commoditization of folk music has been possible through the use of modern technology and music distribution network. Such technologies enable recordings of past traditions to become new ones in the present. Besides these contemporary institutions like record studios, promoters, agents, and marketing networks to boost the re-performance of folklores through the digital medium. The popular music industry has revived the folklores which were on the verge of extinction and has provided modern youths a new medium to teach them art, culture, and nationality. Commercialization has also affected the performance and perception of folk music with the alteration of song texts (Burns 211). Hence, commercial businesses have empowered constituents of continuity, which are

successful through the promotion and marketing of folk song music fusion with YouTube and other online social medians to attract audiences outside the traditional space of performance.

Folklores of Tharus blend the narration of their history, way of life and inform the observers about their lifestyle. Their performances should be extended into the epitome of implicit philosophical ideas. The performances should not merely be interpreted from the aesthetic pleasure rather the inquiry into the narration should be done to decipher great themes and symbols. As Mark Johnson in his book *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* asserts: "We need a philosophy that sees aesthetics as not just art, beauty, and taste but reasonably as about how human beings experience and make meaning" (169). He asserts the importance of interpreting the body not only as the epitome of art and performance but as an interpretation of a wide array of meanings and symbols. Further, Johnson asserts, "Aesthetics concerns all of the things that go into meaning form, expression, communication, qualities, emotion, feeling, value, purpose and more" (169). He criticizes the performance researchers and social scientists' approach to interpret the cultural performance just as a form of art but as the way of life commingled with emotions, evolution, and as Raymond Williams critically examines the whole way of life.

Conclusion

Since, folklores are socio-historical artifacts and the important document for tracing the culture, social evolution, and identify markers, they need to be preserved. The performances of these lore bring back the long-lost legend of superheroes, thriller of mystic adventure, and chronicle of separation, betrayal and reunion. Such themes could also be found on great Tharu metafiction "Hitwa ke Khisa" (Tale of King Hitwa). These performances connect the history with identity and identity with space around which the community resides. Primarily, it functions as a medium and foundation for the community to regularize their ethnicity and livelihood. The community's enthusiasm and zeal to enjoy their occupation would have diminished, had such occasions barely organized. Thus, they cumulate and project the unique philosophy of the community. Therefore, the study of history needs to be imbued in folklore as well.

Jhumra has resurfaced as an occasion of brotherhood, sisterhood uniting humans with divine nature. The occasion smolders the eco-cognizance of the

community driven and professed by the performance deeply legislated by their occupation. *Jhumra* transgresses the mere performance to relate itself with the economic lifestyle of the Tharu people. Agriculture and other methods of farming are the essential ingredients of Tharu culture. Living apart from them would be an act of hamartia for them. Nature and enchanting romance have always hoisted the integrated organic life even at the age of modernity. The forgetting and loosening of the tradition do not make us culturally modern, rather it depletes our divine nature of harmony, humanity, and fellowship. Above all, *Jhumra* treasures the solidarity among Tharu folks weaving spirituality and romance in their life.

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