

Myths or Realities; Patriarchy, Gender Structure and Gender Relations in Swasthani Vrata Katha and Today's Hindu Society of Kathmandu

 Chhabi Ram Baral¹,  Dhundi Raj Niroula²,  Bimal Kumar Khadka^{3*}, Madhu Giri⁴, Dipesh Kumar Ghimire⁵

¹Department of Geography, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

²Department of English, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

³Department of Rural Development, Patan Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

⁴Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

⁵Department of Sociology, Central Department of Sociology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

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Abstract. Some interpretations of Hindu scriptures and texts have been used to explicate how patriarchal views and practices function in the society as well as academia, such as the devaluation of women and the justification of male dominance. This article critically analyzes both mythological representations and lived realities of patriarchy, gender roles, and power structures as portrayed in the text *Swasthani vrata katha* and manifested in contemporary Hindu society in Kathmandu, Nepal. The findings of the paper are; although hyper- patriarchy exists in the present-day Hindu society with dichotomy and dialect in nature, people criticize, disagree and deny the concepts that are embedded in the *Swasthani vrata katha* but still, the respondents or participant devotees follow the *vrata*. The traditional roles of *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) under patriarchy are gradually dissolved in the capitalistic frame of society. In the past, *sāsu* used to be a powerful agent of patriarchy and that of the patriarchal head (father-in-law) who controlled the economy of the family, mobility and sexuality. However, the scenario has altered at present and *buhāri* has turned dominant since her husband earns the remittance, which is transferred to her bank account and she decides where to spend, and what to purchase. Due to such economic independence, *buhāri* plays decisive roles in the household chores and the public domain as well. This shift underscores the growing influence of economic agency in reshaping gender relations within Hindu families in urban Nepal.

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Swasthani Vrata Katha* is a culturally significant religious text and ritual practice observed predominantly by Hindu Communities in Nepal. *Swasthani* is composed of two words; 'Swa' holds the meaning of self and 'sthani' means place (Parajuli & Paudel, 2022). *Swasthani* symbolizes a ritualistic effort to harmonize the individual self with its rightful spiritual place, aiming for purification and divine upliftment. Further, if all the components are in their respective places they function perfectly and look attractive, otherwise, they are useless (Parajuli & Paudel, 2022). So, it is to stand in the appropriate position for a better future.

There are eighteen *Mahapurana*, among which *Skanda Purana* is the largest one with eighty one thousand and one hundred *shlokas*. *Maheshwor Khanda* is the first portion among seven *khandas* (parts) of the *Skanda Purana* and *Kedar Khanda* is the first sub-portion of the *Maheshwor Khanda* containing thirty-five chapters that are chanted in *Swasthani vrata katha* (Nepal, 2018). The *Swasthani* epic text is mainly woven with a story of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, mentioned in *Skanda Purana*, which is the largest one among the eighteen *puranas* (Bakker, 2014).

Devotees observe a fast throughout a month and engage in various rituals such as reciting the *Swasthāni vrata katha*, offering prayers, and visiting deities' temples. The festival is also an important time for socializing and strengthening relationships with family and friends. The *Swasthani* stories mainly revolve round the theme of redemption depicting how the ignorance of devotees make them fall to sinful works (*adharma*) and are later rescued by the goddess. In some stories, the goddess describes who protects her devotees (Nepal, 2018). A major highlight in the stories is the prominence of *Swasthani Devi* over other gods in the Hindu pantheon.

The *Swasthani* fast observance period starts on *Poush shukla poornima* (full moon day) and ends a month later on *Magh shukla poornima*. Devotees often visit the Salinadi River in Sankhu valley for a holy dip and to offer prayers to Goddess *Swasthani*. The festival is a time for devotees to seek blessings, purify themselves, and pray for a better life. This is a collection of stories that are traditionally read during the festival. The stories are narrated by Lord Kumar to Agastya *rishi* (sage) and are about the Goddess *Swasthani*, Lord Shiva, and other gods (Nepal, 2018). The *Shree Swasthani vrata katha* is a month-long Hindu ritual and tale recitation, primarily observed by Nepali Hindus, that focuses on the story of Goddess *Swasthani* and her role in helping goddess *Sati*, wife of Lord Shiva, to overcome adversity. The observance also holds gendered implications, where married women fast for their husband's longevity and unmarried women pray for an ideal spouse (Bascom, 1953). The *vrata* is a reflection of Nepali culture and traditions, with a strong emphasis on family, faith, and moral values. The *Swasthani vrata katha* is derived from the *Skanda Purana*.

Myth is a belief or fallacy that preserves a distorted reality of the family, community and society through the perceived behavioural prescriptions with the help of story, cliché, proverb and any other scripts of saying within the frame of ritual, theme, moral and any other folklore (Upadhyay, 2016).

Anthropologically, myth is not merely a fallacy or fiction, but a narrative form that encodes and transmits cultural meanings. Myths possess ceremonial and symbolic significance and play positive social roles (Upadhyay, 2016). They may reinforce or

challenge prevailing norms, values, and moral codes offering a framework for understanding justice, ethical conduct, and human relationships. They serve as vehicles for intergenerational knowledge transfer, cultural identity formation, and the construction of moral worldviews (Thompson & Wojcik, 2025). Myths can help individuals interpret their place in the cosmos and foster communal solidarity by reinforcing collective values.

1.1. Myths or Realities; Back Space or Front Space

Is the *Swasthani vrata katha* a mythical story or a reflection of the contemporary society? The core aim of the research is to explain contemporary human interactions, institutions, and collective behaviours by asserting that reality is socially constructed in the form of myths, customs or traditions. It explains that human identity, morality, and even truth itself are not fixed, but rather shaped and maintained through the structures of society. Sociologists, from Emile Durkheim to Erving Goffman, argue that without these constructs, there would be no shared meaning, no communication, no organized civilization — just chaos.

However, philosophers have long challenged this premise, questioning whether these so-called social constructions serve as a necessary foundation for human order or as an inescapable prison that locks individuals into artificial identities and forces them into inauthentic existence (Ritzer, 2008). This fundamental clash raises profound questions: Are social structures essential for human survival, or are they the primary sources of alienation, suffering, and existential emptiness?

Philosophy, particularly existentialism, has a long tradition of critiquing the illusion of social identity or myths about religious characters. Thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger (Sanderson, 2005) argue that human beings are condemned to "bad faith" when they surrender to societal expectations instead of forging an authentic existence. Sartre, for instance, believes that humans deceive themselves by conforming to externally imposed roles, losing their true freedom in the process (Adams and Sydnie, 2001). Heidegger, in a similar vein, speaks of the "they-self" (*das Man*) — a state in which individuals unconsciously adopt the values and behaviors dictated by society rather than discovering their unique path (Goodman and Ritzer, 2004). Heidegger's notion of the "they-self" mirrors the sociological idea of impression management, as both show how people give up their real selves to fit into social expectations. Similarly, Sartre's "bad faith" highlights the inner cost of living through roles designed for approval rather than from personal truth. These ideas strengthen the view that social identities are not harmless tools, but traps that keep individuals from living authentically. In this regard, *Swasthani vrata katha* is such a mirror through which one can find the image of contemporary Hindu society, gender roles and the role of patriarchy in shaping, constructing, controlling and expressing in that society through storytelling to build the characters, familiarize or to socialize the mythic or real knowledge of contemporary Hindu society of Kathmandu, particularly Sankhu.

Friedrich Nietzsche goes even further denouncing social morality and collective identity as oppressive forces that suppress the individual's true potential. His idea of the "Übermensch" (Superman) challenges humanity to rise above the herd mentality and reject the social expectations that keep people in a state of spiritual mediocrity (O'Flaherty et al., 1979). Beyond Western philosophy, Buddhist thought offers an equally radical perspective. The illusion of the self, a key idea in Buddhism and Hinduism (particularly focused on *yoga*, and meditation), suggests that what people or individuals perceive as identity is nothing more than a fabricated mental construct shaped by external influences. According to Buddhist teachings, attachment to the self is the root of suffering. If this is true, then sociology's glorification of identity construction is not just misguided but it may be fundamentally harmful. The endless pursuit of social validation keeps individuals trapped in a state of dissatisfaction, anxiety, and perpetual craving for approval. In other words, the more one tries to perfect the self, the more one suffers.

Sociology of religion, however, embraces the idea that religious identity is constructed through the characters, the roles played in various epic stories are — myths or realities. Are they illustrative illusions? But a functional necessity. Thinkers like George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman present human identity as an ongoing performance, an adaptation to social life that allows for cooperation, stability, and order (Irving 2007).

According to Goffman, individuals act as performers and carefully curtain their behaviour, speech, and emotions to align with social expectations. Mead argues that the self emerges through social interaction — that we become who we are only through the recognition of others. In this view, identity is not a burden, but a tool that allows individuals to navigate their world (Ritzer, 2008). Without it, there would be no social cohesion, no relationships, and no civilization as we know it. But what if this perspective is deeply flawed? Scholars (Holdrege, 2004) challenge the premise that human beings need to perform to function in society. They argue that the constant pressure to maintain social roles results in inauthenticity, existential anxiety, and a lifetime self-surveillance. If the self is merely a construct designed for survival in society, then does anything real exist beneath it? If individuals curating his or her public personas, do they ever experience true freedom, honesty, or peace? This raises a disturbing possibility: perhaps human civilization itself is built upon an illusion — one that enslaves us rather than liberates us.

This crisis of self is exacerbated by capitalism, which has weaponized the social self for profit. Karl Marx argues that capitalism does not merely exploit labor — it exploits the very concept of identity (Craib, 1997). In today's world, selfhood is no longer just a personal or philosophical matter; it has become a marketable product. Social media platforms, consumer brands, and advertising industries reinforce the idea that identity is something that must be crafted, polished, and displayed for public approval. The pressure to curate an acceptable social image fuels an endless cycle of comparison, insecurity, and consumption. People do not just buy products — they buy identities. They dress in a certain way, drive certain cars, and follow certain trends — not out of genuine necessity, but because they are competing in a marketplace of social approval. Capitalism has ensured that identity is not just a performance — it is a commodity, which we are arguing as reality in this study. Our research gap is to identify the religious devotees' perceptions and the impacts on the socio-economic conditions of society that despite the fact of being myths *Swasthani vrata katha*, is still followed as well as criticized by people in the modern scientific world.

This debate between philosophy and sociology is not just theoretical — it is an urgent issue in the modern world, where social media, digital identities, and consumer culture have amplified the illusion of selfhood to unprecedented levels. Sociology expresses that self-presentation is necessary and that playing our roles is what makes society function. But philosophy dares to ask: is this the best way to live? If identity or realities are forever dictated by external validation, can humanity ever find true freedom, peace, or authenticity? Or must we abandon the very idea of a socially constructed self to finally reclaim what it means to be truly alive?

We have started this study to satisfy our curiosity about how patriarchy emerged and spread as a universal phenomenon and how it has survived for centuries. The never-ending debate on nature versus nurture encouraged our interest in this area. Hindu religious provisions that have highlighted women's social bodies and coded gendered roles and relations accordingly made us more interested in going deeper into the problem. Besides this, feminist's universalized interpretation of women also encouraged us to conduct this study purposefully.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

To undertake this study, we have gathered issue-wise religious provisions that have portrayed a man and his attributes suitable to be a dominant companion of a woman (as a God, as a strong ruler, as a protector, as a breadwinner, as a fighter, as an active social agent and so on). Correspondingly, a woman and her attributes suitable to be subservient companion (service provider-devotee, physically vulnerable, weaker, passive, untrustworthy and so on) of a man. In doing so, We have highlighted the revisited religious rules that the hetero-patriarchal rules, manifested through the various cultural activities ultimately contributes to producing and consuming hierarchal gender culture in everyday life (Adhikari, 2024).

Malinowski (1954) has propounded the theoretical arguments that myth and social realities are functionally interrelated. Myth confirms, supports and maintains the social state of affairs, and provides an account of origins - of the world, of people and their conventions. The structuralists, who succeeded Malinowski, while discarding such overt functionalism, nevertheless retained a somewhat more abstract version: they maintain that myth provides conceptual rather than normative supports for a social world. If the members of a society are seen to have something as coherent as cosmology, this is largely an effect of the anthropologist's search for a stable or ordered cultural world in which to place them (Thompson & Wojcik, 2025). Accordingly, myth and ritual came to stand to semantic structures much as joking and avoidance relations and 'rituals of rebellion' (for the last three generations of British social anthropologists) stood to social convention, and both were said to function in the same paradoxical manner: to preserve the integrity of society by subverting its conventional premises in other-worldly, supernatural terms, and thereby focusing people's attention on them (Thompson & Wojcik, 2025).

But there is an alternative way in which we can view myth that avoids this paradox, or, at the very least, allows the articulation of the paradox to be part of its methodology. We can assume that nothing so substantial as culture, language or convention exists except as it is tacitly revealed by the continuously innovative, extemporized, and experimental behaviour of people in interaction with each other (Weiner 1992). We can view culture, convention, the utterances that defer to it and invoke it, and the body of rules by which we codify it, as things that emerge post facto, varieties of retrospective judgments on the part of actors, singly and collectively, as to the appropriateness, creativeness, felicity, infelicity, etc. of particular actions (including speech actions, that is, the utterances themselves).

Anthropologists construe the relationship between myth and the rest of social discourse, and more generally, between vehicles of representation and that which is represented. Levi-Strauss sees myth as similar to music: it shares superficial syntactic and contrapuntal similarities with language but is essentially non-linguistic in form and effect. It could then be said that a myth must stand outside language if it is to represent something other than itself. We would then have to agree, as did Levi-Strauss (1969, 1979), with Richard Wagner (1994a), who think that music and myth have the power to convey messages that ordinary language cannot. Nevertheless, both Richard Wagner and Levi-Strauss feel that these extra-linguistic forms ultimately function to unify and coordinate the worldview and morality of a community. In other words, though the forms of myth and music are not conventional, their effects are. And this is just another version of the functionalist paradox.

For most of the Hindu households in Nepal, the *Swasthani vrata katha* needs no introduction. This religious text, a compilation of mythological stories about the goddess *Swasthani* and other Hindu gods and goddesses become a part of daily life for an entire month every year. The month-long ritual is quite popular in Nepali villages; however, many Nepali feminists (Pandey, 2023) have questioned the text's relevance arguing it is patriarchal and sexist.

Swasthani vrata katha is also a created identity of "self" that Hindus constructed it carefully. The scripture has taught axiological parameters to the people arguing that self-presentation is necessary for forming identity that is not merely a means of connection but a form of social control, gender shaping, sexual role and their controls. Drawing on Goffman's "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (Goffman, 1959) and Mead's Theory of Self (1934), it examines how impression management enforces comparison, competition, and existential distress. Rather than fostering genuine social cohesion, the constructed self becomes a commodity shaped by capitalism, reinforcing alienation rather than authenticity in the modern Hindu society of Kathmandu. The sacredness gradually turns to be commodity saleable in the market under local and global capitalism where religious acts and actions are not only for salvation rather they are for profit and surplus.

If the religious identity of characters featured in the *Swasthani vrata katha* is socially constructed, then perhaps it is time to question what controls this construction — and whether Hindus need it at all. The pressure to perform identity does not liberate but confines, reducing human interaction to a scripted exchange dictated by invisible forces. This article aims to explore an alternative vision of the social existence of characters or story of *Swasthani vrata katha* in modern, secular and globalized Kathmandu where people are free from the constraints of self-presentation, meaning and communication transcend artificial identities. In the capitalist Hindu world/local markets where sacredness gets priority and is greatly valued as capital that may be a stage, but who always performs?

This study has primarily focused on investigating the universal nature of patriarchy defined by different religious ideologies. It also helps to find similarities and differences in the patriarchal values coded by different texts under Hindu religious philosophies. In the same way, it also focuses on exploring various intrinsic values embedded in a patriarchal nature coded by various great religions other than the Hindu religion. This study also contributes to understanding gender relations existing between a man and a woman; and between a woman and a woman under Hindu hetero-patriarchal society. In the same way, the contribution of this study is to introduce a method to research 'on self' applying the auto-ethnography method and unveiling truths from many angles.

3. METHODS

The present study is purely explorative cum descriptive in its nature. It construes the context of *Swasthani vrata katha* created. Based on the nature of the research study, unobtrusive measures are chosen. It includes a variety of research techniques that have no impact on whom or what is being studied. Those are designed as non-reactive since people's behaviour is not influenced. Many social scientists find it useful to study cultural, economic and political documents, including newspapers, periodicals, radios and televisions, tapes, diaries, scripts, songs, folklore and legal papers, to name a few. In examining these services, researchers employ a technique known as content analysis, which is the systematic coding and objective recording of data guided by some rationale (Schaefer & Lamm, 1992).

Content analysis is one of the classical procedures for analysing textual material no matter where this material comes from-ranging from media products to interview data (Bauer, 2000 cited in Flick, 2010). One of its essential features is the use of categories which are often derived from theoretical models: categories are brought to the empirical material and not necessarily

developed from it, though they are repeatedly assessed against it and modified if necessary. Above all, and contrary to other approaches, the goal here is to reduce the material (Flick, 2010).

This research aims to perform qualitative analysis through the content analysis method. *Swasthani vrata katha* books are selected as samples and the content of these books are categorized into different strata based on sectors: social, religious, gender, sexual, economic, and spiritual contents that have been through the emic mode of context analysis.

The case study method is adopted to gather information about their traditional and existing trends of storytelling, and fasting to understand the changes in the pattern of the *Swasthani vrata katha* festival, processes and factors to these changes. Relevant information is gathered from different sources and different stakeholders.

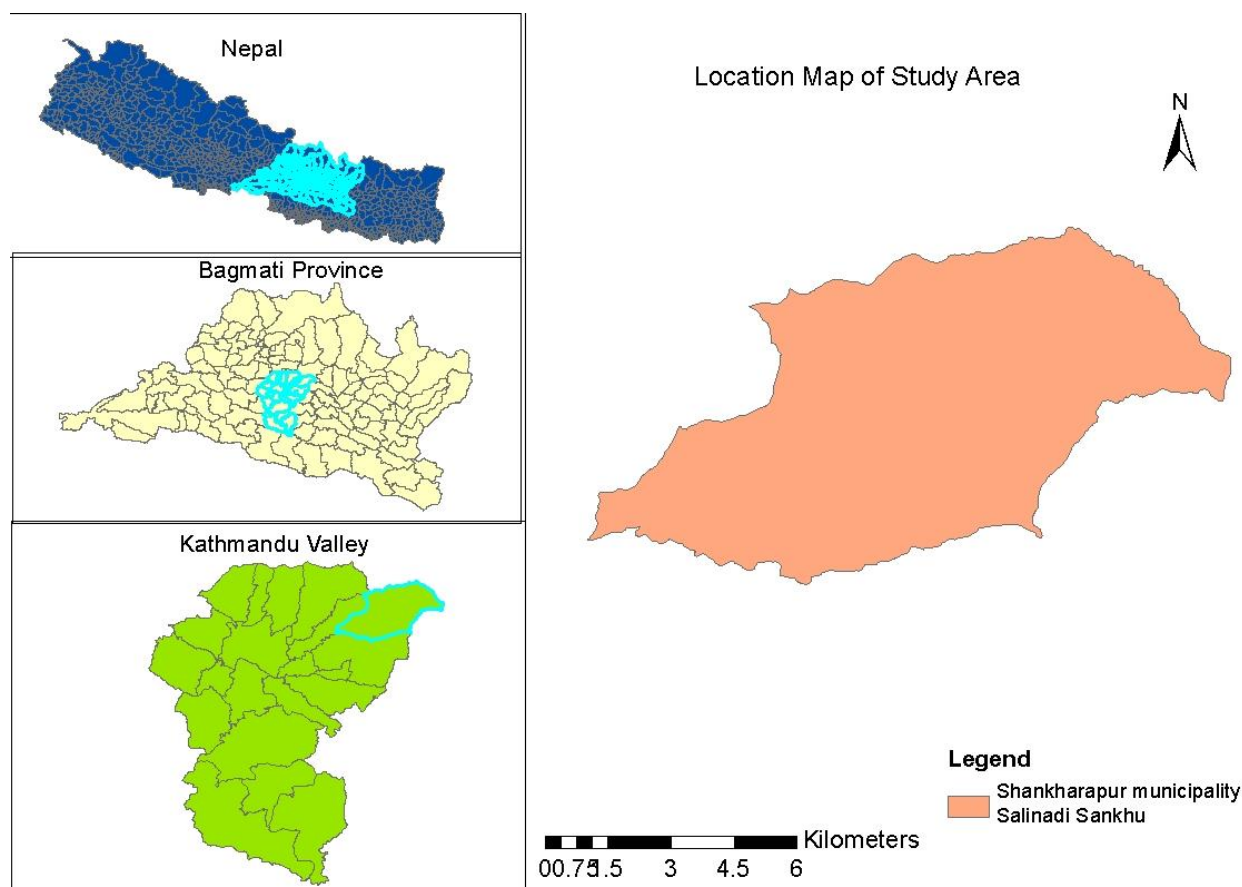


Figure 1. Map of study area.

Different types of data or information from several sources have been necessary for this study. Therefore, the qualitative data have been collected through traditional methods like ethnographic fieldwork, field observation, unstructured interviews, structured interviews and case studies in Salinadi Sankhu at Shankharapur Municipality, Kathmandu, Nepal. Before the field study, a brief encounter visit has been made with devotees, storytellers, participants and visitors. Fieldwork was carried out in the Salinadi area during the festival year 2024. The fieldwork was conducted from 13 January 2024 to 12 February 2024 with 50 devotees; 41 women and 9 men were respondents who took part in fasting, and *Swasthani vrata katha* telling in Salinadi in Sankhu.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As researchers, we have focused on the exploration of the *Swasthani vrata* (fasting) process, worship, story telling, listeners and its impacts on Nepali society. Our concern is to pin point the significance of *Swasthani vrata katha* in the spiritual and moral sphere of Nepali people. Simultaneously, we enquired all the devotee visitors in the festival what they get from the Salinadi visit and how they implement the moral values of the story in their day-to-day life. The Sali River has a special significance during the fast observance period since it is mentioned in the narrative of *Swasthani vrata katha* as a sacred, healing and wish-fulfilling place.

The narrative of *Swasthani* covers a number of places including the country of Labanya, where Navaraj was the ruling monarch. Goma Brahmani practiced the devotions of *Swasthani* to make her son Navaraj the king of Labanya. After insulting *Swasthani Devi*, his wife Chandravati became a leper. She later repented and worshipped the goddess who restored her health. There is a huge rock in the middle of the river Sali which people worship as a symbol of Chandravati. Here, Goma, Chandrawati, Navaraj, and Shiva Sharma are the typical characters through which saint (sage) Agastya Muni, has sketched the outline of Nepali society, roles, responsibilities, and structure and inter-gender relationships with each other in the Hindu orthodox system.

4.1. Roles of Women in *Swasthani* and Present-Day Hindu Society

In the *Swasthani vrata katha*, a month-long Hindu ritual, women play a central role, in fasting and observing religious practices. Married women observe *vrata* (fasting) for their husbands' well-being, while unmarried women seek good husbands. The stories within the *Swasthani katha* often depict women's roles and struggles, including the tale of *Sati Devi* and her journey to reunite with Lord Shiva.

When we asked her about the role of women in *Swasthani vrata katha* and Hindu society, one of the respondents replied, "For

women, the husband is everything. If women look at their husband annoyingly, they will be cock-eyed, if do not obey husband, will be sinful, if discuss, will be dumb, if eat secretly turn to be bitch, if argue become witch. Goma (incarnation of Parvati) humiliated Goddess *Swasthani* and she underwent hard times. However, later on, she observed the *Swasthani* fast perfectly and attained the grace of the goddess".

Provisions coded in Hindu sacred religious literature are the main guidelines of the Hindu social life. These literatures, starting from the Rig-Veda to religious sects of present day newly adopted philosophy, have offered traditional to modern rules and regulations to direct Hindu people's socio-religious life. In the Hindu religious and philosophical world, there are mainly two categories of sacred texts, namely '*shruti*' or hearing and '*smriti*' or remembering (McGuire, 2008). The two types of sacred texts in Hinduism where *shruti* refers to 'that which is heard' (e.g., Vedas) and *smriti* refers to 'that which is remembered' (e.g., law codes), serving as moral guides. McGee argues that these categorizations are "based on their traditional means of transmission" from generation to generation.

To explore the portrayal of a woman's subservient attributes, we have used the second categorical sacred texts, the *series* because, as argued by Sheldon (2012), "the *smriti* texts tend to be more accessible than the Vedas and thus many of them are popularly remembered and passed from generation to generation". Describing the salient feature of *smritis* Sheldon (2012) has further remarked, "In the *smriti* text, God is imagined to be much more personal..." and "verses from *smriti* texts are often recited in an individual daily meditation and the stories from these texts are repeated by priests, grandmothers and storytellers as a means of inspiring moral living". Highlighting the importance of these texts, some scholars clearly state that *smriti* texts are "the fundamental basis of 'Hindu Laws' (David, 2006) and *smritis* have given the social rules in elaborated form. These include the ways of rights, duties and responsibilities.

Looking at the importance of *smritis* in Hindu social life, we have selected some popular *smriti* texts including *Swasthani*, namely *Nirnayasinthu*, *Satyarthaprakash* and *Kamasutra* that are somehow more critical and analytical than the classical literature; but have been influencing in the construction of socio-religious knowledge. The objective of such selection is to analyze the religious rules and provisions on the issues of women. As compared with the sacred texts, *Manusmriti* and *Gita* are more philosophical, whereas some other literatures (like *Garud Purana*, *Swasthani*, and *Purushottam Mahatmya*) are recited in different ritual functions that are equally accessible to women in the form of the story describing different mythical characters (Perrett, 1998). Both of these kinds of literature have played a significant role in the construction of type-gendered knowledge in understanding the individual and the social self.

We asked a respondent, "What is the significance of *Swasthani vrata katha* in the modern context? Even due to migration, there are no clear roles and responsibilities of individuals in family and society." She replied, "*Swasthani brata katha* is still more significant in the modern context. It spreads a message that if a male plays a negative role or against social rules, he will be charged accordingly. In the case of women, by any cause socially or sexually, the fasting helps to purify women and after purification, she gets the lost morality revived. It helps to make society move ahead".

4.2. Husband and Wife Relation

The intimate, spiritual, immortal, irreversible relation between a husband and a wife is highly valued in the ideal Hindu family system to carry out the functions of family life. This has been translated into the culture coding the provisions that husband and wife should observe rituals together so that they can achieve desired worldly and spiritual wishes. We asked respondents about the moral of the *Swasthani vrata katha*. One of the women replied, "The abstract of *Swasthani* has further reiterated it in a way that if the wife is happy with her husband and if she is ready for any kind of harmony with husband and vice versa (husband to wife), the family life always becomes happy".

Swasthani advocates that *Brahma*, the God of creation, also interchangeably known as *Daksha Prajapati*, divided his body into two halves (male and female) and started to have sexual reproduction between them. *Swasthani* has further accounted that *Daksha Prajapati* worshipped *Rikdevi* Goddess to create the world. Following the worship of *Daksha Prajapati*, *Rikdevi* came out in the form of *ardhanarishwor* (a combination of half male and half female) and was later separated into male and female for recreation. This symbolized representation of the human creation shows that the image of *ardhanarishwor*, half part male and half part female blended in a single individual human entity. The notion of *ardhanarishwor* on the other hand is connected to maintaining an intimate, close and harmonious relation between a man and a woman. This notion has created an irreversible, paired relationship between a husband and a wife. Terrestrially speaking, this thought has been translated into an immortal and spiritual connection between a husband and a wife in different rebirths. To symbolize this relationship, husband and wife share a very intimate relationship in their social and physical life (Holdrege, 2004). Such ideas of the eternal connection of a husband and a wife have been championed in the practice of Hindu people who acknowledge the wife as '*arranged*' (McGuire, 2008; Lipner, 2010) or 'half of the husband'.

The discussion above about gender relations between a man and a woman could be analyzed in different ways. In the first form of its origin, it remained as a single entity as *Brahma*. The second *ardhanarishwor* form showed hermaphrodite (sexless) characters interchangeably as appeared in a nucleus form. In the third form, it remained as two sexes of human beings a man and a woman. In the fourth variation, it is understood that husband and wife, are confined to separate gender identity with a distinct culture which is popularly known as gender culture. Since gender analysts have used the fourth form of understanding, we have analyzed some major aspects related to gender relations between a Hindu man and a woman. Fundamentally, a man and a woman enter into a defined gender relation after the marriage. Universally, marriage is the fundamental institution of a society in which "the influence of religion has been very strong" (Bottomore, 1986). Agreeing with the terminology of Bottomore, we begin our further writing with the analysis of the religious codes sanctified under Hindu hetero-patriarchal culture in the succeeding paragraphs.

4.3. Marriage and Codes

Hindu philosophy has given a high value to the bond relationships between a man and a woman that is established through sacred marriage. Highlighting the religious value of marriage Sheldon, (2012) writes that marriage is an important step among all of the rituals, which 'involves elaborate rituals'. Giving an important emphasis the marriage ceremony includes observing the necessary ritual rights for women. Once the relationship between husband and wife is established through the sacred marriage, it is indissoluble (Bottomore, 1986). This is because a man gets his marriage partner (woman) that is fixed by the grace of God, and the relationship continues for several rebirths, according to the Hindu philosophy. This social bond of the marriage system

echoes the concept of *ardhanarishwor*, which argues that the embracing cordial relation of half male and half female contributes towards fitness for the function of procreation.

As argued by religious texts, marriage carries high social and psychological value in the life of a young woman. She will get full social, religious and cultural status only after the marriage. In the same way, after marriage, she achieves social sanction and becomes eligible to have a physical relationship with a man. Marriage between a man and a woman is therefore acknowledged as an inevitable moment of initiating a new life.

Marriage has its own unique system as an institution which has protected its authenticity derived from the religious texts. Religious texts have formulated different effective codes that are regarded as rules and followed accordingly. First of all, we will analyze the marriage age coded by different texts and their ultimate effect on women's lives in the following paragraphs.

Although the *Kamsutra* has advocated measures for being perfect in sixty-four arts for both men and women, it has also reiterated the demand for prioritizing an attractive physical outlook as the tenet for a woman while selecting a marriage partner.

The exclusion of the marriage of the Hindu girl within ten *pustā* (lineages) seems to create awareness of the people towards transmission of genetic diseases. The Hindu texts have also advocated that the restriction for ten *pustā* codes is equally applicable to the male lineage, too. Some of the restricted code attributes seem to be scientific for the sole purpose of inheriting a healthy life value system. After discussing the attributes of the female considered as an important element while selecting the proper girl for marriage, we have tried to discuss the highly popularized, well-institutionalized woman-specific *patibrata dharma* that played a great role for women's subordination character under hetero-patriarchal culture.

4.4. *Patibrata Dharma*: A Form of Hetero-patriarchy

Patibrata dharma is a popular woman-specific socio-religious system. The literal meaning of *Patibrata dharma* is a woman's 'loyalty to one husband' (Poddhar & Goswami, 1990). In an ideology and practice, *patibrata dharma* is the devotion of a woman bestowed towards her husband from her body, mind and behaviour. It is an explicitly women-specific religious system which is also known as *Sanatana dharma* or eternal religion (*Manusmriti*, 8/216). The origin of *patibrata dharma* seems to be as old as patriarchy which is institutionalized with the institutionalization of other patriarchal values. It includes both cultural practices and a belief system that exists in both theory and the practical level.

Arguing the views from the *Swasthani vrata katha*, the respondent argued on the patriarchal system and relations between husband-wife as "women do not need to perform any separate fire sacrifice or religious fasting; but she can achieve salvation only from the faithful loyalty towards her husband". This argument indicates that *patibrata dharma* demands unconditional loyalty by a woman to her husband (Davis, 2006). This belief system is rooted in the *bhakti path* (one-way of achieving salvation among other four paths) of getting salvation among other paths, in which the relation of the God (here husband is God) and the devotee (wife is devotee) is defined by the relation of lord and servant.

Swasthani vrata katha highlighting the inherent value of *patibrata dharma*, is entirely presented in various contexts; with husband, away from husband, and in difficult situations. In *Swasthani vrata katha*, the image of the woman is portrayed as a slave and her husband as a lord. This 'lord and slave relation' of the husband and wife has been valued in all the situations mentioned in the *Swasthani vrata katha* (Dev, 2024). These texts further argue that everything related to her husband should be considered as the things from the temple and the women should take care of them unconditionally.

In Hindu religious philosophies, the *bhakti marga* is regarded as a simple way to attain *moksha* (salvation) among three types of spiritual paths namely *gyan marga* (knowledge path), *karma marga* (action path) and *bhakti marga* (devotion path) for a Hindu devotee (Dahal, 2024a). The devotee of *bhakti marga*, as advocated by the holy text *Gita*, 'involves a complete surrender to the God' and 'no special knowledge, language or ritual is required to relate God on a personal level' (Dahal, 2024b). The characteristic feature of the *bhakti path* or the surrender to the husband regarding him as a God for *moksha* (salvation) excluded women from access to knowledge and reinforced her to be a physical laborer. Practically, the specific bond of a wife attached to her husband fundamentally based on *bhakti marga* appeared (Dahal, 2024a) to be an oppressive system because of its enforced characters that even neglected women's fundamental human rights. This relation encouraged a woman to become a slave forever and get salvation from the pleasure of her lord husband. Such types of bipolar status (slave and lord) created a permanent form of gender hierarchy, which is inherently oppressive and problematic (Zlomislic, 2008).

Strong *patibrata* faith, inculcated in the *bhakti path* does not support the inherent meaning of *ardhanarishwor*. It is because the doctrine of *ardhanarishwor* evolved more to associate with recreation of the world through sexual method, but not to divide man and woman into two hierarchical people possessing separate cultures - the master and the slave. *Patibrata dharma* rather served institutionalized discriminatory gender relations between a husband and a wife. It is a process of the domination of intuitive knowledge of feminine values by rational knowledge or masculine values, which are the chief characteristics of hetero-patriarchy.

Patibrata dharma, which is also characterized as a spiritual and immortal relation of man and woman, has restricted women from joining with other males. The husband is regarded as her inherent relation when they are evolved in their first form, *ardhanarishwor* or the blended form of yin and yang. Creating a wall of *patibrata dharma*, social codes (as mentioned in *Manusmriti*) have prevented a woman, a widow, a divorcee woman or a woman separated from her husband for remarriage at any cost.

Like *Manusmriti*, other subsequent literature such as *Garud Purana* (4/35-53) and *Purushottam Mahatmya* (30/1-97) have also strongly condemned those women including widows, who commit sinful acts like extramarital affairs or emotional relation in presence or absence of her husband. *Garud Purana* (4/28-30/) states that a woman who neglects her husband and remembers the other one, is compelled to go to a dreadful hell. This sort of notion creates a fear psychosis that attacks women's thoughts and behaviour permanently and reinforces her to be confined to the above-mentioned boundary.

To make *patibrata dharma* more prestigious, orthodox Hindus used to follow a practice of the *sati* system (burning a woman in the pyre of her dead husband). To clarify the notion of the *sati* system, we have revisited the historical events related to the ideology and practice that continued until eighty years back in Nepal. The *sati* system caused its massive socio-cultural effects on women's lives. Likewise, the story of Brinda in the text *Swasthani*, who burnt herself in the pyre of her husband after his death, is a popular story for shaping up the women's delicate mindset towards *patibrata dharma*. This story's message recollects that a *patibrata* woman is more spiritually powerful than any other Gods and Goddesses. The final aim of a woman is to achieve salvation through the self-sacrifice as a *sati* (Sheldon, 2012). There are thousands of women, who attained satihood burning themselves in the pyre with their husbands.

Theoretically, Hindus believe in the rebirth. In the text *Gita*, Lord Krishna has said, "When the power of *dharma* decreases, and *adharma* (opposite of *dharma*) increases, I will reincarnate myself to protect sages and to destroy demons. In modern days,

although *patibrata dharma* is strongly observed by Hindu women, there is no *sati* system in practice after 1929 in Nepal.

All of these evidences indicate that the religious texts and customary practices have deliberately tried promoting *patibrata dharma* by honouring her sacrifice (as a *sati*) with great value in the worldly life and in the spiritual life, too. The widows in the past, willy-nilly, adopted satihood to protect themselves from the social deprivation and psychological burden. After explaining the *sati* system, we have explained the demand for a genetically pure male lineage system over-valued by hetero-patriarchal society in the following lines.

4.5. Hetero-Patriarchal Lineage System

Patibrata dharma (including the *sati* system) advocated by the religious texts is further attached to the notion of lineage purity. Almost all religious texts, including the text *Manusmriti*, have stated that the main challenge to a patriarchal family is to maintain lineage purity. The main threat in Hindu families is the fear of incorporating other's genes (hybrid/cross children) into one's lineage by kinswomen (Bennett, 2005). Hybrid children are thus considered as a source of a great threat to building a strong patriarchal family. The text *Gita* also states that the hybrid children produced by the widow destroy the whole prestige earned by the ancestors of the patriarchal lineage.

Thus, the relationship practised between a husband and a wife seems to be deliberately codified and a dignified venture advocated making it structural. The prioritized lineage purity system and *brahmacharya* value system are connected within the realm for the achievement of salvation ethics that has prevented oneself from erotic pleasure in conducting a normal life between a Hindu husband and wife. Hindu ideology discourages running for involvement in erotic pleasure because "exclusive pursuit of or attachment to pleasure is dangerous, even immoral, leading to greed and sufferings and distracting from one's responsibilities and the ultimate goal of *moksha*" (salvation) (Sheldon, 2012; Dahal, 2024a). From these discussions, it is clear that Hindu religious texts have emphasized the devotion of life for social interest rather than individual. It has emphasized more on the spiritual life rather than worldly pleasure and has dwelled upon the philosophy of keeping up lineage purity to release ancestors from entering the hell.

4.6. Legal Provisions Coded by *Muluki Ain*

Among the legal provisions on different issues of women, some of them are similar to the religious codes advocated by the religious texts; whereas some others contradict it. From the analysis of the religious texts and customary practices, we uncover that a woman's physical existence is always under the direct supervision and control of men. For a woman, to remain free from the yoke of a man's control was/is totally against patriarchal doctrine. It fosters an insurmountable challenge in a man's sole authority. To disrespect a widow, a divorcee or a prostitute means to perceive that these women are not under the protection of any man. Thus, they are not equal with those women who belong to a protected forum (virgin girl or a married wife living with her husband) or the man.

There is no doubt that every patriarchal society shaped by the above religious dogma, grants women's purity, especially protected within a man's domain. What could be the actual cause behind the notion that only a woman protected by a man is considered a pure person? We think a man's controlling intention of a woman goes beyond the intention of protection of a woman's sexual purity. It commences with the reinforcement of the patriarchal philosophy feature recalling that a woman is the property of a man, and he is the ultimate predestined owner of this property. A woman controlled by a man is considered as another person's property to the other man. He is disallowed to proceed to have access to her.

We reiterate that Brown emphasizes four characteristics of patriarchy, viz. patrilineal descent, marriage is patrilocal; inheritance (of property) and succession (to rank) are in the male line, patripotestal family. In this, we have added *patibrata dharma* to specify Hindu hetero-patriarchal characteristics.

The first and most important characteristic of patriarchy as argued by Brown is the system of patrilineal descent. The arguments claimed above clearly state that every religion has suitably imagined a family structure in which the children belong to the clan or *gotra* or carry the surname of the father.

Some proverbs underpin that *jasko bhainsi usko ban, jasko chorā usko dhan* (who has got buffalos he owns the forest, and who has sons he owns the wealth). The other proverb pronounces, *dhilai hos, choro hos* (though late, hope son). These entire customary proverbs still reflect a social demand of a son over a daughter that continues patrilineal inheritance. The fourth feature of Brown's patriarchy is related to the nature of the family as patripotestal, i.e. the authority over the members of the family is in the hands of the father or his male relatives. This feature is distinctly visible in Hindu religious culture. In this culture, once a woman enters her husband's house, her relationship with that house remains forever. Even if she dies elsewhere than in her husband's house, her funeral rites must be performed by her husband's family. Actually, in every religious society, the authority over the family members resides at the hand of the father or other senior male member of the society.

4.7. Hierarchical Relation between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law)

Hindu hetero-patriarchy underscores specialization within layers of hierarchies. There is caste hierarchy, birth (age) hierarchy, gender hierarchy, generation hierarchy, economic hierarchy, intellectual hierarchy and so on. The relationship between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) viewed from an intergenerational gap also appears hierarchical. The hierarchical relation between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) is based more on the seniority ladder, with different cross-cutting social matters (Bennett, 2005). She puts forth the notion that *sāsu* (mother-in-law) is privileged to enjoy opportunities because she is the "wife of the senior male in the family". According to Bennett, to become the wife of a senior man is "the greatest source of prestige available for women..." in Hindu families. Due to the senior status of the *sāsu* (mother-in-law) which she acquires from the *sasurā* (father-in-law), she demands unconditional faith, loyalty and service from the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law). In this mission, *sāsu* (mother-in-law) is always conscious to secure and maintain her hierarchical position. Simultaneously, she inflicts to enforce patriarchal ideology upon the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law). She even does not hesitate to maltreat her *buhāri* (daughter-in-law), if she realizes that her *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) is opposing her on an ideological or a practical level. Undoubtedly, *sāsu* (mother-in-law) being a powerful female member of a patriarchal family naturally fights tooth and nail to control her *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) who is junior in the succession rank.

For deconstructionist scholars, like Derrida and Powell (Zlomislic, 2008) such hierarchical relations are always problematic. Derrida argues that, hierarchical relations prevent the members from enjoying a free interaction with each other whether they are

females or males. Hierarchical binary opposites bind people to confined limited roles preventing them from crossing the boundary in various ways. For Derrida, in each pair of binary opposites, one member will be privileged; and the other will be suppressed. In the above case, being a senior member of a patriarchal family, *sāsu* (mother-in-law) is more privileged than a *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) who holds control over domestic activities; and insists that *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) should confine her boundaries, accordingly.

Conflicting hierarchical relation between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) ultimately safeguards the hetero-patriarchal values. When two female members *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) stand against each other, as a ruler and a ruled, their mechanical solidarity becomes weak (Bottomore, 1986). They become unable to create a commune of female members to struggle against an oppressive rule of males. The *sāsu* (mother-in-law) seems to become the ruler of her son and daughter-in-law, but she is again ruled by her husband. *Sāsu* (mother-in-law) exercises her virtual power to rule over the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) unhesitatingly. Nonetheless, both women cannot appear in the forefront while making a real decision. They take the support of their husband to exhibit and exert their influence over the dispute.

During fieldwork, it is noted that after the breakdown of joint family, both the father and the son do not lose prestige rather enjoy other sorts of social privileges that they used to enjoy before. *Sasurā* (father-in-law) as a senior male member of a hetero-patriarchal family continuously gain honour from other members, and receive non-paid services from the *sāsu* (mother-in-law). In the same manner, the son also receives unpaid services from his wife. The split of the family does not weaken patriarchal ideology or practice; but fortifies to retain once again from the first to the second generation. After the split of the family, both *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) come to be free from each other but their subordinated gendered relation concerning their husband does not change. *Sāsu* (mother-in-law) starts to prepare a set of meals for her couple, cleans a set of utensils and performs daily worship and rituals as usual. *Buhāri* (daughter-in-law) also repeats the same sets of activities separately. Both *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) are domesticated through the gender-based division of labour under an oppressive patriarchal culture that is inherently problematic.

4.8. Understanding the Relation between *Sāsu* (mother-in-laws) and *Buhāri* (daughter-in-laws) from Psychological Perspectives

To analyze the prevailing conflicting relations between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law), we review some literature related to psychology and gender. Among some books, we review, is *Psychoanalysis and Gender* edited by Rosalind Minsky (1996). When we did not find sufficient literature related to the socio-cultural relationship between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law), the task of dealing straight with the issue grew uncomfortable. In such a case, we endeavor to apply psychological theories to interpret the socio-psycho-emotional relation between the mother and son because such relation between a mother and her son in a specific context can assist in providing a background when there are few incidents to analyze the conflicting relation between *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law).

The psychoanalysis perspective, theorized by Sigmund Freud, is predominantly dominated by the domain of interpretation of the "unconscious or psychic reality" (Minsky 1996). Magnifying the dynamic process of psychological construct, Minsky argues that the central concern of psychoanalysis is to analyze the hidden or suppressed psychic reality that is grounded in the unconscious zone of the individual. The hidden psychic reality comes out or erupts under suitable conditions in different ways. Highlighting the dimension of unconscious psychic condition, as theorized by Freud, Minsk further argues that Freud thinks we can only catch glimpses of its meanings in dreams or random slips of the tongue or pen, in-jokes. He describes it as neurotic symptoms in the form of anxiety, guilt, depression, obsessions, phobias, and psychoanalytic illness or in sudden eruptions of emotions, which we find impossible to explain.

As argued by Minsky, Freud's psychoanalysis is useful, to describe the nature of the unconscious or psychic world that is beyond the conscious subjectivity of an individual. We are convinced by Minsky's view that psychoanalysis is a useful theoretical construct because it "provides the essential 'missing link' between biology and history and culture". Therefore, by using psychological theories, we have tried to interpret women's unconscious psychic world that erupts in certain contexts or conditions creating an effect to nurture or disrupt an existing social system. As discussed earlier, psychoanalysis assumes that the relationship between mother and son is driven by unconscious libidinal desire.

Hindu culture also has specified mother and son's relation conferring some imbedded duties; and obligations of a son to his mother. For example, *Manusmriti* has greatly admired a mother's selfless sacrifice towards bearing and rearing children. It has amplified the value of a glorious mother and demanded her son be obliged to fulfill his duty, according to the wish of his mother. In doing so, it has offered the highest status to a mother than any other one on the earth. Islamic doctrine has also advocated the same notion (Umri, 2004). In a practical life too, a Hindu woman like *sāsu* (mother-in-law) socially and culturally regains her prestigious status by giving birth to a son. Her wish to have a son appears as a rational way to satisfy the demands of the culture (Bennett, 2005) or to satisfy the unconscious desire as argued by Freud (cited by Minsky, 1996) that "only a birth of a male child gives the women the penis she is longing for...". This means, culturally or psychologically, a Hindu woman like *sāsu* (mother-in-law) regains powerful status after the birth of a son. Culturally, she deserves an absolute right to maintain her biological intimacy with her son and pour her love through breastfeeding and caring. When a mother becomes the first person to take care of her dependent infant son, she becomes an ideal person for him in his childhood. The tight bond of love and affection between mother and son develops in such a complex way; Minsk in this regard argues that Freud has termed the development of such a condition an 'Oedipus complex'. This terminology was, as argued by Minsk, 'named after the Greek myth in which Oedipus unknowingly unconsciously killed his father and married his mother'.

According to Freud, argued by Minsk, the Oedipus complex becomes so contradictory when the son feels a great loss when he understands that he has to adopt his father's patriarchal culture to transform him to perform as a full man with expected masculine attributes. So, in psychological theories, the relationship between mother and son seems to become a mainstream or dominant discourse to analyze the painful loss by the son and mother after the son starts (is compelled) to live independent life. Psychologists further argue that this complex relationship between mother and son never ends despite the forceful intervention of the patriarchal culture.

Explaining Freud's insight to interpret penis envy, Beasley (2005) comments, "In the Freudian paradigm, female desire is always the desire for a penis..." and "male desire, on the other hand, is to get back to the mother's body, to have sexual relations with his mother, as is evidenced in the Oedipus complex".

4.9. Feminist Standpoint

Most feminists agree on the point that patriarchy is the rule of males in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men (David, 2006). Feminist's this particular claim of patriarchy heralds that it truly exists in discriminatory gender relations between a man and a woman under the functional features of patriarchy accounted for by anthropologists. Feminists claim that the nature of patriarchy or the rule of males is inherently an oppressive system towards a woman (Davis, 2006). They also advocate that a patriarchal system is comprised of unequal power relations between a man and woman (Whelehan, 1995) in which a man by his dominant power (social, cultural, religious, economic) controls every aspect of a woman's life. Some feminists (Beasley, 2005) have sharply criticized a patriarchal system claiming that such systems have been primarily supporting calls for oppression of a woman in every sphere of her social and private life. They further argue that in a patriarchal family (society) a man controls a woman's sexuality, mobility, production and reproduction. Due to the control of a man, he has been playing a prominent role in the systematic marginalization and subordination of a woman's values and agenda in every aspect of her ordinary life.

In this regard, feminists confirm that "actually there is no historical evidence of the existence of matriarchy, anywhere". In the same way, some feminists (Uberoi, 2006) argue that the term matriarchy is a myth or an imaginary projection that rarely exists in society. These arguments lead us to the fact that there was no true form of institutionalized matriarchy, which existed in human history. The nature and function of Hindu patriarchy is framed primarily under the socio-religious doctrine. From our day-to-day experience, we have come to realize that Hindu patriarchal society covers the micro-practices of bipolar hierarchal gendered activities that are shaped under patriarchal cosmology. Brown's understanding gave intuition that the overall gender practices are to be analyzed in a continuum; rooted to the far historical period. Brown's patriarchal features have functioned as an outlined structure under which discriminatory gender practices are evident (Collins, 1990, Beasley, 2005).

With a few differences as assumed by Derrida & Powell (Zlomislic, 2008), the Hindu patriarchal system's additional doctrine, namely the *pativrata dharma* (a system of a woman's unconditional loyalty towards her husband forever) has specially contributed to its specificity. To denote its specificity, we have borrowed the word "hetero-patriarchy" coined by Wilkinson (1993b cited in Jackson, 1998) and used it in our entire research work.

Wilkinson has used this word (hetero-patriarchy) to criticize hetero-normative sexual behaviour as a fundamental feature of patriarchal value. Nevertheless, we have frequently used this word to denote particular Hindu socio-religious practices, primarily based on hetero-normative sexual behaviour that has dominated all other ideals and practices of social life.

In this sense, hetero-patriarchy assumes that a man and a woman-specific socio-religious system can be regarded as guidelines of hetero-normative social rules (Richardson & Robinson, 1997) that have significantly contributed to the construction of institutionalized (legalized and normalized) gender relations. For us, as Richardson has argued Hindu patriarchy is hetero-patriarchy because its ideal (social, religious and cultural) values and norms are highly associated with the hetero-normative socio-sexual practices which have controlled the whole system of social life. Our aim is to use the word 'hetero-patriarchy' instead of using patriarchy to explore the blended form of patriarchal features, and its values within woman-specific religious doctrines and vice versa. Actually, under the Hindu religious system, both a man and a woman-specific hetero-religious culture equally reciprocates to the survival of hetero-patriarchal ideology and practice.

We can argue that Hindu patriarchy is still strong and functioning well because of the existence of a women-specific system in the form of *pativrata dharma* (unconditional loyalty of a wife towards her husband), which adheres to the patriarchal features. Indeed, a Hindu religious doctrine, which highly values *pativrata dharma* that emphasizes the immortal relationship between a man and a woman, is a unique character of the Hindu system. Ideally, a Hindu religious system does not offer any provision for divorce (Bottomore, 1986); but it has developed different provisions for a woman to retain her life fulfilling subordinate companionship of her husband forever.

4.10. Socio-cultural Viewpoints

Nepali women's epistemological character is amply guided by the patriarchal socio-cultural mindset. In a (hetero) patriarchal society, social-cultural practices represent patriarchal culture (Minsky, 1996). On the other hand, gendered subjectivity is also a cultural product transformed through the enculturation process. Broadly speaking, *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) are the products of the same orientation system- on acceptance of the supremacy of patriarchy, and is motivated towards the same goal- to reinforce the same supremacy and to be ruled by it.

From the cultural point of view, there is a system before the person. Every person is bound to fulfil, according to his/her cultural demands. Culturally, the hierarchical relation existing between a *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) is considered a normal and natural state of affairs. In a country like Nepal, wherein social life is guided through a shared or common axiological context-based understanding, there is no iota of doubt that *sāsu* (mother-in-law) vehemently attempts to train a *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) to embrace her thought and behaviour in the social hierarchical system. What *sāsu* (mother-in-law) ardently adheres to is that it is her bounded duty to keep a *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) on the right track, so the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) fanatically continues to follow a patriarchal culture in the negation of her life, too.

In this instance, as argued by most of the sociologists and feminists both *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) are engaged in the domesticated gender role but differently. In this regard, we have tried to connect the above case with the views of post-structuralist feminists (Whelehan, 1995, Weedon, 1996). They argue that it is necessary to explore and theorize the power offered to women by patriarchal family "to socialize children, to run the house and to be the power behind the thrown' although woman is 'subject to a male control'".

Weedon's view fits here to analyze the hierarchical power exercised by *sāsu* (mother-in-law) against the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) although both are oppressed by the rule of males. *Sāsu's* (mother-in-law's) oppressing tendency to her *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) cross-cuts different issues including the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law)'s power. We can oversee that when the *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) comes into the house, *sāsu* (mother-in-law) tends to enjoy privileges as far as possible; including the exemption of the household works. She limits her boundaries in which she can enjoy socially. Many of the *sāsus* (mothers-in-law) start to concentrate on the kitchen and other household politics. She changes her domain from outside the home to inside the home. However, for a *buhāri* (daughter-in-law), her duty is fixed, packed and difficult. She has to adjust herself to those persons, neighbours and outsiders who are strangers to her. She is ever under the scrutiny of the *sāsu* (mother-in-law). She is a 'dangerous wife', suspicious to all, of the Hindu agnatic (heteropatriarchal) family in the word of Bennet (2005).

4.11. Holy Bath and Salvation from Sin

In *Skanda Purana*, a holy bath or sacred cleaning ritual symbolizes the process of purification and the process of atonement for respective sin, pollution and demonic acts. In Hinduism, the spiritual traditions of holy baths or baptisms are believed to cleanse individuals from sin and facilitate spiritual renewal, leading to salvation. These rituals, often involving immersion in sacred waters, symbolize purification and repentance, representing a cleansing from past actions and a turning towards a new, righteous path. Holy baths are often seen as a symbolic act of washing away the physical and spiritual impurities associated with sin.

Swasthani vrata katha is one of the significant ritual texts of Hindus, which offers a holy bath for purification from polluted, sinful acts probably the copulation and menstruation of women. The act of bathing denotes a form of repentance, expressing remorse for the past misdeeds and a commitment to a righteous life. Beyond the physical act of washing, holy baths are believed to initiate a spiritual transformation, leading to a closer connection with the divinity and a sense of renewal. In some religious contexts, holy baths are seen as a means of attaining salvation or redemption from the consequences of sin, such as eternal damnation.

4.12. Present-day Hindu Society in Kathmandu

Modern Hindu society has witnessed a shift from solely focusing on traditional roles to acknowledging women's diverse talents and aspirations. Many Hindu women are now working professionals, entrepreneurs, and leaders in various fields. Hinduism, with its concepts of *dharma* (righteous conduct) and *moksha* (liberation), emphasizes the potential for all beings, including women, to achieve enlightenment. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, highlights the equal worth of men and women in pursuing liberation. While modern roles are gaining prominence, traditional values like respect for elders, particularly mothers, and the importance of family are still upheld in many Hindu communities.

The concept of *varnashrama dharma*, which outlines duties based on caste and life stage, continues to influence societal expectations, but it is also evolving as societies modernize. Hindu women have made significant contributions to various fields, including arts, sciences, and politics, as evidenced by their achievements in fields like medicine, engineering, and literature.

In contemporary Hindu society, the role of women is evolving, with increasing recognition of their worth and potential, alongside traditional expectations. While traditional roles like homemaker and caregiver remain, many Hindu women now pursue careers and contribute significantly to the workforce and public life. There is also a growing emphasis on women's rights and empowerment, with organizations working to raise awareness and promote inclusivity. While there is progress in recognizing women's rights, patriarchal structures still exist, leading to challenges like discrimination and violence against women.

How do these changes occur? One of the respondents replied, "Structure of society and women's status have undergone massive transformation. The reasons behind are the change in family structures, i.e. from the joint to the nuclear one, due to the migration from hill to *terai* and from country to abroad. Similarly, changes in the working space of women i.e. from domestic sphere to public sphere. In the same way, changes in communal life to familial to individual life, improvement in legal status of women and so on". These factors have caused changes in the social pattern and role of women in Hindu society, patriarchy and changes in relations between them. In the new edition of *Swasthani vrata katha*, if published, the writing style, illustrations, and examples will gradually change because of diffusionism, assimilations and cultural interactions.

Due to economic reasons, Nepali society receives remittance through son - daughters-in-law (*buhāri*), historic land through which the economy was generated is now idle, nothing is generating. All these circumstances have forced to change the role of *buhāri*. Previously, *sāsu* used to be the agent of hyper-patriarchy of that time/age. Conversely, along with the change in time, the mode of production has changed and the relationship between *sāsu* and *buhāri*, too has undergone transformation. *Buhāri* exercises more power due to the remittance that comes to her bank account and she decides and plays the family power particularly the power of patriarchy. During the fieldwork, we found that two epic texts namely *Swasthani vrata katha* and *Garud Purana* propagate the message of sin and salvation thereby to enhance the ideology of patriarchy in all spheres of human life. *Garud Purana* is recited during the twelve-days-long mourning period of a deceased Hindu man or woman. The abstract of *Garud Purana* is to control the roles of men and women practicing the politics of fear in the name of sin and pollution.

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

5.1. Construction of Gender and Patriarchy in *Swasthani Vrata Katha*: Myths or Realities

For decades, sociology has embraced the idea that the self is not something we are born with, but something built through social life. It sees the self as flexible, changing, and created by our interactions with others. People form their identity by engaging with society (Mead, 1934). Who we are depends on how we are treated and recognized by others. It is not something we discover ourselves alone. Here, our core argument is how Hindus perceive the *Swasthani vrata katha* in a modern context and how they follow the prescriptions, and values in fasting or during a month of fasting and in everyday life. Do devotees follow the customs about gender bonds in family and society that *Swasthani* prescribes? Do they completely ignore the modern laws that secular states prescribe? Social life is like a theatre in that people are like actors, performing roles in front of an audience, and carefully managing how they are seen (Goffman 1959). In this view, we are not truly free individuals, but performers who adjust their actions to meet the expectations of those around us – values of *Swasthani vrata katha*, and various codes including formal laws.

At first, this might seem harmless or even necessary. If everyone plays their part, society runs smoothly. But when we look deeper, a troubling truth appears. If the self is just a performance shaped by outside approval, what happens to our real self? What happens to the person underneath all the roles, masks, and expectations? If we live only to meet social standards, then our identity becomes a tool for survival, not a true expression of who we are. In such a system, authenticity is lost. We found mostly the devotion of the fast-observers during the month of *Swasthani vrata katha*, and then they fully followed the capitalist market-led norms and values. They completely forgot what they did in the past and what their moral values and purpose of life are, guided by *Swasthani vrata katha*. The value system that *Swasthani* signifies can no longer oppose the capitalist market in the Hindu society of Kathmandu valley particularly in Sankhu.

In Hindu society, a person celebrates individuality and the motto is to "be ourselves." Yet at the same time, it sets narrow rules about what is acceptable. It teaches people to fit into roles rather than discover who they really are. This creates a painful contradiction. We are praised for being unique, but only within limits set by society. True uniqueness — being fully oneself without fear — becomes almost impossible.

This process starts early, from childhood. Hindus are taught to behave differently as sons or daughters they born in ways that others approve of. They are trained to dress, speak, and act according to religious-social norms that Hindu prefers. Success is measured by how well we fit the mould. Authentic emotions, dreams, and differences are often suppressed in favour of polished images that Hindu women greatly suffer. Instead of growing into their true potential, many people are pushed into roles that feel empty or fake they follow all norms and values of Hinduism on one hand and when they are participating in public political forums they defy or criticize the Hindu value systems. Sometimes, our arguments turn to be contradictory in these two cases - traditional-modern, religious-market, and culture-capitalism.

The result is a deep inner conflict. Many people feel they are living a life that is not truly theirs. They constantly balance between who they are inside and the roles they must play to be accepted. This split creates emotional stress, confusion, and dissatisfaction. People are left feeling lonely even in crowded places, and tired even when doing things that are supposed to bring joy. Far from helping people become their best selves, the social construction of identity often traps them. It creates a system where people must hide parts of themselves to survive. What was meant to create community instead produces alienation. What was meant to bring meaning instead caused people to feel hollow. Underneath the surface of social life, many are struggling silently, carrying the heavy burden of being someone they are not. Thus, the idea that identity is just a social product reveals a dystopian reality. A world built on endless performance is not a free world. It is a world where the true self is buried under layers of masks, where people trade authenticity for acceptance, and where life becomes a stage rather than a journey of genuine self-discovery.

5.2. Gender Relation (Goma and Shiva Sharma) in Capitalist World in Hindu Society

Goffman's idea of impression management suggests that individuals, whether they realize it or not, are constantly adjusting their behaviour, speech, and even emotions to fit what society expects. Every setting — whether it is the workplace, a friendship circle, or a social media platform — becomes a stage where people perform carefully crafted versions of themselves. This performance is not random. It is aimed at winning approval, fitting in, and being seen as acceptable. But the deeper question remains: what price do we pay for this constant self-curtain?

The demand to project a polished, socially approved image does not come without heavy consequences. People often have to hide parts of who they are. Traits, feelings, and ideas that do not fit into the socially accepted mould are tucked away and suppressed out of fear of judgment or exclusion. Over time, this suppression builds up stress, emotional fatigue, and a sense of living a double life. Individuals feel the growing weight of managing two selves — the one they must show and the one they must hide.

This conflict between the inner self (backstage) and the performed self (frontstage) comes even sharper in today's digital Hindu world, where women are practising both selves simultaneously. For example, Hindu women go to bathe in *Salinadi* to become sacred or free from pollution and they enjoy many opportunities in the capitalist market that are always against their works, which Hindus categorize as – sin. Therefore, two spaces – sacred or front space and profane (sin) or backspace that assumed by Erving Goffman, coexist. Various religious spaces and digital (online) spaces have turned impression management into an endless, high-pressure game. Social media platforms are not places for genuine connection anymore; they have become stages for branding the self as religious or secular.

People are no longer just individuals with thoughts and emotions — they are both individuals and public performers, engaging in society through carefully constructed roles. Every act, action, behaviour, and presentation is crafted, filtered, and edited to present an idealized version of life. The approval people seek comes in various forms of temporary signs of acceptance that disappear just as quickly as they arrive. In the context of Kathmandu's contemporary Hindu society, such performative behavior is visible even in ritual practices like the *Swasthani Varta Katha*, where societal expectation often outweighs individual faith or reflection.

As a result, a person's sense of self-worth is no longer built from within but constantly depends on outside reactions. When validation becomes external, inner peace becomes fragile, and authenticity is compromised. Double faces or spaces that create confusion – pure-pollution, sacred-profane, good-bad as performances. These binaries reflect not only online identities but also how people navigate religious and gendered expectations women as both sacred and submissive, men as both powerful and vulnerable. In this emotional happiness, courage, social image, anxiety, self-doubt, and insecurity become inevitable outcomes.

This emotional fragility echoes the contradictions found in traditional gender roles within the *Swasthani Vrata Katha* where divine women are powerful yet mortal women remain subservient. This transformation has changed the very meaning of human relationships. Instead of connecting sincerely, people now often interact to maintain their image, gain status, or avoid falling behind in the endless race for attention. Friendships and relationships sometimes turn into exchanges of approval rather than mutual understanding. Trust weakens when vulnerability is hidden and when everyone is acting a part.

The suppression of vulnerability becomes especially damaging. Showing fear, sadness, confusion, or imperfection is often seen as a risk — something that could lead to mockery, rejection, or social punishment. To protect themselves, people put up walls. In rituals like the *Swasthani* observance, this suppression manifests as the silent endurance of women who fast, not always out of belief, but out of societal pressure, family duty, or fear of moral failure. This leads to a strange kind of loneliness: being surrounded by others but feeling unseen, unheard, and unknown. Everyone performs, but no one is truly witnessed for who they are.

The irony is bitter. A society built on the idea of connection has created a culture of isolation. Impression management was meant to make social life easier, but in reality, it demands endless labour. People must keep adjusting their images, updating their personas, and chasing approval in a game that never ends. In both digital society and religious communities, performance replaces authenticity, and duty overshadows desire.

The consequence is a deep, lasting dissatisfaction. Satisfaction is always one step ahead, just out of reach. Similarly, in Kathmandu's ritual landscape, women's roles in *Swasthani* practices remain tightly confined by unending expectations of piety, sacrifice, and silence, even as society modernizes. The constant race to maintain a perfect self-image drains emotional energy and robs life of genuine joy. What remains is the performance of devotion, gender, and identity detached from inner truth but inseparably tied to public recognition.

Ultimately, impression management becomes a burden heavier than it first appears. It shapes not just how we act, but who we become. It teaches people to trade honesty for acceptance, to value appearances over truth, and to prioritize performance over connection. In a world obsessed with image, the real self is pushed further and further into hiding, leaving behind a trail of unseen pain and unrealized potential. In the case of *Swasthani* – the bond between Goma, and Shiva Sharma characters and

their impressions are illogical, irrelevant and anti-legal provisions but still, Hindus recite the story as life guidelines, role models and ideals to promote patriarchy and capitalism.

We wonder - myths and realities are true or false and how far is the social reality the same thing? What exactly is truth, and does it truly align with reality as we live it? Maybe that is the very reason we find ourselves struggling within the reality shaped by society. As referencing from the findings of this study, we strongly recommend that myths and realities are socially constructed and people interpret accordingly with how they perceive, what they understand. The main thing is the socialization of identity that signifier- signified.

6. CONCLUSION

Patriarchy exists as both a reality and a myth within Hindu society. While some patriarchal structures and traditions limit women's rights and opportunities, there are also instances of female agency and resistance, as well as evolving interpretations of religious texts and practices that challenge traditional patriarchal norms. Traditional beliefs about women's roles as homemakers and caregivers can restrict their participation in the workforce and other areas of public life. In Hindu families, communities and societies, women are limited in mobility and sexuality through limited participation in various sectors and decision-making within the household.

The changing roles of *sāsu* (mother-in-law) and *buhāri* (daughter-in-law) under patriarchy forces to change the relations between them. In the past, *sāsu* used to be a powerful agent of patriarchy and the patriarchal head (father-in-law) would control the economy of the family, mobility and sexuality. However, at present, *buhāri* enjoys power because her husband earns the remittance, which is transferred to her bank account and she decides where to spend, and what to purchase. Due to her economic independence, *buhāri* plays key roles in household chores and the public domain. During our fieldwork, we found that the duo Hindu religious texts *Swasthani* and *Garud Purana* advocate normative rules in the society. Those texts define rules for men and women, and warn that disobedience to their holy message is sinful act. The politics of fear is practiced through *Swasthani vrata katha* drawing a demarcation line between what is righteous and what is sinful for Hindu women. However, under the capitalistic economic system the demarcation line has been violated now and again since economic independence is a significant aspect of many modern Nepali women.

Ethical Approval:

All procedures performed in studies involving participants were followed by ethical standards.

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