



Ritual as a Site of Gender Subversion: A Study Through the Lens of Performativity

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Abstract—

Rituals hold the potential to transcend social ethos, serving as platforms for the expression of barred themes and the enactment of collective solidarity. This paper examines a particular ritual performed during wedding ceremonies in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, known as Domkach, Loharghat, or Lohandi. In this ritual, women don male personas and engage in improvisational performances characterized by humor, “vulgarity”, and social critique. These performances serve as a subversive enactment of gender, desire, and power. Despite lacking a standardized name across regions, the ritual retains a common structure and objective: providing a communal space for women to momentarily transgress patriarchal expectations.

Drawing on Victor Turner’s concept of *communitas*, this study explores how this ritual momentarily dismantles hierarchical structures, creating an egalitarian experience that fosters solidarity among women. Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity further contextualizes the ritual as an act that simultaneously reinforces and disrupts normative gender roles. Additionally, Richard Schechner’s idea of second reality situates the performance as a transformative space where women temporarily step outside societal constraints, expressing alternative versions of their identities through playful yet politically charged performances.

This study argues that these rituals are not mere acts of entertainment but constitute political acts of resistance, reclaiming agency through performance. By combining humor, collective strength, and subversive play, these rituals create a fluid enactment of gender and serve as crucial sites for reimagining and reshaping social codes.

Keywords— Rituals; Gender Performativity; Second Reality; Femininity; Solidarity; Patriarchal Subversion.



I. INTRODUCTION

Rituals have long served as cultural touchstones that reinforce, negotiate, and at times disrupt social structures [1], [10], [19]. While many rituals emphasize continuity, order, and the reproduction of social norms, others open up temporary spaces for transgression, play, and reimagining of social roles. Within such ritualistic moments, participants are often permitted to enact behaviors that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate or unacceptable in everyday life. These moments of suspension allow for the expression of suppressed desires, critiques of authority, and the formation of collective bonds, making ritual a potent site for examining the intersections of performance, power, and social regulation.

Gender, within ritual contexts, is not merely represented but actively done through embodied acts, gestures, speech, costume, and interaction [5, pp. 32-43], [11]. Rituals structure gendered experiences by prescribing who can act, speak, transgress, or remain silent, while simultaneously creating sanctioned moments where these prescriptions can be inverted or exaggerated. Within such frameworks, gendered acts become highly visible, as bodies perform roles that both draw from and depart from everyday norms. These performative enactments allow participants to experience gender not as a fixed identity, but as a set of socially coded actions that can be intensified, parodied, or temporarily reworked [13]. In this sense, ritual becomes a critical arena where gender is experienced, negotiated, and occasionally destabilized through collective performance.

One such example is the ‘all-women’ wedding ritual prevalent in parts of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh, commonly referred to as Domkach, Loharghat, or Lohandi. Performed in celebratory settings, the ritual involves women engaging in improvised performances that include cross-dressing, exaggerated enactments of masculinity, explicit humor, and sexual parody.

These acts not only invert normative gender roles but also foreground the embodied labor of performing gender itself. By adopting male-coded behaviors and appearances, participants expose the constructed nature of gender norms, revealing how authority, desire, and power are enacted rather than inherently possessed.

This study aims to document and analyze this ritual through ethnographic observation and theoretical analysis, situating it within broader discussions of performance, ritual, and gender performativity. The research is guided by the following questions: How does this ritual function as a space for gendered play and subversion? In what ways does it challenge, reinforce, or complicate dominant gender norms? By centering the voices and experiences of the women involved, this paper seeks to explore how ritualized performance enables alternative gendered experiences—however temporary—within a deeply patriarchal social framework.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand and analyse the ritual within the particular context of the paper, it is necessary to engage with key theoretical concepts related to performance, performativity, gender, and ritual.

Performance and Performative Acts: Richard Schechner, conceptualizes performance as a continuum that includes ritual, play, and everyday behavior [16], [17, pp.2]. He introduces the idea of "second reality", where performance blurs the line between real life and staged action, performer and role, reality and fiction, allowing performers to temporarily step into different identities [17, pp.52]. This is different from his concept of "restored behavior", which refers to rehearsed and repeated actions—things people can perform again and again, even outside their original context.

In contrast, ‘second reality’ is more fluid and transformative. It creates a space where



performers aren't just imitating past behaviors but actively reshaping their reality in the moment. This idea is particularly useful for understanding the ritual in question, where women take on new roles, experiment with gender expression, and momentarily embody ideals of femininity and masculinity that might not align with their daily lives. The ritual becomes more than just a performance—it's a space where gender is explored, exaggerated, and even challenged, allowing participants to experience an alternative version of themselves, if only for a while.

Gender & Performance: Judith Butler's (2002) theory of gender performativity offers a powerful lens to understand this ritual. Butler argues that gender is not something we are born with, but something we do—a continuous series of acts, behaviors, and expressions that make gender feel natural over time [5, pp. 147], [13]. These repeated performances, shaped by social norms and expectations, create the illusion that gender is fixed and stable. However, because gender is constructed through repetition, it can also be disrupted, exaggerated, or reimaged [11].

In the ritual, cross-dressing and exaggerated masculine performances make this performative nature of gender visible. When women adopt male-coded gestures, clothing, and behavior, they are not simply "playing a role"—they are exposing how all gender roles are, in a way, performances. This act both reinforces and challenges social norms: on one hand, it follows a structured tradition where women temporarily embody masculinity; on the other, it reveals that masculinity (and by extension, femininity) is something that can be put on, taken off, and reshaped. In this moment of performance, gender is no longer an unchangeable truth but something flexible, playful, and open to reinterpretation.

This aligns with Butler's argument that the possibility of resistance is located within performative acts themselves [5, pp. 155]. By stepping into roles typically reserved for men, the participants are not only bending gender expectations but also questioning their authority. These traditions foreground gender as a learned and rehearsed performance, exposing its

constructed nature through stylized and socially regulated practices [8, pp. 45–60, 82–94].

Ritual and Social Structure: Anthropologists such as Émile Durkheim (1912) and Turner (1969) suggest that rituals reinforce social cohesion while simultaneously allowing moments of anti-structure [10], [19]. Victor Turner introduces the concept of liminality, where rituals momentarily disrupt societal roles, creating a state of anti-structure. Turner's concept of liminality enables temporary suspension of hierarchy and the emergence of *communitas* [19]. His work highlights how *communitas*—a temporary sense of egalitarian solidarity—emerges in such moments. This notion is particularly relevant to the ritual under study, where women momentarily transcend domestic roles and engage in playful yet critical performances, exemplifying the paradox of temporary subversion within a rigid patriarchal framework.

Gender in Performance: The study also draws on performance traditions where gender is actively constructed through impersonation and embodied practice rather than biological identity. Performance traditions across cultures demonstrate that gender is constructed through embodied practice. Historical exclusion of women from performance spaces led to traditions of female impersonation in forms such as Yakshagana, Parsi theatre, and Thirukoothu. Similarly, Japanese Kabuki developed the *onnagata* tradition. These practices demonstrate how gender is stylized and codified within performance systems [15]. These traditions foreground gender as a learned and rehearsed performance, sustained through codified aesthetics and social convention rather than bodily sex.

While emerging from distinct cultural and historical contexts, these practices reveal how gender is produced, disciplined, and idealized within structured artistic systems. By situating the ritual alongside such traditions, the study highlights how performance can function both as a reinforcement of dominant gender norms and as a site where their constructed nature becomes visible [4, pp. 57-74]. In contrast to these formal



theatrical practices, the ritual's improvisational and women-only framework allows for a more irreverent and communal engagement with gender, positioning it as a vernacular space of temporary destabilization rather than aesthetic codification.

This review establishes the theoretical foundation necessary for analyzing the ritual through an ethnographic lens.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs an ethnographic approach, combining participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis. The methodology includes:

Fieldwork: Conducted in Buxar, Ranchi, Satna and Allahabad, where the ritual is performed occasionally. Observations and informal interviews were carried out with regular participants. A total of 10 participants were interviewed, using a semi-structured format to allow for both guided discussion and open-ended responses. To protect the privacy of the participants, all names used in this study are pseudonyms. The researcher occupied a participant-observer position during fieldwork, allowing for both engagement and critical distance in documenting the performances.

Oral Testimonies: Conversations with women who have engaged in the ritual multiple times provided insights into their motivations and interpretations. Ethical considerations were taken into account, including informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and maintaining sensitivity toward cultural contexts.

Theoretical Analysis: Research papers, books, and case studies on gender, ritual, and performativity were reviewed to frame the ethnographic findings within broader academic discourse.

By blending firsthand experiences with theoretical frameworks, the study aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the ritual.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

1. The Ritual as a Space of Playfulness and Liberation: Women who participate in the ritual

describe it as a source of joy and entertainment. 'X' a resident of Patna, remarks:

"They wait for this ritual eagerly, as they get to perform and actually act like their male counterparts." (All participant names have been changed to maintain confidentiality)

The temporary subversion of gender roles allows participants to embody masculinized authority, although in a humorous and exaggerated manner. The ritual's appeal lies in its fleeting yet immersive experience—women step into a performative space where they control the narrative, unlike their daily lives.

'Y', from Satna, Madhya Pradesh, highlights another fascinating aspect: *"They often plan in advance what they would wear. Most take their husband's shirt and pants."* This act of cross-dressing is not merely symbolic but actively enables participants to inhabit a different social identity. Several women described feeling powerful simply by wearing their counterparts' or husbands' clothes, noting a perceptible shift in posture, confidence, and authority. The donning of male-coded attire, combined with the enactment of explicitly sexualized and assertive behaviors, momentarily reverses traditional power dynamics. Clothing here functions as a performative tool through which power is embodied rather than spoken—allowing women to access forms of dominance, visibility, and control that are typically denied to them in everyday domestic life. This reflects Butler's argument regarding the materialization of gender through repeated acts [4, pp.107-109].

2. Improvisation and Sexual Playfulness:

Unlike codified theatrical traditions, this ritual is entirely improvisational. Women create spontaneous performances, engaging in exaggerated sexual innuendo and physical humor. A striking practice involves using a braided dupatta (scarf) and sometimes a 'rolling pin' (Belan - a tool to make chapati) as a makeshift penis, tying it around the waist, and teasing one another. These performances are accompanied by 'vulgar' songs and jokes,



transforming the space into one of playful eroticism.

This element of the ritual, while shocking to outsiders, is deeply significant. It offers women a rare opportunity to openly engage with sexuality, a topic otherwise shrouded in societal taboos. The ritual's improvisational nature allows for explicit humor and sexual play. These performances align with Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, where social hierarchies are inverted through humor and bodily excess [2, pp. 5-12], [7]. The grotesque and exaggerated nature of their acts echoes the carnivalesque—where bodily excess, parody, and transgression create a temporary space of liberation.

Through satire, desire, and defiance, these performances reveal the complex ways in which women navigate their restricted social realities. The ritual's humor, rather than being mere entertainment, becomes a tool for subversion, offering fleeting but powerful moments where power dynamics are destabilized and reimaged.

'Z', a resident of Ranchi originally from Bihar, offers a unique perspective on the ritual's significance. Having witnessed it since childhood, she notes: "*This ritual is very fascinating because it reflects how women envision relationships. In contrast to real life, where violence is often present, the ritual replaces it with humor*".

This suggests a desire for relationships built on playfulness rather than dominance, indicating that the ritual is not only about subverting power but also about reimagining intimacy and domestic relationships. The humor employed in performances allows women to construct an alternate reality—one in which dominance does not equate to violence, but to playfulness and mutual amusement.

3. Men's Indifference and Domestic Containment: One of the most intriguing aspects of this ritual is the reaction (or lack of it) from men. According to the participants, men generally do not interfere with or acknowledge the ritual. Instead, their curiosity manifests in private

conversations with their wives. As one participant shared:

"Men usually don't react to this ritual. They usually act indifferent about it. But personally, sometimes they ask their wives about what all happened."

This indifference can be interpreted in multiple ways. It may signify a passive tolerance, an understanding that the ritual is a temporary and contained space of transgression. It also suggests that the ritual, while liberating within its own sphere, does not significantly challenge the overarching patriarchal order. It might be useful to further explore whether this indifference is strategic (to avoid challenging a women's-only space) or stems from disinterest.

4. Young Women's Perspectives - Amusement and Discomfort: Younger women and children who witness the ritual for the first time often experience mixed reactions. One interviewee recalled her childhood memory of the event:

"When I was in 5th grade, I saw this ritual and was quite amused and in fact felt unsettled. I had mixed feelings, and thought it was vulgar or inappropriate. Didn't particularly understand what was going on, as I had never seen women of the house doing such gestures or even talking about sexual acts. And here they were overplaying every act."

This response highlights the layered meanings embedded in the ritual. While it is a space of freedom for its participants, it also remains transgressive and unsettling for those unfamiliar with it.

5. Communal Solidarity and the Formation of 'Communitas': Beyond its performative aspects, the ritual fosters *communitas* [19]—a shared liminal space where social structures momentarily dissolve, allowing women across ages and social standings to bond through laughter, play, and role inversion. This temporary sanctuary offers support, recognition, and emotional release, enabling participants to step beyond everyday expectations without fear of judgment.



While the ritual does not directly challenge patriarchy, it cultivates resilience through lasting social ties and shared experiences. However, shifting social dynamics and digital visibility pose challenges to its secrecy and intimacy. Younger participants, influenced by feminist discourse, question its contemporary relevance. Can its essence—play, inversion, and solidarity—be reimagined in spaces like gender workshops or improvisational theatre? Though the ritual's structure remains, its core principles could inspire broader conversations on gender and power.

Moreover, Z's perspective invites further reflection on the potential of humor as a subversive strategy within relationships. If women's use of humor in the ritual reflects an aspirational model of non-violent relationships, could similar performative spaces be cultivated to foster alternative gender dynamics? The contrast between humor and real-life gendered violence adds another dimension to the discussion, urging scholars to explore how performance can be a tool not only for inversion but also for envisioning new relational paradigms.

V. DISCUSSION

The ritual, while appearing to be a space of liberation, remains bound by limitations. The performative inversion of gender roles does not translate into sustained socio-political change. Instead, it functions as a pressure valve, allowing momentary release while leaving the dominant power structures intact [3], [12]. While the ritual appears liberatory, it remains structurally contained. It functions as a pressure valve, allowing temporary release without dismantling power hierarchies. Scholars such as Bell (1997) and Kapferer (2004) critique liminality for reinforcing rather than dismantling power hierarchies, arguing that rituals of transgression often serve to reassert normative structures rather than challenge them in any lasting way. In this case, the ritual's improvisational nature offers a fleeting sense of agency, yet its containment within a specific time and space prevents deeper structural transformation [19].

Further, the men's passive acceptance of the ritual may suggest an implicit understanding that these transgressions are ephemeral and contained. This aligns with Turner's notion of anti-structure, where societies allow temporary disorder only to reinforce long-term order. The ritual's sanctioned defiance paradoxically upholds the same gender norms it appears to subvert.

However, the discomfort expressed by younger women raises questions about the evolving perceptions of gender roles in contemporary India, particularly in the studied regions. With increasing exposure to feminist discourse, shifting economic participation, and the rise of digital spaces for gender activism, the ritual's significance may be transforming.

A crucial perspective that emerges is Z's observation on humor and its role in reimagining power and intimacy. The ritual does not merely invert gender roles but also reconstructs the dynamics of authority and desire. The use of humor—particularly through exaggerated performances, satire, and erotic playfulness—allows women to express desires and critiques that may not be articulated in everyday life. Importantly, the absence of violence in these performances is telling. While many real-life intimate relationships are marked by coercion and dominance, the ritual presents an alternative framework in which authority is expressed through jest rather than aggression. In this way, humor acts as both a coping mechanism and a subversive strategy, offering a glimpse into how gendered power could be reshaped beyond the ritual space.

This interplay between humor and violence adds another dimension to the discussion on gender performativity. If masculinity in the everyday world is often enacted through control and, at times, physical dominance, then the ritual's humor-driven masculinity suggests an alternative form of power—one that is playful, absurd, and consensual. Humor emerges as a key subversive strategy, enabling critique and reimagination of gendered power relations [6], [18]. The women's performances do not replicate the structural violence they may experience in their daily lives;



instead, they carve out a space where gender roles are rewritten, even if temporarily. This absence of aggression, then, is not just a feature of the performance but a political statement—one that imagines power as something that can exist without coercion.

Given the ritual's deeply personal and largely undocumented nature, its performative force resides in its liveness and ephemerality, resisting capture or reproduction beyond the moment of enactment [14, pp. 1-20]. However, the opening scene of the play *Agarbatti* directed by Swati Dubey and presented by Samagam Rang Mandal - Jabalpur, offers a striking theatrical interpretation of this ritual [9]. This play is a compelling tale of feminine resilience that explores the conflicts of caste, class and gender. The particular scene in context captures the transgressive and performative elements central to the ritual, framing it within a broader narrative of gender and power. While artistic adaptations may not fully encapsulate the lived experience of participants, they provide a critical lens through which such traditions can be examined, circulated, and reinterpreted.

One emerging avenue of inquiry is the role of social media and digital documentation in shaping perceptions of such rituals. Given the ritual's highly sensitive nature, where women engage in performances that are often deeply personal, subversive, and secretive, its presence on social media raises ethical concerns. While casual sharing or targeted archiving could lead to greater visibility, it also risks misrepresentation, misunderstanding, or even public scrutiny. Yet, at the same time, opening up discussions about the ritual online—without direct exposure of participants—could spark important conversations on gender, power, and performance.

Beyond social media, this ritual's unique structure could be adapted for gender workshops and improvisational exercises. Using similar embodied performance techniques, participants could explore gender performativity in a safe, reflective space. This approach would not only help in understanding how gender is constructed and performed but could also initiate critical

discussions on agency, power, transgression and collective resistance in everyday life. The humor-violence dialectic highlighted by 'Z' could serve as a foundational theme in these explorations, prompting deeper reflection on how gendered power manifests in different spaces and how performance can be leveraged to reimagine relational dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights how an all-women ritual in some Indian states functions as a site of temporary transgression, communal bonding, and solidarity. Through performance, women momentarily inhabit positions of agency, engaging in humor and play that challenge traditional norms. The ritual's improvisational structure allows for embodied resistance, fostering a unique space where authority and desire can be reimaged without the presence of coercion or violence. However, this transgression remains contained within a cyclical framework that ultimately does not threaten the overarching patriarchal order. While the ritual disrupts everyday power dynamics, its repetition ensures that the larger social structure remains intact, reinforcing Turner's notion of anti-structure as a temporary release rather than a permanent shift.

By centering participant narratives, this research contributes to discussions on gender, performance, and ritual, demonstrating how everyday acts of defiance coexist with structural constraints. Importantly, it also foregrounds the formation of *communitas* within the ritual, emphasizing that its significance lies not only in its momentary inversion of gender roles but in the collective solidarity it nurtures. The ritual strengthens social networks among women, providing an internal support system even within restrictive societal structures. The role of humor, in particular, emerges as a crucial mode of engagement, allowing participants to critique authority, express desire, and momentarily reframe power relations in ways that feel safe and intimate.

Future research could examine how younger generations engage with this ritual in an era of



digital documentation. Do online representations of such performances extend or further limit their subversive potential? How does social media shape the reception and evolution of these traditions? Additionally, as digital spaces offer new forms of virtual communities, could these rituals evolve beyond their physical boundaries to forge new spaces of solidarity and collective play? Exploring these intersections through ethnographic studies or digital performance analysis could provide deeper insight into how performance, gender, and technology interact in contemporary Indian society

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