

A Critical Study of Women's Representation in Haryanvi Folk Culture

Vandana Punia

Dean, Faculty of Education,
Chairperson, Department of Education,
Malviya Mission Teaching Training Centre,
Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the multifaceted presence, roles, and resistance of women in Haryanvi folk culture and literature. By analysing oral traditions, folk songs, ragnis, folktales, and folk performances, the research identified and interpreted the images and roles of women in light of contemporary social changes. The study also seeks to foreground the voices of rural women, often present in tradition but absent from documented discourse, to understand their self-definition, rights, opportunities, and challenges through folk literature and art. The findings aim to contribute to cultural preservation, social justice, gender equality, and rural women's empowerment, offering valuable insights for academic scholarship, policy-making, and practical interventions. Ultimately, this research aspires to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, highlighting the evolving discourse on women in Haryanvi folk culture.

Key words: Haryanvi Folk Culture, Women's Representation, Patriarchy, Rural Women Empowerment, Oral Traditions, Social Change

Introduction

Folk culture is the soul of any society, condensing its philosophy, customs, traditions, social structures, beliefs, and values towards life. Haryana folk culture is a reflection of social roles, and the life journey of women is vividly reflected through oral traditions such as folk songs, *ragni*, folktales, and *saang*. These traditions are rich sources of entertainment and considered as mirrors of the socio-economic and cultural realities of rural life. A nuanced analysis of the diverse dimensions of women in Haryanvi folk culture highlights the region's cultural heritage. It also brings academic discourse to the unheard voices of rural women, often absent from mainstream studies despite their presence in oral traditions. Manisha (2023) stated that Haryanvi *raginis* serve a dual function in society as both reflections of social realities and agents of cultural evolution. Singh, B. (2023) focuses on Haryanvi women's folk songs, especially the "*Jakari*" genre, which reflects their dreams, desires, frustrations, and resistance to patriarchal norms in Haryana's society. Kumar, R. (2020) analysed women's folk songs in Haryana, focusing on their expression of women's emotions, social conditions, and challenges to established norms. It discusses how these songs function as a safety valve for bottled-up feelings and provide insight into women's perspectives on domestic life, social roles, and cultural practices in Haryana. Gaur, V. (2018) examines how gender identity is constructed and

conditioned through Haryanvi folktales, focusing on the rigid gender roles, social norms, and portrayals of women within these oral narratives. The paper highlights the dual role of women as both revered and controlled figures in the context of local cultural and religious practices. Punla and Sharma (2011) conducted a sociological study on leisure folksongs and women of Haryana, emphasizing how these songs express women's emotions, social conditions, and everyday life experiences. Their research highlights the role these folk songs play in providing women with a socially accepted platform to vocalize their joys, frustrations, and longings, reflecting the broader socio-cultural milieu of Haryana's rural society. Sharma, S. (2024) discussed the evolving role of women in Haryanvi folklore music, highlighting their contributions to the preservation and development of this traditional art form, while also reflecting changing social dynamics in Haryana. Singh and Attri (2023) examine how Haryanvi women use folk songs, particularly the *Jakari* genre, to express their emotions, social realities, and challenges to patriarchal norms. These songs function as powerful tools for asserting female identity and resisting societal constraints in Haryana's cultural context.

Traditionally, Haryanvi folk literature was only confined to patriarchal social structures and strictly restricted to the role of devoted wife, mother, daughter, and daughter-in-law. These portrayals reflect societal expectations and a certain degree of control, authority, and constraint over female lives. In changing times, conditions, and scenarios, female voices of sensitivity, struggle, love, rebellion, and self-expression exist in folk literature that challenge this traditional framework. Social changes in the form of education, increased economic opportunities, urbanization, digital media, and globalization have significantly affected rural women's lives. It empowers them with their rights, personality development, and community participation. These transformations are visible in folk traditions, where women are emerging as active, independent, and decisive agents.

Research Gap

Despite a growing body of research on Haryanvi folk culture and female portrayals, several significant research gaps persist: Many research studies highlight that women in Haryanvi folk literature and performance are largely described through patriarchal lenses and confined to roles like mother, wife, or housekeeper. Their socialization and identity are shaped to fit traditional norms, and their narratives rarely challenge the underlying structures of gender inequality. There is limited exploration of how these roles are internalized and how power operates subtly through cultural conditioning rather than overt coercion.

Some research concedes women's folk songs as autobiographical and therapeutic. These researches reflect the deeper subjective, resistant, and subaltern voices of women. These are underrepresented in mainstream academic discourse. For example, folk songs that articulate female sexuality, desire, and resistance to masculine norms have not been widely studied. Much of the literature focuses on traditional settings, with insufficient attention given to education, economic empowerment, urbanization, and digital media. This phenomenon transforms women's participation, agency, and representation in folk culture in today's scenario. The effect of these modern factors on both the content and performance of folk traditions remains a largely unexplored area. Few studies offer comparative perspectives with

other regional folk traditions or address how findings could inform educational, cultural, or gender policy interventions. The research gap lies in the need for a critical, intersectional, and contemporary analysis of women's voices, agency, and resistance in Haryanvi folk culture, moving beyond patriarchal representations to foreground subaltern, transformative, and modern narratives that remain largely unaddressed in existing research.

Research Objectives: The main objectives of your study are:

- To analyze the representation and construction of women's roles and identities in Haryanvi folk culture.
- To examine the influence of patriarchal values, gender norms, and socialization practices on the depiction and lived experiences of women in Haryanvi folk narratives.
- To investigate the extent and nature of women's agency, resistance, and self-expression within folk traditions, including both traditional and contemporary forms (such as digital media and modern performances)
- To assess the impact of modern factors—such as education, economic empowerment, urbanization, and digital media—on the changing roles, participation, and empowerment of rural women in Haryanvi society.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology rooted in the interdisciplinary traditions of folklore studies, cultural studies, and gender studies. The approach is designed to capture the complexity and depth of women's representation, agency, and transformation within Haryanvi folk culture.

Research Design

The study prioritizes qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of cultural meanings, gender roles, and lived experiences. Ethnography and fieldwork are central, involving immersion in rural communities to observe, document, and interpret folk performances, rituals, and everyday practices. Selected villages, folk artist groups, and digital platforms serve as case studies to explore both traditional and contemporary expressions.

Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques included semi-structured and in-depth interviews with women folk artists, storytellers, and community elders, which provided firsthand accounts of women's roles and experiences in folk culture. Direct observation of folk performances (e.g., *saang*, *ragni*, *phag*) and participation in community events helped to capture authentic practices and gender dynamics. Group discussions with rural women and youth elicited collective perspectives on cultural change, agency, and resistance. Analysis of folk songs, *ragnis*, tales, and digital content (YouTube, WhatsApp groups) helped to identify recurring themes, symbols, and shifts in women's representation. Examination of recorded folk materials, published anthologies, and previous research for historical context and comparative analysis was also done.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been done through Coding and categorizing data to identify key themes related to gender roles, agency, resistance, and transformation. Discourse and Narrative Analysis had been done through interpreting language, metaphors, and storytelling patterns to uncover underlying cultural meanings and power structures. Through Comparative Analysis: Contrasting traditional and contemporary forms, as well as rural and urban expressions, was done to reveal patterns of continuity and change.

Ethical Considerations

Prior consent was obtained from every respondent for voluntary participation and informed regarding confidentiality for all interviewees and participants. Respecting local customs, traditions, and the autonomy of participants throughout the research process has been maintained.

Main Findings

Women's Folk Songs as Autobiographical Narratives

Haryanvi women's folk songs, especially genres, function as autobiographical and intense narratives. These songs provide women with a medium to express their dreams, desires, struggles, and emotional traumas. These songs reflect their political, religious, and intellectual worldviews. Women use these songs to communicate their experiences and aspirations in subtle or metaphorical language, sometimes directly challenging social norms. Folk songs are the most significant reflections of evolution in a woman's life with reference to different life phases, i.e, adolescence and marriage to motherhood and beyond. The lyrics of songs are full of excitement, anxiety, and emotions associated with leaving parents' home for the in-laws' home. For instance, the song:

*“Sajan ke ghar jaana se ma meri tassli kar de
Jo kuch lena den se ma baandh jud ke dhar de”*

These songs are not limited to personal experiences, but they also serve as a form of social commentary and refined confrontation. Women use metaphor, humor, and coded language to critique their circumstances, express dissatisfaction with patriarchal norms, and share their emotions.

*‘Re beera ek be gheran mai jaieya re banul ki dheer bandhiaye
Re usne ro ro suja li aankh, beti to uski tadke digar jaagi’*

In some folk songs, females are eager to raise voices for their own needs and frustrations, sometimes directly challenging social expectations. Moreover, these folk songs offer a harmless space for women to express emotions and desires that might be suppressed in public or mixed-gender settings.

*“Mahare ghar kya ne julm kra padhe likhe ke byah di
Vo nu bola water laa de, mai baat takhri lai a meri bahan:*

While sitting in the groups and singing folk songs, they foster strong bonds of female friendship and harmony, allowing them to share stress, anxiety, and support each other to face life's challenges.

*“Main naala ke sker aayi re, ke baahti aavenge,
Mera chunda matke re, ke chunder lavenge”*

These folk songs are of autobiographical nature and considered as a collective archive of women's experiences, aspirations, and resistance within a patriarchal society. Haryanvi women's folk songs can be well-thought-out living autobiographies and tools for self-expression, emotional release, and subtle protest, making them a vital part of both personal identity

Challenging Patriarchal Norms

Haryanvi folk songs have portrayed females mainly responsible for the home, family, and self-sacrifice. But many of these songs also include silent signs of resistance. These expressions generated by women raise voice against rules even if they do it in a gentle or hidden way. In many folk songs, women use metaphor, wit, and coded language to critique the limitations imposed upon them by family and society.

*“Mei to gudia bhuli hai, babul thare aale mai
Mahri poti kehel hai, dhiyad ghar ja aapne”*

For example, songs may lament the hardships of early marriage, the burdens of dowry, or the lack of autonomy in household decisions.

“Mera Yana Sa Bahrtaat, mai thaddi su ghnni

In some folk songs, women openly express frustration of imaging them as self-sacrificing and the hypocrisy of gender roles. Women challenge the preconceived notion of domesticity or obedience as the primary value through artistic expressions. Singing folk songs in communal singing gatherings or female-centric performances or women-only spaces, they easily raise their voice for their grievances and aspirations for equality. These moments of articulation are not always overtly disobedient. They are woven into narratives and rituals. It makes them accessible and relatable to other women in the community. These voices foster a sense of unity and harmony with shared consciousness, progressively spreading the waves for social change. In a very true sense, Haryanvi folk songs serve as both a reflection of patriarchal norms and a vehicle for bringing social change by allowing females to express their emotions and desires in open society through cultural means.

Gender Socialization and Identity Building

Haryanvi folksongs passed down by word of mouth play a big role in teaching moral and ethical lessons to the young generation. These songs consist of showing females in double roles, as they are respected but also held back. Over time, these ideas shape how young females see themselves. It's not just outside rules that control them, but also the beliefs they grow up with.

From a young age, girls hear stories about the “perfect” woman, someone who is patient, loyal, and always puts her family first.

“Ekai maai ki kokh te janmya, fer kismataan mein fark se.

Bhai khaata taaja rot, nava kapda paire se.

Bahan khaati baasi rot, faatya kapda odhe s”.

Haryanvi folk songs rarely celebrate female independence or assertiveness. In fact, they reinforce the expectation that a woman’s worth is tied to her ability to serve and uphold family honour. It is also a very interesting fact that when women are represented as strong or clever, their actions are usually framed within the boundaries of social approval and patriarchal values, thus leads to the internalization of gender norms. A different segment of females themselves begin to accept and preserve the standards set by society. Power, therefore, operates not only through explicit rules or external control but also through these internalized expectations. Women may police their own behavior, limit their ambitions, or judge other women based on these ingrained ideals. In some folk songs, women are portrayed as goddesses or embodiments of sacrifice. It can create a paradoxical situation. While these narratives seem to honor women, they also serve to justify and maintain their subordinate status by equating virtue with self-denial and compliance. Haryanvi folktales and oral narratives are central to the construction of feminine identity, reinforcing rigid gender roles and expectations. They shape not only how society views women, but also how women view themselves, making the process of gender socialization both a communal and deeply personal experience.

Emergence of Subaltern and Resistant Voices

In Haryana, women often find comfort and freedom in all-women gatherings. These spaces feel safe and familiar, allowing them to speak openly about their thoughts, struggles, and dreams that they might not feel free to share in public or in front of men. These gatherings give women a voice, helping them talk about parts of their lives that are usually hidden because of social rules and expectations. In these groups, women often use jokes, stories, and hidden messages to talk about the power men hold and the unfair rules placed on women.

“ Ohh sasre kuna jaoun mai, Ohh sasre kuna jaoun mai,

Balm chota saas ladaki tanne baton main”

For example, some folk songs quietly make fun of how men act or point out the double standards women face. They might also talk openly about women’s bodies and desires—things rarely discussed in public. This clever way of speaking lets them push back against unfair rules without causing conflict. Since these gatherings are shared by many women, personal stories become part of a bigger group experience. This builds trust, support, and a strong feeling of togetherness. Through songs and stories, women work through their struggles and help each other feel seen and heard, creating a shared record of strength and resistance.

“Jethe Ne Boli Maar Deyi:

Harya suint meri kaali chotti, haath ke bandh rahi teim gharhi

Audh peher ke paani ne chaali, jehthe ne boli maar deyi

Jinke balam bhai ghar pe konya unka singarna theek nahi”

Many researchers are seeking to explore the significance of these women’s voices for understanding culture and feminist work in rural Haryana. Instead of just following old traditions, the women in these spaces are actively changing and rethinking them. They show new ways of thinking about power, choice, and what it means to be a woman. Gatherings like *Jakdi* singing aren’t just for fun or tradition—they are powerful spaces where women speak up, question unfair rules, and dream together about a different, more equal future in a male-dominated society(Folk songs as discussed in Anjali & Suchitra. (2024), Gaur, V. (2018), Kumar, R. (2020), Manisha (2023), Puneeta. (2024). Punla, D., & Sharma, D. L. (2011), Sharma, S. (2024), Singh, B., & Attri, S. (2023).

Contemporary Shifts and Cultural Identity

In Modern influences, such as education, economic empowerment, urbanization, and digital media, are quite instrumental to reimagine women’s roles and their representation through Haryanvi folk culture. Females, whether young or old, participate in digital folk platforms, compose and share their own creative expressions, and perform leading roles in cultural events. Despite these advances, many traditional patterns persist, and the negotiation between old and new values remains ongoing. Needless to say that folk songs play a continuous vital role in shaping and expressing the cultural identity of Haryana. Anjali and Dr. Suchitra (2024) assert that the folk songs of Haryana deeply reflect the region’s cultural identity by weaving together its agrarian lifestyle, social norms, and historical experiences, serving as living archives of collective memory and values.

Women's voices are gaining greater prominence in both traditional and contemporary contexts. While Haryanvi folk culture has reinforced patriarchal norms, women’s folk songs and oral traditions have always provided a dynamic space for self-expression, subtle resistance, and the reimagining of gender roles. Today, these spaces are evolving further, revealing both the enduring constraints and the expanding agency of rural women as they navigate and reshape their cultural worlds.

Conclusion

This research has explored the multifaceted roles, representations, and voices of women in Haryanvi folk culture. It has tried to reveal both the enduring influence of patriarchal norms and the dynamic spaces of resistance and agency that women have stamped out within these traditions. The present study explored Haryanvi folk songs, *ragnis*, folktales, *saang*, and *phag* in close proximity. This is also stated that culture is not fixed or unchanging. It does not simply repeat old gender roles. Instead, it is active and growing. Within it, women often question, resist, and even break the limits set for them. Women’s folk songs often function as autobiographical and intensive narratives. It allows women to express their dreams, frustrations, and desires in ways that are both personal and political. Traditional literature has largely confined women to diverse roles that include sacrifice, devotion, and domesticity. Folk songs and performances provide women a way to question norms, voice frustration with

patriarchy, and share hopes for equality. The “safety-valve” function of folk songs enables women to voice their feelings and social commentary in a culturally acceptable manner, providing subtle but powerful forms of resistance. Contemporary force like education, economic empowerment, urbanization, and digital media are gradually transforming women’s roles and representations, though traditional patterns persist. Haryanvi folk culture historically reinforces patriarchal values and provides women with creative and communal spaces for self-expression, resistance, and the reimagining of gender roles. Women’s oral traditions are not merely reflections of their oppression; they are also archives of resilience, agency, and hope for change. As women’s voices gain greater prominence, both in traditional gatherings and modern digital platforms, they contribute to the ongoing evolution of Haryana’s cultural identity and the broader discourse on gender equality.

Implications

The present research highlights the scope for documenting and critically analysing female voices in folk culture for academic concerns, cultural preservation, and policy-making. This is the need of the hour to recognize and strengthen these voices for promoting gender sensitization and empowering rural women. We must ensure that the cultural heritage of Haryana remains a living, inclusive, and transformative force in society.

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