

Levity during the *Mahilā holī* oral narratives

Notes for a literary and mediatic analysis

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This article investigates, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the aesthetic and socio-cultural values incorporated by the oral narratives performed during the *Mahilā Holī*-s in Kumaon. These are celebrations of a playful and sometimes humorous nature generally performed in this region by women and for a women-oriented audience. The study proposes to investigate these narratives primarily through a critical and literary survey of the recited oral texts. It also draws inspiration from data gathered during fieldwork in Almora and other urban and peri-urban settings in Kumaon, which included the author's observation of a few performances. Inspired by studies about the forms of "emotional refuge" (Reddy 2001) found in different cultural contexts, in the presence of a certain "emotional community" (Rosenwein 2006), the research combines these views with theoretical models derived from Humour studies and Feminist approaches to media. The objective of the article is to analyse the values embodied by these narratives within the broader characteristics of the emotional community of Kumaoni *Holī* performances.

Keywords: *Mahilā Holī*, levity, farce.

1. Introduction^{1,2}

The objective of the article is to present the results of an interdisciplinary analysis regarding the oral narratives connected to the celebration of *Holī* (or *Hori*) in Kumaon, with a focus on the aesthetic and

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² The article generally adopts the system of transliteration of words in *Devanāgarī* script as indicated by McGregor (1993). However, there are a few exceptions. The transliteration of Sanskrit terms, unless used in Hindi sentences, embraces the standard model universally recognised for Sanskrit terminology. The transliteration of the names of Hindu gods also follows

socio-cultural values embedded in the *Mahilā Holī* ('Women's *Holī*'), a typology of celebration characterised by the almost exclusive presence of women as performers and in the audience. The article also investigates the role embodied by the concept of *khel* ('play') in the oral narratives and performances, often associated with the poetic and aesthetic notions of *hāsyā* ('laughter'), *vyangya* ('satire') and *svāṃg* ('farce'). It proposes to answer the following set of questions: which socio-cultural values and norms are incorporated in the elaboration of oral narratives performed by women authors in Kumaon? What values does the concept of levity embody in the investigated texts? How are such texts mediated and employed to develop a certain way of conceiving sentiments as experienced by women in the Kumaoni public sphere? To what extent do such practices reveal attempts by the local community to find an 'emotional refuge' (Reddy 2001)? By addressing these questions, the article broadens the reflection on the forms and functions embodied in the Indian contemporary setting by *Holī*, the 'festival of colours,' that marks the beginning of the spring season around mid-March.³ The study of *Mahilā Holī* is, then, situated within the framework of a number of previous contributions that have focused on the features of Kumaoni oral narratives. It investigates a gendered North Indian festival that, despite being explored in the past, has rarely been studied from a perspective focusing on the distinct value of narratives performed by women artists. The *Mahilā Holī* is said to share the same cultural value as the other two forms of *Holī*-related celebrations present in this region: the *Khaṛī Holī* ('Standing *Holī*') and the *Baiṭhki Holī* ('Sitting *Holī*'), which are mainly performed by men associated with the main urban centres of the Kumaoni region.⁴ In this regard, it is worth noting that, according to Karki, a shared *māhaul* (Karki 2025b: 99-110), or aesthetic, religious 'atmosphere,' seems to be experienced by both men and women performers during the celebration of Kumaoni *Holī* (Karki 2025a: 175). However, despite the clear affinities between the *Mahilā Holī* and other performances in the

the Sanskrit model. Names of cities and geographical regions, with the exception of those present in the translations from Hindi and Braj languages, are transliterated by adopting the common usage. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Hindi into English are by the author. I would like to thank all the performers and people who contributed to this research, especially Latā Pāṇḍe, for their insights. I would also like to thank the two reviewers of this article for their comments.

³ One of the major motifs that inspires *Holī* is connected to the self-sacrifice of Holikā, sister of the two demons Hiranyakaśipu and Hiranyākṣa. Alongside this mythopoetic and religious reference, *Holī* presents extremely diversified regional temporalities, symbolisms and forms, and seems to embody different socio-cultural values, also with reference to gender dynamics. The emotions evoked by this festival also vary greatly depending on the different ritual and religious contexts in which it is celebrated. For instance, while local forms such as the *Masāne kī horī* ('Cremation ground's *Holī*') are playful and light-hearted, they also incorporate references to death that are not present in other local forms of the festival (Caranti 2022).

⁴ One of these centres is the Lakṣmī Bhaṇḍār 'Hukkā Klab' in Almora, where many generations of *holiyār-s* have contributed to the preservation and renovation of the *Baiṭhki Holī*. Other important urban centres can be found in Nainital, Pithoragarh, Haldwani.

region, previous studies have also reflected in a succinct way on the relevant discontinuities existing between them. Primarily, it has been noted that the *Mahilā Holī* can generally be attended only by women belonging to the Kumaoni community (Karki 2025a, 2025b; Pande 2011; Srivastava 2016; Upreti 2009). A socio-cultural aspect that seems to characterise the *Mahilā Holī*, and may link it to other performative practices in North India, is the presence of levity and a humourous tone in the performances. Indeed, according to Karki's interpretation, since the pre-independence period, women *kalākār-s* ('artists') and *holyār-s* of the region, "did not see it as something to be ashamed of but as a marker of their deep attachment to the festival. Holī's permissiveness and relaxed social structures allow them to revel, relax and rejuvenate their spirits" (Karki 2025a: 173).

Another introductory observation concerns the fact that during *Mahilā Holī* women performers would be engaged not only in reciting oral narratives but also in dramatic enactments involving an element of farce (Upreti 2009: 163-164). The adoption of a dramatic enactment during *Mahilā Holī*, and the subsequent use of the body as an instrument through which women performers can express the sentiments and atmosphere of the celebration, may be another indication of the distinctiveness of the *Mahilā Holī* in Kumaon. The research, mainly based on the literary survey and investigation of the oral narratives associated with the *Mahilā Holī*, reflects the data gathered during my personal fieldwork in a number of urban and peri-urban cultural centres of the region between December 2024 and March 2025.

2. Problems and methodology: studying levity and emotional refuge

The article is inspired by the wide spectrum of contributions on the function of oral narratives in establishing a normative representation of gender dynamics within a given society. The assumption of this theoretical approach is that oral narratives are 'mediatic' instruments encompassing a variety of forms and playing a pivotal intellectual role in constructing and communicating to a given audience memories and identities established through storytelling (Harvey 2020; Martindale, Schneiderman and Turin 2018: 200–202). Oral narratives are important instruments for the edification of a collective memory and atmosphere, that may integrate individual experiences and sentiments experienced during a performance, into collective forms reflecting the *habitus* of a given community. Notably, the article postulates that the atmosphere created by the performance of oral narratives is a dynamic and unstable entity, whose realisation may be fragmented in a variety of subjective responses and interpretations by the audience and performers. I postulate two dimensions that define the heterogeneous nature of the experiences that characterise the Kumaoni *Holī*. Primarily, oral narratives and performances—and the feelings associated with them and shared by both performers and

audience—may reveal a variety of forms, responses and sensibilities that depend on, and are deeply affected by, the intersectionality of the contexts in which the oral narratives are performed. The *Mahilā Holi* may be a gendered *mahfil* ('gathering') that, for its intrinsic aesthetic and socio-cultural traits, represents finalities and patterns of representation that partially deviate from other coeval performative spaces present in Kumaon during *Holi*. The gendered nature of this event is, however, one of the dimensions in which its intersectional character may be studied.

A second dimension reflected on here regards differences in feeling and sensibility detected in the main urban and cultural cities of Kumaon, such as Almora, Nainital etc., as compared with peri-urban centres and settings. It is also important to note that the values and functions embodied by the oral narratives may also be deeply affected by the impact of new technologies. Kumaoni history is exemplary in this sense. Since the second half of the 19th century, oral narratives associated with this region have been increasingly incorporated into traditional Indian media (Karki 2025a: 175). More recently, communities in Uttarakhand and other South Asian regions have shown a tendency to use oral narratives in new digital contexts, fostering new storytelling practices that adapt the collective self to current socio-cultural, economic and political needs (Fiol 2010, 2011, 2012). The circulation of oral narratives through digital technology "helps the 'traditional' past converge with present-day practices, producing transnational cultural forms of memory that rely on hybrid technological repertoires" (Martindale, Schneiderman and Turin 2018: 200). In this context, a semiotic text analysis that focuses on the representation of gender identity through a survey of different media and socio-cultural contexts allows us to derive social meanings from the repeated combination of images, symbols and words related to women in the Kumaon region during the *Mahilā Holi*.

In line with the perspective proposed by Harvey (2020), the semiotic text analysis of the role assigned to women in media representation may embody two distinct common features. One narrative may consist of symbols and values established by projecting upon women cultural "tropes" that are useful in defining a certain normative, ideal behavior. Regarding this, Harvey writes that "tropes" are those "devices" that allow the audience to identify with the characters. Tropes have cultural significance and are specific, but in general, despite some global discrepancies, they seem to follow certain recurring patterns. The role of tropes is to help the audience establish relations between the main characters of the narration (Harvey 2020: 58-84). The construction of an ethical/unethical model associated with gender identity is, however, only one side of the coin. In parallel, the projection of certain tropes also elicits the definition of a certain idea about the subjectivity of women, that is established through the representation or self-representation of desires and free will.

How are these seemingly mutually exclusive narrative tendencies presented in the Indian context? As Rao argued in reference to *ṭhumrī* and the socio-cultural consciousness and empowerment of women performers in India, these seemingly different narrative dimensions are not separate but often tend to coexist (Rao 1999: 475–477). According to Rao, oral performances, especially those connected to local practices, often represent liminal spaces of continuous negotiation between diverse societal, aesthetic and cultural tendencies. Local arts and artists may also enact strategies of grotesque and satirical narrativisation, and render “existing power structures alien and arbitrary” by remarking how “utopian aspects of performances are subordinated mainly to its satirical functions” (Prakash 2019: 33). The presence of humorous narratives and also, in a more latent way, the representation of levity, be it linked to a ritualistic religious context or partially separate from it,⁵ may also be important cultural vectors through which less represented categories can renegotiate the individual and collective self during the liminal⁶ space of the performance (Dempsey and Raj 2010; Perera and Pathak 2022). The sentiments and modalities through which narratives that define a politics of representation may be expressed are many and reveal different ways of establishing what may be defined the ‘emotional community’ of Kumaoni women (Plamber 2010: 249–261; Rosenwein 2006). In broad terms, if the concept of levity is adopted here to refer to narratives that emphasise the concept of ‘playfulness,’ often translated into Hindi as *khel* (lit. ‘play’), *mazāq* (‘taste,’ but also ‘wit’) and *sukh* (‘joy’), humour, as explained by Attardo and other linguists, primarily reveals linguistic incongruity (Attardo 1994, 2001), which may or may not be characterised by satirical intent (Simpson 2003).

A literary and ethnographic perspective focusing on how distinct communities codify certain feelings and sentiments, examines also how performative spaces characterised by humour may become an “emotional refuge” for less represented members. According to Reddy’s theory, an emotional refuge is a performative space where performers and audience members express in a more independent and non-normative way. Indeed, it is a “safe release from prevailing emotional norms” and a “relaxation of emotional effort” that, under certain conditions, “may threaten the existing emotional regime” (Reddy 2001: 129, quoted in Jiang 2019: 90). As theorised by Rosenwein with the scope of explaining the nature of the emotional community, every social system, despite an appearance of homogeneity, is generally permeated by the coexistence of a variety of emotional communities (Rosenwein 2006: 1–32).

⁵ For a recent bibliography on the relationship between humour and religion cf. Gilhus (1997, 2004), Graham (2024),

⁶ The concept of liminality implies, in Turner’s words, those moments of ‘passage’ during which the subjective and collective self is on the ‘threshold’ and is subject to a process that is “betwixt-and-between the normal” (Turner 1979: 465). These moments also usually reveal a transition from one status to another.

Every community is, therefore, inextricably characterised by an inner heterogeneity and the continuous aesthetic, socio-cultural and political (re)negotiation of the symbols and values associated with the manifestation of sentiments. The present study accepts Rosenwein’s theoretical model and, more precisely, the idea of studying the values associated with the manifestation of feelings, through oral narratives and performance, in a multidimensional manner. This theoretical perspective is, indeed, functional at enlarging the picture so far crafted by prior studies, that investigated Kumaoni *Holi* as a monolithic and unilateral aesthetic, socio-cultural and religious experience. The idea of the fragmentation of the emotional community in a variety of intertwined yet distinct coexisting communities permits the investigation of the intersectional dimensions of the discourse.

Taking a broader view compared to previous theoretical approaches, this article primarily analyses the processes of elaboration of the women’s identity through the critical study of the oral narratives recited in Kumaon. It builds on the literary material gathered during the fieldwork in Kumaon, consisting primarily of booklets published before or during the *Holi* celebrations (Pāṇḍey J. 2017; Pāṇḍe K. 2025; Upreti 2009).

Also, a few Hindi collections of Kumaoni *Holi śāstrīya* (‘canonical’) and *lok* (‘popular’) songs have been consulted and adopted for the translation and analysis of the oral texts.⁷ After a literary and linguistic analysis of the narratives produced by oral practices, the second part of the work, primarily through interviews and observations gathered during the fieldwork, analyses two other aspects that are functional in contextualising the performative ‘life’ (Lutgendorf 1991) of the texts. The first dimension regards the role of farce, intended here as a mode that, apart from the enactment of oral narratives, also implies the realisation of small dramatic sketches that can also embody a playful, humorous and satirical value. The term which is generally used in previous Hindi studies to denote the concept of farce in the *Mahilā holi* is *svāṅg*; or, less commonly, *prahasan*. Here, this terminology has a general value, and does not specifically refer to the musical theatre tradition that, according to Sharma, developed in many North Indian regions during the 19th century (Sharma 2025: 42). The research does not aim to give a comprehensive ethnographic or ethno-musicological analysis of this cultural phenomenon. Rather, it is an attempt to provide an interdisciplinary understanding of this celebration by emphasising the narratives present in the oral literary forms of the *Mahilā Holi*. It also

⁷ It is relevant to note that, apart from this aesthetic separation between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ traditions of Kumaoni oral narratives, the majority of the songs recited during this celebration are fit to be included in what Manuel (2015a, 2015b) and, more recently, Caranti call ‘semi-classical’ or ‘intermediate’ genres of Hindustani music, musical genres that play a “transitional” role between the classical and the popular genres (Caranti 2022: 41).

develops an introductory critical approach toward sociocultural tendencies surrounding the *Mahilā Holī* in the current Kumaoni cultural sphere.

The data collected in research through interviews and notes was provided by participants who were previously informed about the scope of the research. Performers associated with the *Mahilā Holī* also played the role of gatekeepers in permitting observation of events connected to the celebrations. In the context of the fieldwork in Almora, the informants were *holyār-s* associated with the Lakṣmī Bhaṇḍār ‘Hukkā Klab.’ I also attended public *Mahilā Holī*-related events held in this religious site in March 2025. In this month, besides private *Mahilā Holī*-s held at home, a few public events connected to this celebration are organised at the Hukkā Klab and in other religious and non-religious venues. The main informant among the women performers associated with the Lakṣmī Bhaṇḍār ‘Hukkā Klab’ was Latā Pāṇḍey, with whom I had a virtual interview on 15 January 2025. I had other smaller and informal interactions with this performer in the following months. To collect general information about the aesthetics, forms and socio-cultural values of *Holī* in Kumaon I had also interviews with the men performers at the above-mentioned centre. With regards to the fieldwork in urban and peri-urban areas of Munsyari the data were primarily collected through anonymised interviews with local performers. Indeed, by doing the research under the methodological principles articulated by general ethical considerations,⁸ I have preferred to use the anonymisation method for local artists connected to the Kumaoni *Holī* who are not associated with major cultural and artistic centres. The open-ended interviews, which entailed reflection on the general forms, aesthetics and the content of the main oral narratives of the *Mahilā Holī*, had a variable duration and were usually held in the home of the artists. I limited myself to the observation of performances where the presence of a man would not be seen by participants as a limit to self-expression. From this perspective, I decided to have a limited participation at public celebrations only, avoiding attendance at private meetings. In addition to analysing the data collected during the fieldwork, the second part of the article considers the dynamics of mediatisation in the Kumaoni region regarding the aesthetics and socio-cultural values associated with *Mahilā Holī*. To investigate these processes, the research built on Harvey's theoretical approach to

⁸ Cf. Atkinson (2009); Harvey (2020), especially with reference to the role embodied by the positionality of the research/researcher during the research and fieldwork; Bonetti-Natali (2024: 11-38, 186-195); ‘Ethical Guidelines 2021 for Good Research Practice,’ by the Association of Social Anthropologist of the UK (ASA); ‘Statement on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility,’ by the American Anthropological Association (AAA). The research has been also situated in the context of the ethical lines inspiring the *Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation)* and the *European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (2023).

the study of media and considered the role of both traditional media in Hindi and new media in Hindi and English.

3. Main characteristics of the three forms of Kumaoni *Holī*

Alongside the *Mahilā Holī*, the most significant celebrations performed during *Holī* in the region are the *Khaṛī* and *Baiṭhki/Nagar Holī*. Before delving into an analysis of the specific narratives and tropes embodied by the *Mahilā Holī*, I now briefly consider the broad socio-cultural characteristics of the three typologies of *Holī* in Kumaon. Some of the more famous Kumaoni *baiṭhak-s* ('meetings') are associated with religious centres present in major cultural cities of the region, particularly the cities of Almora, Nainital and Haldwani. Generally, they are organised through institutions, such as the Lakṣmī Bhaṇḍār 'Hukkā Klab' at Almora, where the aesthetic value of the oral narratives performed is enshrined in the solemn and mystical dimension of these centres. The earliest Kumaoni *baiṭhak-s* are organised around mid-December, during the first *ravivār* ('sunday') of the month of *pauṣ*, and in the period that spans from December to the Hindu month of *māgh*, with the beginning of the *Vasant pañcamī*. The majority of the oral narratives recited during the *Baiṭhki/Nagar Holī*'s celebrations are of a highly solemn and spiritual tone (Pande 2011, 233). During this phase, named *Nirvāṇ kī Holī*, detachment is the dimension mostly represented by the *holyārs*, a theme often pursued by artists through songs that stress the leit-motif of the *bārahmāsā*, the 'songs of the twelve months.' The repertoire of the oral narratives performed during this phase is mostly inspired by *bhakti* literature and reveals affinities not only with Braj literature but also with *nirguṇ* (lit. 'without qualifications') *bhakti* literature and, among other early-modern devotional authors, with Kabīr's poetry.

After this temporary phase, performers shift from the narration of solemn stories of detachment to motifs of love and play. During this phase, around mid-February to March, the *holyār-s* may be engaged in exhibitions that stress the notion of *śṛṅgāra rasa*, the aesthetic category that focuses on the 'flavour' of erotic sentiment in artistic and literary representation (Upreti 2009: 111). The language adopted by the artists during this and the following phases of the *Baiṭhki Holī* is *Braj*, but, occasionally, *Khaṛī Bolī* may be used during the performance. Also, in spite of the impact made by local culture on the rhythm and sound of the songs recited, the Kumaoni language is mostly avoided in the recitation. The manifestation of the *śṛṅgāra rasa* may also be accompanied by narratives emphasising the symbolic role incorporated in Kumaon, and elsewhere in India, by notions of play and levity. While considering the aesthetic traits of the *Baiṭhki Holī* within the broader discourse on the value of levity and humour during the Kumaoni *Holī*, two aspects emerge that distinguish it from the *Khaṛī Holī* and, to a larger extent, from the *Mahilā Holī*. Firstly, with a few sporadic exceptions, humour is generally excluded from

the oral narratives recited during these performances. In contrast, as noted by Karki, more ‘serious,’ solemn motifs and a general sentimental tone emerge, characterising the majority of the *Holī baiṭhaks* (Karki 2025a: 174-190). Another crucial aspect is that dramatic performances are generally excluded from these shows, where the emphasis is placed on music and poetry.

Baiṭhki Holī is primarily associated with music and oral narratives, whereas the *Khaṛī Holī*, which is performed standing, is a dance-centred celebration that, in continuity with the *Baiṭhki Holī*, also incorporates oral narratives. As regards the timing with which these narratives manifest themselves during *Holī*, it is relevant to note that the *Khaṛī Holī* reveals almost the same temporality observed in relation to the development over the months of the themes sung during *Baiṭhki Holī*. Particularly relevant during the early phase of this celebration, when dance is not allowed (Upreti 2009: 4), is the presence of songs called *vihāg*, which immediately precede the *Cīr bandhan*, performed during *Holikā aṣṭamī* mostly in the peri-urban and rural areas of the region. The *cīr*, a strip of cloth attached to a sacred stick, is bound during this celebration—from this derives the name (lit. ‘binding of the strip’)—and a procession is led by a person holding the *cīr*, and by the men of the community for several days. The celebration has a gendered character and involves a quite strict ritual separation between men and women. The popular dimension of the *Khaṛī Holī* is proven by the diffusion of this kind of celebration in many second-tier cities, peri-urban and rural areas of Kumaon, where, alongside the *Mahilā Holī*, it is probably the most widespread form of *Holī*-related celebration present in the region.

Compared to *Baiṭhki Holī*, the *Khaṛī Holī* is characterised by an aesthetic hybridity that, according to performers interviewed at the ‘Hukka Club’ and elsewhere, is not present in the highly solemn environment of the *Baiṭhki Holī*. It is worth noting that not only do the artists connected to *Baiṭhki Holī* tend to mark the profound aesthetic and social difference between these arts, but, also on the popular level, these events are devised through the use of labels that openly establish aesthetic hierarchies between the above-mentioned events. While, as noted by Upreti, the *Baiṭhki Holī* is often labelled as a canonical form of *Holī*, the *Khaṛī Holī* and the *Mahilā Holī* are considered as *moṭī*, more ‘rough’ and less polite forms of *Holī* (Upreti 2009: 13). If considered in the context of the broad aesthetic, socio-cultural and religious characteristics of the two other men-oriented forms of *Holī* in Kumaon, the *Mahilā Holī* reveals a few remarkable differences. First of all, it is generally considered the most ‘noisy’ among the forms of Kumaoni *Holī* celebrations (Upreti 2009: 163). This specificity derives not only from the presence of oral narratives and songs during the *Mahilā Holī*, but also from the realization during this performance of dramatic enactments that reveal a ‘tradition of farce’ (*svāṃg ki paramparā*; Upreti 2009: 163). There are a few socio-cultural reflections that may be derived from the observation of farce in Kumaon during the *Mahilā Holī*, to which I will return later; for now, it is important to outline that,

more than *Khaṛī Holī* and, in a much more marked way than the *Baiṭhki Holī*, the *Mahilā Holī* seems, at least in the reading that is generally offered by *holyār-s* and prior studies, to have a less solemn tone. Another reflection that was derived from the interviews to authors associated with the *Mahilā Holī* is that, in a much more marked way than the *Baiṭhki Holī*, this celebration may embody a variety of forms and social dimensions. Before reflecting further on the specific tropes and narratives incorporated during the *Mahilā Holī* two additional contextual hints must be provided.

The first relevant observation regards the different temporality that marks and differentiates this *mahfil* if compared to the *Baiṭhki Holī* and *Khaṛī Holī*. Generally, based on prior studies and fieldwork, the *Mahilā Holī* celebrations start around mid-February—almost two months after the start of the other celebrations—and are introduced by the *maṅgalacaṛaṇ*, with a dedication to Gaṇeśa and songs devoted to Viṣṇu (*Viṣṇupadī gīt*; Upreti 2009: 163). Not unlike the other Kumaoni *Holī*-related celebrations, a crucial moment in the development of a feeling of levity and erotic sentiment comes after the realisation of the *Cīr bandhan*. In the peri-urban areas of Kumaon, the *Mahilā Holī* celebration is usually performed by carrying out a procession that is led simultaneously with the other men-oriented celebration. Further, I had the possibility to note that the women are generally not allowed access to the temple. As for the oral narratives recited during the celebrations, in spite of the presence of a few *rāga-s* that are sung during the performances, the songs of the *Mahilā Holī-s* generally have a distinct melody (*tarz*) and sound (*dhvāni*), and are not deemed by the majority of the *holyār-s* as belonging to a classical genre.

4. Levity and other emotional tones of the *Mahilā Holī*

On the basis of a critical analysis of songs assembled in religious booklets, anthologies, and reported to me during the fieldwork I conducted in Kumaon, it is possible to identify a wide spectrum of emotional ‘tones’ associated with the representation of women in the context of *Mahilā Holī* in Kumaon. Significantly, however, not all the songs I analysed reveal what, according to some previous studies, seems to be the essential and specific element of this celebration, namely a lesser emphasis on the religious and solemn elements of *Holī* in Kumaon. In addition, many of the songs analysed do not seem to allude, through the use of words such as *khel* (‘play’) and *sukh* (‘joy’), to the joyful and light-hearted atmosphere sometimes associated with *Mahilā Holī*. On the contrary, especially if we focus on the songs collected in the booklets, it seems that a large part of the repertoire sung by performers during this festival addresses the concept of *maryādā*, the obligations that the local community of the Kumaoni women must fulfil. Much of this repertoire focuses on the religious and mythopoetic imagery of the *Itihāsa-s*, and seems to represent the duties of women within the framework of ideal relationships

established by female goddesses with their male counterparts. The figure of Sītā stands out in this more solemn and moralising context, appearing in numerous compositions in which the *Rāmāite* iconography is present. The construction of values, associated with the gendered representation of mythical figures through oral narratives, is certainly part of the processes that have always characterised the retelling of the story of Rāma and related figures throughout history. Sītā not only represents an ideal of fertility and socio-cultural and political renovation, but her figure is inextricably connected to issues of purity, innocence and legitimacy that are at the core of almost all the renderings of the *Rāmarājya* (the ideal ‘kingdom of Rāma’), found in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and elsewhere.⁹ Sometimes, alongside the representation of elements that refer to the duties of figures belonging to religious iconography, the songs seem to indicate to the audience—presumably composed in most cases of women—elements that refer to spiritual and religious paths of improvement and purification. Quite marked in some of the songs I identified in booklets is the reference to the concept of *mōkṣa*, or spiritual liberation. However, this dimension is sometimes accompanied by the idea of ‘prosperity’ or ‘fortune,’ that can be achieved through a series of invocations and/or by complying with a series of duties and moral obligations.

सुमिरो सिद्धि सीता-राम भया, तुम हिरा जन्म नहीं पावोगे
 इस कलयुग में दो ही बड़े हैं
 एक गंगा एक राम भया, तुम हिरा जन्म नहीं पावोगे
 पाप कटन को गंगा बड़ी है
 नाम जपन को राम भया, तुम हिरा जन्म नहीं पावोगे
 क्या कलयुग में दो ही बड़े हैं
 एक ब्राह्मण एक गय भया, तुम हिरा जन्म नहीं पावोगे
 कर्म करण को विष्णु बड़ो है
 कुल तारन को गाय भया, तुम हिरा जन्म नहीं पावोगे (Upreti 2009: 168)

Remember the prosperity [of the time when] there were Sītā and Rāma,
 Otherwise you will not get salvation.
 In this Kaliyuga there are only two great entities,
 the one was Gaṅga, the other was Rāma, otherwise you will not get salvation.
 The Gaṅga is great in destroying the sin,
 remember the name of Rāma, otherwise you will not get salvation.

⁹ For a brief bibliography on the notion of *Rāmarājya* in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and in Indian literature and its socio-cultural implications throughout the centuries cf., among the others, Gonzalez-Reimann (2006), Lutgendorf (1991), Pollock (1993) and Stasik (2009).

In this Kaliyuga there only two great entities,
one was a brahman, the second was a cow, otherwise you will not get salvation.
The priest is extraordinary in performing his obligations,
the cow is extraordinary in letting the family cross,
otherwise you will not get salvation.¹⁰

तुम सिद्धि करो महाराज, होली के दिन में
तुम विघ्न हरो महाराज, होली के दिन में
गणपति, गौरी, महेश मनाऊं इन सब को पूजूं आज
होली के दिन में
ब्रह्मा विष्णु महेश मनाऊं, इन सब को पूजूं आज
होली के दिन में
राम लछीमन भारत शत्रुघ्न, इन सब को पूजूं आज
होली के दिन में
जगत जननि जगदम्बे मनाऊं, नव दुर्गा पूजूं आज
होली के दिन में (Upreti 2009: 165)

Oh Mahārāja, make your fortune in the days of *Holi*.
Oh Mahārāja, cancel the obstacles, in the days of *Holi*.
I praise Gaṇapati, Gaurī, Maheśa,
I offer my *pūjā* today to all of Them,
during the day of *Holi*.
I praise Brahma, Viṣṇu, Maheśa, I offer my *pūjā* to all of Them,
during the day of *Holi*.
I offer my *pūjā* to Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bhārata, Śatrughna,
during the day of *Holi*.
I offer my *pūjā* to the Genitrix of the World, to the Mother of the World, to the
nine Durgā-s during the day of *Holi*.

The intellectual horizon in which these narratives are situated tends to place greater emphasis on an external focalisation of women's feelings and condition. Characters are often portrayed within the intimate and private context of the family. As we see in the first narrative, women goddesses are not represented individually, but often as part of divine couples. This type of representation, especially in reference to Sītā, fits a model that is present within the textual tradition relating to the *Rāmāyaṇa*

¹⁰ The words *hira janam* literally mean 'diamond birth;' in this context, they may be interpreted as a reference to the concept of *mokṣa*, liberation from rebirth.

(Goldman 2018: 61; Hess 1999: 1-3), and informs the gendered tropes present in numerous performative contexts of northern India. However, it is possible in Kumaon to see less monolithic and rigidly idealised images focusing on the duties to which women are subject. These narratives often derive from elements taken from *Itihāsa*-s, but they sometimes develop more ‘marginal’ paths relating to the representation of Sītā and other figures. As noted by Goldman, the representation of Sītā and, in particular, that of Sītā’s body is generally used in many textual traditions to mark a religious “anxiety” (Goldman 2018: 68). One moment where this feelings emerges regards the ordeal of the *agniparikṣā*, a ‘trial by fire,’ to which the *Sītāchāyā* (“Sita’s shade”) is subjected to prove her purity at the end of the *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (*Yuddhakāṇḍa*, 101-104). The second moment in which this feeling emerges would be connected to the trope of the *Sītātyāga*, the ‘abandonment of Sītā,’ that appears in the *Uttarakāṇḍa* (*Uttarakāṇḍa*, 43ff). Both episodes, writes Goldman, “are deeply disturbing and have sparked much debate” (Goldman 2018: 68). According to Hess, both of these episodes have produced a variety of cultural, philosophical and religious responses that “creatively engage with the tradition, altering plot points, shifting emphases, adding and dropping episodes, bearing the mark of regional cultures and historical developments” (Hess 1999: 4). Such moral tension and anxiety, that is also part of a few oral narratives collected in the consulted booklets and anthologies, seem to be well exemplified in the song *Sītā van merī akeli kaise rahī*, that is generally performed during the *Mahilā Holī* but also in the frame of the *Baiṭhki* and *Kharī Holī*:

अरे हां रे सीता वन में अकेली कैसे रही
 कैसे रही दिन-रात सीता वन में अकेली कैसे रही
 अरे हां रे सीता महल सब छोड़ चली
 वन में कुटिया रमाय सीता वन में अकेली कैसे रही
 अरे हां रे सीता षटरस भोजन छोड़ चली
 वन में वनफल खाय सीता वन में अकेली कैसे रही
 अरे हां रे सीता पलंग बिछौना छोड़ चली
 वन में पात बिछाय सीता वन में अकेली कैसे रही
 अरे हां रे सीता संग सहेली छोड़ चली (Upreti 2009: 171).

Oh, how did Sītā wound up alone in the forest?
 How did she wound up for the whole day and night, alone, in the forest?
 Oh, Sītā left the palace and everything else and went away!
 In the forest she enjoyed a stay in the small hut,
 how did Sītā wound up alone in the forest?
 Oh, she gave up food endowed with six flavours and went away.
 In the forest she ate the fruits of the forest,

how did Sītā wound up alone in the forest?
Oh! She left her bed and went away!
She spread leaves in the forest,
how did Sītā wound up alone the forest?
Oh! Sītā left the company of her friends and went away!

The episode described in the narrative framework of this song seems to recall the emotional dimension evoked by Sītā's exile from the city of Ayodhya after being subject to the ordeal by fire. Unlike in other songs belonging to the same repertoire, the figure of Sītā does not appear stylised or idealised, but the focus seems to be on a series of elements that highlight the drama of this goddess's new status after exile. This narrative, and the consequent vulnerability to which the character is exposed, is expressed through the juxtaposition of ingredients that recall the comforts at court, and a series of elements that seem to destabilise Sītā's existential and ontological condition. Thus, for example, the foods endowed with the six flavours, a reference to Ayurvedic medicine, are contrasted with the frugal foods eaten by Sītā in the forest; similarly, the sumptuous bed of palace life is contrasted with the bed of leaves that Sītā prepares in the liminal space of the forest. Parallel to this narrative style, that underlines the separation between what happens inside the palace (*mahal*) and everything outside it, is the reflection on Sita's loneliness, expressed through the use of the adjective *akelī* ('alone'). However, while the tone of this and other similar songs seems generally and allusively critical of the system that produced this exile, significantly, this song does not seem to outline an alternative ethical or moral vision to that present in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The criticism, if present, remains subtle and forms the backdrop to a reflection that focuses on the psychological and existential condition of the goddess. Interestingly, even though it is set in the carnival context of *Holi*, the narrative is neither humorous or satirical. Finally, while exposing the fragility of Sītā 's situation, I believe that this kind of songs projects onto this figure an idea of strength and heroism. Sītā is not only portrayed as a figure who is subject to events, but becomes part of a transformative process through which she seems able to overcome her new difficult situation. This takes on even more significance when the song is contextualised in Kumaon, where the image of women as harbingers of independence, strength and responsibility is recurrent, even in oral narratives unrelated to *Holi*, and seems to be at the centre of socio-cultural dynamics of normalisation to which traditional and new media also contribute. This imagery can be seen in songs and popular practices that celebrate the symbolism of the *kirsāṇ*, of the *bhyokhuli* and

ḍaukhuli (Negi, R. 2022: 33).¹¹ This analysis suggests a thematic repertoire in which the dimension linked to the representation of women's feelings appears veiled by a subtle and implicit critical reference to a patriarchal system.

Considering the representation of ideas of responsibility and duty towards such a system, the semantic and symbolic spectrum linked to the idea of play and lightness appears equally multifaceted. The songs listed below quite clearly reveal the adoption of concepts that refer to the idea of play, and serve to represent the polysemy of this notion in the oral narratives linked to *Mahilā Holī* in Kumaon.

चलो बरसाने खेलेंगे होरी
कहा पहन होरी खेलें कन्हय्या
कहा पहनै राधा गोरी
मुकुट पहन होरी खेलें
कंकण बांधे राधा गोरी (Upreti 2009: 172).

We will play *Holī* in Barsāna,
what we will wear by celebrating *Holī*, oh Kṛṣṇa,
what will the fair-skinned Rādhā wear?
We will play *Holī* wearing a crown,
The fair-skinned Rādhā wears bracelets.

मत जाओ पिया होरी आई रही।मत...
जिनके पिया फागुन घर रहते
उनकी नारी सुहाग भरी
जिनके पीया प्रदेश बसत हैं
उनकी नारी कोप भरी।। मत...
सिंदूर-काजल खूब बिराजे
नैन में झकझोर, भाई।मत...
मखमली अंगिया खूब बिराजे
छातियां में झकझोर भाईमत (Upreti 2009: 176).

Don't go my love, *Holī* has arrived and is here to stay. Don't...
The wives of those whose husbands stay at home
in the month of *Phāgun* are full of happiness.

¹¹ As noted by Negi, the term *kirsān* is usually adopted in the Kumaon region to address the ideal and trope of the hardworking and dedicated woman; *bhyokhuli* is a technical term that is employed to refer to highly skilled women climbers. Finally, the term *ḍaukhuli* is used to refer the skilled tree climbers (Negi, R. 2022: 33).

The wives whose husbands live in foreign lands
are full of anger. Don't...
sindūr and *kājal* shine a lot,
the eyes are being shaken,
the velvet blouse shines a lot,
the breasts are being shaken. Don't...

होरी खेलें पशुपति नाथ
नगर नेपाल में होरी खेलें...
ब्रह्मा जी खेलें विष्णु जी खेलें
लक्ष्मी बिराजे साथ, नगर नेपाल में होरी खेलें...
राम जी खेलें लखन जी खेलें
सीता बिराजे साथ, नगर नेपाल में होरी खेलें...
दाऊ जी खेलें बलदाऊ जी खेलें
राधा बिराजे साथ, नगर नेपाल में होरी खेलें (Upreti 2009: 166).

We will celebrate *Holi*, oh Lord Paśupati,
in the city of Nepāla, we celebrate *Holi*...
Lord Brahmā will play, Viṣṇu will play,
alongside the shining Lakṣmī, in the city of Nepāla. We will celebrate *Holi*...
Lord Rāma will play, Lord Lakṣmaṇa will play,
Alongside the shining Sītā, in the city of Nepāla. We will celebrate *Holi*...
The elder brother will play, the younger brother will play,
Alongside the shining Rādhā, in the city of Nepāla. Let's celebrate *Holi*...

बिरज में होरी कैसे खेलूंगी मैं सांवरिया के संग
कोरे-कोरे कलश मंगाए ता पर घोला रंग
भर पिचकारी सन्मुख मारी अंगिया हो गई तंग
अबीर उड़ता गुलाल उड़ता उड़ते सातों रंग
भर पिचकारी सन्मुख मारी अंगिया हो गई तंग
लहंगा तेरा धूम-धुमैला अंगिया तेरी तंग
खसम तुम्हारे बड़े निखटू चलो हमारे संग (Upreti 2009: 176).

How will I celebrate *Holi* in Braj today with my dark-skinned beloved?
New and diverse water pots have been requested,
inside which colours have been mixed, buckets of water have been placed at the ready, and my
whole body is numb.
Abīr and *gulāl* are being thrown and sprinkled in all seven colours,
buckets of water have been thrown in front and the whole bodice is numb,
your voluminous skirt is making a lot of noise and your whole body is numb

your husband is a great idler; come with us!

The songs reveal several shared features. Firstly, most of them appear to draw thematic inspiration from tales of eroticism centring on the relationship between Kṛṣṇa and the Gopī-s, with a few references to Radhā. The iconographic context within which these compositions are set is therefore strongly influenced by Braj literature, which, according to the interpretation of the well-known literary critic Rām Candra Śukla, seems to define more clearly an interest in aspects that are apparently more light-hearted and linked to the narration of Kṛṣṇa's plays (*līlā-s*).¹² In light of this, most of the analysed oral narratives reveal a lighter poetic dimension, in which the image of play defines a sentimental horizon often different from the more solemn tone of the previous songs. From the formal perspective, with the notable exception of *Birāj Holī kaise khelūngī*, the texts under investigation avoid first-person narration and this, as I am going to explain in the following, contributes to the construction of a narrative in which the representation of the subjectivity of women's characters remains less visible. Alongside these affinities, some significant differences in the modulation of feelings can be identified. One tendency can be seen in texts, such as *Māt jāo piyā Horī āi rahī*, where the concepts of lightness and *suhāg* ('joy of the wifehood') are, in a sense, 'contained' and linked, albeit not explicitly, to the idea of preserving the notion of women as protectors of marriage. This theoretical model is also evident in the song *Calo barsane kheleṅge Horī*. Here, it is plausible to figure out that an atmosphere of play remains embedded within the ethical and gendered responsibilities of the women toward their home and familiar boundaries. The poetic construction of women's subjectivity appears to serve the purpose of defining and regulating the possibilities of finding what Reddy would call as an 'emotional refuge' within the broader ethical boundaries of the Kumaoni 'emotional community.'

A different thematic model for representing levity in relation to the portrayal of women characters can be found in *Horī kheleṅ Paśupati Nāth*, where a certain eroticism seems to be emphasised, and ethical ambiguity permeates the allusions to the relationships established by single goddesses with couples of gods. Negi emphasises in her study on the representation of women in the oral traditions of Kumaon the echo of a symbolism, sometimes of a satirical and humorous nature, linked to the erotic dimension. This component, to use Negi's words, is present, alongside songs that extol the dimension

¹² This imaginary usually transcends the more normative social and ethical horizon of *Rāmāite* literature or that of the *Kṛṣṇaite* iconography described in the *Bhagavadgītā*. In the *Sūrsāgar*, a 16th-century literary work by Sūrdās, the concept of play, linked to eroticism and love, serves as a means of expressing a form of devotion that is similar to, yet distinct from, that present in *Rāmāite* literature. According to Śukla, in this type of work, "the image to which these poets refer is a sea filled with waves produced incessantly by joy and aesthetic pleasure" (Śukla 2011: 130–131).

of sacrifice and personal chastity, in “a few genres of songs that explore aspects of feminine desire and sexuality, and women are portrayed as desiring subjects who long for their lovers and husbands” (Negi, R. 2020: 19). However, it is worth noting that, in some cases, such as in the song considered above, the woman's subjectivity apparently does not constitute the thematic epicentre of the narrative but, to put it in Harvey's (2020: 120-125) words, it represents the ‘object’ of the desire directed at her by male characters. From this point of view, in light of the present mapping of the sentimental tones and socio-cultural values expressed in songs that refer to the idea of play in Kumaon, it is reasonable to assume that, within the framework of the songs I have analysed, only lyrics such as *Birāj Holī kaise khelūngī* reveal the formal and aesthetic hallmarks that denote the concept of emotional refuge as described by Reddy.

The first characteristic that distinguishes this and similar songs is the presence of the first person. The use of this device in local Indian performing arts is not a common ingredient; moreover, as Shen Dan (2001: 128) notes, the use of the first person is rather rare, even outside the Indian context, in spaces where ‘folk’ arts involve the presence of a narrator and an audience in the same place. Meanwhile, other songs belonging to the *Mahilā holī* repertoire demonstrate that the presence of the first person is not an indispensable element for the manifestation of subjectivity on the part of women narrators. In other contexts, for example in the distinctly erotic song entitled *Śāhar sito jāgo rasiyā* (“The city was sleeping, my beloved woke up”),¹³ the narrative is characterised by the use of the third person. Similarly, in numerous songs, the narrator addresses the lover and expresses her desire through the use of the second person. Nevertheless, it is significant that in certain contexts the first person is used to directly articulate the sensitivity and desire of the woman narrator.

The second relevant aesthetic feature of *Birāj Holī kaise khelūngī* lies also in its humorous and satirical character. Indeed, in this context, levity is also associated with a satirical and farcical tone that is evident in the use of the term *baṛe nikhaṭṭū* (“great idler”) to describe the husband. The term alludes to the idea of the Gopī-s cheating on their husbands, while also ‘justifying’ this behaviour due to their husbands’ indolence. This ambiguity is perfectly in line with the textual tradition relating to the deeds of Kṛṣṇa, where, as Siegel points out, a religious tone does not appear to be disconnected from a more irreverent vein, represented by the sometimes impetuous irruption of the comic and satirical dimension. Kṛṣṇa, writes Siegel, referring to the aesthetic categories implied in Bharata's notion of

¹³ Negi notes that, in the context of the *Mahilā holī* celebrations, this is one of the songs that more explicitly translates the idea of a clandestine encounter between a woman and her lover. Also, in Negi's interpretation, this song may suggest the idea of a sexual encounter between two women (Negi, R. 2020: 19).

rasa, is not associated only with “trickery,” “excessive audacity and desire” and “embodiment of childish love” (Siegel 1989: 340-341), but also embodies the ethics of a total devotion toward the Divine. The representation of the inner feelings of the women belonging to the Kumaoni community in the context of this and other songs seems to suggest something that, in this reading, embodies also another value if considered in the broader characteristics of the ‘emotional community’ of Kumaon. The subjectivity of the woman and the description of her devotion for the beloved that is not associated with the private sphere of the home, is, indeed, also essential in the elaboration of a space, connected to the religious system but, apparently, external to the direct sight and perspective of the men belonging to the community, where the manifestation of feelings is less rigid.

Such aesthetic relaxation, especially if considered in the context of the Kumaoni social life, may also embody a social value of empowerment; however, on the basis on the textual evidence gathered, it does not seem to enact any form of clear-cut deviation from the aesthetic values generally associated with the broader values of the Kumaoni *Holi*. Rather, it seems to strengthen the idea of an existence, within the broader values of the local *mahaul*, of a distinct and specific cultural and social sphere where the women *holyār-s* may overcome, under certain conditions, the aesthetics that tend to associate women only with idealised models of sacrifice and responsibility. Levity and, to a lesser extent, humour and satire are, following this interpretative line, essential instruments for establishing a separation of this ‘other space’ from the performative dimension and atmosphere associated with the *Kharī Holi* and *Baiṭhki Holi*. They, moreover, are adopted to establish a repertoire of caricatures that, often building upon the *Kṛṣṇaite* iconography, may be used to mock a variety of figures that are seen to be external to this dimension.

5. Mediatisation of the *Mahilā Holi*’s songs and performances

On the basis on the survey I made in Kumaon consulting various *holyār-s*, cultural centres and gathering data from local journals, we can begin to envisage a few tendencies that characterise the definition by traditional and new media of a certain view of the values and symbols associated with the *Mahilā Holi* in Kumaon. The broader consideration regards the fact that, on the administrative level, some initiatives are currently pursued to preserve Kumaoni-related oral performances and celebrations. These initiatives are also an attempt to promote, also on the pan-Indian level, the identity and culture of Kumaon. In this context, it is worth noting that many initiatives have been addressing arts associated with local women artists and performative authors. With reference to the organisation of celebrations associated with the *Mahilā Holi*, for example, in 2016 a cultural programme has been implemented in the region for the organisation by *Mahilā Holi*-related *holyār-s* of a comic play focusing on the theme of

demonetisation (Negi, R. 2020: 30). As revealed in a personal interview by Latā Pāṇḍe, a well-known *holyār* and artist committed to the spreading of the Kumaoni culture, there are many other activities and programmes that, also at the local level and transversally in the urban and peri-urban areas, are being adopted to raise awareness and knowledge about a variety of social themes. During the *Mahilā Holī*-s and *Baiṭhki Holī*-s occurring in Almora in March 2025, for example, initiatives have been organised in this city to implement the *Naśā muktī*, a programme addressing the issue of the drug addiction in the region. It is plausible to claim that also the traditional media are currently playing an important role in implementing the programmes associated with the *Mahilā Holī* celebrations and in giving visibility through many strategies to *holyār*-s connected to the *Mahilā Holī*. Over the last years, the analysed journals have started considering the specificities of the *Mahilā Holī* and emphasising its connection to the broader aesthetic and cultural dimension of *mahaul*, as experienced in Kumaon.

One aspect often addressed regards the playful and comic value of the *Mahilā Holī*'s songs and their capacity to foster a variety of coping and empowering strategies in the region.¹⁴ This increasing attention toward the representation of the women in the local culture and society is reflected in a variety of new studies, at both the academic and non-academic level, which permit a more detailed and complex survey of the songs, and relative social and cultural values, tied to the *Mahilā Holī*. The role epitomised by the traditional media in promoting new initiatives and activities connected to the *Mahilā Holī* reflects also creation of new urban spaces where initiatives associated with this celebration are currently being led. Every year, for example, the Lakṣmī Bhaṇḍār 'Hukkā Klab' in Almora, besides the *mahfil*-s usually associated with the *Baiṭhki Holī*-s, organises *Mahilā Holī* celebrations and offers the possibility to new generations of women *holyār*-s to do exhibitions. As far as the role embodied by new media in the promotion of *Mahilā Holī*-s is concerned, it is possible to detect a certain aesthetic and narrative continuity in the elaboration of the picture tied to the role embodied by *Mahilā Holī* in the region.

As noted by *holyār*-s, new media such as YouTube are providing the possibility to preserve and, at the same time, to renew on the aesthetic level the repertoire of songs performed during the *Kumaoni Holī* and, specifically, the *Mahilā Holī*. Latā Pāṇḍe, for example, engages in producing a variety of new lyrics, inspired by Kumaoni local culture, to extend the visibility of this local art. The process of

¹⁴ Cf. the article, published on the online page of the journal *Kumāūnī vāṇī ḍesk*, होली महोत्सव में झलकी कुमाऊंकी संस्कृति, ग्लोबल व पिछोड़े में सजी धजी महिलाओं ने कुमाऊंकी संस्कृति को बचाने का दिया संदेश...” ('Kumaoni culture was reflected in the *Holī* festival, women dressed with shawls and necklaces gave the message of saving Kumaoni culture...'); also the article, published on *Mati ki khabreṃ ḍesk*, कुमाऊंकी महिला होली की प्रस्तुति ('Presentation of the Kumaoni *Mahilā Holī*').

mediatisation does not concern only local practices associated with the cultural hub of Almora and/or with other important urban settings of the region. On the contrary, such a tendency can also be seen in peri-urban and rural areas, where, through the support of local associations, a variety of new actors are engaged in the development of narratives regarding cultural practices in less central areas of the Kumaoni region.¹⁵ At the urban level, the quite common presence of prosceniums during public events is paving the way for a partial remoulding of some of the ritual practices usually associated with this celebration. As also noted by a few performers of main urban centres, this has produced, both on the visual and narrative level, the emergence of new styles, genres and songs. This partial aesthetic shift is perceived by some performers with a feeling of nostalgia. This partial transformation in the atmosphere surrounding the festival also leads them to ponder on the fact that, outside the urban context, it is possible to find a ‘genuinity’ that, sometimes, also due to the mediatisation to which the celebration is subject, seems to be less experienced in major cultural centres. The preservation of a humorous and satirical dimension, as noted earlier, is also at the core of many cultural activities and programmes conducted in the region. At the same time, it seems that the variety of emotional tones associated with the idea of playfulness in Kumaon becomes less polysemic in urban cultural contexts and through the agency of traditional and new media, that tend to project onto the *Mahilā Holī* quite a monolithic picture.

6. Notes on the performative life of the *Mahilā Holī*

The dimension of farce detected in *Birāj Holī kaise khelūngī* seems to prelude a satirical dimension that, from my personal experience at public *mahfil*-s in Almora, has only been marginally detected. It is plausible to imagine that during the events organised at home in the urban context forms of dramatic enactment are still held by members of the community. However, in this city, as confirmed by *holyār*-s at the Hukkā Klab, the so-called ‘tradition of *svāṅg*,’ a popular dramatic enactment with satirical humorous narratives, drama and music, has been generally limited. Outside major urban centres, however, the data gathered through participation at forms of *Mahilā Holī* in the peri-urban areas

¹⁵ A Website which is contributing to the elaboration of digital stories about the rural areas of North India and has also gathered, through fieldwork research, narratives associated with *Mahilā Holī* in Kumaon is PARI, *People’s Archive of Rural India*.

The article ‘Melodies of Mahila Holi in Munsyari’ can be retrieved at the following link: <<https://wagtail.ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/melodies-of-mahila-holi-in-munsyari/>>.

surrounding Munsyari offer a somewhat different picture.¹⁶ Here, the rite consisting of a procession through the homes of the villages by two distinct audiences/groups of people is still present and the women belonging to the community still have access to a distinct ritual sphere where oral narratives, dance and some dramatic enactments are present. Also, outside public events, informants recount the presence of farce during the meetings that are usually organised at homes during *Holi*.

Local *holyār-s* seem to embody a variety of aesthetic functions that span from the simple act of reciting songs to the enactment of small exhibitions where members of the community also perform small satirical sketches. Which are the main topics that are generally the object of jokes and dramatic enactments performed during the events? In general, in Uttarakhand, in a region characterised, since the 20th century, by tendencies and trajectories of eco-feminism, one of the most common satirical targets regards the literary topos of the ‘idler husband,’ already encountered in songs such as *Birāj Holi kaise khelūngī*. To mock this character, performers associated with the *Mahilā Holi* generally take on the role of a man, dressed in clothes that emulate those used by men of the community during the *Kharī Holi*. Based on data collected through participation in activities on site, such dramatic enactment is not usually associated with the interpretation of a text to be recited. On the contrary, the farcical dimension is usually mimed, with simple, stylised gestures, through the emulation of potential ‘vices’ to be projected onto this figure. The performer is generally surrounded by the community, who may also dance in a circle and/or recite verses commonly associated with *Mahilā Holi*.¹⁷ In other cases, however, it seems that the dimension of farce is not necessarily associated with a satirical dimension and, on the contrary, it merely functions to emphasise the dramatic enactment of the feelings tied to the celebration. From this perspective, it is worth noting that a comparison of the *Mahilā Holi* forms performed in urban and peri-urban settings reveals at least two essential aspects for producing a more detailed picture of the value embodied by the concept of levity in this performance. The first evidence suggests that performances in a peri-urban context offer the *holyār-s* much greater scope for

¹⁶ With reference to the socio-cultural characters of Munsyari and the surrounding villages it is worth noting that two major communities that inhabit this geographical area are the *Bhotiyā-s*, who, especially in the past played an important role in the Himalayan commercial routes (Chatterjee 1976, 1977; Kak 2000), and the *Śilpkār-s*, a Scheduled Caste. For a study concerning the historical role played by *Śilpkār-s* in this region during the 19th and 20th centuries cf. Kumar (2003); Negi, S. (2011); Pathak (2003).

¹⁷ With reference to the development of an eco-feminist movement in Uttarakhand, it is important to note that the roots of this movement can be traced back to the *Cipko* Movement, originated in the 1970s in the Reni forest of the Garhwal region but whose impact has deeply affected the whole North-Indian area and also the Kumaoni area. This movement, rooted in the Gandhian principles of non-cooperation, stressed on the need in this region to preserve a sustainable ecological stability and to contribute to a distribution of wealth. Cf. Shiva and Bandyopadhyay (1986); Jain (1984).

expression than those in an urban setting, where a more normative form of *Mahilā Holī* tends to be affirmed. This, if we consider recent feminist criticism on the relationship between comedy and the ‘politics of body’ (Kein 2015; Mizesejewski 2014) is quite remarkable. It seems to suggest, but this hypothesis should be better explored in the future, that in these ritual contexts the constraints over the display of the performative body are less strong than in other cultural contexts, where the embodiment of a humorous and satirical self must be somehow justified by a socially-oriented programme.

Limiting the discourse to the peri-urban areas of Munsyari, it is possible to observe some aesthetic shifts. One such transformation regards the opportunity for women in the community to occasionally celebrate the festival at night, which was generally off-limits to women in the past. It is also worth noting that, with reference to performances attended during *Holī* in Kumaoni peri-urban areas, the impact of literary narratives in Braj and Hindi seems quite diffused. Another aesthetic factor regards the fact that, as the reflection on the performative life of the Kumaoni *Holī* repertoire suggests, the satirical and humorous dimension associated with *Holī* seems to be present in the performances of these areas, where a distinct space for the performance of women seems to be maintained and preserved by the community.

7. Conclusion

Based on the critical survey of texts that have been studied through the fieldwork and on previous anthologies by Hindi scholars, it was possible to trace two general narrative tendencies that characterise the representation of women in these songs. One tendency reveals a more ‘serious’ tone, and stresses the relevance of the responsibilities that the represented characters must fulfil; it also tends to support the trope of woman as heroines of Kumaoni society and upholder of the home. The other narrative tendency decoded, mostly inscribed within the mythopoetic horizon of the *Kṛṣṇaite* literary tradition, paves the way for the representation of a more light-hearted motif. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, a normative tendency may be found in the analysed songs focused on the concept of *khel*. The concept of play is often associated with an idea of responsibility towards home and the society. What Reddy would call an ‘emotional refuge’ within the broader ethical and aesthetic characters of the Kumaoni *Holī* was found only in a few other compositions, where the subjectivity of the woman is expressed by stressing the feelings of desire, longing and, sometimes, the extra-marital experiences of love and devotion of the devotee toward God. If the mediatisation of *Mahilā Holī* tends to produce a rather normative view of these *mahfil*-s, setting aside narratives that cannot be reduced to a ‘contained’ form of playfulness, then fieldwork in peri-urban areas seems to support the hypothesis

that spaces where women can express their feelings more ‘relaxedly,’ in Reddy's terms, exist even within the gendered system of Kumaoni *Holi*. At the present state of the research, and by virtue of the processes to which *Mahilā Holi* is subject, the value of levity, farce and satire during these events generally does not deviate in a clear-cut way from the system but, rather, produces a less rigid renegotiation, also through the relaxation produced by it, of the symbolic and ethical values usually associated in the region with the local community of women.

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