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### Talking Tools, Suffering Servants, and Defecating Men: The Power of Storytelling in Maithil Women's Tales

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CORALYNN V. DAVIS

## Talking Tools, Suffering Servants, and Defecating Men: The Power of Storytelling in Maithil Women's Tales

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*What can we learn about the way that folk storytelling operates for tellers and audience members by examining the telling of stories by characters within such narratives? I examine Maithil women's folktales in which stories of women's suffering at the hands of other women are first suppressed and later overheard by men who have the power to alleviate such suffering. Maithil women are pitted against one another in their pursuit of security and resources in the context of patrilineal formations. The solidarities such women nonetheless form—in part through sharing stories and keeping each other's secrets—serve to mitigate their suffering and maintain a counter-system of ideational patterns and practices.*

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### “Coming Through”

Renowned folklorist A. K. Ramanujan argued that, while the folktale genre in South Asia is itself related dialogically to the more official mythologies of the cultural region (1999a:585), those folktales with women protagonists (and most often told by women) shift the interpretive and moral universe further away from dominant representations (Ramanujan 1991b). Ramanujan made a strong case for women's tales as a “counter-system,” an “alternative way of looking at things” (Ramanujan 1991b:53), to dominant male-centered discourse in South Asia.<sup>1</sup> He relates the story “Lampstand Woman,” for instance, in which the heroine tells of her past trials, a narrative of her suffering she had been unable to tell anyone at the time of the events (1991b:35–9). Ramanujan observes that such tellings by story characters are often linked to positive resolution of the heroine's troubles and indeed to self-creation, or what he calls “coming through.” “The whole tale is the tale of her acquiring her story,” he writes, of “making a person of her, making a silent woman a speaking person. This may be why it is crucial that stories should be told, and why there are stories about not telling stories and why *they* should be told” (Ramanujan 1991b:42; see also Ramanujan 1999c).<sup>2</sup> This article is about the question of “coming through” in Maithil women's folktales.

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In 2003–4, I recorded 140 stories, which constituted the folktale repertoires of a number of Maithil women living in several villages in the vicinity of Janakpur, a town located in the Tarai region of southeastern Nepal.<sup>3</sup> My research represents a decade of engagement with Maithil culture and society in the Janakpur area, including approximately two years' cumulative duration of ethnographic research. Janakpur is a commercial and pilgrimage center located in the heart of the cultural and linguistic region of Mithila. (The language is called "Maithili," and the descriptor for people and their culture is "Maithil.") The region transverse the (open) Nepal/India international border; it expands to the Himalaya foothills to the north, the Ganges River to the south, and the Gandaki and Kosi Rivers to the west and east, respectively (Burghart 1993; Grierson 1881). While the region includes a number of cities and towns, its characteristic form of human habitation is village clusters surrounded by irrigated rice fields and dotted with ponds.

As an ethnographer, I have found myself to be interested not only in the textual content of the stories I recorded but also in Maithil women's storytelling itself as a cultural and social practice. I am intrigued by the social effects and individual purposes of storytelling and by the contextual factors that are integral to the creation of meaning in storytelling events. A variety of methods enable ethnographers to get at such effects, purposes, and meanings. Ramanujan's comments above suggest a complementary approach: critical attention to the purposes and results of storytelling by characters *within* the tales themselves (see also Ramanujan 1991a:xxx; 1999c). In the present article, I take a close look at what happens in Maithil women's folktales when stories of women suffering at the hands of other women are first suppressed and later overheard by men who have the power to alleviate such suffering.

The late twentieth century saw shifts in folklore studies away from the treatment of folklore as text or static custom and toward the understanding of folk practices as performative, strategic, contextual, emergent, and (thus) interpretively complex. In the same historical moment, feminist theory began to have an impact on literary and anthropological studies, bringing the politics of gender and reflexive methodologies to the study of folklore, and ultimately drawing wider attention to women's folklore practices (e.g., Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993; Jordan and Kalčík 1985; Lawless 1988, 1993; Radner 1993). Of particular relevance to the present discussion is Joan Radner and Susan S. Lanser's (1993) effort to delineate a cross-cultural "provisional typology" of coding strategies in women's folklore, through which women may communicate (in safe disguise) critiques of, and enact resistances to, the patriarchal natures of their own cultures.<sup>4</sup> Of the several types of strategies described by Radner and Lanser and represented in the individual essays included in Radner's edited volume *Feminist Messages* (1993), "indirection" (ambiguous or equivocal modes of expression) is most pertinent to the Maithil women's tales presented here. Such indirection results from the fact that the social commentary offered in the telling is most clearly aimed at settings within the story, rather than the storytellers' own lived contexts. (In addition, the mode of expression is narration rather than other modes, such as instruction or debate.) One might also argue that Maithil women's folk storytelling is representative of the strategy that Radner and Lanser designate as "trivialization" (adoption of forms of expression considered unimportant by the dominant culture), insofar as Maithil

women's storytelling takes place largely in the absence of men and operates in a cultural context of significant gender segregation and women's seclusion. I am not altogether comfortable with the term "trivialization," however, since, to me, the "work" of oral storytelling hardly seems to be a trivial component of Maithil culture. Though it is practiced by men and women alike, it is particularly important mode of circulating meaning, particularly among Maithil women and children. Indeed, women and children articulate appreciation for the storytelling aptitude of the women they know. Moreover, the notion of trivialization seems to assume patriarchy to be the only vector of power in women's lives, an assumption amply contradicted by the plot lines of the stories to follow.<sup>5</sup>

An examination of Maithil women's tales provides insights into the importance of telling stories in the context of culturally sanctioned and gendered controls on speech. I argue that such controls help account for a set of themes that emerge in the three stories presented below: *men's overhearing* of women's stories at the water's edge; *tellings to and by objects*, which stand in for silenced women; and *tellings that men force out of women*, in contrast to solicitous or *voluntary tellings* by women to other empathetic and similarly muted women or their stand-ins. In the context of patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal social formations, Maithil women are pitted against one another in their pursuit of security and resources. The solidarities such women nonetheless form—in part through sharing stories together, as well as through keeping each other's secrets—serve to mitigate their suffering and maintain counter-system ideational patterns and practices.

Much of the current literature stresses that South Asian verbal arts constitute a form of discourse in a field of competing discourses and a variety of contexts (e.g., Flueckiger 1996; March 2002; Raheja 2003). Folklore in South Asia consists of a wide set of practices that take prose, poetic, musical, dramatic, and visual forms (Mills, Claus, and Diamond 2000) and that are part of "an interacting continuum" with classical and popular modes of expression (Ramanujan 1991a:xviii). Ramanujan (xix) reminds us that folklore is "autotelic," meaning that it travels across space and linguistic boundaries without necessarily being accompanied by a corresponding movement of populations (migration). What he fails to note is that in-marrying women in patrilineal, exogamous cultures such as those in South Asia are prime "carriers" of folklore across space. However, Ramanujan does note an important parallel between women and stories in Indian folktales: similarly to daughters, stories are *danas* (gifts) that, like food, wealth, and knowledge, must circulate. "Communities and generations depend on such exchange and transfers" (Ramanujan 1991a:xxxii; see also Rubin 1975). Given these cultural resonances between the "traffic" in women and stories, one might expect to find substantial differences according to gender in the practice and significance of storytelling in South Asia.

A central element in the gendering of South Asian folklore is certainly the contrast between men's and women's lives, particularly the restrictions placed on women's speech and movement that are enforced through practices of *purdah*, which I discuss below, and the accompanying fact that women's ritual and leisure activities are undertaken largely in the absence of men. Indeed, given the widespread differentiation of gendered practices in South Asia, it is not surprising that the gender-inflected

quality of folklore is highly pronounced there (Wadley 2000b:241), and Mithila is no exception to this. As I have discussed elsewhere, Maithil women have few outlets for direct, extrahousehold expression as compared to their male counterparts; nevertheless, they have developed a number of expressive forms, which offer insights into their preoccupations, perspectives, and values (Davis 2005, 2008). In particular, Maithil women have become known to outsiders for their colorful paintings that feature scenes from the great epics of the region, as well as depictions of their work and ritual lives and of the plants and animals that are integral to their world (Brown 1996; Davis 1999, 2003, 2008; Heinz 2000; Mishra 1997; Singh 2000). Folktales are another rich medium for Maithil women's expression, for coming through.

In selecting the three tales featured below, my decision-making process was sequential. First, I searched through the folktales in my collection for those stories in which characters themselves tell stories. What I discovered at this stage was that storytelling within the tales invariably results in *realization* (on the part of listening characters) and *transformation* (on the part of storytelling characters). A listening character might realize, for instance, that a trusted guard is actually a traitor or that a mendicant sage is actually her brother. The storyteller might be transformed from beggar to king, from unmarried invalid to married man, or from human form to stone. I noticed next that several subthemes emerged within the broader theme of storytelling itself. For instance, storytelling in the tales sometimes takes the form of deposition at a *panchayat* (village council) meeting. Another type of story takes the form of an answer to a riddle. And, because of my current interest in actual Maithil women's storytelling practices, one subtheme that particularly caught my interest was that of the suppression and then telling of women characters' stories of suffering. For current purposes, I selected the three tales that follow from among those of the last type. After presenting the tales, I will highlight some of their thematic patterns, interpreting the significance of those patterns in light of Maithil society and culture generally and, finally, in light of the practice of Maithil women's storytelling itself.

### *Tales of the Second Wife, the Winnowing Basket and Sieve, and Lord Kartik*

Because of space limitations, and for clarity's sake, the stories that follow are presented in summary, with occasional direct quotations, in translation. Of the three tales, only the third, "Lord Kartik," is definitively a *vrat kathā*—that is, a tale (*kathā*) told in association with a particular women's festival that involves fasting (*vrat*). The other two are not clearly associated with particular festivals; however, the second, "Winnowing Basket and Sieve," shares plot elements with "The Fragrant Melon," a tale retold in Kirin Narayan's *Mondays on the Dark Side of the Moon* (1997) and associated in Kangra with the Five Days of Fasting.<sup>6</sup>

I begin with "Second Wife" ("Dutti Bar"), as told by Indu Karna and recorded by me at Indu's home in her marital village of Nagarain, about an hour's bike ride from Janakpur, in December 2003.<sup>7</sup> Along with her husband and their two children, his mother and brother, and the latter's wife and child, Indu lives in a mud-and-thatch house of several rooms, all opening to a common courtyard. I first met Indu on my

initial trip to the Janakpur area, and I have visited with her on each subsequent sojourn in the area. On this occasion, my research assistant, Dollie Sah, and I parked our bikes outside the house's courtyard entrance by the garden. As was customary, we first visited for a while, cooling off in the shade of the thatch, while Indu's daughter finished cooking the late morning meal. Only after our bellies were (over-) full did we retire to one of the interior rooms, where I pulled out my voice recorder, clipping the miniature mic to the edge of Indu's sari near her collarbone, and, with little prompting, she began to tell the story. In the course of things, Indu's female relatives and the children came and went, occasionally commenting on the story or interrupting Indu to ask about some mundane subject—possibly the whereabouts of a sandal or the need to clean some vegetable item for that evening's meal. The menfolk were nowhere to be found. While Indu spoke, her voice was once nearly drowned out by the passing of a ancient, rickety bus on the dusty road nearby and sometimes complemented by the song of a bird or raised voice from someone on the dirt path between neighboring homes.

### The Second Wife Tale

Once upon a time there was a king to whom was born a daughter. On the occasion of her birth, the king called for a priest to make a chart (*tipni*) of his daughter's destiny. Having done so, the priest determined that everything in the girl's future life looked rosy, except for the fact that she was destined to be a cowife (*sauta*); she would be her husband's second wife (*dutti bar*). Thinking it beneath the station of a king's only daughter for her to be a cowife, the king was determined that his daughter should not be married at all, in order to avoid this fate. So, he took her to live in the jungle, where he hoped his daughter would meet no men and therefore not think of marriage.

Traveling deep into the jungle with his daughter, the king became thirsty. The two could find no source of water but eventually came upon a house. Inside the house, a man was sleeping, and there was a container (*gagro*) filled with water. Dipping a small vessel (*lota*) into the water, the girl went back outside to offer water to her father; she drank some herself and then went back inside to replace the *lota*. At that moment, the door closed shut behind her, and no matter how hard they tried, neither she nor her father could open it. After seven days of trying to open the door, the king finally gave up and left.

Having nowhere else to go, the king's daughter decided to stay at the house in the jungle and to provide service (*sewa*) to the man who was sleeping there.<sup>8</sup> She cleaned inside the house, fetched water, and tidied the surroundings. In order to survive, she would beg for food, graze animals for people in the nearby village, or eat fruits found in the jungle. The birds and animals of the jungle became her friends. She spent the next twelve years in this way. (In those times, Indu explained, it was the custom to keep the dead's body rather than cremate it, and after twelve years the person would come alive again. When such a person came back to life, he would be as he had been in his youth.)

When the day arrived for the man to awake, the king's daughter was out roaming in the jungle. The first person he laid his eyes on was another girl, one who had been

returning from fetching water at a well. This girl was a domestic servant (*dasi*). Her eyes met his; they became one, and they married. (Again Indu explained: in those times, if two people's eyes met when they encountered each other for the first time, they would get married.) When the newly awoken man asked his bride who the other girl at the house was, she replied that she was her servant. The man, who turned out to be a king's son, soon inherited his kingdom when his father retired into asceticism. "So, the servant girl he married became a queen, and the princess, who had been staying at his house, became a servant. Things were turned upside-down (*ulto*) between the two women," asserted Indu. The king found it puzzling that the girl who was a servant was very pretty, more beautiful than the one who was his queen. Concerned that in his absence other men might see his servant and find her desirable, he had a veil (*burka*) sewn for her and made her wear it.<sup>9</sup>

One day, the king decided to go to the market. He asked both his wife and his servant what he could bring them from there. His queen asked only for a necklace, while the servant asked him to bring a "smiling-but-not-smiling box," which was the name of the box that had been given to her by her mother.<sup>10</sup> (When the princess was still small, just one year old, her mother had given her a box [*pauti*]. She used to play by herself with the box. The girl kept everything in that box. If she felt like eating, then she would get food from it; if she felt like wearing something, she would remove it from the box, just like that.)<sup>11</sup> The girl did not reveal to the king that her mother had given her such a box, but she described the box to him and said she wanted that item and only that item from the market. As he traveled to the market, the king mused again about how the queen spoke like a servant and the servant like a queen, and he wondered what could possibly account for this. Arriving at the market, he easily found a necklace for his wife but had to search far and wide for the smiling-but-not-smiling box. In his search, he eventually arrived at the very country where his servant girl had been born. After the girl's father had taken her to live in the forest, her mother in her sorrow had decided to sell the box in the marketplace. Now this other king found the box and brought it back for his servant.

Back at their home, the king's wife was accustomed to treating her servant (the princess) harshly. She was jealous of her servant's beauty and worried that her husband might also marry her someday. She made the girl pick up cow dung, cook food, and do only outside work, and she would not give her anything good to eat. She also made her servant keep her face veiled in front of the king, though in his heart he had a great desire to look at her face.

After all of the housework had been done and everyone else had gone to sleep, the girl used to take the smiling-but-not-smiling box with her and go out to sit at the pond's edge, where she would speak to the box. "Like a saying," Indu suggested, "the girl would lament, '[The goddess] Gauri's daughter is crying that it should be love's reign (*prem raj*).'<sup>12</sup> Whose reign is it right now? It is the reign of the [woman who was born a] servant. The [princess who now lives as a] servant does outside work. Soon it will be my own reign again."<sup>13</sup> The box would say to her, "'Gauri's daughter is crying that love should reign. Servants do outside work. Again it will be your reign. But ask me for anything you want.'" If she was hungry, she would ask for food. If she



needed clothes, she would ask for them, and very nice things would come from the box. "In this manner, the girl spent two or three years," related Indu.

Then one night when the girl was out at the pond, a man who was looking for a place to defecate happened to come in her direction and overheard the girl sharing with the box all the joys and sorrows that were in her heart. The man wondered why she was talking like a mad woman and whether she was a "ghost or spirit, a goddess or devil," explained Indu. His curiosity piqued, he followed her for several nights. Once he learned that this beautiful girl was speaking to a magic box and that she lived at the king's palace, he reported this news to the king. The king was skeptical but accompanied the man at night to observe the girl. That night, the box asked the girl why she was crying. She responded that she was missing her parents, that though she herself was a king's daughter, here she was being treated poorly and made to do unfamiliar work by the queen. She beseeched the box to return her to her parents' home. The box promised to take her there the very next day. Upon his return to the palace, the king asked his wife where she had found the girl who was her servant. She said that she didn't know, that the girl had come on her own. The king considered this, saying "Then maybe she is a king's daughter."

The following night, the king once again went near the pond's edge to observe the girl with the box. The box produced a stool (*pīhiya*). It told her to place both herself and the box onto the stool and to put her hands together, upon which the stool would fly her away to her father's home. She did this, but just as she was about to fly away, the king caught her and commanded that she tell him who she was—ghost, monster, or goddess. She said she was none of those things but rather a king's daughter. She explained that since it had been written in her destiny that she was to become a co-wife, her parents had taken her to the jungle. She related her entire story: of being thirsty, of entering his room, of the door shutting behind her, of still being there when his twelve years were over and he awoke. Though she herself did not know he would awake, she suggested, the woman who became his wife must have known, which is why she came near to meet his gaze. The girl explained that out of jealousy the queen had forced her to veil her face from him.

The king replied that this was a terrible thing and that now he understood why he had always felt that the queen's words were like those of a servant and the servant's words were like those of a queen. "'And now I will marry you,' he concluded. She replied, 'If you will do so, fine; I will marry you. But what was written in my destiny has come true. Your first wife is someone else, and now I will be your second wife.' He said, 'You will not have a cowife; I will kill her and keep only you.' Thus he wed the king's daughter and then killed his first wife. And that is the end of the story," concluded Indu.

\* \* \* \* \*

In "The Second Wife," a woman's suffering at the hands of her rival ends when her destiny is finally fulfilled after the sorrowful complaint she makes to an object is overheard and after she tells her life story to her husband-to-be.<sup>14</sup> The next tale, "Winnowing Basket and Sieve" (*Sup Chalaïn*, henceforth "Winnowing Basket"),

was likewise told to me by Indu Karna.<sup>15</sup> Here, it is objects themselves that are overheard while telling of a woman's suffering, again at the hands of another woman. In this case, it is a husband and a god who intervene.<sup>16</sup>

### The Winnowing Basket and Sieve Tale

Once upon a time, began Indu, "there was a Brahman man who lived with his mother and his wife. The Brahman's mother was truly wicked and treated his wife, who was at once beautiful and well behaved, very poorly. The Brahman's mother used to make her daughter-in-law work long days, doing all the outside and inside chores." She gave her no food to eat during the day (though she made lovely food for herself to eat), offering her daughter-in-law a dinner of only chapatti made of rice and flour residues. But the daughter-in-law did all the work without complaint. Her husband did not know of her woes, since he lived and worked abroad. When he would return home for visits, his mother would tell her daughter-in-law to dress nicely (so that she would appear well treated). She warned her daughter-in-law that if she spoke to her husband of her mother-in-law's maltreatment, she would act even more harshly toward her. Out of fear, the daughter-in-law kept silent.

At night, the daughter-in-law used to keep her work tools—the winnowing basket and sieve, the mortar and pestle, the rice-measuring container, the broom—in an orderly fashion inside her room. And she would lovingly extinguish the lamp each night. The winnowing basket, sieve, and the other work tools loved and had sympathy for the woman, noting that she had no one to whom she could tell her woes and that, regrettably, they were unable to speak on her behalf, having themselves no voice.<sup>17</sup> They all loved her very much but did not have the power in their bodies to show her their affection.

One day, when her son came home from abroad, the Brahman's mother put on a grand feast and worship event (*bhoj*). Her daughter-in-law thought that surely, on this sort of day, her mother-in-law would allow her to have something good to eat. But no, she gave her the same measly food she always had. That night, the daughter-in-law cried bitterly. After midnight, her mother-in-law suspended the god's offerings on a plate from the ceiling of the room, so that they would be protected from rodents and could be consumed the following day. Before placing the offerings on the plate, she wiped it well, in order that she would be able to ascertain whether her daughter-in-law took from it any of the food. In the middle of the night, the hungry daughter-in-law awoke and took a bit of the offerings, leaving a mark on the plate.

The next day, when her furious mother-in-law discovered the mark and accused her daughter-in-law of partaking of the offerings, the daughter-in-law desperately blamed it on a mouse. The mouse, feeling that the woman had disgraced her, came up with a scheme to get the Brahman's mother to kill her daughter-in-law. The mouse ran to the palace of a nearby king and from there stole the hat of a horseman, which at night he placed by the head of the daughter-in-law on the bed where she slept. And a ribbon from the hair of the daughter-in-law he placed on the hat of the horseman. The husband discovered the hat, came to the conclusion intended by the mouse, and decided to murder his wife. He plotted to bury her right there in the room, so that

no one would discover her and learn of her transgression or the killing, thereby saving himself from disgrace and a murder charge.

Now, while everyone was sleeping each night, the work tools that the daughter-in-law maintained so carefully were themselves in the habit of going out to the edge of a pond. There, they would meet the work tools from all of the houses of the village to gossip about what was happening among the people who inhabited their households and to compare their treatment by the women for whom they worked. All the tools from this daughter-in-law's house would praise her highly at these gossip sessions. They knew of her husband's plans and worried what would happen to themselves if she were killed. And yet they lamented: "God has given us neither hands and feet nor a voice, so how can we demonstrate our affection for her, how can we save her?"

But the god Satnarayan, whose offerings the woman had eaten and thereby whose boon she had gained, was determined to save her.<sup>18</sup> He realized that she had stolen the offering due to her overwhelming hunger and had blamed the mouse because she was afraid of her mother-in-law's wrath. When her husband had finished digging her grave and was ready to kill her, he decided he needed first to defecate, so he extinguished the lamp and went out toward the pond to do so. When he did this, the lamp also went to the pond, where the others asked it what took it so long to get there. The lamp explained everything to them. All of the tools from that house began praising the woman again, and her husband overheard them talking amongst themselves. They told the whole story of her mistreatment at the hands of her mother-in-law, about her eating the offerings and about the mouse's scheme. Her husband heard it all.

The husband returned to his house and told his wife to answer him truthfully. She agreed to give him an honest answer. He asked whether his mother gave her a hard time, and she answered him that she did. He asked her about everything he had heard, and she told him it was all true. Indu explained that the husband said, "This means you are not having a relationship with another man?" She told him no. Upon hearing this, her husband repented, saying, 'If I hadn't gone to the pond to take a shit, I wouldn't have heard anything; I wouldn't have known the whole story.' . . . He slay and buried his mother and lived on with his wife. The end."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Lord Kartik" was related to Dollie and me by Sikiliya Devi Shah, a midcaste woman living in a primarily low-caste village neighborhood on the outskirts of Janakpur. I met Sikiliya when her curiosity brought her and two of her children over to the storytelling session of another of my informants, who was her neighbor. When, in the midst of the session, Sikiliya started helping this other storyteller remember parts of tales I was recording, I realized that she was a good storyteller in her own right. I asked her to share some of her own stories with me, which she readily agreed to do.

As in the prior two stories, the husband in "Lord Kartik" demands to hear the female protagonist's narrative. In contrast to the other two tales, however, the husband here does not slay the suffering woman's female counterpart once he hears the truth. Instead, further suffering ensues, as the storytelling woman is turned to stone. At the end of the story, though, *both* women survive in human form, with all of their sins expunged.<sup>19</sup>

A few items of background information are necessary to understand this last tale. Lord Kartik (who was created to destroy all evil) and Lord Ganesh (the elephant god associated with beginnings, removal of obstacles, and intelligence) are both sons of Shiva and Parvati, themselves primary deities in the Hindu pantheon. Kartik Snaan is the last Hindu festival in the calendar year, falling in the eighth lunar month of Kartik (October/November). It is customary during this event for people to go to rivers, oceans, or ponds to worship (*puja*) and take ritual baths (*snaan*). It is generally believed that one's sins are washed away, their *karmic* effects reversed, when such baths are performed. (*Karma* is a concept in Hinduism that describes a pattern throughout a person's reincarnated lives wherein beneficial effects are derived from past beneficial actions and harmful effects from past harmful actions.) Several festivals take place in the same season prior to Kartik Snaan, and the entire period is associated with purification, transformation, and the triumph, through *shakti* (feminine power/energy), of good and knowledge over evil and ignorance.<sup>20</sup>

### The Lord Kartik Tale

There once was a king's daughter. A maidservant (*narhiniya*) from a poor family lived with her and took care of her chores. In the month of Kartik, the king's daughter used to go with her friends early each morning to bathe. When the maid asked where she was going each morning, her mistress strongly rebuked her: "How is that any of your business? You are my maidservant, and you want to do what I am doing? No, go and do the jobs you are supposed to do, and I will do whatever I want!" Nonetheless, the maid decided to follow her mistress in the dark of early morning. She would hide in the bushes near the pond until her mistress and her friends had finished, after which the maid would also worship Lord Ganesh on the shore of the pond. She would dip once into the lake, and since she did not have any rice-saffron, sandalwood paste, or flowers to offer the god, she used the same flowers the princess and her friend had used. Bowing down, the maid would pray, "Lord Kartik, I do not know anything [about the appropriate way to worship you], but I also take an early Kartik bath." Then she would sneak back home.

When the princess returned home, she would instruct her maid, "I will not eat khesari lentil, pumpkin, eggplant, onion, or garlic." (In other words, she wanted to eat only pure foods, as appropriate to the Kartik season of worship.) She instructed the maid to cook her food separately from that prepared for the rest of the household members. But the maid would secretly make enough of the pure foods for herself to eat, as well. The princess suspected her of this, and sometimes, she would lace the maid's food with fish and garlic (impure foods). While the maidservant was unintentionally eating impure foods, her sins were accruing to the king's daughter rather than to herself! Time passed like that, and a few years later, the king's daughter was married, and the maid was sent with her as her personal servant. The king's daughter had children, while the servant did not. Eventually both grew old and died.

In their next lives, the maid was reborn as a princess and the princess was reborn as an elephant. When this princess grew up and was wed, the elephant was given to her as part of her dowry by her father. On the day the princess and her entourage, including

the elephant, were traveling to her new husband's home, they came to the village boundary, where the elephant recalled its previous birth (as a princess) and wondered indignantly what sin it must have committed that it was reborn as an elephant.<sup>21</sup> The elephant stubbornly refused to move on, despite its handler's efforts. So, the princess, whose palanquin had been carried out ahead of the elephant, ordered the carriers to take her back to the place it had stopped. The princess addressed the elephant: "In a previous life, I was your servant and you were a princess. Now I have been reborn as a princess and you have taken form as my elephant. What grave sin must you have committed? Now you say you will not come further; what greater sin do you want? Think wisely—if you want to improve your status, then come with me; otherwise you will remain an elephant." The elephant realized that she was right, that if it went with the princess, then its sins would be reduced along with those of the princess. And so it followed and stayed with her for years. The princess had children. Both she and the elephant grew old and died, one after the other.

Again the two were reborn. This time, the one who had been a princess in her immediately prior life was reborn as a princess, and the one who had been an elephant was reborn as a she-goat! It came the time of the Chatihar ritual, which, Sikiliya Devi explained, comes on the sixth day after a child is born and in which "people massage the baby nicely and then let it sleep." While the mother was massaging her daughter's body, the baby goat started wandering around the princess's basket, complaining, "Why do you continue to be born as a human being, while I become first an elephant and then a baby goat? Why must my sin [bad karma] continue?" The infant princess replied, "If nothing else works for you, then I will swallow you, when no one is around. Once you are inside my body, both of our sins will be finished at one time."<sup>22</sup> The baby goat agreed.

Later that day, the mother massaged her baby and put her in the courtyard; no one was around, and she left to get some water. After she left, the baby goat jumped over to the princess, who started to eat her. By the time the mother returned, only the hooved feet of the goat were visible, sticking out of her baby's mouth. When the mother saw this, she immediately picked up her daughter and cleaned the fur and such off of her. She realized that if others saw the baby like this, they would think it was a she-demon and throw her out. She decided not to mention what she had seen to anyone, including her husband. "She kept her knowledge to herself in her own heart/mind (*man*)," explained Sikiliya.

So, the girl grew up, and as she grew, she repeatedly uttered the following words: "No mother can be as my mother; nobody else in the world is like a mother. No mother can be as my mother; nobody else in the world is like a mother." People used to hear her and wonder what she meant. When eventually the girl was married, she continued to repeat this utterance at her in-laws' home. Her mother-in-law was afraid to ask her about it, but her husband insisted that she explain it. At first, his wife refused, but when he told her that she had to do so (*kaha parat*), she said, "If you are unrelenting then I will tell. But after unveiling the truth, I will change into a stone."

Her husband was determined to know and was skeptical that his wife would turn to stone, so he forced her to tell. A crowd of people gathered round, and the wife explained:

"I am telling the truth that nobody could be like a mother. When I was born, we were two friends. . . . I continued to take birth in human form while my friend, who was a king's daughter, was reborn one time as an elephant and another time as a goat. I thought if I were to eat that baby goat then she too would attain salvation with me. My mother saw me swallowing that baby goat. But my mother did not even tell of this to my father. My mother kept this knowledge inside herself. . . ." By the time she got this far, her lower half had turned to stone. She continued, "She hid this incident from my father, because if she had told him, he would have said, 'She is not my daughter; she is a she-demon. Out with her!' He would have thrown me away or killed me, so my mother did not tell him; she kept it inside herself. Since that day, for this reason, I have been saying that on this earth, even if a woman delivers a demon, her affection for it will be the same. A father's love is not the same. That is the whole story, and now I am of stone."

Sikiliya continued:

And with that, her entire body turned to stone. When her husband saw this, he was horrified at himself. "Oh God, why was I so obstinate about this mystery about her mother? I was adamant that she tell me, and now look what has happened!" He began crying and screaming and in his despair went wandering from village to village. A god came to him in the disguise of a sage and told him, "If you love your wife, then carry this stone slab in the month of Kartik to the shore of the holy Ganges River. There you will find girls bathing with their friends. They will be wringing out their clothes. Let the water from their washing sprinkle on the stone slab, and then all her sins will end. After the sin is erased, then two women will come out of this stone slab. Both of their sins will be dissolved."

So, this is what the husband did. He carried the heavy stone all the way to the Ganges River, where he came upon a group of girls bathing on the last day of the month of Kartik. As the water splashed onto the stone, Sikiliya explained, the one who had been reborn as a goat emerged in human form, saying, "In accordance with my behavior, God gave me misery for my sins; finally, I am a human being again." Then the one who had been reborn as a princess emerged, saying to the other woman, "Now, you go that way, and I will go this way." So, the one who three lives prior had been the princess went one way, while the one who had then been a maidservant came home with her husband.

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Themes and Interpretations*

#### Factors Determining Women's Quality of Life in the Stories

Taken together, these three stories paint a complex picture of Maithil ideas of inherent nature, fate, karma, divine intervention, and human, and more specifically, women's agency. "Second Wife" begins with a priest's reading (tipni) of the king's daughter's destiny (*bhāg*). This destiny proves finally to be unavoidable, at least in a narrow sense.<sup>23</sup>

The princess momentarily becomes a second wife just before her husband kills his first wife. And just as some second wives do, she suffers under the thumb of her senior co-wife, who, however, relates to her in the manner of a mistress to a servant. Moreover, despite the switch in status of one woman from servant to queen and the other from princess to servant, the two retain their inherent qualities—qualities that, in this story, are understood to adhere in persons of particular stations: the real princess is beautiful and speaks and acts in a refined manner, while the real servant exudes none of these qualities. This story follows the common motif of misrecognition, whereby the revelation of a person's true identity makes understandable her qualities and behaviors. Often, what happens in such stories is that a low-status person exhibits highly valued qualities (such as devotion to a god or unwavering dedication to a friend or mother) and is ultimately rewarded with a rise in station (e.g., poor to rich, beggar to king, childless to having children). That people of inherited low station (sometimes but not always marked by caste) are often better people than those of inherited high station is a common theme in the stories I have examined. "Second Wife" is unusual, in my experience, for its attribution of valued qualities to the person of inherited higher, rather than lower, station.

But inherited station and fate are not the only factors that lead to the outcome of this tale. In line with another common theme in South Asian folktales, the "Second Wife" protagonist's uncomplaining and unchallenging devotion—both to her eventual husband prior to his first marriage and to his first wife afterward—seem to favor a happy ending to her suffering at the hand of her conniving antagonist. In addition, the fact that she conspires to reappropriate the box gifted to her by her mother (a distant and otherwise constrained agent) and thereby gains a receptacle (literally and figuratively) for her story of suffering has a critical influence on the termination (again literally and figuratively) of the source of that suffering. A man who, unlike her, has the power to report this suffering to the king does so; and the king himself, who has life-and-death power over his wife, ultimately effects this termination (by slaying the suffering woman's rival).<sup>24</sup>

Likewise, in "Winnowing Basket," it is ultimately a man with authority over both women who puts an end to the agony of one by slaying the other, the latter being the proximate source of the former's suffering. In this tale, however, fate plays no role in the story. Instead, the god who has blessed the offerings that the wife/daughter-in-law has illicitly ingested intervenes on her behalf, since he has sympathy for her predicament. It appears that what he does is give her husband the urge to defecate in the middle of the night (a type of divine intervention that Maithil listeners would find amusing), causing him to overhear the household tools describing his mother's ill treatment of his wife. As in "Second Wife," the suffering woman in "Winnowing Basket" is shown to be approvingly silent in her suffering, as well as chaste and devout, which is contrary to the way the mouse attempts to portray her.

Finally, in "Lord Kartik," neither fate nor the gods but karma plays a dominant role in determining the course of the women characters' lives. This appears to be an exception to Ramanujan's observation that in Indian folktales, in contrast to Indian epics, karma and rebirth are rarely featured (1991a:xxviii). As in the other two tales, we have two women in hierarchical relation to each other. This time, however, the cruelty of

the higher status woman and religious devotion of the other results in a reversal of their positions in their next two lives. The concept of karma is itself one that combines a sense of “destiny” in one life based on “agency” (action, often chosen action) in a previous life. And yet, the “more evolved” of these two characters even finds a way to thwart karma, in a sense, by combining her own karma with that of the other soul with whom her life is tied. In an amazingly generous gesture, she literally swallows the sins of her counterpart, an action that ultimately results in the dissolution of their now commingled sins, as well as the dissolution of the knot holding their destinies together. As in the other two tales, when a man finally figures out what is going on—here, by listening to his wife’s story—he plays a positive role in the resolution. That the outcome of this third story displays a significant difference from the other two hints at the possibility that relations among women *unmediated by men* may be within the realm of the imaginable. I will discuss this more fully below. What should be evident here, though, is that Maithil women think in a complex manner about the various sorts of causal forces—social-structural, supernatural, and cosmological—at play in their lives and also see opportunities for their own strategic action.<sup>25</sup>

#### Women Pitted against Each Other in a Stratified Society

In Mithila, high-caste Hindu males are privileged over others by formal and informal means that are structured through patriarchal and patrilineal relations and values, as well as through gendered and caste-based discourses of pollution. Of particular importance to these constructions is the Maithil practice of *purdah* (*pardā*). As I have noted elsewhere (Davis 2005, 2008), the *purdah* system in Mithila affects behavior of and toward recently married women and is meant to assure the appropriation of these women’s procreative capacities for their husbands’ patriline. In its ideal form, *purdah* entails the social, spatial, visual, and verbal isolation of in-married women from nonhousehold males and from men senior in kinship status to the husbands of those women.<sup>26</sup> For young wives, sanctions against tactile and verbal contact with husbands, except in the privacy of their shared room, also apply. Women’s speech and silence in Mithila must be viewed, in part, through this prism of *purdah*.<sup>27</sup> While traditionally, the silencing of a new daughter-in-law in her husband’s extended household is most prominent, the silencing of Maithil girls and women takes many forms in contemporary contexts (Davis 2009).

Practices of *purdah* in the context of patrilineal village exogamy leave newly married women especially vulnerable in their marital households and communities. Customarily, a Maithil woman’s only “rights” within her conjugal household—to sustenance, shelter, and life—are secured through her husband. As the least-enfranchised members in the household structure, daughters-in-law often bear the brunt of tensions among members of their affinal households. They are sometimes overworked, undernourished, and subjected to physical attack. In this context, such vulnerability is thought to be mitigated by ongoing connections between married women and their natal families. When visiting her natal home and village, a married Maithil woman generally experiences greater freedom of movement and speech, and she need not cover her head or face (except when, by chance, an individual defined as affinal to her appears). As daugh-



ters and sisters, Maithil women returning to their natal homes are beloved guests. Their brothers' wives are expected to feed and otherwise treat them with deference, and their mothers may dote on them while serving as sympathetic sounding boards for stories of the trials they may have encountered as wives and daughters-in-law in their marital households.

A number of themes emerge in these three tales that shed light on Maithil women's perspectives on the structural and cultural contexts, including purdah, in which they enact their lives. These themes move the question of quality of life from the realm of the supernatural and individual agency discussed above to the arena of social structure. Of central interest here is the subject of women tormenting women. In the case of "Second Wife," the torment is performed by a first wife and directed at the woman who stands to become her junior cowife. Another way to understand this relation in the tale is that it is between a royal woman (princess, queen) and a woman of lowly station (servant), which is the explicit form the relation takes in the "Lord Kartik" tale. What complicates matters in "Second Wife" is the reversal, whereby the first wife positions herself to move from being a servant to being a queen, and the second wife, actually a princess, is misrecognized (also possibly purposely repositioned by the first wife) as a servant.<sup>28</sup>

While the "Second Wife" and "Lord Kartik" tales offer reflections on the structural relations between women as cowives and between mistresses and their servants, "Winnowing Basket" addresses the common theme of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations. Its treatment of the mother-in-law as "wicked" is ubiquitous in the South Asian context, as it is in the West and beyond.<sup>29</sup> As in the case of cowife and princess-servant relations, these female in-law relations, too, are hierarchical in terms of levels of authority, control over labor, and differential access to resources. In the three stories, the dominance by the higher station woman is signaled variously by her control over her lower station counterpart's food intake and over the kind and amount of labor she does. (Picking up cow dung and otherwise working outside—which often entails strenuous labor in the hot sun—are the undesirable activities of someone of low status.) The lower status woman is also controlled by her higher status counterpart in one case by enforced veiling and in another by silencing.

The tropes of the mean mother-in-law and cowife reflect a conflict of interest based on structural features of Maithil society and of Hindu South Asia generally. These features are culturally specific forms of patrilineality and patrilocality. In essence, Maithil women marry into their husband's households, which are, ideally, multigenerational units consisting, minimally, of parents, their unmarried children, their married sons, and the wives and children of those sons. Property is held by men in lineages. Women are dependent on men: first on fathers, then on husbands, and finally on (grown) sons.<sup>30</sup> The more dependents a man has and the fewer his resources, the greater the competition for access to those resources among his dependents; naturally, within families, such competition takes the form of emotional attachment, as well. Thus, in the case of a mother and wife of the same man, the two vie not only for his resources but also for his affection. Often, this is presented as a zero-sum game in which the man's mother, who has authority over her daughters-in-law, is stingy with or mean to his wife. In such a case, the wife or, if she cannot petition him di-

rectly, someone working on her behalf, will beseech him to rescue her from the situation by, for instance, bringing her food, medicine, clothing, or money for her children's schooling.<sup>31</sup>

With cowives, the competitive situation is complicated in a different way but is based on the same structural principles of patrilineality and patrilocality. First wives may have more power in their households based on their seniority. (Indeed, they may have their own grown sons and daughters-in-law.) While the rate of polygyny in Mithila is relatively low, the reasons for it and effects of it are varied. Perhaps the most culturally legitimate reason that men take second wives is if their first wives fail to provide them with heirs. Alternatively, a man may simply become enamored with another woman and decide to marry her, too. This happened, for instance, to a close acquaintance of mine in Mithila, who already had two sons (their father's heirs) by the time her husband took a second wife. A man with a drug habit and few resources, his neglect of his first wife was so severe that she and her sons eventually returned to her natal village in disgrace. The greater sexual and romantic attention potentially paid to second wives and concomitant emotional and material neglect of first wives, particularly if they have borne no sons, is a great threat to first wives. In "Second Wife," the first wife manages to contain this threat by treating her potential competitor as a servant and by keeping the latter's beauty literally veiled from her husband. And yet, being a second wife is also not desirable, as signaled in "Second Wife" by the lengths to which the original princess's father goes to prevent it (i.e., leaving her in the forest). She, too, will be called upon to share her husband's resources with her cowife, at least in a minimal fashion.

In contrast to the other two stories, the relationship between the two women in "Lord Kartik"—princess and maidservant, and subsequently, princess and beast of burden—appear to be structured by social rank rather than by gender, and no man mediates between them. While social rank is certainly operating, the two hierarchical systems are actually intertwined. In this case, a male head of a royal household provides a servant to his female dependent (daughter). In the next life, the servant position is replaced by, and thereby shown to have parallels to, a beast of burden, again provided by a king to his daughter, this time as part of her dowry. The elephant transfers along with the princess in the exchange between her father and the (unmarked) father of her husband-to-be. In this manner, the ongoing status (royalty) of the men and their male heirs is secured. Below, I consider the possibility that women who are apparently at odds in terms of their structural positions may join in solidarity, thereby dissolving their power-inflected relationship and even the bonds of patriarchy that helped create it.

*Of Speech, Knowledge, and Natal Connection:  
Why are Defecating Men Overhearing Women's Stories at the  
Edge of Ponds Where Objects are Witness to Women's Suffering?*

Beyond thematic attention to the sources of women's suffering and its relief, one notices several commonalities between "Second Wife" and "Winnowing Basket." One is that men are inadvertently overhearing stories of women's suffering. Addressing this subject requires a return to the question of Maithil women's speech.

In sociolinguistic studies, the capacity for speech has often been equated with degree of power (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley 1983). In much feminist scholarship, as well, emphasis has been put on “giving voice” to women and their experiences, following the premise that women’s voices—their knowledge, perspectives, and practices—have been ignored or suppressed (e.g., Baxter 2006; Chin 2005; Coleman 1997; Donovan 1998; Galindo 1999; Gilligan 1982; King 2007; Kingsbury 1994; Lewis 1996; Newson 1998; Sharma 2002; Waters 2007). I have great sympathy with this position but believe that it can be overgeneralized. Susan Gal has argued rightly that, in such scholarship, “silence is generally deplored, because it is taken to be a result and a symbol of passivity and powerlessness” (1991:175; see also Visweswaran 1994:68–9); however, the meanings and effects of silence, as well as speech, are, Gal argues, contextually and culturally specific. Examining the coercions of speech and disclosure (as, for instance, in confession, psychotherapy, or welfare interviews) scholars influenced by Michel Foucault have demonstrated how silence can be at once a coercive tactic of the powerful *and* a strategic defense against them (Gal 1991:175; see also Meyer 2000; Visweswaran 1994). One need only think of the mother’s decisive silence in the “Winnowing Basket” tale to understand the point that “silence and inarticulateness are not, in themselves, necessarily signs of powerlessness” (Gal 1991:176).

Thus, no inherent relationship exists between speech, silence, and power. What is clear in the Maithil context is that low-status persons have trouble speaking truth to power: wives to husbands, daughters-in-law to mothers-in-law, and household servants to those they serve. This is undoubtedly due, in part, to their isolation from others with whom they might forge bonds of solidarity and communication—*confidence*, in both senses of the word. In “Second Wife” and “Winnowing Basket,” this communicative isolation is signaled by the fact that *objects*, rather than other people, serve as sympathetic receptacles for suffering women’s stories. These magical objects can “speak” in their own ways: while the smiling-but-not-smiling box converses directly with its suffering owner, the household tools simply speak among themselves, having observed a woman’s suffering.

#### Overheard and Commanded Storytelling

While Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1955–8) recognizes overhearing as a motif found in South Asian folklore, links to gender are strikingly absent there.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the gendered nature of overhearing goes unremarked in the *Index*. Given the significance of gender to folklore (and visa versa) in South Asia, this is an important omission. The limits set by the ideals of purdah on women’s speech, and particularly on the speech of women of relatively low household status, renders it unlikely that women dependents will simply tell their stories of suffering to the men on whom they depend. The more likely scenario is that, if they tell their stories at all, they will find an other who is not their immediate superior; rather, they will find an empathetic person of equal or lesser power to whom to tell their story, or the story of their suffering will be told *for* them by another. Indeed, this is what occurs in the first two stories.

What is especially interesting here is that even when female characters find themselves in the audience of the men who are empowered to end their suffering, those women tell their stories only when *commanded* to do so by those men. The husband in “Lord Kartik” makes his wife speak, even after learning from her that if she does so, she will be turned to stone! The authority of the men, and patriarchal relations more generally, are, in this way, maintained. Indeed, all of the men in these stories end up with dutiful, desirable wives. Of the three tales, only “Lord Kartik” differs in the gender identity of the proximate human listener; it is no coincidence, I believe, that the ultimate outcome with regard to patriarchal relations also differs.

“Lord Kartik” exhibits a fundamental difference when compared to the other two tales presented here. In the beginning of this tale, as throughout the others, two women of different statuses are at odds, with the higher status woman oppressing the other. In “Second Wife” and “Winnowing Basket,” the oppressive nature of those relations ends only when the higher status woman is *slain*. In “Lord Kartik,” however, the woman who is reborn to a higher station acts *compassionately* toward the one who is first reborn as an elephant (whom she counsels about getting rid of her sin) and then reborn again as a goat—despite the fact that the latter has in both prior lifetimes shown herself to be less than cooperative! In fact, when the one reborn (for the second time) as a princess swallows the other (now a goat) and thereby *takes on the latter’s sins as part of her own karma*, she effectively dissolves the competitive, jealous, zero-sum quality of relations between them, the very relations evident between women in so many other contexts.<sup>33</sup>

While in “Second Wife,” a conflation exists between, on the one hand, the first and second cowife relation and, on the other, the queen and servant relation, in “Lord Kartik,” the princess-servant relation is straightforward and explicit. Yet, as in the case of “Second Wife,” a reversal of stations occurs in “Lord Kartik.” In “Second Wife,” the reversal appears to be a matter of human misrecognition and is perhaps the result of one woman’s disingenuous maneuvering for a rise in station; in “Lord Kartik,” it is karma, which has accumulated based on the characters’ behavior in previous lives, that causes the reversal. In “Second Wife,” it is intervention on the part of the king/husband that ends the relationally lower woman’s suffering at the hands of her higher status counterpart. In “Lord Kartik,” it is the devoutness, purity, and kindness of the originally lower status woman that ends the suffering and erases the sin of both women.

### Regeneration and the Mother Line

Notably, in both “Second Wife” and “Lord Kartik,” it is a mother’s love that sustains her daughter. In the case of “Second Wife,” the tie to the mother is maintained through a magic box that provides for the daughter when she is not adequately provisioned in her marital home. It listens to her woes and conspires to end her suffering by flying her back to her natal home. These plans are thwarted by the king/future husband who physically restrains her, just as she is about to fly away, and demands to hear her story. Perhaps the helpful but ultimately ineffectual succor of the box (which is par-

allel to the ineffectual succor of the mother's love after her husband takes her daughter away) is what makes the box at once smile and not smile.<sup>34</sup>

In "Lord Kartik," the mother's assistance comes in the form of *silence*, of the keeping of a secret, even from her own husband.<sup>35</sup> The mother in "Lord Kartik" does not tell anyone that her daughter swallowed a baby goat. She fears that her baby will be accused of being a she-demon and therefore thrown out by her father, for, as the daughter character points out, fathers do not have the same loving devotion to their children as do mothers. Thus, in the teller's words, the mother keeps the truth "inside her heart/mind" (*apna mane me*). While in "Second Wife" the daughter maintains and reestablishes her tie to her mother by talking with the magic box, in "Lord Kartik" this tie is maintained with the daughter's mantra, "No mother could be like my mother; nobody in the world can be like a mother." The power of the mother's support-through-silence (the secret), like the power of the magic box to take the daughter home to her mother, is stripped by the command of the husband who forces his wife to reveal her story to him.<sup>36</sup> Here one sees that the relationship between speech and power is not so much about the duality of speech and silence as it is about *who controls* speech and silence.

In "Lord Kartik," when the woman is compelled to speak, she turns to stone. What brings both her and the princess/elephant/goat back to human form is an elixir made from holy water that has come into contact with the clothes worn by girls who are bathing, as is customarily done at the end of the month of Kartik. In the tale, this "purified maiden essence," as one might call it, dissolves the sins of the one who was originally the princess, bringing her back to human form, along with the woman who was originally a maidservant. In the end, each woman goes her own way, the one with her husband and the other on her own.<sup>37</sup> In effect, and in contrast to the more common plot line in the other two tales, *both* women live happily ever after. The success of one does not entail the suffering or demise of the other, for they are not made to be in competition for the resources and affections of a man. Indeed, in a surprisingly refreshing ending, one of the two women simply goes her own way, by herself, and without a sense of tragedy or danger. This is a rare ending, indeed, for a South Asian tale! This unusual theme brings into relief the commonality of the "Second Wife" and "Winnowing Basket" tales and the fact that in most Maithil stories, even those where women's suffering is relieved, the patrilineal structures that divide and conquer women are left in place. The glimmer of a different way is just recognizable in "Lord Kartik." Even in this case, though, one woman's ultimate fortune is traditional; she is married. However, the delinking of the two women and the nonpatrilineal nonresolution for the second woman raises a great cultural and philosophical, if not political, question. Where does she go?

One final comparison to another tale in which the telling of a story results in the teller turning to stone may shed additional light.<sup>38</sup> In the tale "Friends" ("*Dost*"), a young man who is attempting to thwart the plot of Bidh and Bidhata, the birds of destiny, knows that Bidh has threatened that if the man tells the story of their plot, Bidh will turn him to stone. The man does tell, and he does indeed turn to stone. Only pouring over the stone the blood of a slain newborn baby, still attached to the

placenta, can bring him back to life, and this is exactly what occurs at the end of the tale. Subsequently, an elixir provided by the wife he abandoned long ago but who remained committed to him and to religious devotion brings the baby itself back to life (Davis 2008). What I think we are seeing across these Maithil women's tales is a view of the "mother line"—through placentas, unmarried girls, and boxes—as powerfully regenerative.

#### Men's Waste and Women's Knowledge

Two additional oddities found in "Second Wife" and in "Winnowing Basket" beg to be explored: Why are men defecating while overhearing tales of women's suffering? And why is the telling of such stories taking place at the edge of ponds? I would argue that the two apparently independent peculiarities are both part of a larger pattern found in Maithil women's folktales and speak to epistemological questions related to gender, within both Maithil culture and the field of folklore studies.

In "Second Wife," a defecating man overhears the protagonist sharing with the box all the joys and sorrows in her heart. The man wonders why she is talking like a mad woman, whether she be "a ghost or spirit, a goddess or devil." The following night, after the king, too, overhears her, he uses his status to command her to tell him what nature of being she is. Neither man is able to understand, without explanation, the real meaning of the speech event they are observing. Similarly, in "Winnowing Basket," the husband is defecating at night when he overhears the household tools gossiping about his wife's suffering. Like the king in "Second Wife," he goes to the suffering woman and demands an explanation. In this case, his wife is compelled to assure him that she has suffered at his mother's hand and that, contrary to his prior misunderstanding, she has remained chaste in his absence.

Among Maithils, as among South Asian Hindus generally, feces and other bodily excretions are considered polluted, defiling in the spiritual sense, and untouchable, as are those who come into contact with them, including those whose ascribed caste occupation it is to do so. One undergoes ritual ablution (purification) before such undertakings as eating, performing other rituals, or study.<sup>39</sup> A passage from an additional tale can help us grasp why the men are defecating at the stories' moments of revelation about suffering women's truths. In a tale called "Arm's Length Boy" ("*Bhair-bitna*"), a boy is thrown away at birth by his mother's jealous cowives.<sup>40</sup> The boy's soul falls into a grain storage vessel (*taula*), and, by rolling it from within, he embarks on a journey to find a way to support his mother, despite the handicap of living in a pot and having no corporal form. He comes to rest one night in the courtyard of a king. Later that night, the king emerges from the palace to defecate, sees the vessel, and decides to defecate in it. The moment he sits upon the vessel, it (the boy's soul) grabs hold of him and will not let go until the king promises to give him half the wealth of the kingdom and his daughter's hand in marriage. Mortified at the thought of facing his kingdom in this defiled and exposed state, with a pot filled with his own waste stuck to his bare buttocks, the king grants the boy his wish. The boy is able to turn his defilement (having been shat upon) to his advantage. These scenes of men defecating while demonstrating ignorance are clearly very funny to Maithil women listeners and

tellers, who display great delight at these parts of the tales. I believe one source of humor here is the gendered reversal of power and purity. In hegemonic Hindu constructions, the nature of women's bodies renders them as a group less pure than men. This is exemplified in a number of ways in everyday life; for example, women may eat the leftovers of their menfolk, but not the reverse. (Also note that the arm's length boy is emasculated by his lack of male embodiment.) In the three stories that I focus on here, the voicing of women's perspectives occurs while the men are engaged in impure behavior. Perhaps what the men are "eliminating" is their ignorance of the truth of women's suffering as a structural fact.

If, in these women's tales, men's defecation is linked with their ignorance of the lives and perspectives of their womenfolk, in these same stories the association of women with ponds is correlated with women's knowledge and effective action. As I have argued at length elsewhere (Davis 2008), in Maithil women's folktales that feature male protagonists, ponds are frequently sites for the articulation of women's insight and agency. Furthermore, the trope of ponds shifts the imaginative register toward women's perspectives and the importance of women's knowledge and influence in shaping Maithil society.<sup>41</sup> In the tales I have studied, when women are found at the edge of ponds or within them (and sometimes at the edge of rivers or oceans, as well), the exploits of men—their heroic journeys, their honorable and ignominious behaviors—are decentered by women's knowledge and intervention.

This point is reinforced in the tales presented here. At moments when topics of primary concern to women—their values, knowledge, dilemmas, and anguishes—are at the fore, men are correspondingly at a loss: they are found to be perplexed, engaged in misrecognition, and in making polluting waste. While in Maithil women's stories ponds are a key metaphor for women's creative capacity and insight, in this gender segregated and stratified culture, it is at this very same location in women's tales that men display the opposite qualities: pollution and ignorance. Men stumble into women's knowledge, learning about their womenfolk by accidentally overhearing their stories when expecting, instead, to be alone in the dark with their pants down. And then men use their authority to compel their women to enlighten them further.<sup>42</sup>

### *Conclusions*

One of my aims in focusing on these tales is to bring the narratives and lives of South Asian women to the attention of those for whom their existence has been unacknowledged, underappreciated, or misunderstood—to facilitate, in Ramanujan's words, their "coming through." Attention to women's tales can help widen our understandings of gender and culture in South Asia by revealing perspectives and practices submerged in socially elite, masculinist, and development discourses—discourses that Maithil women themselves also "speak" in many contexts (see Davis 2005).

In conclusion, I would like to make several observations that tie the content and structure of Maithil women's tales to the content and structure of their lives. First, the speech of Maithil women, and particularly those most recently and tenuously attached to new patrilineages through marriage, is suppressed. This is true sociologically, as I delineated earlier, but it is also a recurring subject within Maithil women's

tales, where it is unambiguously associated with suffering at the hands of women whose links to that same patriline are more securely in place.

This point leads naturally to the second, that Maithil society, as a patriarchal, socially stratified system, pits women against each other in particular, structural ways that require one woman to “lose” when another “wins.” In women’s tales, when such women lose, they lose big: the man on whom both women depend slays the one (most proximately) causing the suffering of the other. Such an eventuality in women’s tales points to the stakes for women of successfully negotiating the stratified social system in which they are differentially positioned.

Third, the possibility of a way out of this divide-and-conquer arrangement is suggested in “Lord Kartik,” where women with structurally opposing interests cast their lot together and ultimately emerge, freed from their structural opposition and freed from the intertwined karmic load of their sins. Thus, when women of differing statuses do choose solidarity with each other—as opposed to staking all their solidarity with the men upon whom they are dependent—their suffering may be relieved, without full capitulation to the structures that pit them against each other in the first place. Of course, real Maithil women *do* do this frequently in numerous mundane ways, as when the wives of brothers in one household combine their resources or when cowives amicably share tasks.

Fourth, the strategic use of storytelling by Maithil women may mitigate suffering, even when such storytelling is “depersonalized” through folk genres. In Maithil women’s folktales, storytelling within the narratives invariably results in listeners within the tales having realizations and in storytellers in the tales being transformed. My survey of this genre indicates that such tellings improve the lots of those women within the story. Interestingly, this appears to be true whether the storytelling is voluntary (in which case the stories are told to feminine, sometimes maternal, sympathetic others) or when it is forced (as when men command women to tell).

But what of the real women who are telling these tales in the context of their domestic lives? Like the household tools that bemoan their lack of agency and yet whose conversations have an effect in the domestic world of women’s suffering, Maithil women’s storytelling does make a difference. Such storytelling matters in the creation of meaning in women’s lives, as well as in the creation of a solidarity of communication among women, whether along matrilineal or within the households and neighborhoods into which they have been wed.

Students of the life story genre have suggested that individuals construct past events and actions in personal narratives to claim identities and construct their lives, and that such narratives structure perceptual experience, organize memory, and provide frameworks for future actions (e.g., Gluck and Patai 1991; Langness and Frank 1981; March 2002; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Watson and Watson-Franke 1985). And feminist scholars of folklore have examined ways in which women in patriarchal societies and institutions that constrain women’s speech nonetheless create avenues for self-expression that, in turn, help to reshape those contexts. A prime example is found in Elaine Lawless’s work on women in Pentecostal congregations (Lawless 1988). In this male-dominated context, women nonetheless use the mode of testimonial to appropriate the function of “preaching” about



their lives as women, thereby subverting the master narrative of divinely sanctioned male leadership. Further, postmodernist feminist critics have attended to aesthetic performance as an arena for the (de)construction of hegemonic forms of gendered subjectivity. For example, Patricia Sawin (2002, 2004) employs insights from feminist and critical mass media scholarship to extend Richard Bauman's theories of performance and more fully account for issues of audience and emotion. Sawin writes, "esthetic performance is a central arena in which gender identities and differential social power based on gender are engaged. It is precisely in performance that these apparently stable identities are either temporarily stabilized through reinstantiation or disrupted and transformed" (2002:48).<sup>43</sup> In discussing possible threats of female performance to a hegemonic system, Sawin points out that successful performances *move* audiences: "They can be threatening if the performance evokes feelings toward the material and/or toward the performer that are inappropriate within or contradictory to the 'order of things' that benefits the dominant group" (2002:42). Like the work of these scholars, my examination of Maithil women's stories provides a window into the politics of gender in particular cultural settings. Our scholarship demonstrates that stories provide frameworks for constructing lives, as well as opportunities for self-expression that sometimes subvert dominant narratives and can contribute to both the reproduction and transformation of culture.

A number of feminist anthropologists of South Asia have suggested that, given the limitations on direct speech or other registers of articulation, women's folklore serves as a location for indirect commentary on the singer's or teller's own life (e.g., Narayan 1997; Wadley 1994). As we have seen, outside of their own natal home contexts, the capacity of Maithil women, particularly those of relatively low station, to speak of the struggles they encounter in their new contexts is often limited by the culturally specific form of social stratification that they encounter there. In such constrained contexts, the following, I would suggest, obtains: in a personal narrative, *events or experiences* from the teller's life are the story's topic, and communication about those events or experiences are transformed into an opportunity for making meaning, including meaning about the self; in folk storytelling, however, *the tale itself* occupies the place of personal experiences or events in providing such an opportunity. Just as the structural, thematic, and plotted patterns inhering in folktales may influence the way people think and talk about their own life experiences (as do any narrative media), folktales themselves, I would argue, serve as a medium of personal expression, identification, and self-constitution for those whose direct speech is culturally proscribed. When Maithil women gather to hear and tell stories, the fact that they are moved is indicated by their laughter and tears. They may sit in silent reflection or make assertive comments in harsh or appreciative evaluation of the behavior of particular characters. They sometimes comment on the similarity between a plot line and the life experience of a woman they know. For instance, this happened in the case of Sikiliya Devi Shah, the teller of "Lord Kartik" and herself a senior cowife, who was encouraged by another woman present at her storytelling session to tell a narrative that had some relationship to her own life. Sikiliya Devi settled on the story (not retold in the present article) of a woman whose suffering began when her husband took a second wife and that second wife began to torment her.

In the course of folk story tellings, Maithil women recognize themselves and recognize others. They become each other's smiling-but-not-smiling boxes; they are those others in the house who witness their suffering. And although, like the household tools in "Winnowing Basket," they may not have the means to directly alleviate that suffering, they continue to circulate stories that keep such suffering—in its personal specificity and structural generality—from utter inarticulateness and invisibility. As with defecating men whose worldview is made to shift, if only slightly, when overhearing stories of women's suffering at the pond's edge, we, too, hear the whisper of submerged perspectives when we listen to servants speaking their sorrow to boxes; when we observe the silence of a loving mother; and when we consider a woman made sinless and untethered by virtue of her trust in the wisdom of the woman she formerly abused and wonder, where will she go?

### Notes

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1. Ramanujan insisted that his term "counter-system" was somewhat misleading because it seemed to imply a unified order, while he intended the term to imply "an alternative way of looking at things." Nevertheless, he also espoused the idea that "genders" were as distinct as "genres" and that the worlds of women and men were divergent (1991b:53).

2. On the importance of the circulation of stories, see also Rushdie (1990).

3. In her entry "Folktale" in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Wadley states that this term refers to "a variety of oral prose traditions in South Asia, told in prose, not sung, although some folktales may include sung rhymes or verses, usually for special effect." Thus, the conversational speech style of the folk teller distinguishes the folktale, for instance, from the folk epic, which is sung and may include verse (Wadley 2000a:218). In addition to this distinction, I would describe folktales as: (a) fundamentally collective—passed from person to person with plots, structures, and conventional elements *relatively* intact and with this collective nature recognized by those participating the telling of the stories; (b) oral, performative, and social—requiring tellers and listeners to be in proximity to one another, this quality being present even if the tales are also circulated in other ways; (c) neither officially sanctioned nor the prerogative of any person in particular, though they may be appropriately told only in certain contexts by certain kinds of people; (d) set in time and space neither radically dissociated from the speakers/listeners nor immediately present; (e) intertextual, in the sense that themes and motifs traverse tales and cross between tale genres and other forms of folklore (Wadley 2000a:219); and (f) functioning in part to communicate information about the nature of life in general, to situate types of people and other things within it, and also to entertain. Ram Dayal Rakesh, who has written extensively on Maithil cultural life, has said that the Maithili gloss for folktale is *kathāpīhani*, and that people in Maithil today often just use the term *galp* (literally, talk or gossip) for this (Rakesh 1996). The people I know from the area in and around Janakpur usually used the word *kissa* for folktales, although some were familiar with the more

formal term *purkhauli kathā* (ancestral stories), which emphasizes that such stories are passed down through the generations.

4. The Radner (1993) paradigm appears essentialist in its unified sense of patriarchy and resultant need for indirection in women's folklore practices. Its typology is, nonetheless, a potentially useful tool for folklore analysis in contexts of social stratification, including but not restricted to gender.

5. See Raby (2007) for a contrasting example from Nahua society in Mexico, wherein women's words embody long-standing hegemonic Nahua values and morality (rather than creating a counter-system) in a postcolonial context of competing values.

6. The elements that associate "The Fragrant Melon" story (Narayan 1997) with Kangra women's ritual lives—namely, the floating of boats down a stream—are absent from "Winnowing Basket and Sieve" told here.

7. The original transcription and draft translation of this story was completed in 2005 by Smriti Jaiswal, a woman of Maithil descent who was then a Fulbright Scholar at Temple University.

8. In contradiction to her earlier assertion that the king's daughter was trapped in the house, the storyteller suggests in this passage that the daughter *decided* to stay and that she, in fact, came and went from the house as she lived her life there. This is not as contradictory as it may seem if one interprets this part of the story as akin to (or symbolic of) the transfer of a woman from the household and authority of her father to the household and authority of her husband (to be).

9. Later, the storyteller attempts to correct herself, saying that it was the queen and not the king who made the servant wear a veil. This latter version is more consistent with the rest of the story.

10. The unusual expression "smiling-but-not-smiling box" is an exact translation from the Maithil, and it is never explained further in the story. I have not found a reference to it in other South Asian tales, nor is it in the Thompson index (1955–8).

11. In telling this tale, Indu presented this information near the beginning of the story, just after saying that the girl's father left her in the house in the jungle after his unsuccessful effort to reopen the door. I have moved the text here for clarity. The motif of a magic box or vessel that furnishes needed items appears several times in Thompson's index (1955–8), including D1174, D1470, D1472.2.2.

12. The goddess Gauri represents purity and austerity. She is the *kanya* (young, unmarried) Parvati, who undergoes severe penance in order to get Lord Shiva as her husband. Sita, the eventual wife of Lord Rama, worshipped Gauri to fulfill her desire to marry him. Unmarried girls worship Gauri in order to get virtuous husbands.

13. This "saying" (*phakra*) was particularly cumbersome to translate. It was spoken in Maithili as follows: "*Kani gauri putri ki prem raj. Kakar raj? Mahdaiya ke raj. Mahdaiya kare bahar ke kaj. Puni humre raj.*"

14. Indu Karna's telling of "Second Wife" is very similar to "The Dead Prince and the Talking Doll" as retold by Ramanujan (1999b:450–4). Unlike "The Dead Prince," however, "Second Wife" emphasizes the ongoing suffering of the heroine at her rival's hand and the continuity between the talking object and the heroine's mother and natal home.

15. "Winnowing Basket and Sieve" appears to be a variation of "A Song and a Story," a tale analyzed by Ramanujan (1997). The variation recorded by Ramanujan has several aspects that are of significance here. The source of the woman's song and story is not specified (there is no mother-in-law), but the song and story needing to be told turn into a man's coat and shoes, which make it appear that the woman is having an affair. (This is similar to the mouse's plot line in "Winnowing Basket.") There are several differences, however, between the tales. First, in "A Song and a Story," the man who overhears his wife's story does not do so while defecating by the pond but while at a temple devoted to the monkey-god Hanuman (a much more auspicious context), where he has gone to sleep for the night after a fight with his wife. Second, it is not an array of women's household tools but rather only lamps who go out to gossip at night, and they go to the temple rather than to a pond. I would argue that, taken together, these differences render the variation I recorded more woman-centered and more clearly part of a counter-system, in Ramanujan's sense of these terms. See also Motif C672.1 in Thompson (1955–8) and cf. "The Fragrant Melon" as retold in Narayan (1997).

16. The original transcription and draft translation of this story was completed in 2006 by Mita Jha, a Houston-based woman whose family originates from Mithila.

17. The original Maithili expression is “*U sab je chhai se baaja wala nai chhai. U sab ta, okra sab ke bolta ta nai chhai.*” (Them, they are not the speaking type. For them, speaking [capacity] does not exist).

18. The generic meaning of *Satnarayan* is “True God” (*sat* = True; *Narayan* = *nara*, “man,” or “water” combined with *ayana*, “abode”). This is one of the names of Lord Vishnu, who is considered the first of the living beings. *Satnarayan* worship is very common in South Asia, performed on all sorts of auspicious occasions (e.g., rituals associated with new houses, new brides, a daughter’s wedding) and before starting any other worship (Mita Jha, personal communication, April 20, 2006).

19. “Lord Kartik” bears strong a resemblance to “The Female Weevil Who Fasted,” as recorded in Narayan’s *Mondays on the Dark Side of the Moon* (1997). In both cases two figures, one who is devout and the other who is not, are reborn as a princess and an elephant, respectively; in both cases, a man forces a woman to tell her story. Absent in “The Female Weevil” are the elements of female-female hierarchical relations and female solidarity that are of particular interest to me in “Lord Kartik.”

20. The original transcription and draft translation of this story was completed in 2007 by Mita Jha.

21. Here the storyteller explains that when elephants recall their past, they start throwing dirt over their heads, which is what the elephant did at the village boundary.

22. There is no clear evidence from the story that the one reborn as a princess ever had any sin, yet it is possible she had accumulated some “negative karma” from still prior lives.

23. I have come across only one tale, “Friends” (“Dost”), among those I have recorded wherein fate or destiny is effectively thwarted. In “Friends,” destiny takes the form of the birds of destiny, Bidh and Bidhata. Bidh’s plot to kill a man who is unappreciative and suspicious of his devoted friend is overheard by that friend, who ultimately outsmarts Bidh and Bidhata, despite their efforts to think of all possible contingency plans.

24. Note that in all three tales presented here, the most proximate others to the protagonists (either sympathetic or antagonistic) are other women or their stand-ins. Of women-centered tales generally, Ramanujan has noted that the heroine’s chief helpers tend to be other women (Ramanujan 1991a:xxv).

25. My assertion here is in accordance with Ramanujan’s assessment of Indian folktales dealing with “fate, gods, demons, and such,” which led him to conclude that such tales “give lie to the stereotype that ‘peasants,’ ‘illiterate folk,’ or ‘Orientals’ are fatalists who passively accept their destiny” (1991a:xxviii).

26. The practices of *purdah* discussed here, particularly those involving space, generally do loosen over the years of an individual woman’s married life, especially for those who successfully produce patrilineally appropriate males (that is, have sons by their husbands). The degree of sequestering of women is also related inversely to the need families may have for their outside labor.

27. While Maithil Brahman males sometimes refer to *purdah* as a valued marker of Maithil culture that distinguishes them from and makes them superior to their *pahāDi* (hill) counterparts in Nepal, whose cultural traditions they describe as *bigral* (broken), popular media and development discourses, including feminist-inflected media and development discourses, tend to characterize Nepali Hindu culture and society, and Maithil culture and society especially, as particularly oppressive to women (Acharya 1981; Acharya and Bennett 1981). Both Brahmanic and (women’s) developmentalist portrayals have functioned historically to cloak the existence of other views and practices, such as the strategic behavior of women, culturally and socially specific contradictions and tensions in the gender order, extant alternative gender practices and cultural constructions, nonpatriarchal axes of domination, and nonpatrilineal solidarities, such as those among related and nonrelated females and among cross-sex siblings. Further, one would do well to bear in mind that South Asian women engage *purdah* with constrained agency and that it “is not a monolithic prison but a subtle, fluid, and often highly manipulable bundle of practices and precepts” (Raheja and Gold 1994:169).

28. In Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1955–8) and Thompson and Balys’s *Oral Tales of India* (1958) this corresponds with the broad motif field L, Reversal of fortune, in which, however, very few examples involving women obtain (but see L410.7, Queen forced to become a courtesan, and K1911.3, Reinstatement of true bride).

29. See Thompson and Balys (1958) Motif S51, Cruel mother-in-law. In my Maithil folktale collection, however, there are exceptions in which mothers-in-law treat daughters-in-law well, and there are even ones, such as “Arm’s Length Boy” (“Bhairbitna”), in which the two conspire against the son-husband figure.

30. Maithil women and girls also depend on their brothers, though this relation is not featured in the

stories presented here. Brother-sister ties are subject to multiple ritualizations, festivals celebrations, and particular forms of prestation (Davis 2005; Raheja and Gold 1994:88–92). For discussions on brother-sister relations in South Asia, see Bennett (1983), Lamb (2000), Nuckolls (1993), Peterson (1988), Seymour (1993:47–9), Trawick (1990:170–8), and Wadley (1976; 1994:43–5, 57).

31. Laura Ahearn describes how a rise in women's literacy in a Hindu hill village in Nepal has given wives the possibility of contacting their absent husbands by letter to request that their husbands intervene to protect them from cruel treatment by husbands' mothers (Ahearn 2001).

32. This corresponds in Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1955–8) and Thompson and Balys's *Oral Tales of India* (1958) with Motif H11, Recognition through storytelling, and H13, "Recognition by overheard conversation (usually with animals or objects). Person not daring to reveal self directly thus attracts attention and recognition" (Thompson 1955–8:371).

33. Another tale that I recorded, "Eagle and Jackal" (*Chilho Siyaro*), is relevant here. In this tale, an eagle and a jackal, one who kept the Jitiya festival fast and the other who secretly broke it (by eating meat), are reborn as human sisters. When they are grown and married, the one who kept the fast has many sons, while the one who broke the fast has none. Insanely jealous of her reproductively successful sister, the former kills all of the latter's sons and delivers their severed heads to her sister as a "gift." When evidence comes to light of her original fast-breaking (and thereby the source of her barrenness and evil deeds), the woman dies from the horror of it all. Here, the karmic link setting the two sisters at odds is not explicitly resolved at the end of the story, as it is in "Lord Kartik."

34. In an interesting parallel, another story I have recorded, "*Champa Rangbati*," features a woman whose son is about to be married, which is generally considered to be a happy occurrence in South Asian narratives and culture, but whose bride has a reputation for killing her grooms on their wedding night. Several times in succession, the mother of the groom-to-be comes out of her house crying and goes into her house laughing, torn as she is between two conflicting emotions.

35. As a revealing comparison regarding the issue of power and silence raised earlier, note the contrast between the mother's voluntary silence in "Lord Kartik" and the daughter-in-law's culturally enforced silence in "Winnowing Basket."

36. I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer who pointed to the sexual connotations of the smiling-but-not-smiling box. The link between the box, on the one hand, and male gaze and force, on the other, is certainly suggestive. I believe in this case that the womblike qualities of the box, and its function in connecting the protagonist to her mother, are interpretively salient.

37. The metaphor of a "free radical" comes to mind here. In chemistry, free radicals are atomic or molecular units with unpaired electrons. These unpaired electrons are usually highly reactive, so free radicals are likely to take part in chemical reactions and bond with the substances with which they react. Likewise, women in South Asian tales tend not to be alone for long; when they are, they are usually tragic or dangerous figures, such as widows or witches.

38. Cf. Motif D231, Man transformed to stone (Thompson 1955–8), and Motif D231, Transformation: man to stone (Thompson 1958).

39. See Dundes (1997) for an extended, psychoanalytically informed discussion of pollution, especially defecation, and untouchability in India.

40. The title derives from the fact that the boy, the soul in the vessel, is only as tall as the measure of an arm's length.

41. The pond trope is also of central importance in Maithil women's ceremonial painting (Brown 1996; Davis 2008).

42. Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the key opportunities married women have to forge friendly relations with those from other households in their marital villages is when, in the dark of early morning, they walk out to the fields together to defecate. In my fieldwork, I observed that at such times women, like the household tools in "Winnowing Basket," share household gossip and support each other around what is happening within the walls of their homes. Informants told me that sometimes they even use such unsupervised moments to share food and other small resources and to exchange token gifts of friendship. Thus, women's defecation can be a time of communication and solidarity-building among them across households in marital villages.

43. See also Bacchilega (1997) for a feminist, postmodernist, and poststructuralist approach to "post-

modern” rearticulations of classic (Western) fairy tales. Like Sawin, Bacchilega engages with theories of performance including those of Richard Bauman and Judith Butler. Her work, however, leans more toward deconstructionism, following such thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous.

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