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Recommended Citation

Davis, Coralynn V.. "Pond-Women Revelations: The Subaltern Registers in Maithil Women's Expressive Forms." *Journal of American Folklore* (2008) : 286-318.

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Pond-Women Revelations: The Subaltern Registers in Maithil Women's Expressive Forms

Ponds are ubiquitous in the Maithil region of Nepal, and they figure prominently in folk narratives and ceremonial paintings produced by women there. I argue that in Maithil women's folktales, as in their paintings, 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, even as this register shift occurs within plots featuring male protagonists. I argue further that in the absence of a habit of exegesis in their expressive arts, and given the cross-referential, dialogic nature of expressive practices, a methodology that draws into interpretive conversation the multitude of expressive forms exercised by Maithil women enhances analytical access to Maithil women's collective perspectives on their social and cosmological worlds.

Pond Narratives

I arrived in Nepal's eastern Tarai town of Janakpur at the end of October 2003 to do research on women's storytelling.¹ I had first spent time in the region over a fifteen-month period in 1994–95, during which I conducted ethnographic research in and around Janakpur. Janakpur is a commercial and pilgrimage center located in the heart of Mithila, a primarily rural region named for the ancient kingdom that flourished in its place. Historically, Mithila has more accurately designated a cultural and linguistic region blending into neighboring regions, rather than a definite political or geographical unit (Henry 1998:415–7; Jain 1995:207).² Mithila 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). (See Figures 1a and 1b.) The region is characterized by village clusters surrounded by irrigated rice fields and dotted with ponds. Ponds are arguably the “single most prominent geological feature” of the Mithila region (Brown 1996:728); certainly, as I discuss at greater length below, ponds are an economically, socially, and cosmologically significant element of the Maithil landscape.

I had decided to rent a room to use as an office space in the upstairs of a building just a five-minute walk from the home of my research assistant, Dollie Sah. The met-

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Figure 1A. Nepal and the surrounding region.

Figure 1B. The Mithila region.

al wardrobe and the crude wooden bed and table that were provided with the room were indications that it was intended as living space, rather than for the uses to which I would put it over the next five months: a place for Dollie to transcribe stories undisturbed by household duties and for me to write field notes, begin to work on translations of what would amount to 140 Maithil women's stories, and find peace and quiet. I had chosen this space over others we had looked at because it was up above the fray of neighborhood life and near to Dollie's home (enabling her parents to keep a distant eye on their marriage-aged daughter, which made our work together more palatable to them); it had cross-ventilation, and its back windows—screened at my request to keep mosquitoes at bay—looked out on rice fields, as far as the eye could see. It was a place where I could think and breathe.

Directly below the back windows, in a corner of the field that served as a place for cows to graze and for men from the nearby aluminum cookware factory to relieve themselves, was a smallish pond formed at a slight low point in the landscape. One merciful result of this dip in the land was that the water table supported the growth of several shade-providing trees; these in turn kept our office from baking daylong in the relentless sun. When we moved into the room just several weeks after the end of the monsoon season, the pond was full of fresh water that drew cattle and other stray animals to drink and also served as home to small fish and frogs. As the fall and then winter progressed, the pond gradually dried up, drawing herons near to feast on the now more exposed water life and attracting a litter of stray puppies who cooled themselves by rolling and chasing each other in the mud. By March, the pond was completely dry.

Given their ubiquity, it is not surprising that ponds feature in any number of Maithil women's folk narratives and are a central feature in important ceremonial paintings created by Maithil women. Attention given to ponds in Maithil women's folklore must be seen within a rich set of discourses on rivers, wells, lakes, and ponds throughout South Asia. In Sanskrit texts, water is imbued with the power to wash away the sins of bathers and bring peace to ancestors, the ashes of whose cremated bodies are immersed in it. Of equal or more relevance here is the association of bodies of water with fecundity and femininity, and the belief that they are residing places for female divinities. Some water spirits are dangerous and have the power to interfere with fertility, cause drownings, or seduce male ascetics (Feldhaus 2000:634). In Maithili, the same word, *pokhair*, is used for what in English are distinguished (primarily by size) as lakes and ponds. For purposes of consistency in this article, I have chosen the English word "pond" even when the body of water in question seems to be large. In this article, I examine a number of stories in which ponds appear. Drawing on these, as well as on the figure of ponds in Maithil women's paintings, I argue that ponds serve as a locus in plots for women's knowing, specifically for the kind of knowing that requires deep wisdom—as in the story below, where insight into emotional landscapes and bodily experiences occurs in the context of patrilineal arranged marriage.

In early December, Dollie and I found ourselves sitting at the edge of the kitchen garden behind the mud-and-thatch home Indu Mishra shares with her husband's parents and her husband's brothers' families. Indu, one of ten Maithil women who

joined me in the project of recording folktales and other narratives, launched into the following story, announced by a rhythmic and rhyming riddle.³

The Riddle Story

“*Chature chature chāughate, jal nai bore hāth, gāu swarupe pain pibe, he sakhi ekar kon arth?*”⁴ (Round and round four corners of the pond he walks. He does not dip his hands in the water; he drinks water in the manner of a cow. Hey, friend, what is the meaning of this?) Having repeated the riddle twice, Indu then continued:

Now I will tell its meaning:

There was one person who had become a capable young man in whom a particular girl was very much in love. She wished that the boy she was in love with “be he to whom I shall be married.” But the girl’s mother and father betrothed her to somebody else. Her wedding ceremony completed, the girl was soon to leave for her marital home [in another village] when she called for that person whom she had loved before, in order to meet with him. Sobbing heavily, she said to him, “my love is broken, and I am going with someone else.” Her lover raised his hand and wiped her face like this [demonstrating]. When he did so, then *sindur* (red vermilion powder) and kohl got on that boy’s hand.⁵ Then that boy thought, “as long as these remain on my hand, her memory will be with me. Neither will I dip my hands in the water, nor will it be washed away.” Then, with these things still on his hand, that girl left for her marital home, and the boy took leave for his own home.

Walking and walking along the road, that boy became very thirsty. Eventually, he came upon a very large pond, whereupon he thought, “If I scoop the water this way with my hands to drink, then the kohl and sindur will get washed away and my love’s mark will be lost. So no, instead, I will go around all four corners, all four corners of the pond, and if I find a current somewhere, then I will drink the water from it with just my mouth.” So, around the pond he walked. Three or four female friends from the nearby village had also come to the pond, in order to take a bath. They noticed the boy walking around, on all four sides. At one spot where it seemed there was a current, sticking his mouth in like a cow, he began drinking water—just like cows and bulls do. He did not use his hands.

Then those friends who were bathing, they saw that he was sticking his mouth in and drinking [like a cow], despite being human. “Why is he drinking this way, my friend?” That is, “*Chature chature chāughate, jal nai bore hāth, gāu swarupe pain pibe, he sakhi ekar kon arth?*” (Round and round all four corners of the pond he walks. He does not dip his hands in the water; he drinks water in the manner of a cow. Hey, girlfriend, what is the meaning of this?) Those friends were talking amongst themselves. Then one of the friends came up with the answer. She understood in her mind that he was in love with someone, and that there was some mark of this on his hands. She told them, “One time when he had become a capable young man, they fell in love. She wept and he wiped her tears, so this is why he does not dip his hands in the water.”

In this and other stories featuring ponds, women have the power to shape the fate of men. Indeed, just as ponds in Maithil women’s ceremonial painting are the sym-

bolic locus of auspicious feminine fertility upon which patrilineal are utterly dependent (Brown 1996), in Maithil women's folktales, ponds are frequently sites for the articulation of women's insight and agency in plots featuring male protagonists. That is, 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.

My analysis of metaphoric resonances regarding ponds and women in Maithil culture requires attention to certain epistemological concerns, which in turn suggest a particular interpretive methodology. Given the Maithil cultural context of gendered constraints on speech (delineated below), in the absence of an indigenous habit of direct explication of meaning in expressive arts, and the cross-referential, dialogic nature of such expressive forms within Maithil culture, I contend that a methodology that draws into interpretive conversation the multitude of expressive forms exercised by Maithil women enhances our ability to access those women's collective perspectives on their social and cosmological worlds.⁶ In demonstrating this assertion, I begin with the recognition that Maithil women's stories display "an alternative set of values and attitudes, theories of action other than the official ones" (Ramanujan 1991b:53). While A. K. Ramanujan argued that in South Asia, the "folktale universe (both men's and women's tales) itself is in a dialogic relation to the more official mythologies of the culture" (1999:585), folktales, particularly those with women protagonists (and most often told by women), shift the moral universe yet further from dominant representations of reality and morality (Ramanujan 1991b). While Ramanujan identified two contrastive ideal types of South Asian folktales, "male-centered" and "woman-centered," the tales I examine support the view that, within a single telling, shifts in register may occur, with attendant shifts in perspectival angle.⁷ Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold have demonstrated that in Rajasthani women's *gāli* songs, such a register shift may be marked by the presence of a heron narrator (Raheja and Gold 1994). I contend that a similar alteration in perspective—and, in particular, in understandings of women's knowledge and effectiveness in putting that knowledge to their own uses—is quietly signaled in Maithil women's stories by what I am calling "pond-women": women (or girls) situated in actual physical proximity to or immersed within ponds.

This narrative analysis supports the view that "the subaltern" is located not in individuals or collectives of people who share a unified subjectivity. Rather, the subaltern is enacted through verbal and other practices by interpreting subjects whose lives are constituted through and who continually navigate the interstices of multiple—contextually complementary or contradictory—discourses that, in tension together, constitute the webs of meaning and relation we call culture. In this sense, "the subaltern" refers to perspectives on culture or social relations "that may employ reflexive devices to interrogate or subvert that dominant discourse but that may not necessarily coalesce into a closed, unified, discrete, and knowable totality" (Raheja and Gold 1994:14–5).⁸

In what follows, I situate Maithil women's storytelling culturally and politically, including a discussion of the politics of women's speech, before turning to the centrality of ponds in Maithil society. I then locate my own work in these spheres and situate the present article within that work. Because of space limits, I will present the

three additional stories in summary and excerpted form, using the above riddle and those abbreviated tales to support my interpretive claims. My concluding remarks center on the function of the trope of ponds in Maithil women's tales and paintings, the function of women's storytelling in Maithil society, and epistemological questions regarding the subalterity of Maithil women.

Maithil Women's Storytelling: Geo-Cultural Contexts

Until May 2006, Nepal had officially been a Hindu kingdom, despite the wealth of religious variation found among its population. And although Nepal has seen dramatic formal political reform and subsequent turmoil in the past sixteen years, Hindu, high caste, and male citizens are still significantly privileged over their counterparts in myriad formal and informal ways. Some of these privileges, for instance that of inheritance based on gender, have been debated in the courts, and others, especially ethnic and caste privilege, have been fought over in the political and social arenas. Directly and indirectly, state-sponsored Hinduism has treated Nepali women as legal and social dependents, sexual threats to patrilineal integrity, and polluting/polluted entities. The decade-old Maoist insurgency in Nepal, for all its brutality, had taken on these matters of inequality (along with others) in its official platforms and, to a lesser extent, in its organization and infrastructural development. In part as a result of this, the insurgency appeared to have been successful at recruiting many young (especially unmarried) women into its ranks.⁹

Among Maithil people in the Janakpur area, the above-mentioned constructions of gender pre-date the incorporation of Maithil society into the Nepali state and national society, and the two social formations have been mutually reinforcing in some ways.¹⁰ Added to these constructions is the Maithil practice of *pardā*, in local parlance, *ghogh tānab* (lit., to pull a veil), meaning in this cultural context to draw the trail of one's sari or shawl over one's face. The *pardā* system in Mithila most affects behavior of and toward recently married women and quite clearly concerns the assurance of appropriation of these women's procreative capacities for their husbands' patriline. In its ideal form, it entails the social, verbal, and spatial/visual isolation of in-married women from nonhousehold males and from males senior in kinship status to the husbands of those women. Although I have been repeatedly told that the constraints and burdens for daughters-in-law have relaxed somewhat in the current generation, I met women in the mid-1990s who reported that, after marriage, they had not left the household courtyard in more than a decade (except perhaps in order to travel chaperoned to their natal homes) and who had never spoken with their husband's elder brother, with whom they shared common living space. These practices, particularly those involving space, generally do loosen over the years of an individual's married life, especially for those women who successfully procreate patrilineally appropriate males (that is, have sons by their husbands). Poorer, lower caste, or less-landed households are generally less capable of enacting this ideal (since, among other things, they need women's field labor) than are their high caste and better-off counterparts. Those of higher social classes are at once more capable of enacting *pardā* and poten-

tially less dependent financially—but not socially—upon the “chastity” of their women; it is, therefore, difficult to generalize about a direct correlation between social class and *pardā*.¹¹

Women carry particular burdens in regard to family honor that center on sexual propriety and its correlates and that are especially acute in the Maithil cultural context. Pramod Mishra characterizes the situation in the following way:

A man, no matter what he does with his sexuality, remains whole and dynamic, capable of countless renewals, while the woman involved in [elopement across caste and culture] is branded as a “broken egg,” forever rotten and polluting. . . . The metaphor of an egg as a signifier of a high caste Hindu woman, current in Nepali cultural conversation, speaks of the fragile status accorded to a high caste woman in Nepal. And since high caste mores constitute the dominant ideology of the Nepali state, this characterization applies, in various ways, to all Nepali women (the case of the hill tribal and Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Awadhi-speaking Tarai women belong to the two extremes of this situation. In the Tarai case, you trample the egg further and finish it, if it breaks. . . .) (Mishra 1997:345–6)

The practices of *pardā* in Maithil communities are meant to safeguard against such “breakage.”¹²

While Maithil Brahman males sometimes refer to *pardā* 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 “broken” (*bigral*), popular feminist, media, and development discourses tend to characterize Nepali Hindu culture and society, and Maithil culture and society especially, as particularly oppressive to women (see Acharya 1981; Acharya and Bennett 1981; and Davis 1999). 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, alternative extant gender practices and cultural constructions, nonpatriarchal axes of domination, and nonpatrilineal solidarities, such as those among related and unrelated females and among cross-sex siblings (Davis 2005; Nuckolls 1993; Peterson 1988; Raheja and Gold 1994; Seymour 2002).

Maithil women have harnessed the trope of ponds as one vehicle for the construction of these alternative meanings and practices. In Janakpur and its surrounding villages, ponds play important roles both in everyday life and on special occasions. In Janakpur itself there are to be found twenty-four sacred ponds or “tanks” (*sagar*). Most significant among these are Dhanush Sagar and Ganga Sagar, both located near to the equally famous Rām Mandir (Rama temple).¹³ Characteristically, villages in Mithila boast several ponds, each with its own origin story. The ponds serve a number of critical functions for the surrounding human population. They are places for bathing and for washing pots and other items. (See Figure 2.) They may be stocked with fish, which are harvested through the cooperative labor of men of the fishing (*mallah*) caste, who, standing or swimming in the water, use nets to trap and haul out the fish. In this region, where temperatures can reach over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) for days on end, young children play at the water’s edge and

swim there to cool and refresh themselves. Ponds teem with other forms of life, as well, a point captured by Carolyn Henning Brown in the following passage:

These ponds shine under full moons as the many creatures who inhabit them sing lustily throughout unquiet nights. In the heat of May and June, moisture lifts from their surfaces, clogs the air with a humidity that is almost painful to breathe, and covers everyone's skin with greasy layers of perspiration. To bathe in these ponds or wash large brass trays and pots one must wade into thick oozy mud and stake a territory against the encroaching water lilies with which most Mithila ponds are thickly covered from edge to edge. What lives beneath this covering one can only guess, though some of its inhabitants appear on the walls of the *kohbara ghar*: fish, turtles, and watersnakes. (Brown 1996:728)

Brown's interest is in Maithil women's paintings and, in particular, in the central figure (*puren*, lit. lotus leaf) in the painting done by high-caste women on the wall of the wedding chamber, or *khobara ghar*, which is referenced in the folktale called "Dost," summarized below. According to Brown, the somewhat abstract figure of the *puren* is, in fact, a pond, and the pond, metaphorically, is the source of auspicious feminine fertility (Brown 1996:729). (See Figure 3.)

Maithil women's connection to ponds is particularly strong on occasions associated with marriage and fertility. Brown describes the ceremony whereby new brides

Figure 2. A potter approaching a pond to rinse his vessels. In the background, a water buffalo cools itself in the pond. Photo credit: Ronald B. Davis.

Figure 3. Reproduction on paper of khobar ghar images by Maithil artists Mithileswari, Hira Karna, and Phulaba.

come to worship the household goddess (*kula devī*) of their marital home, having grown up worshipping the *kula devī* of their natal home. In a girl's natal home, *kula devī* worship is intended to ensure that she be favorably married; at her marital home, such worship is meant to ensure and enhance *suhāg*—the auspicious state of the woman with a living husband, a state connoting adult female sexuality, with its attendant productive womb, beauty, and adornment. The ceremony in which the bride is introduced to the *kula devī* of her husband's family is to take place just a few months after her wedding, when ideally she will have become pregnant. In this ceremony,

the young bride carries the old Gauri betel nut she formerly worshipped in her parent's *kula devī* shrine to the edge of the pond in a clay pot balanced on her head. In a little pouch made from a fold of her sari hanging over her womb she carries seven types of grain ("seed"), turmeric (for protection), betel nut (representing the goddess of virgins who brings *suhāg*), and a rupee (for prosperity). Wading into the pond, she allows all these materials to float off while other women call Gauri near by singing songs of the goddess. She then emerges and dresses in an *old* sari to avoid inauspicious premature enactment of the final life-cycle immersion in the pond at widowhood. At that point all symbols of *suhāg*—vermilion, comb, mirror, and bangles—will be abandoned in the pond. Thus in

ritual she performs what she proclaims in art: her auspicious association with the natural fertility of pond life. (Brown 1996:729)

Perhaps the most well-known festival of Mithila, and of Janakpur in particular, is *ChhaiTh*, the central ritual of which is worship of the sun god, Surya. On the last night of this four-day ritual, female devotees enter ponds at dusk to face the setting sun with baskets of offerings. After the subsequent night spent sitting and singing at the water's edge, women reenter the pond just before dawn and, remaining otherwise very still but often shivering violently from the cold, again make offerings as the sun rises. (See Figure 4.) Their prayers are meant to extend the lives of their husbands and sons. This is at once meant to ensure the viability of husbands' lineages and also to enhance women's own security, as women are structurally dependent for survival and well-being on these affinal kin.

South Asian Women's Expressive Traditions: Epistemological and Methodological Considerations

Just as with festivals, the gender-inflected nature of folklore is pronounced in South Asia. Prominent South Asia folklorist Susan Wadley goes so far as to suggest that "[e]very piece of folklore is gendered by its performer's identity, while the content of every item reflects, comments on or challenges the gender constructions of the community and norms of the performer" (Wadley 2000b:241). A fundamental factor in the gendering of South Asian folklore is the separation and difference of men's and women's lives (whereby women's ritual and leisure activities are undertaken in the absence of men), particularly the restrictions on speech and movement enforced through practices of *pardā*. Indeed, most South Asian women (except in very particular, framed contexts) sing and tell stories only in the absence of adult males. (While

Figure 4. Women with offerings, pond-side at the ChhaiTh festival.
Photo credit: Ronald B. Davis.

South Asian historians, linguists, and literary scholars have created a substantial literature on the Mithila region, contemporary Maithil culture and society in Nepal has received very little attention from ethnographers and scholars of women's verbal expressive forms.)

Following Ramanujan, Wadley notes that women's folk events in South Asia tend to take place within the house among kin and close neighbors, entail relatively simple speech, and involve tales or songs without named characters. In contrast, male public events are sometimes competitive and tend to involve more formal speech patterns, longer and more complex tales, and narratives filled with named people and places. Furthermore, women's folklore is thematically centered on issues of intimacy, family relations, and household prosperity, whereas men's folklore emphasizes broad political themes. As both Wadley and Ramanujan recognize, this conceptual scheme is better characterized as a continuum rather than a duality (Wadley 2000b:241–6). Indeed, in the present article, examples of stories told by women with both named and unnamed characters are presented.

A large literature has developed in the last two decades on South Asian women's expressive traditions, including song, story, art, and ritual. While some of this work focuses primarily on the ways that dominant (patriarchal) forms and understandings of femininity are reinforced through women's ritual and religious lives (e.g., Leslie 1989, 1991)—even with “small deviations” (Leslie 1991:3) and in self-serving ways (Pearson 1996)—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). These works suggest, for instance, that women's songs are a place to voice criticism and bawdiness not articulable in everyday speech or in mixed-sex settings (Ahearn 1998; Raheja and Gold 1994; Skinner, Holland, and Adhikari 1994; Srivastava 1991). A number of feminist anthropologists of South Asia have also pointed to such forms of expression as a location for indirect commentary on the singer or teller's own individual life in contexts where direct speech or other registers of articulation are not possible (e.g., Narayan 1997; Wadley 1994). Raheja and Gold suggest that we understand such articulations not as a form of resistance, subversion, or inversion but as evidence of the coexistence of contradictory perspectives available in differing moral registers (1994; also see Kumar 1994). Thus, what Holland and Skinner (1995) have called cultural “contestation” and “critical commentary,” Raheja and Gold (1994) refer to as cultural “dissensus” (see also Brown 1996). I agree with this latter perspective, for I believe that while Maithil women's gender-specific moral registers and cosmological perspectives may be less known by others—from their own menfolk to outside observers—they are nonetheless central psychological and social organizing principles in Maithil women's lives, which coexist in complementarity and tension with other such principles. Outsiders, and folklorists in particular, need to learn to listen differently to access these perspectives (March 2002), and we need to rethink our epistemologies and reshape our methodologies accordingly.¹⁴

As a possible result of the degree of separation and difference between male and female life experiences, and despite the fact that Maithil women themselves have few outlets for direct, extrahousehold expression (as compared to their male counterparts as a class), Maithil women have developed a number of expressive traditions, which

offer insights into their preoccupations, perspectives, and values and which shed light on the micropolitics of their lives. Within the international community in Nepal (and elsewhere), Maithil women have become known for colorful paintings replete with scenes from great epics of the region, as well as with depictions of their work lives and plants and animals that are integral to their world (Brown 1996; Heinz 2000; Mishra 1997; Singh 2000). Maithil women also tell folk stories. By attending to these women's stories, one of my aims is to bring these narratives and the lives, perspectives, and insights of the women who tell them to the attention of those for whom their existence, and the value of that existence, is unacknowledged. Attention to women's tales, in conjunction with the images they paint, can help widen the view of Maithil understandings of gender and culture by revealing perspectives and practices submerged in Maithil Brahmin, masculinist, and development discourses—discourses that Maithil women themselves also “speak” in many contexts.¹⁵

In her entry “Folktale” in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Wadley designates “folktale” as a term referring 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: fundamentally collective (passed from person to person with plots, structures, and conventional elements *relatively* intact and with this collective nature recognized by those participating in the telling of the stories; oral, performative, and social) requiring tellers and listeners to be in proximity to one another, this quality being present even if the tales are circulated in other ways, as well; 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; set in time and space neither radically dissociated from the speakers/listeners nor immediately present; intertextual, in the sense that themes and motifs traverse tales and cross between tale genres and other forms of folklore (Wadley 2000a:219; see also below); and functioning in part to communicate information about the nature of life in general, to situate types of people and other things within it, and to entertain.¹⁶ As Wadley notes:

Folktales contain cultural wisdom to be passed on to further generations, while being continually responsive to the settings and times in which they are told. They tell of social and cosmological relationships, as they create new relationships between tellers and audiences. Folktales are not necessarily used to teach, but even those told for entertainment often contain biting commentaries on social situations and incorporate and substantiate key cultural beliefs. (Wadley 2000a:218)¹⁷

Ram Dayal Rakesh (1996), who has written extensively on Maithil cultural life, has said that the Maithili gloss for folktale is *kathāpihani* and that modern Maithili people often just use the term *galp* (lit., talk or gossip). 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.¹⁸

In her work with the storyteller Urmila Devi Sood in *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* (1997), Kiran Narayan identified two broad genres of stories in this Himachal Pradesh community—those told in relation to annual festivals and those told “on cold winter nights” for purposes of entertainment. Among Maithil women, I have noticed a similar (indigenously recognized) categorization of stories. In most of the tales not associated with female festivals in Mithila—that is, in stories told primarily for entertainment of other women and children—the main protagonists are almost always male, although female characters sometimes have quite active secondary roles. In fact, it is often female characters who launch or redirect the plot in Maithil women’s folktales. I have not found true what Ramanujan argues in his book *Folktales from India*, that “in women’s folktales women predominate and men are wimps, ruled by mothers, mistresses, wives” (1991a:12). Even in those tales whose main protagonists are women, men are not uniformly, as a class, constitutionally weak or stupid—although some certainly are. In most of the tales I recorded, males are the main protagonists. The most common plot line entails a boy who must go on a journey and through his journeying becomes wiser, wealthier, and wed. But even within these, what Ramanujan would call male-centered tales, women frequently are more than rewards at the end of men’s journeys. Indeed, they may instigate, shape, take part in, and themselves reap the benefits of those journeys. As I suggest below, in particular narrative contexts, female characters in Maithil women’s folktales do seem to have special gendered power of insight, an ability that enables them to assert a positive, often life-saving effect on men’s lives—and, thereby, their own.

Keeping in mind the politics of gender, the place of ponds, and the role of storytelling in the world of Mithila, let us now turn to the story of two friends, entitled “Dost.” By placing this tale in dialogue with two additional tales, the riddle presented earlier, and painting imagery, I aim to demonstrate that female characters, in their familiarity with and proximity to ponds, acquire special abilities to understand the (sometimes strange) behavior of males and to make self-serving interventions in men’s lives and men’s worlds. A corollary to this assertion is that males cannot “see” within ponds and therefore depend on women to light their way. In this manner, the lines of dependency between men and women are reversed in relation to dominant characterizations.

Of Ponds and Women: Stories, Interpretations, Intertextuality

We are in a village a good hour’s bike ride over dusty, pitted road from Janakpur, sitting in Indu Karna’s family courtyard, a place I first visited in the spring of 1995. Indu, Dollie, and I sit together on a woven straw mat. Indu begins haltingly, embarrassed by the tape recorder and the newness of this work together, which subsequently spanned a number of weeks. It is the month of Kartik (October/November), the festival season when the sun, mercifully, has lost much of the brutalizing intensity it had in the early, postmonsoon period. In the course of the telling of this complex story, Indu’s small son, daughter, and mother-in-law sit down and listen in, occasionally commenting on the plot or some other activity related to their everyday lives.¹⁹ “Go ahead,” Dollie encourages, “which story will you tell?” “Hmmm, the one about the friends,” Indu

decides. “Don’t be shy,” I chip in, as Dollie clicks on the tape recorder. With a giggle and a blush that I interpret as combined self-consciousness and excitement, Indu begins.

“Dost”

Friends, there were two friends.

One was a king’s son, the other was the son of a *dewan* (man of the ministerial/military caste). The *dewan*’s son was married, but his bride was dark-skinned.²⁰ He thought she was ugly, and so he left her, saying to his friend, “Let’s get out of here.” The king’s son had a lot of money and agreed to a journey. That night, the two friends slept in the jungle. During the night a large cobra (*nāga*) came out of the recesses of the jungle, searching for food and lighting its way with an incandescent pearl (*mani*) it took out from its mouth.²¹ Setting the pearl down to light the area, it went off in search of food. The king’s son was sleeping, but the *dewan*’s son lay awake. When the cobra had left, the *dewan*’s son arose and covered the *mani* with some horse dung, making the area dark. Without the light, the cobra could not see to hunt, and it died. In the morning the friends went to a nearby pond to wash the horse dung off the *mani*. As soon as they washed the *mani* clean, it began to shine, and it illuminated the water. And when it shown down into the water, the two friends saw something like a ladder. Curious, they climbed down the ladder, where they discovered a whole cobra kingdom! In one room of a large house they found a cobra maiden, the dead cobra’s daughter, crying. All other cobras were dead. She explained that her father cobra had bitten one of the other cobras each day, eventually killing them all but her. And now, she feared, it was her turn. The two friends explained where they had come from and started living with the cobra maiden. After some days, the cobra maiden declared her interest in marrying one of the boys and threatened that, if neither of them married her, she would never let them go. Since the *dewan*’s son was already married, they decided the king’s son should marry the cobra maiden, but only if his parents could be present at the wedding.

In order to send off the *dewan*’s son to summon the prince’s parents, all three of them came up to the surface from inside the pond, using the *mani* to light their way. It was the first time the cobra maiden had come to the surface. There she saw the ground, the trees, the green grass—all of which she liked very much. When the *dewan*’s son went off to get his friend’s parents and the wedding guests and such, the other two descended back into the water. The *dewan*’s son was gone for several days. Each day the cobra maiden would feed the king’s son and then, telling him to rest, take the *mani* and come to the surface of the water. The top half of her body would emerge, as she looked around. One day, a boy from another kingdom happened by, saw, and fell in love with the cobra maiden. He vowed to marry her and arranged for her abduction. [. . .]

Meanwhile, the *dewan*’s son returned with his friend’s parents, but the cobra maiden had left with the *mani*, and his friend down below could not hear them calling for him. Furious, thinking that it had all been a ruse and that their son had been drowned, the parents threw the *dewan*’s son in the water. Even so, the *dewan*’s son vowed to find

Figure 5. Representation of the “Dost” story by Maithil artist Sita Karna. Here the two friends descend by ladder, mani lighting their way, to the bottom of the pond, where they encounter the crying Nāga princess.

his friend and take him to his father. He began roaming from village to village, searching for his friends, and eventually came to the village where the cobra maiden had been taken. The cobra maiden had been able cleverly to delay her wedding to her abductor long enough to give time for the dewan's son to find her. Together, they returned to the pond and were reunited with the king's son. The three then set off for the king's son's home to prepare for the wedding.

Along the way, the king's son became intensely jealous and untrusting of his friend, accusing him of having designs on his bride-to-be. The king's son's behavior was observed by the gods, Bidh and Bidhata, who, in the form of birds, were sitting in a papal tree, observing the scene.²² Bidh (the husband of the deity pair) could see the undeserved mistrust in the king's son's heart. He decided that the jealous one was not a good person and had no right to live—especially given how helpful his friend had been to him. [...]

Bidh and Bidhata engaged in a long conversation about how Bidh planned to kill the king's son. At each suggestion, Bidhata challenged him to have another plan, in case the previous one did not work. Finally, she asked him what he would do if someone overheard the very conversation they were presently having and used the information to foil Bidh's murderous attempts at every turn. Bidh replied, "When that person explains how he knew about the plan we have laid and why he then sought to save the king's son, at the moment he begins to explain, his body will turn to stone. And if it becomes a stone, then that person's life will be destroyed."

Then again his wife got worried. "How will his stone body ever come back to life again? It will not be good if his body remains of stone." The god replied, "Those two, the cobra bride and her groom, when their first child is born, while it still has its placenta [*nair purain*], if at that time they cut the child's throat and pour its entire blood on the stone body, then the stone person will come into human form again." She probed, "Then how will that child come back alive?" To which her husband replied, "The dewan's son had left his own wife. She was black and ugly. That is why he did not like her, so he abandoned her. Every day his wife gets up at four o'clock in the morning and goes to Girija's temple.²³ She prays to Girija, asking only to be reunited with her husband. She had been living as an ascetic [*tāpasya*], doing this for twelve years. If the king's son goes to that temple, taking that child's entire placenta with him, and if he tells his wife that Girija will have an elixir for him, then the child will come alive again." All this Bidh said, and the dewan's son heard the entire story. [...]

And then everything happened just as the gods discussed. The dewan's son saved his friend and his friend's bride at each attempt of Bidh to kill them. Ultimately, the dewan's son had been hiding in the wedding chamber at night when Bidh, in the form of a serpent, came to kill the king's son and his cobra bride. When the dewan's son went to slay the serpent, the couple awoke and caught him, thinking he was a thief. But the dewan's son began explaining everything to his friend. He showed them all the proof, including half of the serpent's body. He told them that when he finished the story, his body would turn to stone, and that in order to be freed from stone, they would have to slay their first child with its placenta and bathe him in it. Even as he was telling all this, his body turned into stone.²⁴

Now it came in his friend's heart that, "My friend has saved me over and over again.

It will not do for me to leave him as a stone.” Thus, they started waiting for a baby, determined when the child came to set the dewan’s son free from his stone body. After ten months they had a son. Without removing the placenta, they cut the baby’s throat and bathed the entire stone in the baby’s blood. The dewan’s son came into human form again. He took the baby, with the entire placenta, and he departed for his wife’s place. As usual, she came in the early morning to pray. After praying, she saluted the god, imploring, “Unite me with my husband, oh god!” Then the statue of Girija started laughing. Startled, she asked, “Why have you laughed today?” Lord Girija replied, “What you have been praying for all this time, that person is here today.” Then her husband arrived with that child. Putting the baby down, her husband said: “If you bring this child back to life, then I will accept you [as my wife] and take you with me. If you don’t, I will leave you just as I did before.”

Now, she had been praying to Girija for twelve years. Lord Girija had to listen to her, so she asked him for an elixir, which he gave to her. They sprinkled the elixir on the baby’s body, and he came back to life. The two husbands and wives were united, and the king’s son got his son back, too.

Interior Meanings

The version of “Dost” told by Indu Karna is full of interpretive and analytical possibilities. For instance, one might discuss Maithil stereotypes regarding character differences between kings and their ministers, the relationship between gods and mortals, or the ubiquity of *nāga* in South Asian tales. Likewise, one might engage in structural analysis of the narrative, discuss at length the relevance of extratextual factors such as audience in the meanings of the tale, or consider personal resonances of this tale in Indu’s own life. For present purposes, I wish to focus on patterns in gender-inflected relationships between people and ponds in the narratives.

The plot in “Dost” is driven in part by the murky quality of the pond and the use of the dead king *nāga*’s *mani* to light the way between the surface (the firmament where the two boys live and roam) and the bottom or underworld (where the *nāga* maiden lives). (See Figure 5.) On the most general level, the underworld/surface division resonates with the highly gendered domestic–intrahousehold and public–extrahousehold spheres of Maithil familial and community life. These gendered spheres are not just “opposed”; ideologically, in *pardā* the feminine interior sphere is *encompassed within* the masculine exterior/public sphere—just as the pond is a space within the larger landscape across which males may (indeed, are compelled to) travel.²⁵ From a woman’s perspective, the *pardā*like constraining quality of the topological context of the story is made most evident by the fact that the cobra maiden, once she gets a “taste” for the outer world, seeks to access it again and again. Note that the male friends are not, in mirrorlike fashion, interested in experiencing the beauty of the inner world of the pond once they taste it—after all, everyone in it, save the maiden, is dead. Their goal is to remove the maiden from it and place her inside their own patrilineal, patrilocal world.

The underworld of the pond is a feminine space in another sense, as well. It is a

locus or impetus of female knowledge, self-determination, and influence over men. In “Dost,” the cobra maiden proposes and succeeds in getting the marriage she desired and in stalling and evading a second, undesired marriage.²⁶ She succeeds, further, in getting out of the dark interior where she had been trapped by her murderous father and into a prosperous royal family. Along the way, she proves to be a vehicle both for the rift between the royal and ministerial classes upon which her well-being depends and for the healing of that rift.

I will return to the analysis of “Dost” below, but for now it is important to explore how themes similar to those I have been discussing play out in a different tale, the story of two brothers, Sit and Basanta. As with “Dost,” this story was told to me by Indu Karna in the courtyard of her home in November 2003.

“Sit Basanta”

Two brothers, Sit and Basanta, embark on a journey in order to escape the murderous intentions of their step-mother. In the jungle one of the brothers, Basanta, is bitten and killed by a snake. The other, Sit, continues on to another land in search of the things he needs in order to perform the death rites for his brother. Through a series of events, Sit ends up being declared king of that country and forgets about his brother. Meanwhile, ants suck the venom out of Basanta, bringing him back to life, whereupon he heads for what turns out to be the same country in which his brother has become king. A tiger has been ravaging that country, and the queen promises to bestow half the wealth of the kingdom upon anyone who can kill the tiger. Basanta manages to do it, much to the chagrin of a royal guardsman (*chowkidār*), who has his sights set on getting that wealth. The royal guardsman determines to kill Basanta and claim the reward for himself. After one failed try, he beats up Basanta and dumps him into a large body of water.

Near death, Basanta is inadvertently caught and dragged in by a fisherman’s [*mal-lah’s*] net. The fisherman has a daughter who can see what will happen in the future. He marries his daughter to Basanta. One day, when Basanta decides to go fishing, his wife insists, against his protestations, on going with him. Two other men are already fishing, and they begin to flirt with and tease Basanta’s beautiful wife. They decide they want to take her away, and though she protests, they are able to throw Basanta off of his boat and begin to make away in their boat with his wife. She throws a cushion into the water to provide a floatation device for her husband. Basanta subsequently begins to float to the water’s edge, where he is sucked down into a whirlpool. At the bottom of the whirlpool is a princess, bathing with a friend. She proposes marriage to Basanta. He agrees to marry her only if she can find all of his family members. She says she cannot do that, but she has an idea. “Go forward six kilometers, and you will find a temple with a statue. Bow in front of the statue and then go around and stand behind its back.” Basanta does just this, whereupon the statue swallows him. In the statue’s belly, Basanta finds another beautiful princess sleeping on a bed. He notices a small container of vermilion powder on a table by her bedside. Taking a bit in his hand, he is just about to draw it through the part in her hair (thereby marrying her), when she awakes with a start and asks, “Why do you want to marry me?” In response, Basanta tells her the

story of his trials and tribulations. Having heard his story, the princess tells him that she has an idea.

They begin to walk along together and eventually reach the land where Basanta's brother has been made king. Just before entering the village, the princess suggests to Basanta that he disguise himself as a holy man. She sends a message to the royal court, announcing that a holy man has arrived and wishes to tell the story of the two brothers, Sit and Basanta. Upon hearing this, the king is shocked. He calls together all the people of the kingdom, including Sit's first, second, and third wives. When Basanta spins his story from beginning to end, the king realizes that this holy man is his very own brother and rushes forward to greet him. He also summons the royal guardsman who had lied and has him killed. Following this, the two brothers and their wives gather together at the palace. After a few months more, they return to their home to be reunited with the brothers' parents, where they all lived happily ever after.

Pond-Woman Insight and Agency

One of the most obvious commonalities between "Dost" and "Sit Basanta" is the presence of maidens in the watery underworld and the nature of their encounter with boys who haplessly find themselves down there.²⁷ As in "Dost," in "Sit Basanta" a princess in the depths proposes marriage. Then she comes up with an idea to help the boy solve his dilemma of finding his way back to his brother and his home. He submits to her instructions, a relinquishing of agency so complete that he is "swallowed up," whereupon he encounters yet another princess with the insight to bring him still closer to his goal, but in a manner, again, of submission to her authority rather than of understanding or collaboration. As with "Dost," "Sit Basanta" ends in the reuniting of the patrilineal family amidst an abundance in which all three pond-women wives share.²⁸ This ending is made possible through the combined efforts of the three pond-women, efforts that are not, notably, at cross-purposes. (More commonly, cowives are pitted against one another in story plots.)

Of course, the connection of the first of Basanta's wives with ponds is one of proximity, not interiority: she insists on going in the boat with him. Indeed, even under the intense duress of capture and possible rape at the hands of the other fishermen, this wife throws Basanta a literal life line. While we can infer that the two other women can, figuratively speaking, see beyond their own watery circumstances into Basanta's courtly world, the first wife is explicitly designated with the ability to "see the future." Her special knowledge and ability appears to be connected to her willfulness *in defiance of her husband's protestations*, which in dominant Maithil discourse would mark her as a bad wife. In other words, because she knows better, because she in fact will save her husband's life (while risking her own), her self-determination is vindicated.

This special ability of storied girls and women in association with ponds to understand the plights of boys and men is highlighted in an especially explicit form in the story with which I began this article, a story in which a girl bathing at a pond deciphers a boy's strange behavior and thereby solves a riddle. The telling and solving of riddles is common to many South Asian communities (Badalkhan 2000; Bauman 2004; Bhat-

tarai 2000b), as elsewhere around the world. Here it is male behavior itself (particularly in matters of unsanctioned love) that is marked as a solvable riddle from the female perspective. One additional story involving special insight by a female at the water's edge affirms this point. Like "Dost," the story "Barsait" (rain) features relations between people and *nāgas*. This story, however, begins not with a man ridding himself of his undesirable wife but with a mother of seven sons who is cooking at her hearth. Indu Mishra, the Brahman woman who told me this story in December 2003, herself had but one son who, in the course of his still short life, had already been near death from an undiagnosed illness.

"Barsait"

A Brahman woman inadvertently kills all the children of a *nāga* couple by pouring the scalding wastewater of the rice she has been cooking down into their nest hole at the side of her hearth.²⁹ In what ensues, the cobras seek revenge by vowing to bite and kill all of the woman's sons and their brides on their respective wedding days. [. . .]

After six of her sons and their brides are killed in this manner, the woman decides not to arrange a marriage for her youngest son and instead provisions him for a journey and sends him off with the following curious admonishment: "When you find yourself standing in the shelter of a tree, pull open your umbrella, and when you start walking the hot sun on the road, then fold closed your umbrella. When you wade into the water, then wear your shoes, but when you walk on the road, remove your shoes." Along the road, the boy comes to a pond, where he sits down in the shade of a pipal tree to rest and, following his mother's advice, opens his umbrella. And then when he goes to wade across the water, he wears his shoes. Further, when he reaches the other side, he removes his shoes; and when it is sunny, he folds up his umbrella.³⁰

Now, seven laundresses (*dhobin*) have come to the pond to bathe, and they observe the boy's strange behavior.³¹ They ask one another why the boy is acting in such a way, wondering whether he might be crazy. But one washerwoman, Sait Dhobin, a very devout girl, knows everything. She can see what has happened six months into the past and what will happen six months into the future. She says to her friends: "All his brothers have died. When he stands under the pipal tree, he opens his umbrella, lest a snake or insect fall and bite him. And if he puts his feet in the water, something that he cannot see might bite him from below, so he wears shoes. In the road he can see, so he needn't wear shoes or protect himself from above with his umbrella."

Sait Dhobin declares that she will marry the seventh son. Before leaving for her new husband's home, Sait Dhobin requests milk and popped rice (*laba*) from her mother.³² When they arrive at the location where, with each previous son's wedding, the *nāga* have bitten and killed the bride and groom, the Sait Dhobin uses the milk and popped rice to entice the *nāga* husband into a trap. She then bribes his wife into agreeing to bring all those killed back to life in exchange for her husband's release. Sait Dhobin was a great devotee, and this protected her, along with her husband from themselves being bitten.³³ Ultimately, all of the sons, along with their wives, are brought back to life and reunited with their mother.

Further Intersections

As in “Dost,” in “Barsait” we find a male in need of feminine “sight”; as in “Sit Basanta,” in “Barsait” we find a male in need of female instruction in order to safely reach his destiny. Indeed, the boy in “Barsait” needs to be told something as basic as when to put on and take off his shoes. (He cannot, after all, “see” in the pond to avoid its dangers.) As in “Sit Basanta,” the female in question in “Barsait” is associated with the water through proximity (bathing) and occupational caste (in this case, she is a *dhobin* or laundress).³⁴ As in “Dost” and “Sit Basanta,” this maiden decides autonomously whom she will marry and is successful in carrying out her plan. Through her insights and actions, she not only secures herself a husband but also relivens the fraternal (patrilineal) household of which she will become a part, saving the lives of those brothers and their wives while reversing a mother’s sorrow and loss.

Verbal-Visual Reflections: Tacking across Expressive Forms

In order to make a final and very particular point about the ending of “Dost” and the relationship between it, the other stories, and women’s metaphorical connection with ponds, we need to return to Maithil women’s *khobar ghar* art. Maithil women’s art, Brown asserts, “originated in a conversation among women” (Brown 1996:726), by which she means that the forms found in women’s painting spring from their collective experiences and perspectives. It is certainly the case that, like storytelling, ceremonial painting is something that women do in each other’s company and rarely in the company of men, with each other’s cooperation and participation, and in the spaces (interior to households) most identified with them. As with the narrative genres, Maithil women are not in the habit of creating verbal exegesis on their painting (Brown 1996:726; cf. Narayan 1997).³⁵

Mani Shekhar Singh describes succinctly the uses of Maithil women’s ceremonial painting:

Within the domestic-ritual space, the act of painting or writing (*likhiya*) sacred diagrams forms part of a series of ritual events that the women perform without the help of ritual specialists. Most of these ceremonial diagrams are painted on the walls of the *kohabara ghara*, the inner room where rituals associated with the marriage ceremony are performed. It is here that the bridal couple consummates the marriage. Besides the *kohabara ghara* or the bridal chamber, ceremonial diagrams are also written inside the *gosauni ghara*, the abode of the family and lineages shrine. Together these two spaces constitute the *garbha-griha* (literally the womb) of a Maithil home.

Ritual diagrams in the form of *aripana* are also written on the floor in the inner courtyard (*angina*) and other sections of the house on each of the celebrations that are a part of the sacraments or rites of passage accompanying a person’s existence, from the womb through adulthood to death. These floor diagrams are also drawn as acts of devotion during the annual festivals, and for monthly and weekly observances (*vrata-puja*). In each of these cases, the diagram is written either by one woman alone

or collectively by groups of women from the same family and/or community directly on the walls and the floors of the house. The performance by these women artists transforms the domestic place into ritual spaces, thereby making it receptive to the sacred. (Singh 2000:411)

Using the past tense to indicate the historical depth of these painterly practices (rather than their disappearance), Carolyn Brown Heinz (earlier Carolyn Henning Brown) contextualizes high-caste Maithil women's painting in regard to the circumscribed power and influence they wield:

Mithila art was imbedded in a social environment in which objects and images had specific powers and functions, and interacting with them changed something: one's body, one's future, other people's responses. As women, the domains in which they could act were limited by *purdah*, but tremendous powers resided in the household with them. Whether as a daughter worshipping Gauri to bring a husband like Siva, or as a wife worshipping *kula devi*, the lineage goddess, and incarnating her to bring offspring to her husband's family, there were powers which women controlled. Mithila arts was a powerful visual discourse of Brahman and Kayastha women; it was reflexive, about themselves, their powers as women, and their mystical connection with the goddesses. (Heinz 2000:404)

With regard to the images painted or drawn on the eastern wall of the bridal chamber known as the *kohabar ghar*, while Kayasthas refer to these diagrams as *kohabara* (or *khobar*), Brahmans refer to the same composite image as *purain* (*puren*), which is also the word for placenta.³⁶ According to Singh, among the Karna Kayastha of Mithila (of whom Indu Karna is one), the propitious way to begin the painting is to place a vermilion dot (*sindur*) at the center of the eastern wall. The first motif—what Singh (2000) identifies as a lotus plant and what Brown (1996) identifies as a pond with lotus plants in it—is then drawn from that center point. An integral feature of this motif is a “central vertical stem (*dhar*) with a broad base (*jari*) and a pointed head (*muri*), the latter being in the form of either a lotus bud or a female face” (Singh 2000: 413–4).³⁷

The Maithil word for the placenta is *narpuren* (or *nairpuren*), literally “the lotus leaf of the navel.” When she asked women about the long, pointed object that pierces the ring of the lotuses in *puren* (usually interpreted by Western observers and their Brahman priest informants as a phallus), Brown reports that they described it as “the stem which roots the lotus leaf to the bottom of the pond” (Brown 1996:729).³⁸ Brown points out that men never see the placenta or the cord attached to the navel of the newborn. Indeed, as I was to find out in my own research, women in Maithil villages give birth in their homes with the assistance of midwives of the *chamair* caste, who are considered “untouchables.” The blood of birth is considered especially defiling. Men avoid it completely, absenting themselves from the birth process, and the women who encounter it afterwards undergo ritual purification. To Maithil women, Brown argues, the image of the marriage chamber “resembles the lotus leaf and the long stem attached to the bottom of the pond is a metaphorical umbilical cord. In

Mithila art that cord . . . is often . . . shown personified with a face; it is not the male phallus, however, but the infant to be born of the marital union depicted there,” just as a new lotus bud rises from the pond bed, breaking the surface to open as a blossom (Brown 1996:729). Drawing on trope theory (Fernandez 1991), Brown argues that Maithil women’s “bodily experiences are projected outward into cultural productions as source domains by which they attempt to grasp crucial but inchoate aspects of human existence” (Brown 1996:732).³⁹

The theory that the central motif of the *khobar ghar* painting is a pond and that the pond is a source metaphor for women’s fertility is reinforced by the way in which the pictorial surface is filled with local flora and fauna. In Singh’s interpretation,

The view of nature as depicted in the background has its basis in the artists’ understanding of life as growth. Filling the entire pictorial surface with plants and creepers with buds, flowers and fruit in an important sense emphasizes that emptiness is tantamount to infertility or barrenness. It is not surprising that the plants most frequently depicted in both ritual and commodity painting are those that proliferate in water (such as the lotus) or on land (such as betel, banana and bamboo). This is not to suggest, however, that the representation of nature in Maithil arts is conditioned simply by an optical impression of nature’s form. Whenever Maithil painters represent a freely growing lotus creeper (or for that matter any other plant) in their paintings, the intention is not to capture their impression of the transitory shape of a particular lotus but to render the lotus as representing the creative and creating power of nature. (Singh 2000:436–7)

Echoing Singh’s interpretation, Brown describes one particular *khobar* painting: “every space is occupied by themes drawn from Mithila’s many ponds: birds, fish, leaves, blossoms, ants, worms, snakes, centipedes, turtles, and toads” (1996:719). While not all of the flora and fauna represented are exclusive to pond environs, the preponderance of such life forms is readily apparent, as Figure 3 illustrates.

In “Dost,” two extremely polluting types of substances—those associated with childbirth and death—become the only ones that can negate death itself, turning stone into living, breathing humanity. Only with the placenta still attached is the blood of the baby powerful enough to bring the *dewan*’s son back alive. It is this very blood of a child who just passed from the womb through the vagina that gives, rather than threatens, life and that has the power to (re)establish social order. Thus, the story ends by coming full circle to the rejected, dark-skinned first wife. While the *dewan*’s son is repeatedly described as clever and as a devoted friend with a pure heart, we are reminded that his one fault—that he rejected his first wife—is what in fact launches all of his trials, trials that, in the end, return him to her, virtually dead himself and requiring the ultimate sacrifice of a child. He actually never changes heart about his dark-skinned wife, as far as we know, and through her unwavering devoutness and with the help of a slain child still connected to the womb line—to that aquatic base of women’s knowing—she wins him back and brings him back to life. The story confirms the worth of even a rejected, dark-skinned wife and her ability to trump the will and virtuousness of even the most devoted friend. Her religious devotion and fidelity to

her marriage are accorded a moral standing yet higher than his devotion to his friend and their ruling-to-ministerial class alliance.⁴⁰

Subaltern Registers in Maithil Expressive Forms

Earlier I suggested that in Maithil women's tales, female characters connected with ponds effect a shift in the social-imaginative register. In speaking of a shift in "register" in this context, I am drawing on the work on Raheja and Gold in their 1994 volume, *Listen to the Heron's Words*. They write:

In [North Indian] women's songs . . . a heron's speech suggests a different moral configuration [than it does in male performance genres]. Herons act as narrators, inviting listeners to consider tales of illicit encounters, resistance to dominating power, or both. Such accounts are resonant with genuine but commonly suppressed truths. . . . [I]n contrast to the massive body of male lore, where these birds signify a dichotomous split between purity and corruption or surface and core, in women's texts a heron's framing speech points to the potent shift in moral register. In inviting our readers to listen to the heron's words, we undertake to convey that shift and suggest that its spoken truths, if sometimes devalued in male-dominated expressive traditions, are compelling and consequential for the women we know in rural North India. The heron tells us of alternative moral perspectives on kinship, gender, and sexuality, ones that are shaped by women but are sometimes shared by men. (xi-xii)

It may be worth noting that at least one of such songs analyzed by Raheja and Gold begins "A heron speaks *on the water's edge* . . ." (1994:xi; emphasis added). Herons are, after all, creatures whose livelihoods are made at and in the water, but who come and go at will.

In each of the stories I have presented above, the exploits of men—their heroic journeys, their honorable and ignominious behaviors—are decentered at the water's edge or in the murky depths by women's knowledge and intervention. Pond-women birth men, indeed birth themselves, again and again. Pond-women see men's problems from their own angles and base their actions on these perspectives to set the world aright. In so doing, women in the stories often get the men they want—winning prosperity and security by setting men in right order with each other, and sometimes with the gods and their womenfolk, as well. On one level, these women's folk storytelling may operate as fantasy, representing a desire for agency and efficacy that is circumscribed by structural and ideological constraints in their actual social lives. Yet, to treat the stories exclusively as such is incorrectly to marginalize their function in the complex, but never fully closed, whole of Maithil society.

With his work on folklore, Ramanujan aimed to fill in the map of Indian civilization, a civilization whose realities he characterized as "expressed in a spectrum of forms, where one complements, contradicts, reflects, and refracts another—we have to take them together," he wrote, "to make sense of the civilization and catch a glimpse of the complex whole" (Ramanujan 1989:207–9). In regard to Maithil "civilization,"

I have sought to demonstrate how two forms of folklore—women’s storytelling and painting—reflect each other in their contextual treatment of women and ponds, while refracting and even contradicting male-centered narratives. In the case of folktales, such refraction and contradiction take place even *within* a single story and a single telling. The pond-women register is encompassed within male heroic tales, just as the paintings and the women themselves are encompassed within male-centered (patrifocal, patrilineal) households. For all that, the perspectives they reveal are as ubiquitous in Maithil women’s lives as are others with which outsiders may be more familiar. To say that pond-women constitute an instance of subaltern speech is not, therefore, to say that Maithil women speak only in this “language” or embody a unified, subaltern consciousness. To make such an assertion would be to reinscribe the self-originating essential subject of modern Western historicism—a historicism inherited by classic feminist historiography, which sought to recover the authentic experience of women hidden from history (O’Hanlon 1988). On the contrary, Maithil women are complex subjects, who—given the wealth of discourse, multiplicity of expressive forms, and complex systems of privilege and oppression in which they (differentially) find themselves—“see” the world contextually, “speak” of it strategically, and act in it with tactical consideration.

In regard to *khobar ghar* images, Brown points out that the patriline is depicted as a stand of bamboo trees (the metaphorical association being linked to the way bamboo proliferates) off to the side of the central image of the *puren*. (See Figure 3.) Thus, the “all-powerful and socially dominant patrilineages” are reconstructed as “a bit of nature rooted in earth beside the splendid and dominant ponds of Mithila” (Brown 1996:731). Likewise, in Maithil women’s tales, pond-women contextually displace male heroes as the movers and shakers of Maithil life. After all, what are Maithil women doing in the *ChhaiTh* festival but sinking their very corporeal bodies into the pond, feet on the murky bottom (barefoot, unlike the boy in “Barsait”), chests and head out (as does the cobra maiden in “Dost”). Like the newborn emerging from but still connected to the womb (echoing the *khobar* image), they pray to Surya for their husbands, for their sons, and thereby ultimately for themselves. Their stories tell them that when they use their knowledge to pursue their desires in this way, they are effective. In this manner, life, art, story, and ritual lay over one another like so many transparencies, like so many petals of the budding lotus.

Notes

The field research on which this article is based was funded by a Fulbright Senior Research Grant, for which I am very grateful. I wish to thank Dollie Sah for all her diligent work on this project and multifaceted support. I also thank her parents, Deo Narayan Prasad Sah and Manju Devi Sah, and her siblings for providing me with shelter, sustenance, human connection, and the twin offerings of protection and freedom. I am also very appreciative of the careful translation work on the stories carried out in conjunction with me by Smriti Jaiswal and Mita Jha.

1. The Tarai is a low, flat strip along much of the southern border of Nepal, beyond the foothills of the Himalayas. It is often referred to as the “breadbasket” of Nepal. Some of the region remains forested but most is used for irrigated farming and habitation.

2. Mithila boasts a great literary tradition and is renowned for its part in the Hindu epic Rāmāyana. According to this epic tale, Sītā—daughter of King Janak, after which the town is named, and eventual wife of Rāma—was born in Janakpur. Sītā and Rāma are often considered to be the ideal couple in Hinduism—Sītā as a model of chasteness and wifely devotion, and Rāma as a model of personal integrity (*dhṛti*) and fidelity.

3. Originally recorded as a digital sound file, this story was transcribed by Dollie Sah, translated by Smriti Jaiswal, and edited by this author. For this and all subsequent translations, the final editing process by the author entailed tacking between original sound file and field notes, transcription, and translation. I have sought to strike a balance between making the stories comprehensible for an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with Maithili language and culture and retaining the phraseology and connotations in the original language.

4. For transliteration of Maithili words into roman script, I follow Turner ([1931] 1990), except in the case of retroflexed phonemes, which are represented by capital roman letters.

5. Here, the sindur comes from the front of the girl's parted hair and is a sign of her married status. The kohl is applied as a black paste made from ashes and used as eyeliner to beautify and protect from evil.

6. In my field research, I attempted repeatedly and quite unsuccessfully to follow Kirin Narayan's lead in encouraging storytellers to reflect on their own stories—their morals, their personal resonances, and so forth (Narayan 1997). My point here regarding interpretation is in sync with Ahearn's concept of a "practice theory of meaning constraint" (Ahearn 2001:56–8).

7. Ramanujan was very careful to distinguish between "women-centered" tales, in which women are the main protagonists and exhibit a cultural "counter system," and the generically broader set of stories told by women. Where I differ from him is in my attention to "counter system" elements *within* single folktales and *within* particular tellings that are not generally "women-centered" in his sense.

8. For discussion of the question of subjectivity and subalterity, see Raheja and Gold (1994), Das (1989), and O'Hanlon (1988). Ramanujan's work (1991, 1999) on folklore presaged these debates, but it has not been adequately credited as such.

9. During the time of my field research (2003–2004), Nepal was already embroiled in political turmoil involving a Maoist uprising of several years duration. The House of Representatives had been dissolved by the king; political protests were being carried out by the cadres and leaders of the main political parties against the king's "regression," the prime minister resigned, and, following large popular street protests and their failed suppression, multiparty rule with a new prime minister was reinstated. The civil conflict continued nevertheless. The following year, King Gyanendra established autocratic rule, citing the inability of parliamentarians to handle effectively the Maoist insurgency. During the period in which I wrote this article, multiparty street protests arose, with subsequent arrests, killings, and beatings by security forces. The Maoists had indicated a willingness to join the political process, and the king was under increasing popular and international pressure to enter such a dialogue or lose what remained of his legitimacy and that of the monarchy, in general. In April 2006, the king succumbed to these pressures and reinstated parliament. Almost immediately, the House of Representatives declared Nepal a secular state and stripped the king of much of his power, including authority over the military. The House also declared its intention to set in motion procedures for the creation of a constituent assembly, which had been one of the cornerstones of the Maoists demands.

10. When Nepal was administratively reorganized in the 1960s, Janakpur became the capital of the Dhanusa district. By the late 1980s, Janakpur was Nepal's second-fastest-growing town (Burghart 1988:186). According to Richard Burghart, Maithil people have occupied the area for more than one thousand years, and the majority of the population is Maithili-speaking. Since the control of malaria in the 1950s, the district has been increasingly settled by Nepali speakers from the hills, who come to take advantage of the greater supply of fertile land (Burghart 1988:187). Other non-Maithil Nepalis have transferred to Janakpur to take up government posts there.

11. Ideas and practices of purdah in Janakpur (as elsewhere in South Asia) are intimately linked with the notion of *ijjat* (honor or prestige), an asset that accrues to individuals but especially to whole families, and one that is bound up with caste, community, gender, and ethnicity. While one may, by virtue of birth

(say, into a family whose members are known to be particularly devout), be associated with *ijjat*, this is a form of “social economy” that requires constant striving, vigilance, and disciplining of family members. Mark Liechty makes the important distinction that in this social economy of *ijjat*, “sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs, and education are not *ijjat* in and of themselves. Instead, they are things that *give ijat* (*ijjat dine cij*); they *produce* social capital” (2002:84). “Especially for those whose economic resources are limited and whose social status depends on various forms of social and cultural capital (education, caste),” Liechty observes, “*ijjat* can become an overriding, almost crushing, concern” (85).

12. To the extent that formal education for girls requires freedom of movement (minimally, to and from school) and freedom of speech (communication with male peers and teachers), this central feature of modernity—a key location for the production of the value of freedom in women (Liechty 1996:203)—puts the “egg” of female, and therefore family, honor at great risk. Thus, as Liechty points out, “the labor of forcing the rhetoric of freedom into reality is especially onerous for middle-class women who must build a new public femininity that conveys a middle-class respectability that is at once modern, and preserves acceptable (usually double) standards of sexual propriety. Modern women must make *visible* and *portable* a respectable femininity that was in earlier generations largely restricted to domestic space” (Liechty 1996:203). For nuanced discussions of the strategic deployment and interpretation of *purdah* in North Indian contexts, see Raheja and Gold (1994:47–52; 1994:164–81) and Wadley (1994:52–5). For comparative work on *purdah* in South Asia, see Mehta (1981) and Papanek and Minault (1982).

13. According to one widely circulated story, King Janak had the ponds built in anticipation of his daughter Sītā’s marriage to Rāma (of the Rāmāyana). The ponds were intended by Janak to be a bathing site for gods arriving at the wedding from their home in the Himalayan peaks. Dhanush Sagar is also said to mark the spot where one of the three pieces of Lord Shiva’s bow fell into the underworld when Rāma broke it, thereby winning Sītā’s hand.

14. As scholarly approaches to folklore in the past two decades have become less exclusively text-based, so has analytical attention to gender and power, as well as to repertoire and to the sociology of genre, come to the fore. Folklorists have begun to attend deeply to questions of self-representation and self-construction in folk storytelling. Unfortunately, only a few have taken seriously the interpretations of storytellers themselves, and fewer have considered the influence of personal experience on variation in folk storytelling. The larger research project of which the present article is a part is intended to extend these important advances in folklore scholarship by exploring systematically the ways in which Maithil women’s folklore practices influence self-understandings and self-representations emergent in their life stories, as well as the ways that particular life trajectories and dilemmas affect the telling of folktales.

15. Evidence of the exclusion of certain of Maithil women’s perspectives and concerns in dominant discourses includes the scholarly inattention to women’s folklore and festivals in Mithila. For example, as I have noted elsewhere (Davis 2005), in his 1984 treatise on feudalism and rural formation in Nepal, Indian sociologist Sohan Ram Yadav asserts that Maithil folktales and songs provide a means of “cathartic outlet” in lives he characterizes as completely circumscribed by caste, kinship, and the village community (Yadav 1984:173–4). Yadav describes the various annual festivals of this region, including information on the centrality of women to the festivals and the worship of local deities. Worship, he writes, “is celebrated with moderately delicious food and a get-together of womenfolk” (174). He strangely fails to mention the place of *sāmā cakevā* in that annual cycle of festival and worship. Perhaps this omission is due to the fact that *sāmā cakevā* is performed in the absence of men (except on the last day) and does not include the link between agriculture and women’s fertility among its central themes, a connection Yadav sees as the organizing principle of worship and cognition among people in the region (173–82).

16. Regarding the setting of the tales, this orientation is marked, for instance, in English by the standard opener, “Once upon a time,” and in Maithili by the absence of specification of time (except simple past) and place and historical personhood—for example, “*Ekta rāja rahe. Rāja ke beTā dost khojake jangal gelai . . .*” (There was a king. The king’s son went to the forest to look for his friend. . .) Note that *which* king, *which* kingdom, *which* forest, and *when* are not specified.

17. Wadley describes three major, somewhat overlapping, categories of South Asian folktales. The first are those with named characters that are often thought to be both mythological and true. These are relatively long and complex tales that sometimes have counterparts in Sanskrit or Persian literature and

that are told more often by men than by women. The second category includes tales with unnamed characters that stand in as types (representing caste, kinship relation, or occupation). These are relatively short; are not considered “true,” historical, or mythic; and are more often found in collections of women’s than men’s tales. The third type are ritual tales (*vrat kathā*) that are told or read when the relevant ritual is performed and that often explain why and how that ritual is to be performed. All three of these types are represented in the present article. “Sit Basanta,” as its name implies, is of the first type; “Dost” is of the second type, and “Barsait” is of the third. (At the end of “Barsait,” the teller explains that a certain ritual is performed to keep people safe from snake bites.) The opening story converges with another type of South Asian folklore, the riddle (Badalkhan 2000; Bhattarai 2000b).

18. The word *kissa* appears to correspond to the Persian and Urdu *qissā* (*kissā* in Hindi), which sometimes refers to a group of Persian medieval oral narratives of heroic quest and romantic adventure, but which may also be applied to a popular printed pamphlet genre (Pritchett 2000). None of the Maithil storytellers with whom I spoke, however, made either of these associations.

19. In this and the subsequent stories included in this essay, I have omitted all asides made by the storyteller and her interlocutors, as well as redundant passages. Some parts of the story are presented in full translation and some have been paraphrased. Scenes less relevant to the questions at hand have been consolidated considerably. The start and end of the most radically edited passages have been marked by “[...]” The sound file for this performance of “Dost” alone was seventy-two minutes. In future writings, I aim to take up questions of performativity and personalization of Maithil women’s folk storytelling (cf. March 2002; Mills 1991), a project that will require that the stories be presented in fuller and more linguistically detailed form.

20. Dark skin is devalued in Maithil society and is considered a particularly negative quality in a bride.

21. According to my informants, a mani is a pearl with magical powers believed to be inside *nāga* (variously glossed as cobras, serpents, or hooded serpents). *Nāga* use mani to light their way at night while hunting for prey. Deprived of its mani, a cobra will die (as in this story). *Nāga* are very common figures in South Asian folklore and literature. As spirits or gods, they are often characterized as capricious and dangerous, capable of bringing both curses and blessings. In South Asian tantricism, mani *nāga* is a manifestation of Kundalini (the life force) or *shakti* (feminine power). In much of North India, *Nāga Rāja*, the *nāga* king, is worshipped as a manifestation of Shiva, Vishnu, and other local gods. In Bihar, women make offerings of fried grains and milk during the ritual of *Nāga Panchami* (Neff 2000). Such an offering is made by the Sait Dhobin in the story “Barsait” summarized in this article.

22. Bidh and Bidhata are a wife-and-husband “team” of gods, whose normal aspect is as female and male birds. In popular Maithil belief, they govern the course of events of each person’s life. When they are drawn by women on the wall of the wedding chamber (see Figure 3), they are understood to be presiding over the well-being and future destiny of the newly married couple.

23. Girija is another name for the goddess Parvati, who is the wife of Shiva. In classical mythology, the *raison d’être* of Parvati’s birth is to lure Shiva into marriage and thus into the wider circle of married life from which, as a lone ascetic living in the wilds of the mountains, he is aloof. Although she has a number of aspects, she is often associated with love, marriage, and beauty.

24. In his entry, “Folktale, Nepal,” in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, Harihar P. Bhattarai provides the summary of a remarkably similar story. In the place of Bidh and Bidhata, in this tale, is Vāgiwarī, the goddess of tales. He summarizes: “once a king was fond of stories, but he used to fall asleep before the stories were completed. The goddess of tales considered this habit an insult. She appeared in his faithful minister’s dream and warned that she would put a needle in the king’s food, fell a tree to crush him, and send a cobra into his bedchamber to kill him. She also warned the minister not to disclose her intention. Otherwise, he would be transformed at once into a stone. The minister saved the king from the needle and tree. While he was saving the king from the cobra, the king noticed his minister’s presence in his bedchamber, and, flying into a rage, he ordered him to be hanged. The minister preferred a noble death and told all the events to the king and turned at once into a stone” (Bhattarai 2000a:223). This same series of events occurs in the “Dost” story, but I have edited out those details because of space limitations.

25. The vast majority of the folktales I have recorded include significant plot lines of male travel. Usually, male journeys are forced by circumstance more compellingly than in "Dost," and they often entail trials and tribulations leading to positive changes in status of those traveling. The male characters go from poor to rich, ignorant to wise, unmarried to married, being childless to being parents, and so forth.

26. Marriages in Mithila are arranged among patrilineal, with senior men as the official matchmakers. It is inappropriate for girls to express an interest in marriage generally, let alone propose marriage on their own behalf. This is still true in Mithila today, despite trends in the direction of "love marriage" in other parts of South Asia. (Ahearn 2001; Dickey 1995; Seymour 2002; Uberoi 2001). Even in the case of so-called love marriage in South Asia, it is rare that girls propose marriage to boys; this would be treated as a great scandal throughout Mithila.

27. I have noticed a parallel between Maithil women's stories in which male characters are trapped in whirlpools, sucked into watery depths, and drawn ineluctably to the beauty of maidens found there, on the one hand, and Mani Shekhar Singh's observation about the perceptual effect of Maithil women's ceremonial paintings, on the other: "As a spectator one tends to perceive the lotus diagram simultaneously as undifferentiated 'texture' and as an arrangement of 'shapes' (i.e., the leaf motifs). Diagrams such as these 'play' on our inability to recognize at once wholes and parts; they display a certain perceptual and cognitive indecipherability. As a result, such diagrams act as a 'mind-trap'; as a spectator, one is led into the experience of viewing the art and held inside. This property of pattern, which derives its visual power from repetitiveness and the symmetry of motifs, is not limited to the paintings on the wall. It is also exploited by the women artists in writing threshold designs in the form of *aripana* on the floor of the bridal chamber and other sections of the house" (Singh 2000:418–9). For more on Maithil women's paintings and the pond metaphor, see below.

28. It is not absolutely clear that the third wife is under water. But it does seem that there is a sense in which she is yet more interior than the second wife; that is, she is inside the water, a realm Basanta enters through being sucked into a whirlpool. Then from there, Basanta enters yet another interior, that of the statue who swallows him. Inside this further interior, he finds his third wife. Given the metaphorical connection between bodies of water and women's wombs (elaborated below), one plausible interpretation is that Basanta is being repeatedly taken back into the womb in order ultimately to be rebirthed into his family of origin, having undergone a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.

29. This part of "Barsait" resonates with "The Serpent Lover" tale, as recorded by A. K. Ramanujan, in which a wife pours what is meant to be a love potion for her husband into a snake hole behind her house. In this case, the snake eats the potion and falls in love with the woman (Ramanujan 1991a:47–50).

30. In the hot lowland of Mithila, umbrellas are as much for protection from the sun as protection from the rain.

31. *Dhobin* is an occupational caste designation. The number of laundresses here is not clear. The storyteller said "*sait*," which could mean sixty (*sāThi*) or seven (*sāāt*). Seven seems the more likely number, as it is a common number for siblings in stories and corresponds to the number of brothers/sons. Later in the story, what had been this set of multiple washerwomen becomes a single washerwoman whose name is "Sait." This sort of condensing appears to have a parallel form in Maithil women's art. Mani Shekhar Singh remarks: "Since the idea is to express the ceaseless movement seen and felt in vegetation, at times one plant or one flower is sufficient to express and contain the whole of nature in art. One of the results of this compositional strategy is a disproportion of size compared with the real appearance of the object. The tree, for example, is filled with leaves, flowers, and fruits whose sizes are exaggerated and their numbers reduced. This way of representing has the economic and mnemotechnic usefulness of abbreviation. A similar strategy is utilized in folklore where the exploits of an army are symbolized in the exploits of a single hero" (Singh 2000:437).

32. This is a common benediction from mother to daughter, indicating the mother's wish that the daughter always have an abundance of food at her marital home.

33. Female devoutness and other forms of *dharma* are often rewarded in story plots, as is also evidenced by the dark-skinned first wife of the dewan's son in "Dost."

34. In another story I recorded, “Sup Chalaín” (Winnowing Basket and Sieve), the food-processing implements of a woman who is being abused by her mother-in-law gather at night at the edge of a pond, along with the food-processing implements of other village women. Here, they gossip about the human social dynamics of the community. Their talk is overheard by the abused woman’s husband. He thereby changes his mind about murdering his wife. His mother had falsely convinced him that she was having an affair. He murders his evil mother instead (cf. Ramanujan 1991b:44–5). In yet another story I recorded, Dutti Bar, a servant girl, returns again and again to a pond, where she reconnects with her mother through a magical box given to her by her mother. This has potential resonances with the pond-lotus-placenta metaphor discussed below.

35. Even as Maithil paintings are often abstract and, in their noncommercial forms, infrequently subject to verbalized interpretation, they are, insofar as they depict characters and scenes from stories in circulation, structured in parallel to stories and demonstrate painters’ narrative capabilities. For instance, Jyotindra Jain demonstrates how one Dusadh painter uses particular methods of framing to depict *for the viewer* events happening in different storied locations about which only certain characters have knowledge. Likewise in stories, *the audience* is made aware of the full breadth of events and motives, while particular characters are privy to a smaller set (Jain 1995:221–2; see also Singh 2000). Jain suggests further that the painter’s strategic use of space also projects a dis-identification of time and location that gives the paintings a “mystic” feel (Jain 1995:220), which I take to mean a sort of “once upon a time” quality of nonhistoricity and non-falsifiability. Jain suggests further that the pictorial framing technique has parallels to the “*apavarana* device in Sanskrit theatre in which two characters talk to each other in the presence of other characters on stage, a conversation which the audience as well as other characters on stage can hear except the latter who pretend not to, as it is supposed to be *apavarita* or in concealment” (Jain 1995:219).

36. In the Maithil caste system, Kayasthas are of the second-highest level; Kshatriya *varna*, are associated with ministerial occupations, especially record keepers.

37. Singh writes, “As Ganga Devi, the most famous Kayastha woman painter from Mithila, explained: ‘the central vermilion dot is like the kernel (*bija*) from which the lotus plant (*purain*) spreads and gradually proliferates to cover the entire pond.’ It is perhaps this visualization of germination and growth from the central kernel, which probably has its roots in the Hindu philosophy of the creation of the universe . . . that governs the pictorial imagination of most women painters from Mithila” (Singh 2000:414). In response to the question of why they create this particular image in the wedding chamber, Carolyn Brown Heinz’s informants make the connection with human fertility more directly: “Because, just as a seed dropped in a pond produces many lotus, so should the bride and groom produce many offspring” (Heinz 2000:405).

38. Brown’s 1996 article in *American Ethnologist* is essentially an extended argument against tantric interpretations of Mithila art, of which, she argues, “the meaning it has for its makers, the women themselves, is obscured by the interpretive agendas brought to it by outsiders” (717), among whom she includes both Brahman men and, especially, Western male observers.

39. I recall from my fieldwork that Maithil men, seeking to control the development project in Janakpur that first encouraged women there to use their home-based painting skills and aesthetic to make painting on paper to sell in the tourist art market, objected to scenes of childbirth that women in the project began to paint. The childbirth motif is not traditional, and yet the women themselves seemed to have no objection to depicting it. According to the American woman who started the project, this motif was introduced by a development consultant involved in the promotion of safe childbirth practices. Around this time in the evolution of the project (the early 1990s), the painters were being encouraged more generally to depict scenes from their own life experiences (Davis 2003). Yet given that childbirth is associated among Maithils with the spiritual defilement of fluids emanating from the female body and with enclosed female spaces, and given men’s necessary distancing from these “spheres,” the use of birthing as a public representation of Maithil culture must indeed have been disturbing to the Maithil men who sought to control “images” of their culture through the sale of paintings to the outside world.

40. The heroism and wisdom of low-status persons is a common theme in Maithil and other South Asian stories. (Thanks to Susan Wadley for reminding me to mention this pattern.)

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