

PRECARIOUS CITIZENSHIP: SOCIAL ABSENCE VERSUS PERFORMATIVE PRESENCE OF NACHNI

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Abstract: “Nachni” women from the eastern part of India, are popularly known in parts of Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand as marginal performers who earn their living through a performing partnership with the Rasik (the male partner) while remaining in a fragile, yet domestic quasi- conjugal alliance with him. In research and popular writings, these women have been seen as the exploited, marginalised, and socially maligned practitioners. In the current research the signification of the social/cultural presence of the Nachni woman is sought in her performance and the communications that she creates through with her accompanists, audience and the larger society. This paper focuses on the social and the performative spaces that the Nachni inhabits, and the duality of the reception of her social self vis a vis her body. This duality of reception also brings to the fore, the need to theorise commoditisation of the woman’s body where the body, so long as it is seen as a product, and therefore a consumable, is not a threat, unlike the threatening polluting capability of a social presence of the owner of that very same body.

Keywords: nachni women, women dancer/performer, women’s marginalisation, women’s body

By way of introduction

Nachni (literally meaning the female dancer) women from the whole of the Chota Nagpur plateau in India are popularly known in parts of Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand as marginal professional performers who earn their living through a performing partnership with the male partner, known as *Rasik*, (usually accepted as a connoisseur of poetry, dance and music), while remaining in a fragile yet domestic quasi- conjugal alliance with him. The word *Rasik* comes from *Rasa*. In context of the Nachni performance, the term implies an unequal and exploitative partnership. The regional history mentions several famous poets

and singers, who were well known as Rasiks of specific Nachni women. Most such men also trained Nachni women to dance and sing and also accompanied them in performances, as connoisseurs of the arts with specialised skills for singing, playing musical instruments as well as dancing. Currently, many of the Rasiks do not accompany the Nachnis in their performances. In fact they act just as the managers and agents for the Nachni, claiming the rights to control the payments received by the Nachni, and handling the performance and travel plans.

Authors like Chatterji (2009),¹ Sarkar Munsu (1998, 2010),² Chatterjea (2009),³ Chakravarti (2001)⁴ have looked at Nachni as the much maligned and exploited woman performer whose validation comes from being a paramour as well as a performing partner to her Rasik. The known Nachni women from Purulia and Singhbhum, who are the focus of this research, have a range of personal stories to narrate about their becoming professional dancing women. They also speak about being severely socially ostracised in the process, and being labelled fallen women of questionable virtues. One of the common threads in their stories is about running away from parental or conjugal home to live with male performers, who then took charge of training them as professional performers. The social implications have been talked about in popular journalistic stories as well as a few scholarly writings. It is by now well known that the family of a Nachni is expected to perform their last rites, going through the ritual processes – taking her as dead. The societal pressure and stigma force many of the families to act in the similar manner even today, even though there have been marginal improvements in the overall structure of women's positions in the region. Hence, in most cases, as the doors for any possible return to the family of origin closes permanently, the woman becomes more vulnerable to exploitations of social, sexual and performative structures. For her, the only way is to move on, as a Nachni – a professional woman performer. She acquires a new status as a performer-partner-quasi wife through a ceremony, in which she is formally accepted by the Rasik as his Nachni. The partnership has several social implications. The Nachni is known by her relationship with her Rasik – but neither is it a fully accepted performing partnership, providing an agency and a social space to her, and nor is it a marriage, through which she gets the security of a social network, such as family. She remains curiously as a bread-earner, and a paramour, while being prohibited from sharing socially accepted conjugal spaces, like the kitchen, the ritual occasions within the family or the actual domestic shared spaces that become the wife's space within the families.

In the world's so called largest 'democracy', the marginal existence of Nachni, the denial of her rights to call her partnership a 'conjugal' one, the denial of inheritance rights to her

children and even the negation of her entitlement to cremation or burial, are just some landmarks to understand her precarious existence. This structured and socially accepted ‘tradition’ necessitates a research on her status as a representative of the exploited, marginalised, and socially maligned women practitioners in the performance tradition of India.

The principle research questions in this paper centre around the epistemological, performative and social aspects of the Nachni performance – working within a larger rubric of feminist studies on dance. Epistemologically, it relies on existing and accepted normative positions that the society designates for the Nachni performers, while trying to understand the ways in which they themselves understand their position of precarity. From a socio-political perspective, the paper looks at the same precarity of the Nachni, while trying to define the concept of ‘social absence’ through the invisibility that the society assigns to her. This is where it becomes imperative for the paper to analyse the two oppositional and yet inter-dependent spaces off and on stage, where, even while acknowledging the woman dancer’s existence on the proscenium, the society cannot guarantee her a legitimate and rightful space and presence within its fold. While dealing with these questions, this paper constantly probes ways of uncovering gender implications of a woman’s body specifically in performative practices, visible freely in public spaces. It also analyses the differential readings that such performing bodies of women encounter, vis a vis disciplined and controlled female bodies, in “concealed, private sanctum of domestic spaces” (Howson, 2013, 90). Lastly, the paper tries to establish a sense of agency and power within this overarching and overwhelmingly exploitative narrative around the woman performer. It argues for a reading of a strong sense of subversion and agency in the pleasure and control that woman dancer creates, and holds on to, through the tools from within the performance, as she holds the gaze of male audience and compels them to look at the body that they refuse to acknowledge as part of their social co-habitant.

“I Exist in The Feet of the Guru”: Seeking Approval For Being Present

*Shuno shuno shabha jon,
shabha majhe kori nibedano hey.
Shukhen Babur nimontrone, hoey anondito mone,
amra ekhane korechhi agomon.
Ek dikey ma bohin, ek dikey bhai jon,
bal o briddho aaro shishu gon o hey. Shuno shuno dia mon.
Dui haath jor kori, aar doshes choron dhor, bhul truti koribe marjon hey.*

*Bidya buddhi kichhui nai, ache gurur kripa tai,
Rajobala guru podey praano hey.*

Meaning:

Listen all the people in the audience, as I humbly start my song as an offering.

We are extremely happy to be invited to perform here by Sukhen Babu.

While mothers and sisters are seated on one side, the brothers occupy the other side. There are also the elderly and the children present.

Please listen to my songs attentively.

I put my hands together and also touch the feet of the guests, to request you to please pardon me for any mistake I make here.

I am uneducated, and am not intelligent. I only have the blessings of my Guru. I submit my life to the feet of my Guru. (My translation).

The Jhumur⁵ songs that are particularly associated with the Nachni performance are known as *Nachni Shaliya Jhumur* or *Bai Nacher Jhumur* in Purulia. Some of those songs create an introductory space for the Nachni to introduce herself, giving her the freedom to put her name as the singer (not proclaiming to be the author) in the beginning of the last line. The song becomes a signature piece and also a way of thanking the patron for the invitation to perform. Through the song the Nachni claims a temporary space of signification – even though she provides a relatively more acceptable lens through the reference to the God/traditional religious teachers and thereby proclaiming a socially acceptable space as a devotee/ learner. This particular song translated above, actually gives her a way to legitimise and normalise the viewing of her performance by referring to the audience as mothers, sisters and brothers, neutralising the deep discomfort about according any place of significance to the ‘fallen’ woman, and at the same time, claiming her space in the society, as one of them. Generated within a strong patriarchal tradition, many of these popularly used songs of Nachni performance, were originally not written by women and hence presumes a certain form of female subservient subjectivity.⁶

The feet of the ‘Guru’ signifies a space that the Nachni claims for herself, even if for a little while during the performance, in ways similar to many performances related to Bhakti tradition, in Bengal. Here the ‘Guru’ signifies either the god or the religious teachers or

both, and a space at the feet of such an entity, is a reference to a temporary legitimacy for the Nachni's presence in the public space.

A historical survey of the Nachni is outside of the purview of this particular paper, but a reference to its past may be important for setting up the connections between the performance and the lived realities that the performance and the performer is placed in. Surajit Sinha (1995) has written about the feudal aristocracy, who claimed the ritual status of the Rajput Kshatriyas that developed in Purulia turning a few families from the Bhumij tribe into local zamindars (landlords), during the colonial times. He also discussed the complex relationship of the Bhumij landlords with the development of court culture in the region. Chakravarti (2001) mentions the roles the Bhumij landlords played in promoting and preserving the Nachni tradition – by employing local performers, as a more affordable option - in place of patronising *Baiji* (the trained courtesans performers from the mainstream royal court traditions). The performance of the Nachni, according to Chatterji “emerged within a feudal system and they thus share in the popular representation of the courtesan as ‘*patita nari*’ or ‘fallen woman’” (2009, 65). Since the 19th century, this form flourished under the patronage of local landlords and rural gentry and the regional feudal lords. Following the tradition of patronising art in feudal courts, these not so powerful patrons generated their own art practices through the patronage of the Rasik. Hence the woman performer has since been framed as an entertainer and an objectified body within the structure of the male gaze and appreciation. This constant evaluation of her bodily attributes as well as her abilities to please the audience visually through her dance, forces her to remain vulnerable and dependent on the approvals of her patrons. Besides she needs to be a constantly available as a domestic help, a sexual partner, and also one of the labouring bodies for work in the fields, during the agricultural seasons. All the while her principal responsibility is of course to maintain her skill as a profitable performing partner for the Rasik.

Making a living through Performance – validating the Precarious Existence within Family

The Nachni women I have interviewed over the last twenty eight years, belong to the lowest economic strata of the society and are usually from the scheduled caste⁷ groups such as Kurmi, Mahato or tribes like the Bhumij, Munda, Oraon, who make up a sizable amount of the local population. Lack of education, early marriage and generally oppressive patriarchal structures of the family are reasons for the young girls growing up in such families. They are often married off by the family at a very young age, far before the legal

age for marriage in India. Women whom I spoke with reiterate similar experiences commonly endured by most young women in the lowest economic strata in the rural parts of India. Abuse in the conjugal set up, neglect and lack of understanding in part of the husband or the new family, and incompatibility are common reasons for the women to either be sent back to their paternal homes or to run away from their marital homes to save themselves. Some of them also mention running away from their own homes to avoid forced marriage. Some of the Nachni women I interviewed also mentioned their alleged extra-marital relationships with the Rasiks as reasons for their decision to break the marriages. As in most families, in such circumstances, these women almost never find any support from their family of origin. There is even less support for the woman who wants to train to sing and dance - as a trainee/apprentice, under an experienced Nachni or a Rasik. Most of the times the reason for the family disowning the daughter is due to her wanting to become a performing partner in a relationship with a male performer.

Once the young woman leaves her family as a Nachni, there is no turning back for her, in most cases. As stated above, the declaration of her 'death' by her family, many a times, comes from the need of protecting family honour, whereas the Rasik continues to have a space within his family.

It must be understood that when the Nachni shifts out of her family home and into the Rasik's house as his lover/partner, she is already homeless, as well as without any support system replacing her family. The implication of such a partnership is economic, professional as well as social and deeply gendered. Given the form's history, the Rasik acquires and trains a Nachni, as an entertainer, who will be at his beck and call to perform, to entertain and to earn money for the Rasik and his family to survive on, and for the Rasik to get fame from. The Nachni's vulnerability or her absence in the society, also makes her more available, more exploited within the patriarchal set up of her surroundings. Whatever be the structure of accommodating her within the quasi conjugal set up, she continues to be the bread earner for the whole family, particularly in the 'lean' seasons, when the food is scarce at the end of one agricultural calendar and the next harvest is not yet ready.

The Rasik formalises the relationship with a short ceremony of putting vermilion powder⁸ on the Nachni's head. Henceforth she wears this sign of a married woman, but is not considered married and therefore no conjugal rights are there for her as protection. She lives under a constant threat of being replaced, if she refuses to perform, or if she is unable to do so due to illness, age or some other circumstance. The children of Nachni are not entitled to use their father's name, nor are they entitled to inherit any property from him.

The more well-known of the Nachni- Rasik performance duos, are invited to perform in local fairs and festivities during the 'season'. They travel with their musical accompanists to these locations, reaching sometime during the day, performing whole night and again taking off for another performance destination in the morning. Sometimes very young children of the Nachni may accompany their mother. Traditionally, men who became Rasiks were famous in the locality as poets or singers or musicians, and accorded special place in the local courts, for his love and appreciation of art. His 'keeping', training and performing with the Nachni is seen as his engagement and investment in artistic endeavours. The Nachni, even when she is reluctantly acknowledged as a presence in the society - as someone's sister, neighbour or even mother - remains the symbol of undisciplined, uncontrollable, self-indulgence – a figure outside all structures of control. She herself recognises her own precarious existence, knowing fully well her marginal status as a polluting / polluted body. She also remains a threat to the village and the community social structure because of her so-called disregard of the traditional conjugal and family values.

The Nachni may perform in open or domestic performance venues. More often Nachni women are invited to large local fairs, where one arena is reserved for this particular performance genre, out of three or four such arenas created for different performances like *Chhau*, *Baul* and other varieties. The arena is a raised platform, with audience seated on all sides. It is accessible easily from audience space, facilitating the members of the audience to go up on the platform to pin money on the Nachni's clothes – as a show of appreciation for her art. This becomes an additional income, a tip, but at the same time makes a statement about the easy availability and accessibility of the body of the Nachni. In recent times such acts have attracted public criticism, and a few non-governmental organisations working for the welfare of the Nachnis, have raised their voice to start a campaign to stop such acts. The performers are sharply divided in their opinions. Some feel that, while performance itself is not considered as sex work, the stigma around female bodies being available for public gaze and for visual and resultant sensual consumption, creates a sense of availability around these bodies. Hence, while the woman in the domestic conjugal space is protected as a part of family property, the 'public' body of the Nachni does not have any protector, as she does not belong to any familial space.⁹ However despicable and demeaning an act, the pinning of money on the Nachni's garments meant that there was an income that belonged to the woman specifically, as her body becomes the site where the transaction literally took place. Some Nachnis continue to say that this act is singled out as demeaning, as it involves and benefits only the woman in the partnership. All other much more violent

acts, like forcing a Nachni to perform night after night, without asking for her consent before signing a contract for an outside performance or accepting an advance for such performances, go on, as those benefit the male partner. Rasik, as mentioned before, acts as her manager and her master and treats the Nachni with all the arrogance born out of such a position of power as well as all the sanctioned control that the patriarchal society allocates as rights, to the husbands. This arrangement continues without being frowned upon by the society, and are normalised within the accepted framework of ‘artistic’ partnership of the Nachni- Rasik duo.

Traditionally, a Nachni did not have any right to what she earned through night after night of hard labour. The Rasik was her master and therefore the rightful owner of everything she earned. Of course now there are exceptions. Some women are vocal enough to state bluntly “Nobody will look after me when I am infirm, I have to take care of myself”.¹⁰ But there are still so many others, who fear that they will soon be replaced by another Nachni, ‘just as one would replace a cow which has stopped giving milk’.¹¹

The society denies Nachni’s presence in many ways. She is socially ostracised, stopped from attending many social functions of the community, and of course not allowed free access to either her own family home or the Rasik’s house. The only place and time that belongs to her, and she can claim as her own, are the proscenium or the demarcated space for her performance, and that too only for the duration of the performance. Hence, the Nachni exists between the excitement of coming alive by being present as a performer and by controlling the gaze of her audience and the anxiety of becoming absent the moment she is not visible. She fears that she would not have a presence, and would cease to exist – if and when she stops performing. She has seen this happening to most of her predecessors. She learns soon, to make the most of the temporary live-ness that the proscenium offers her, and then to retreat into her restricted space where shrouds of social marginality puts her in the same category of an absent being. In other words she dies every time her performance ends.

In this context, the social existence of Nachni needs to be discussed in order to understand the complexity of her absence. Unlike locally famous performers of Chhau and Baul traditions of the locality, the Nachni tradition exists in the margins. Every member of the community knows that she exists, many make up the regular audience for her performances, but no one talks about her. A Nachni woman may stay within the boundaries of her Rasik’s house, in the same or a different room separately built for her. She may also

seek to move to a separate hut, if she is economically self-sufficient. In case the Rasik is married, the space for the Nachni is more strictly segregated and restricted.

The significance of agency and ownership of the body become central at this point, in relation to the absence that is forced on the woman. The ‘commoditised body’ vis a vis the ‘regulated body’ (Lupton, 1994), need to be understood in the context of ‘being’ and ‘having’ a body (Howson, 2013) whereby control and rights to what that body is or does, can become a part of the feminist debate. Here the central focus must then be on the duality of reception and the criticality of the commoditisation of the woman’s body where the body, so long as it is seen as a product, and therefore a consumable, is not a threat, unlike the threatening / polluting capability of a social presence of the owner of that very same body.

Alexandra Howson (2013, 10) talks about a duality of understanding the existence of the body as an entity, independent of processes of social constitution, or as existing only in relation to the practices and processes that produce them. On the question of rights over the earnings of the Nachni, these above discussions point towards a convenient legitimisation of acceptance of the Nachni as a socially absent but conveniently available tool for making a living, so far as her capacity to support the family of the Rasik is concerned.

Living Through / for Performance and Becoming Absent/ ‘Dying’ as soon as the Performance Finishes

Chatterji writes:

Most scholars would agree that the cultures of the local courts in regions like Purulia in which the institutions of the *nachni* and the *rasika* flourished was crucial for the development of the *jhumur*. yet even though they consider *jhumur* as part of the folk music of Purulia they find it more difficult to include the institution of the *nachni* or even the *nachni nach* as part of its folk culture (2009, 86).

The night-long Nachni performance consists of *Jhumur gaan* (the songs) and *Nachni nach* (the dances). They are never solo acts. Usually, there are a number of Nachnis invited for each of these performance events, and they take turn in performing a segment of half an hour each, in a cyclic order. The stage is shared by Nachni women, the Rasiks, and the musicians of two or three women scheduled to perform through the night. Each Nachni gets a slot of about an hour, and then sits down to rest while the others get their turns. For

each of them, the performance begins with a devotional song with introductory movements, and progressing through the night with more rhythmic songs and dance movements. The Nachni *Shaliya* Jhumur songs are known for their varied themes of devotion, love, sensuousness, latent or blatant eroticism and most often gendered metaphors and sexualised lyrics. The movements correspond to the type of songs foregrounding the eroticised and sexualised body of the woman dancer - playing on creating a sexualised presence that play on the male imagination on one hand, and becoming a popular and much sought after performance for the region. *Prem / priti* (profound love), *bhakti* (devotion), *biraho* (despair due to separation), *nirasha* (hopelessness) and *kamona* (sensual cravings) remain the popular themes. The performance starts with an introduction and then moves into devotional renditions. Slowly as the night progresses the rhythms become more vigorous and the dances become more sensual with the use of suggestive movements signifying enticing glances, jerks of the breasts and the pelvis and exaggerated hip movements. Much of the repertoire has changed in recent times. Audience demands for renditions of popular Bollywood movie songs are resisted still, but a few of the younger Nachni women give in to the public demands and include such songs to increase their own popularity, after performing the introductory song.

The Nachni dance principally is based on two rhythmic structures, that of *mota tala*, or the slow rhythmic part which generally starts each of the presentations, often acting as the introduction to them and the *tin tala*, or the faster sixteen beat rhythm structure, with which she performs simple steps, circular movements, and jumps. The body movements can be located in four zones in her dance. She uses the head and face largely for facial expressions and isolating neck movements that are integral part of Indian dance movements. The upper body is used to create exaggerated front - back thrusts and movements of the bust, activating the torso as well as highlighting and generating attention to the breasts. The hands take a major role to extend, enhance and enlarge movements of the upper body as well as help in expressing emotive words of the songs. The third area of emphasis is around the hips. Jerking forward - backward movements of the pelvis as well side swings of the hips are used with rhythmic foot steps to draw attention to the lower middle part of the body, creating a sensual as well as a sexual reference point of directing the audience gaze. The feet movements are mainly made up of repeated right and left foot steps with one of them flat and the other with the toes touching the ground, with the heel lifted, ensuring mobility of the dancer in linear or circular pattern on the stage or simply for keeping rhythm, with hand and body movements, especially in the more rhythmic and rigorous parts of the dance.

Ramsay Burt talks about live theatrical performance, where the “meanings are produced through a collective and reflexive awareness, shared between performers and an audience, of nuances of interpretation within intersections of a number of over determined discourses” (2004, 34). The participatory process of meaning making in case of Nachni performances involves the Nachni, her Rasik, the musician who accompany and respond to nuances of the gestures, by closely following and communicating with the woman performer who continues to address them as her principle and immediate audience, and last but not the least the surrounding crowd –which is largely dominated by male members of the community. The social unease and the deep rooted prejudice against the “professional” dancing woman of loose moral virtue, does not become a hindrance in the process of watching and appreciating the performances – thereby granting and allowing a presence to the body in the state of dancing, if not beyond.

Even though Nachni women have carried on the tradition of singing a particular form of Jhumur, they are considered only to be the performers who learn and then reproduce the form. Traditionally women do not write Jhumur songs. Except for the Nachni, women also do not sing Jhumur publicly. The Jhumurs sung by the Nachni are written by male poets, which usually carry signatures of the poet in the last line. Only at times one finds some of the older and more well-known Nachni adding her own name as a signature to a song while presenting it. In the context of performance and its connection to creating a sense of power and status, Morcom writes that dance and music can be seen as potentially feminising in terms of emotion and aesthetics and also with respect to the dynamics, audience, status and power (2013, 102). Nobody can deny the Nachni women their presence in the performance arena. That is a space where she holds attention, and also becomes undeniably present through the performance which draws attention to her historically and socially inscribed body and the embodied practice. Discussing dance and presence MacKendrick mentions that “the dancer’s body is indistinguishable from the dance but only while the dance lasts” (2004, 145). The audience, during a Nachni performance, remains visibly engaged and captive through the night, setting aside their uneasiness about the woman, and only seeing the performer. In other words, the only time that a Nachni is taken to be a member of the community she entertains, is while she is dancing. The moment the dance is over, and the Nachni is seen resting in a quiet place in the festival ground, she has to retreat into the shadows of the margins. The same audience which witnessed and appreciated her dance, will not cross her shadows or be ‘caught dead talking to her’.¹² The largely male dominated audience comes to enjoy the Nachni performance and sits appreciatively through the whole night, enjoying the sensual qualities of the songs, the innuendos made through carefully worded lines of the songs sung by the Nachni and her Rasik and / or accompanists, and the

dance – which is often structured in a sexually enticing manner. The very same audience is afraid to cross her shadows during the day, if their paths cross accidentally. Hence presence and absence need to be put in conjunction as well as opposition where the Nachni, her presence and her performance are concerned. The precarity for Nachni, lies in the very fact that, she needs to constantly work on her capacity to maximise the effect of her presence only by means of her appearance, appeal and performance – because, as soon as she ceases to be able to generate and control her power to ‘hold’ the audience, she is redundant in the eyes of the society – and even in the eyes of her only so called social connection, that is the Rasik.

Presence, aliveness and the issues of ‘Pleasure’ Countering ‘Precarity’

Butler writes

So it is, I would suggest, on the basis of this question, who counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity. The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tries to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility. (Butler, 2009, iv)

The Nachni performances need to be read as continuous struggles to count as living beings, through their songs, their dances, and all their performative communications that refer to patterns of lived lives – in the society that denies her recognition. Though the Nachni is not ‘a life’, of the society in which she is present and absent at the same time, references of every day, love, devotion, conjugality, make up her musical, and embodied repertoire. Her songs often mention so-called normal human relationships, and also are commentaries on conversations between married couples, in the changing social scenario. It is ironic that she refers to and draws on a societal structure of which she is no longer a part, enhancing her space as the outsider, looking in through a window that only allows her a glimpse of the world within, but never lets her become a part of it. A Jhumur song composed as a conversation between a wife and a husband - sung by Sombari Mahato and Rabi Singh (recorded during my interview of them in 1988¹³) highlights the precarity of the Nachni as it sets her condition in a stark comparison to a socially accepted wife.

The wife says:’

*Orey biha kartey saadh lagey aar aant lagey akhan,
Aaro bujhbey chhele pulley hobe re jokhon.
Baro loker jamai holi, bish hajar taka peli,
Man kata gur chira khey.
Bhobishyot shukher ashaay, dhaak dhol bajnai,
Rijhey rijhey dhukey jel-khanai.
Jato ache nari jati ki bolibo hai,
Santaa bananor machine nari re banai.*

Translation:

You were so keen to marry me and now you have changed soon
after we are finally married.
You will understand what marriage is about even more clearly
when we have children
You have become the son in law of a wealthy man, and have
accepted twenty thousand rupees from him.
Now be satisfied with jaggery and pressed rice.
I had hopes for a happy life, but have ended up in this jail.
I lament the fate of the women, as the society has turned us all
into the child bearing machine. [My translation]

The Husband says:

*Jato achhe nari jati ki bolibo hai,
Kathai kathai purush ke aag thengey tey nachai.
Aar amar upai nai, parlee dada chayera dekhai,
Doshbar khopa ta ke bandhey.
Jora jora makak shaban, ghontai ghonai mukhey paan,
Tin tin din Ra pawa bhaar.
Kajer kono aarh nai, Raajar beti khawa porai,
New fashion er juta jama chai.
Maartey gele ultey maare, baaper ghorer gorob Korey,
Omon boukey pawa hoilo daai.
Shahsur ghorer lagan bujhan je kore baaper ghorey,
Emon bou ke charai bhalo amar bichaare.*

Translation:

What can I say about the women,
They do not let go of any opportunity to make the men dance to their tune.
I have no option now, otherwise I would have opted to leave the wife,
She is always adjusting her hair, and needing two soaps every few days,
She chews on the betal leaves constantly,
Sometimes three days pass before one can speak to her.
She is not interested in doing any work and yet acts like a princess in terms of her habits,
And is always interested in fashionable clothes and shoes.
She hits back if she is hit, and always refers to the great life she had in her father's house.
It is tough to live with her.
It is far better separate from a wife who reports about her life in the in-laws' house to her family. [My translation]

The song is about conjugality, adjustments, expectations, dowry, and social constructs around marriage and family life. It mentions the wife's frequent visits to the *baaper ghar* (her father's house) time and again as a refuge, referring to an ordinary married woman's life, even though a common condition in case of the Nachni women is the insecure position that they have in society and their inability to go back to their fathers' places, once they have left to become professional dancers. Through such songs and others on themes of illicit or unrequited love, memories of childhood, siblings and parents, devotional love songs between Radha and Krishna - the devotional and the sensual, the traditional and the contemporary, the regular and the irregular relationships, are put in opposition as well as in reference to each other, just as the Nachni traverses her social as well as professional worlds within and through the marginal scape of her performance.

The marginality of the Nachni woman is enforced through the society's refusal to grant her a social space, as a daughter or wife. Her economic vulnerability stems from the nature of her profession, whereby she is dependent on her bodily attributes and her ability to continue to dance and sing. The fear is further enhanced because of the exploitative nature of her partnership with her Rasik – whereby she is consistently used to bring in cash payment against her public performances. Her psychological vulnerability is rooted in the constant assertion of an aggressive social structure, which continues to punish her and her children, as a result of her having chosen to be a professional entertainer. But the Nachni encounters all these marginalities which categorise her as un-disciplinable, and therefore unacceptable member of the community. She negotiates and occupies space with her performance. Her tools are her body and her dance - the very same ones that make her socially dangerous and

therefore unacceptable, in the first place. It, therefore, becomes important to create a register or marker of the commitment, the excitement, the catharsis, the empathy and the pure subjective engagement and kinaesthetic acknowledgement of pleasure that a dancer creates for herself and others through her performance. From a feminist perspective on discourses around precarity (Butler, 2009), it is important for this current research to ensure that, while talking about the precarity¹⁴ of the Nachni's social existence, the analysis does not create yet another story of exploitative disenfranchisement. It is true that the form of subjectivity that is born out of precarity of the living conditions and consistent social exploitations is out of one's own control. But it is important to acknowledge that precarity is also a condition in which subversions and resistance against on-going structures of hegemonic dominations are often produced. Hence it is imperative that this paper provides a space to discursively foreground the embodied empowerment that becomes available to the Nachni women through their dance and the sensory engagement. Such a sense of control exerted over the gazes of the audience, lends a performative presence to the Nachni, even if only during the duration of the performance.

Dance in itself – regardless of the audience, the impacts, or the socio-economic implications - is a source of tremendous kinaesthetic involvement and a resultant “Narcissistic pleasure” (Rainer, 1999). In her Interview to Lyn Blumenthal¹⁵ Rainer talks about her first performance:

It was as good as an orgasm. I knew that was where I lived, that was where I belonged, doing that work and presenting myself physically to an audience. And that, of course, was part of the charisma. That is the urgency, and that pleasure in exhibiting oneself, is part of the seduction of an audience. The performer has to experience that in order for the audience to get a sense of this presence or to be taken in by it (1999, 63).

The Nachni learns the art of being hyper- feminine. She is taught to sing while dancing and emoting. The hyper-emphasising of different parts of the body to highlight sensuous eroticism and excessive use of specific invitations with the eye movements, as well as an on-going conversation through the songs with the Rasik and the musicians are enhanced and encouraged by the active responses from them.

Hips and Breasts are two important parts that are given special attention while the training is on for the Nachni. The exaggerated thrusting of the breast signifies a way of creating a very clear presence of a sexualised female body for a gendered gaze as well as reading. For people trained in some of the classical dances like *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi* (where side-wise movements of torso shifts the reference to the body carefully away from the

materiality of the feminine body in general and the breasts in particular, to the sculpted postures of the temple architecture), the use of the torso and the bust is very carefully monitored through the grammars of those dances - reconstructed in the post-colonial restructuring of the dances.

While one may be struck by the fact that Nachni has little or no agency about how long and where she would perform and even how many performances she would like to do, one must acknowledge the fact that she is the centre of attention, holding the audience with her power, presence and dance – of course with the help of the accompanists, but not because of them. Her pleasure and involvement – almost never acknowledged by herself, her Rasik, or her accompanists, and even her audience - is what makes her performance come alive – and of course she experiences a tremendous amount of power and pleasure which makes precariousness of her existence recede to the background during the performance.

The body of the Nachni becomes a tool here, honed and used to fight the social erasure on the very ground where it is created, and where it is forced on the woman performer. The movements are specific to the genre, and are learned through training and processed through subjective kinaesthetics whereby the personal experience of meaning making through communicative movements of dance, are performed within the socially structured viewing possibilities. The dance is also generated by the need to maximise visual and sensual appeal. On the one hand it can be lamented that the woman as a practitioner is hardly in control of what she dances on the proscenium. But on the other hand, there is a tremendous amount of power and agency in the final execution of the movements. The vulnerability of the viewed body of the Nachni, is countered by or at times exists in tandem with the dancer's experience of pleasure and power. This draws us into a discussion on the conceptualisation of those bodies and embodied acts which do not or cannot generate a 'sympathetic response' that Foster (2011, 142) explains to be generated as a result of the imagination of the viewers about 'why and how the person was experiencing the feeling he or she was feeling'. Such a communication is often impossible, in case of the Nachni performance, simply because the socially structured pre-constructed evaluation restricts and regulates the viewers' opinions about the dance and the dancer. Hence, there are a number of questions that need to be asked. How does one register what those dancers receive or perceive as reception from the audience? Why does this profession continue to attract young women to leave their families (before or after marriage)? Why does she dare to dance when it means 'social death' for her? The ideal and utopic answer one would like to believe in, is the tremendous power of dance in generating pleasure. But maybe a realistic answer would point towards reasons like economic and social vulnerabilities.

Summing Up

The paper must be brought to a close describing the end of a Nachni's life and framing her within the layers of vulnerabilities discussed above. Some Rasiks are known to have had more than one Nachnis, in the patriarchal structure that exists within such a marginal practice. The reason given is that he was attracted to, or was wanting to replace the aging Nachni with a younger performer as his partner. Instances of Nachnis keeping more than one Rasik at the same time, are not known. It is known, however, that in a few cases, a Nachni has left one Rasik and moved in with another. The death of a Rasik – has seen the Nachni mourning in the socially acceptable ways by eating vegetarian food and wearing white sarees for a period, in the same way as a widow is expected to do. However, this does not ensure any social support from the family of the Rasik. In case of the Nachni's death, even now, the body is dragged to the jungle and left there to rot or be eaten by wild animals, as the society still refuses to acknowledge the Nachni's dead body as a body of one of its own member. Recent interventions of some non-governmental agencies have started a debate, and have seen some exceptions to the rules. But her fate depends entirely on the decisions made by the community that has enjoyed her performances over the years. The idea of absence and vulnerability becomes reinstated, thus, through this act of ultimate rejection, whereby even in death her 'presence' cannot be acknowledged. In her death she passes on the precarity to the next generation of Nachni women.

NOTES

1 Chatterji's work on folklore and performative arts of Purulia, gives a detailed historical perspective of the *Jhumur* songs extensively used in the Nachni performances, analysing the different genres of this form, considered to be the representative form from Purulia. In that context she mentions the Nachni performance and the aesthetics of eroticism and enticement.

2 My Ph.D. research on performance traditions and their socio cultural contexts, looked at the Nachni from both performative and social angles. Extensive analysis of songs and a detailed ethnographic account that became a large part of my Ph.D. thesis, also helped me in formulating a feminist reading of professional women dancers. In my later work on women professional and semi-professional dancers, I have looked at the economic implications of this profession, whereby the Nachni remains exploited and marginalised,

even though she remains the principle bread earner throughout the lean season in the agricultural calender.

3 Chatterjea looks at Nachni, as one of the much exploited women dancers from Bengal in her article on women dancers in Bengal.

4 Chakravarti's book is the only one solely dedicated to the Nachni performers, creating a historical as well as ethnographic perspective for the tradition.

5 *Jhumur* is a particular musical form from the south western uplands of West Bengal and its neighbouring areas within Jharkhand. The *Jhumur* songs are classified according to the variety of ways it is sung, the themes and the occasions per performances they are used in. They are commonly sung all through the year for different occasions and festivities, and have been claimed as the folk tradition of the region. This particular Nachni *Shaliya Jhumur* song was recorded by me during my Ph.D. fieldwork in 1988. The singer Rajobala is no more. She was one of the better known performers in Purulia trained in dance as well as singing, and was popular for her performances with her Rasik Koka Tanti.

6 The Bhakti movement, with its particular aesthetic principles of personal devotion to god, which have been mentioned as the origin of such poetic traditions, also posited the artist, poet, devotee as a ever-eager student initiated in the path of devotion.

7 According to the constitution of India, the official schedule of certain disadvantaged and economically deprived castes – include certain caste groups who are protected by the Government of India by certain special reservations and concessions.

8 Applying vermilion powder on the bride's head is a standard procedure and a part of the traditional marriages ceremony among many communities in eastern and central parts of India. The symbolic partnership is given a form of acceptability, by following parts of the Hindu marriage ceremonies, without going through the whole structure of the elaborate acts, which are essential for Hindu social marriages.

9 Time and again the reference to the status of the Nachni as the 'outcast' is encountered in the context of social position of these women, whereas the conceptual understanding of her presence is always in terms of her 'impure' body' – implying her easy availability, even though she is actually not into prostitution.

10 Sandhya Rani, in her interview (in Purulia, on 12/04/2008) to author, clarified that she knew that she had to take care of herself, and she made provisions to save for her future.

11 Ibid.

12 Ramnath Mahato of Purulia, during his conversation with the author, (in Balarampur, on 17/09/2008) had asserted that most people in the village ‘would not be caught dead’, talking to Nachni during the day at all. In fact traditionally it was a practice to avoid even their shadows.

13 Sombari Mahato and Rabi Singh in their interview (in Purulia, on 17/09/1988), described the different contents of the songs commonly sung by the Nachni- Rasik duo, who were famous within the district of Purulia in West Bengal and far beyond in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand (then Bihar).

14 ‘Precarity’, according to Butler ‘characterises that politically induced condition of maximised vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection’.

15 Rainer, in her book *A Woman Who.... : Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, included her interview by Lyn Blumenthal, in a chapter “Profile”, where she talked about her first performance experience (pp. 63).

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