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Research Article

Understanding the *Kichkini*: Death, Female Ghosts, Gender, and Sexuality in Nepal

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Abstract

The *kichkini* is a young, beautiful, female ghost featured in Nepalese legends, instantly recognizable by her back-turned feet. She is believed to travel through the night in search of men to seduce, and those who encounter her may fall ill or even die. This article explores the *kichkini* narrative through four in-depth interviews with Nepali nationals—three based in the UK (n=3) and one in Nepal (n=1)—supported by published stories, online blogs, and YouTube video clips. Ghost stories are found throughout the world, and many features of the *kichkini* legend are transcultural. For example, "hitchhiking ghosts" and "back-footed beings" appear in other folklore traditions. At the same time, ghost stories may also act as "cultural objects," reflecting specific cultural ideas and concerns. In the Nepali context, ghosts arise due to "bad deaths" or incorrect death rituals. They can be malign, and shamans are tasked with protecting the living from these entities. *Kichkini* may represent the perceived threat posed by female sexuality to patrilineal structures and be used to justify restrictions on women and even violence against them. As the social climate of Nepal shifts under the influence of modernity and the drive for development, the position of women is changing, and the *kichkini* story appears to be evolving to reflect this. There is little research-based literature on the *kichkini*, and analyzing such legends could provide deeper understanding of death, gender, female sexuality, and social change in Nepal.

Keywords

back-footed beings, female sexuality, patrilineal structures, Nepalese ghost stories, death in unnatural circumstances

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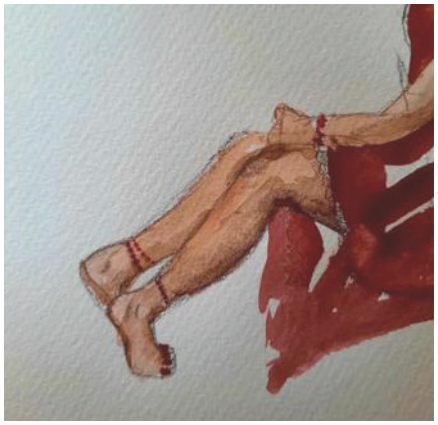

Figure: The back-turned feet of the kichkini. *(Ilustration by the author)*

Introduction

> … My friend was cycling home at night through Kathmandu. He noticed a girl following his bike. She was beautiful, with long hair and a white sari. But when he saw her feet, he saw that her toes were facing backwards! He was so scared that he began to cycle faster. When you see those feet, you know that this girl is not human. She must be a ghost; she must be a *kichkini*!'
> -Suresh

Growing up in Nepal, I was exposed to a wealth of stories about supernatural beings such as ghosts, witches, and spirits. The story that struck me the most was that of the *kichkini* (also known as *kichkinni*, *kichkanya,* or *kichkandi*), a young, beautiful, female ghost. She was a woman who had died in "unnatural circumstances," by suicide, during childbirth, or through murder. She wanders alone at night, searching for men to seduce. She is alluring but deadly; any man with whom she came into contact would fall ill, or die. Appearing as a real woman, her feet—unnaturally twisted backward—identify her as a supernatural being. The image of the backward-turning feet evokes horror for men, especially those who travel alone at night.

The dead are present throughout the Nepali landscape. Across "modern" cities and "traditional" rural regions, scattered shrines, temples, and religious motifs reflect their significance. Despite the diversity of cultural and ethnic groups, responses to death and gender are similar throughout Nepal. Stories of the dead returning and affecting the living prevail all over the Himalayas (Michailovsky and Sagant, 1992). This article explores the story of the *kichkini,* who embodies ideas of both death and female sexuality in Nepal. What is the social significance of ghost stories? What do the *kichkini* tell us about death, about women's place in society, and about the culture surrounding gender and sexuality? How may they help us understand social change in Nepal?

Methods

There is limited academic literature on *kichkini,* so to begin, I conducted four in-depth interviews with Nepalis who had lived in Nepal until adulthood. I aimed to establish the details and perceptions surrounding the story, since narrative telling is central to ghost belief and experience (Baker and Bader, 2014). The interviews were carried out in either English or Nepali, depending on the informant's preference. Because I was already connected to my informants through friends and family, I hoped they would be comfortable sharing their stories and beliefs with me. The interviews were conducted online and recorded, allowing me to reflect not only on the content of the narratives but also on how they were expressed. A priority for me was to interview people of different ages, ethnic groups, and genders. My informants were from Brahman (n=3) and Newar (n=1) communities and would be regarded as "high-caste" within Nepal. To supplement these interviews, additional information on *kichkini* was sought from publicly available online sources, including blogs, public Facebook posts, and homemade YouTube videos.

Given that the study involved limited informants recounting personal stories, I acknowledge that these accounts may not represent all beliefs in Nepal. My position as a secular mixed-race woman discussing topics such as the supernatural may have

influenced what the informants said to me. Bennett describes this as "telling it slant," when people may share their stories with "face-saving ambiguity" (Bennett, 1999:14). People may initially deny belief in ghosts but later quote experiences involving them (ibid.). Indeed, Pigg (1996) noted such behavior while exploring shamanism in Nepal: people who told her they did not believe in shamans (those who contact spirits) spoke of witnessing shamanic ceremonies and consulting them personally. Her status as a foreign anthropologist may have associated her with modernity, which may have influenced what they revealed to her.

Interviews

Laxmi

Laxmi, a 41-year-old Brahman woman, considers herself non-religious. Laxmi described *kichkini* generally, unable to recall any specific stories. She spoke in detail of their backward-facing feet, their white saris, the beauty of their long hair and pale skin, and their seductive ability. Laxmi informed me that *kichkini* would walk alone at night, particularly around small villages and alongside rivers and cremation grounds. She said that *kichkini* are the ghosts of women who had died in unnatural circumstances; for example, during pregnancy or childbirth, or after being abused by men. She talked about *kichkini* arising from the "soul."

> …They are ghosts of women whose souls did not get released. The souls hung onto their bodies. Their souls could not enter "the bigger soul"/the ancestor spirits…

Tales of *kichkini* differed from the other ghost stories Laxmi knew, as she had not encountered such an emphasis on gender in accounts of other ghosts (*bhut).*

> …*Bhut* aren't given genders, they are not men or women. They are just dead souls; they could be anything…

Kichkini are said to hunt lone men at night, often as they return from weddings or worship. They approach their victims, who fail to notice their feet until it is too late. Laxmi was unsure of the motives behind *kichkini* attacks; however, she suspected they may be acting out of revenge for previous mistreatment.

> …She takes a man with her, who will die within a couple of days. She will lure any man, married or unmarried. Men in my village were scared of meeting *kichkini*. Not woman though, *kichkini* wouldn't approach women…

Laxmi did not believe in *kichkini* herself and laughed when recounting the stories. She stated that they were common in her grandmother's generation, but not now. She thinks that these stories will soon be forgotten.

Suresh

Suresh is a 43-year-old Brahman man who practices both Hinduism and Buddhism. He had not seen any *kichkini* personally and recounted stories told to him when he was young by a hotel worker who cycled at night. Suresh trusted these stories. Indeed, it is suggested that "the consumption of others' personal narratives is the most powerful form of vicarious experience" (Baker and Bader, 2014:583). At school, many of his classmates had heard similar stories themselves. Suresh told me that all stories of *kichkini* are the same—a beautiful woman chases a man at night. For a woman to be alone at night was culturally unacceptable at the time and would therefore arouse suspicion. He thinks the story is most common among the Newari community, but that *kichkini* themselves are not from any particular caste or ethnic group. He said:

> …The boy who told me about the *kichkini* had been scared. A beautiful girl chased him at night. When men see girls like this, they run or cycle away as fast as they can. They fear they will die. I'm not sure if they ever do though, I have only heard of them chasing. Surely if they wanted to kill them, they would use a different strategy…

Suresh added that *kichkini* haunt quiet places, often alongside rivers, and noted

that they tended to be associated with unnatural deaths.

> …They arise when girls die from something like suicide or an accident. Not a regular death (such as old age), but an instant death. People who commit suicide do not die peacefully; they become bad spirits. *Kichkini* may also be women who die with some sort of desire. If she was in love with a man, and died before marriage, her desire is still there. It may attract men, and then she will chase them!

Suresh said that these stories were frightening enough to stop him from visiting certain places, such as riverbanks, at night. He said that men are never scared of women in other circumstances, only when they see backward-facing feet.

Anil

Anil is a 40-year-old Newari man who regards himself as Hindu. Anil knew many stories of *kichkini* and recounted them enthusiastically. They were gathered from multiple sources—orally from elders, from books, newspaper articles, and online. He was, however, unsure of his own beliefs. In contrast to Laxmi, Anil said that the most intriguing detail about *kichkini* is that, in Nepal, ghost stories are usually heard in villages, but *kichkini* are always found in cities.

> …In cities, people are more likely to go out at night, meet, and get engaged with others. This doesn't really happen in villages…

His views of *kichkini* also differed in that he did not believe that they acted out of revenge.

> … I think that *kichkini* are different to other ghosts. Other ghosts try to scare you. But *kichkini* are always beautiful. They try to engage with you, as girlfriend or wife. They are not trying to kill you. They are not looking for revenge, they may just be looking for love. And they never go after women; women are not scared of them. I don't know why they don't engage with women. In Nepal we accept lesbians, gays, and transgender people! I don't know why *kichkini* cannot be lesbian …

Anil described the use of objects associated with femininity as protection against *kichkini*. He said men traveling at night to places believed to be haunted by *kichkini* would carry jewelry, including anklets, as a precaution. This idea is echoed in a *HuffPost* blog, which noted that men driving down highways at night are said to varnish their nails and paint female figures on their trucks for the same reason.[1]

> … If you do what women do, you will be safe from the *kichkini.* You can fool them…

When I asked Anil what he meant by the word "engage," he said that he believed that it referred to sexual activity. However, he had never heard this topic discussed openly.

Like Laxmi and Suresh, he described the association of *kichkini* with unnatural deaths as well as torture, pregnancy, and pain. He also mentioned improper cremation before telling me several detailed stories. As a teenager, he had read a book by a Nepali author describing his encounter with a *kichkini*. In the book, the author meets a girl when he is studying at university, and she begins visiting his dormitory at night. He notices nothing unusual, but his friends observe that he is becoming pale and losing weight. They give him a thread to tie onto the girl's foot, and when he follows it, he is led to the cremation ground.

> … All stories of *kichkini* end up in a crematorium. A bone is always found that the string is tied around. You must burn the bone to get rid of the *kichkini*…

Anil mentioned University Hospital, Kathmandu's largest maternity hospital, widely regarded as the abode of *kichkini* because of the deaths of women during childbirth. He also told me that *kichkini* are believed to target nighttime drivers, so highways after dark are considered particularly dangerous for men. However, *kichkini*

are said to be unable to cross water, so men who find themselves in haunted places can escape by quickly crossing a river.

Another story Anil told me is almost identical to one I discovered on an online blog[2] and highlights ambiguity in the *kichkini* motives. In this story, a cycle-rickshaw driver picks up a lone, hitchhiking woman, who wishes to travel to the cremation ground. While recounting the story, Anil expressed his surprise; typically a *kichkini* tries to interact with men, but this one remained silent. After a while, the driver spotted another girl who was hitchhiking and immediately cycled faster to get away from her. His current passenger asked, "Why?" He said, "Did you not see her feet? They were on backwards? The girl replied, "Like mine?" revealing her legs, before disappearing.

Anil's final story came from Dharan, a city near a major highway in eastern Nepal, at the edge of a forest. He explained that this area is known for its busy nightlife, prostitutes, and *kichkini.* In the story, a bus driver regularly visited a woman at night for "partying and drinking" but would wake the next morning in the cremation ground. On each occasion, the man assumed he had simply lost his way due to drinking. However, when he began to grow noticeably thinner, his family suspected a *kichkini.* They followed him one night and found a bone in the cremation ground, which they burnt according to the correct ritual.

Anil suggested that these stories may serve as a way for the older generation to discourage their sons from going out at night and "engaging" with unknown girls. He believes that *kichkini* can be from any caste or ethnic group and, like my other interlocutors, described their striking beauty, long hair, and saris that cover their backward-turned feet.

Debika

Debika is a 70-year-old Brahman, Hindu woman who strongly believes in *kichkini.* Although she had not encountered one herself, she recalled seeing other ghosts in her youth. Like Suresh, she shared detailed stories she had heard from others and had great faith in what she had been told. During my interview with Debika, I became acutely aware of my own role in the storytelling process. Bennett stresses the importance of the interviewer's terminology, body language, and facial expressions (Bennett, 1999). When I asked Debika to explain a specific detail within "the story," she exclaimed, "These are not stories! This is real!"

Debika began by mentioning general features of *kichkini*—their striking beauty, heavy makeup, red saris (though they are also known to appear in white), and backward-turned feet. She explained that they are usually found walking outside at night and hitchhiking along highways.

> … Everyone is scared of *kichkini*. I have never seen one, but if I did, I would be scared too! I don't know if women see them, but that's only because women do not travel around at night. Although, I have never heard of them targeting women, or going into women's homes …

She recalled a story told by her friend's uncle, who was a taxi driver. This account differs from others in that it describes two *kichkini* traveling together during the day. In this story, the driver picked up two beautiful women and took them to their home. But, after entering their compound to fetch money to pay him, they did not return. When several minutes had passed, the driver knocked on the gate, and an older woman appeared. When he explained what had happened, she told him that the girls were her daughters—both of whom had died. It was their death anniversary, and every year they returned as ghosts. In this case, their unnatural deaths were linked to the Newari practice of "*guffa*," the seclusion ritual carried out pre-menarche. Although similar rituals occur in the Brahman community, Debika specifically associated the *kichkini* with this traditional Newari practice.

Debika's second story concerned a young Brahman man renting a Newari property in

Kathmandu. Every day, when he returned from work, he found his house cleaned and food prepared. This routine continued for months, during which he found himself becoming thinner and weaker. His friends suspected a *kichkini.* One night, his door opened on its own, and a beautiful woman entered, cooked, and tidied his flat. However, when she saw that he was awake, she disappeared. Shocked, the man went to visit a shaman, who told him that a *kichkini* had fallen in love with him and often lay beside him while he slept. As in Anil's story, he was advised to tie a thread to her ankle and follow her. Accompanied by the shaman, he was led to the cremation ground, where they found a small bone and burned it.

Ghost Stories as Cultural Objects

Ghost stories are transcultural; despite appearing within different contexts, they often share similar features (Torri, 2019). Their popularity may be due to the widespread perception of the "soul" as separate from the physical body, allowing it to become a detached entity. Ghosts challenge several binaries—existing between the body and soul, life and death, and the past and present (Baker and Bader, 2014:584). Their transitional state is referred to as "liminality" by Van Gennep (1909) in *Rites of Passage*. He describes three stages following death—pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Ghosts are situated within the "liminal" stage, the most ambiguous (Torri, 2019:207). Their flexible nature means that specific cultural ideas can manifest within the stories about them (Baker and Bader, 2014). "Stories structure the meanings by which a culture lives" (Bennett, 1999:5), and although individual recollections of ghost stories may seem personal, they encompass information regarding a particular culture's beliefs and practices. Ambiguous ghost stories, such as the *kichkini*, may reflect uncertainties surrounding particular social boundaries within a culture; for example, those related to sexual relationships (Torri, 2019).

Ghost stories can also be understood within the frame of "religious syncretism" because, rather than being the product of just one tradition, they are often a blend of many different religious and cultural traditions. As they are also found within secular societies, they are perceived as being "beyond religious institutions" (Baker and Bader, 2014:580). This point is particularly relevant in Nepal with its diversity of ethnic groups and religious beliefs.

There is also a view that ghost stories emerge from the anxieties generated by rapidly changing societies. It is said that "urban folk legends may help us address contemporary fears and social concerns" (Johnson, 2007:26). For example, in Thailand, ghost stories were found to be more prevalent around economically developing communities and housing areas. This phenomenon was thought to be due to anxieties around the breakdown of traditional concepts of home, with "hauntings" serving as the reminder of the past and causing people to wonder whether "progress" was genuine or superficial. As life changes and becomes more unfamiliar, "the uncanny" may be more likely to enter the everyday (Johnson, 2013).

Who Believes in Ghost Stories?

Debika was the only interlocutor who admitted to a strong belief in ghosts. She was also the oldest participant and the only one who considered herself to be "highly religious." Hinduism appears to have a major influence on the *kichkini* narrative, particularly given the importance of death rituals. However, the interviews show that even people who do not believe in ghosts are often well acquainted with these stories and their details. All informants noted that, while most of the older generation know the *kichkini* narratives, younger people are less familiar with them, leading some to suggest that the tradition might soon die out. Nevertheless, a search on YouTube reveals numerous amateur films that recreate *kichkini* stories or show "video evidence" of the ghosts.[3] There are also many online blog posts that appear to be written by younger authors, so from this perspective, the story seems to remain popular.

In the United States, the circulation of ghost stories has increased with the expansion of mass media (Baker and Bader, 2014), and similar changes have occurred in South Asia as mass media replaces oral tradition (Lyngdoh, 2012). Television, commercialism, and tourism may trivialize ghost narratives, making them amusing, rather than believable (Baker and Bader, 2014); for example, a Nepali blog post used the *kichkini* story to advertise "Spiritual Trekking Tours."[4] As ghost stories and popular culture are often intertwined, the traditions may be commodified and turned into entertainment (Torri, 2019). However, despite this trend and the apparent decline in formal religious adherence, ghost belief seems to be rising in many countries, possibly because more people now identify as "spiritual." Younger people may also be drawn to ghost stories because the "liminal" nature of ghosts resonates with the liminality of adolescence (Baker and Bader, 2014).

The concept of "belief" in Nepal is complex and tethered to ideas of tradition and modernity. Individuals often deny belief in ghosts or shamans because they fear it might mark them as holding "traditional" or "village" views and thus appear "backward." Since "development" is highly valued in Nepal, people may prefer to present themselves as "cosmopolitan" (Pigg, 1996). However, ghost belief has not necessarily disappeared; it may simply be denied until affected individuals begin to display certain symptoms, which can then be attributed to spirits (Poletti, 2016).

Hitchhiking Ghosts

The hitchhiking ghost motif in the *kichkini* legend can be considered transcultural. Stories of women entering vehicles are found all over the world (Jones, 1944) and are said to be some of the most widespread and enduring folk narratives (Johnson, 2007). Details like those in Debika's story—young women picked up and driven to an address, disappearing upon arrival, the taxi driver being told that they are dead and "returning home" (possibly on their death anniversary)—are found from New York (Jones, 1944) to sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson, 2007). The "Vanishing Hitchhiker" trope readily adapts to local contexts (Johnson, 2007), rendering it authentic and culturally relevant (Lyngdoh, 2021). The taxi itself is an important symbol, appearing in ghost stories from Korea, sub-Saharan Africa, and India. A taxi is not only a common mode of transport for many communities but also represents changing urban spaces, both public and private (ibid.).

Importance of Setting

The settings in these stories are also significant. *Kichkini* are often said to wander near rivers and this may be because natural features represent "liminal" spaces where two worlds meet and may be viewed as channels for supernatural energy (Lyngdoh, 2021:220). In Hinduism, rivers are also associated with death and rebirth (Bloch and Parry, 2001). Further, in Nepal, cremation grounds are commonly situated on riverbanks, widely regarded as the "turf" of ghosts (Lyngdoh, 2021).

Anil noted that Paropakar Maternity Hospital, the largest in Nepal, was associated with unnatural deaths during childbirth, which could cause women to become *kichkini*. As places where life both begins and ends, hospitals link the past and present, the living and the dead. They embody both social and medical anxieties and are thus multi-dimensional. Within these spaces, historical events materialize, and current social realities, such as maternal mortality, are reflected (Varley and Varma, 2018). Notably, Paropakar Maternity Hospital sits on the bank of a major river running through Kathmandu.

Back-footed Beings

Globally, backward-turned feet often feature in descriptions of mythical creatures. In Nepal, the *yeti* of the snowy hills is said to have backward-turned feet (Kutin, 2016). Furthermore, beautiful supernatural women with this characteristic are not unique to Nepali culture (Crawford Cree, 1906). The *krivopete*, a "wild woman" from

rural Slovenia whose name refers to her deformed feet, shares notable similarities. Like the *kichkini*, her motives are ambiguous: she can help humans but also cause them significant harm. Moreover, like the *kichkini*, she is found near water, and her story and places connected with it have become popular tourist spots in Slovenia. Kutin (2016) also provides another example from Margarita Island, Venezuela, where a beautiful, supernatural woman with backward-turned feet is said to seduce men, making them gradually weaker until they finally die.

Several explanations have been offered for the significance of backward-turned feet. Some writers suggest that this feature marks such entities as "distorted human beings, usually wicked" (Crawford Cree, 1906:131-32), reinforcing the connection between ugliness and wickedness. Others argue that the anomaly positions them as liminal figures who inhabit a space between the physical and spiritual worlds. It could also make them seem more powerful than humans, as they can function with a feature that would make ordinary human movement impossible. Another view is that the anomaly simply distinguishes these supernatural beings from humans, on the premise that all mythical creatures require some visible marker of their otherworldliness (Kutin, 2016). Indeed, my participants suggested that the very sight of these feet immediately alerted men to danger and evoked feelings of terror.

Churel

Stories of vengeful female ghosts occur throughout much of Asia; many, such as the *sundelbolong,* in Indonesia, and the *pontianak,* in Malaysia, sharing many of the characteristics of the *kichkini* (Izharuddin, 2019). Like *kichkini, churel,* well known in Indian folklore, are beautiful young women with backward-facing feet who seduce men (Crooke, 1896) and are said to have died during pregnancy or childbirth (Kutin, 2016) or during a period of impurity such as menstruation (Crooke, 1896:269). Ghost stories found in Nepal, particularly those from the borderlands, often resemble Indian stories (Spaight, 1942). *Churel* are said to be ghosts of "low-caste" people (Crooke, 1896:269), a concept I have not discovered with *kichkini. Churel* also inflict harm on the living, but, unlike *kichkini,* women are also targets. A woman meeting a *churel* may become possessed and start to seduce men (Saeed, Gater, Hussain, and Mubbashar, 2000). In a recent Netflix film, *Bulbbul*, a *churel* is described as having links to the Goddess Kali, who empowers her to avenge women and attack men, a framing that I have not encountered with *kichkini* . (Dutt, 2020).

Regarding the source of the *churel* legend, images believed to depict her—dating to around 100–90 BCE—have been found carved into the walls of man-made caves outside Mumbai. These carvings show women with backward-facing feet and are said to be based on a legend from Persia. In Persian folklore, *churel* are the spirits of women who died with "grossly unsatisfied desires." The stories often feature travelers who see footprints in the dirt and, fearing danger, head in the opposite direction. However, because the *churel's* feet face backward, this move would inevitably lead them straight into her clutches (DeCaroli, 2000).

Kichkini, Life, and Death in Nepal

Ghost stories offer ways of thinking about death and, in Nepal, notions of death arise from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions (Torri, 2019). The *kichkini* story contains several themes around death: ghosts, the "bad death," the importance of funeral rites, and shamanic ritual.

Life

In Nepal, the living are thought to exist in the "*Samsara*," the physical world, which fluctuates between physical, emotional, ritual, social, and economic states (Bennett, 1983:36). All parts of the body, including the *saato* (spirit or soul) and *iijat* (social status or honor) are closely connected to the physical world (Kohrt and Hruschka, 2010). This connection is fragile, as highlighted by the common occurrence of "soul loss," where,

during life, one's soul can be temporarily dislodged from the body due to external forces, spirits, or even emotional stress (Kohrt and Hruschka, 2010).

People fluctuate between states of purity and pollution throughout their lives. Organic processes such as sexual activity, birth, death, and menstruation are regarded as polluting and can be controlled by the enactment of rituals. However, due to the ineluctability of such pollution, humans continually shift between ritual states (Bennett, 1983).

Karma, which can cause suffering in life (Kohrt and Hruschka, 2010) and affect the soul after death, is an important concept in Nepal. "Good merit" must be earned through regular worship and rituals. An important way to build Karma is to avoid polluting behavior, such as sexual activity (Bennett, 1983), a concept thematically relevant to *kichkini.*

Death

Death, a taboo subject in some parts of the world, is often discussed openly in Nepal, particularly within Buddhist communities (Desjarlais, 2003). Although feared, death should be accepted and ritually prepared for (Gutschow and Michaels, 2005). Hindu belief sees life as "limited good." Therefore, death and the regeneration of life are considered highly connected. As in many cultures around the world, they co-exist, with one believed to lead to the other (Bloch and Parry, 2001).

If "bad deaths" should occur or incorrect death rituals be performed, the *pitr* (soul) cannot enter *pitrlock* (realm of departed ancestors). These souls become ghosts, lingering around the site of their death and haunting the living (Bennett, 1983:93). The array of terms for ghosts in the Nepali vocabulary highlights their significance. Laxmi and Debika spoke of *bhut,* translating to "the spirits of the dead." *Pret,* referring to "a hungry, wandering ghost" (Torri, 2019:212), and *baayu,* meaning "wind" in Sanskrit (Höfer and Shrestha, 1973:52), are other terms that are regularly used.

The Newari community in Nepal recognizes many categories of ghosts (Torri, 2019); one source describes 49 distinct types (Höfer and Shrestha, 1973). Those of relevance to this study are *sik-khya*, "a vengeful revenant originating from incorrect funeral rites"; *barha-khya,* "the ghost of a dead girl who died during the pre-menarche period of confinement (*guffa*)"; and *kichkandi,* "a roadside, female ghost luring passersby and nighttime travelers" (Dietrich, 1998:45-48). Further, the *barha-khya* relates closely to Debika's stories of the *kichkini*, as she explicitly stated that some women who became *kichkini* died due to the Newari *guffa* rituals. This reflects the malleable nature of ghost stories, which blend and change as individuals and communities shape them, adding their own details (Torri, 2019).

Ghosts exist within the "liminal" stage after death and are regarded as highly unstable and potentially dangerous (Torri, 2019). Desire is a major catalyst, as ghosts often return due to some sort of unfulfilled wish (Poletti, 2016) that drives them to seek revenge among the living. "The more their desire was, such as the love for a child during childbirth, the more jealous and bitter they may be after their premature death" (Michailovsky and Sagant, 1992:24).

Correct Death Rituals and Effects of the Dead on the Living

Death rituals in Nepal serve several functions, as society must come to terms with both the death of the individual and its effects on social order (Bloch and Parry, 2001). Rituals allow mourners to visualize and comprehend the journey from life to death (Desjarlais, 2003), enable the dead to be re-incorporated back into the community in a different form (Torri, 2019), and provide a practical means of disposing of the corpse, considered highly polluting. They may also be an attempt to control death's unpredictability, as in the concept, explored shortly, of cremation being considered a "sacrifice" (Bloch and Parry, 2001). Death rituals should also be continuous and can never be completed. Ancestor spirits must be worshipped annually in

ceremonies known as *shraddha* (Bennett, 1983).

Among Nepal's many ethnic groups and religions, ghosts are often blamed for strange behavior, illness, and death affecting people of any age or gender as a way of protecting the well-being of the living (Michailovsky and Sagant, 1992).

Power of Female Sexuality in Patrilineal Society

Kichkini are always young, attractive females targeting men; this dimension is fascinating and can be explored from various angles. They may reflect the dangers of female sexuality or represent the violence against and the oppression of women. *Kichkini* should also be interpreted within the changing social climate of Nepal and its effects on gender norms and sexuality.

Within these stories, implied sexual activity, or inappropriate contact between men and women, leads to the death of men. In fact, "untamed female sexuality" and its association with death is a prevalent theme cross-culturally. Biologically, sex is linked with reproduction and fertility, but this connection is often symbolically renounced. For example, among the Lugbara people, an ethnic group in Sub-Saharan Africa, a woman's uncontrolled sexuality is associated with the wild and deemed socially unproductive. Thus, it contrasts with the male-controlled compound and ancestral shrine, which represent fertility. Sexuality, birth, and death are all personified as an intrusive, wild woman, who threatens the order created by men (Bloch and Parry, 2001).

In Nepal, concepts of pollution related to sexual activity reflect the social order and usually reinforce male hierarchy (Douglas, 2003), namely the patrilineal system in which importance is placed on the line of male descendants. Women join their husband's households upon marriage. Traditionally, courting or sex before marriage is considered entirely inappropriate; most marriages are arranged by families and center on fathers "gifting" their virgin daughters (Bennett, 1983). The perceived threat of unmarried men and women even sleeping beside each other was mentioned by Debika and is also referenced in this YouTube Video.[5]

Women may therefore be viewed ambivalently. Consanguineal women are generally well regarded, perhaps because their sexuality only "threatens" their husband's patrilineal unit. Affinal women, however, are believed to hold the power to damage patrilineal lines through adultery, thereby jeopardizing caste status and preventing the worship of ancestors. Their sexuality is considered a threat to male solidarity, and they are often accused of using their sexual power to draw their husbands away from their families (Bennett, 1983). When anything goes wrong, affinal women are often blamed and sometimes even accused of using supernatural powers to create mischief.

Hindu goddesses may also reflect this ambivalence. The goddess Devi may present as both gentle and nurturing, as well as terrifying and destructive, when she manifests as "Kali." The powerful Kali resembles the *kichkini* in the way she directs her anger against men. Men may worship Kali as a way of acknowledging their vulnerability to affinal women (Bennett, 1983), and she is known as the "mother of life, death, and rebirth" (McDaniel, 2015:192). Ambivalence surrounding women permeates myth and religion in Nepal, the *kichkini* and Kali being clear examples.

Restrictions for Women

Traditionally, many restrictions are placed on Nepalese women. They must be obedient to their husbands and their mothers-in-law (Gellner, 1993). Those traveling away from the household unaccompanied by men and who speak loudly and confidently on the streets may be said to have a "sexual and moral looseness" (Bennett, 1983:3). A woman walking at night may be considered a *phuri*, looking for trouble, or a harlot, a prostitute (ibid., 125). This sort of behavior

is central to the story of the *kichkini*, who does not fit these social norms.

Sexual activity is only considered appropriate if carried out in a controlled manner, within the right caste, and within marriage. This protects the socio-religious hierarchy and maintains the privileges that accompany it, as well as assuring continuation of the line of descent (Bennett, 1983). "Female sexuality is dangerous and unproductive, but which—like fire—is the center of social life once it has been tamed" (Bloch and Parry, 2001:39). Nepali law also reinforced rules regarding inter-caste sexual relationships up until around 1950 (Tamang, 2000). Other natural processes representative of female sexuality, such as menstruation and birth, are also controlled (Bennett, 1983), and these themes occur in the *kichkini* story.

Debika mentioned the ritual of *guffa (*pre-menstrual isolation) as a possible cause of women becoming *kichkini.* Rituals surrounding menarche and menstruation occur throughout Nepal and may involve women temporarily residing in darkness or even outside the house, avoiding contact with others. This practice stems from the belief that menstrual blood represents female sexuality and is therefore highly polluting. Adult men are considered most at risk from menstrual blood pollution (Bennett, 1983), but it is also thought that the whole community may face misfortune through illness, accidents, or deaths if women of certain castes do not conform to "God's" menstruation rules. This seclusion poses significant health and safety risks, and women have died during *guffa* (Thapa and Aro, 2021). The *kichkini* story may therefore not only reflect the perceived danger of menstrual blood but also challenge the harmful practices linked to these beliefs.

Childbirth also represents female sexuality and is considered highly polluting. "High-caste" mothers are even temporarily "untouchable or secluded" following birth (Bennett, 1983). Therefore, midwives are traditionally "lower-caste" women, as only they are allowed to touch women in labor (Cameron, 1998). Postnatally, mothers are considered so polluted that contact with men is forbidden for eleven days, and they may be required to live in unsafe conditions during this time (Acharya and Rimal, 2009). These harmful practices, as well as the fear surrounding death during childbirth, are reflected in the *kichkini* legend.

Debika's account links the fear of women to the fear of losing caste status. The caste system is built on a social hierarchy from purity to pollution, and men may lose caste status if they have sex with women from a "lower caste" (Bennett, 1983). In Debika's story, the "high-caste" man faces an evident threat to his status due to the sexuality of the "lower-caste" *kichkini* who follows him.

Patriarchy and the *Kichkini*

Societies that perceive women as a threat to patriarchal structures often create figures of dangerous femininity. Creed (1993), in reference to shocking and horrific female figures in Western film, terms this phenomenon the "Monstrous Feminine." The term has also been applied to ghosts within Asian folklore, such as the *pontianak* (Izaharuddin, 2019) and the *kichkini.* Creed argues that these creatures are derived from mythology and imagery dating back thousands of years. Their horrific nature centers on the perceived "difference" of female sexuality and reproductive organs—such as "the all-devouring womb"—which conveys a negative view of their powers of fertility (Creed, 1993) and expresses fear and ambivalence toward women (Wee, 2011). These women not only threaten individuals but also the ideological systems that maintain patriarchal order (Lee, 2015). De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, also discusses the myths surrounding women that sustain patriarchal notions, where women are regarded as "other." Throughout history, and taken as "fact," women have always been considered in ambivalent terms, representing both life and death (De Beauvoir, 1949). Notions of witches are primarily found within patriarchal ethnic groups and may arise due to suspicion and fear of female sexuality. Women may also use this concept to negotiate patriarchal forces, claiming to

be witches because their sexuality is the only area in which they may exert authority (Sinha, 2006).

Changing Position of Women within Nepalese Society

The themes within the story of the *kichkini*—the dangers of female sexuality and restrictions for women—are interesting to examine within the changing social climate of Nepal. Ghost stories may mirror social change. In Thailand, an increase in female migrant workers and ambiguity surrounding "modern femininity" led to the circulation of more ghost stories about sexually attractive female ghosts assaulting young men (Johnson, 2013). Asian cinema now features more powerful female characters that threaten the patriarchal order (Lee, 2015). In Japan, the changing social status of women, with many now working and in the public sphere, appears to have led to an increase in stories of "demonic" women in pop culture (Wee, 2011). If ghost stories are associated with fears of social change, how might *kichkini* represent modernizing Nepal?

Change is occurring throughout Nepal, in both cities (Liechty, 2010) and villages, impacting the position of women (Ahearn, 2001). Terms such as "development" and "modernization" are highly regarded within Nepal, particularly since the overthrow of the Rana oligarchy in the 1950s, before which education was limited to an elite group. The "People's Movement" was thought to highlight the importance of democracy and individuality in the 1990s. Other factors, such as the high level of foreign aid entering the country, the rise in outmigration, the adoption of Western notions of "modernity" and "success," and even the arrival of Bollywood and Western films, have all contributed to cultural and social change. Individuality may now be regarded as more important than traditionally held beliefs (Ahearn, 2001).

Marriage practices are changing, with more people choosing their partners and entering "love marriages." This trend may increase the incidence of "wrong" marriages, such as those crossing caste boundaries, and in turn affect kinship systems, caste statuses, and the patrilineal unit. New notions of love and choice may challenge traditional social structures, often regarded as "backward." "Love," once regarded as shameful and embarrassing, may now be considered a sign of modernity, development, and success (Ahearn, 2001). *Kichkini* may reflect the fear of this change, as in these stories, men fall in love with women as individuals, without family approval, and pay heavily for doing so.

Education enables women to leave their villages for cities, where private university accommodation creates more opportunities for interaction with men (Ahearn, 2001), as referenced by Anil. Education and the individuality it fosters may therefore threaten traditional social structures. The theme of female education also featured in a story I discovered online. It described a schoolgirl who longed to leave her village and go to the city for further education. After failing her exams, she committed suicide and became a *kichkini.*[6] With its emphasis on "development" and education, the story may reflect these ongoing social changes and perhaps highlight the pressures placed on women as they navigate them.

Changing culture also entails changes in concepts of pollution and the social politics they represent (Douglas, 2003). Ahearn found that as women's positions in society changed, the number of days during which they were deemed menstrually polluted decreased, and they spent less time in seclusion (Ahearn, 2001).

Kichkini appear to be relevant within this changing social dynamic. Ghost stories may influence those who hear them and can indirectly reinforce traditional systems (Lyngdoh, 2021). As Anil suggested, *kichkini* may function as a warning from the older generation to the younger, whose lifestyles are rapidly changing. Her story may endure precisely because traditional practices are increasingly threatened by modernity.

Change is also rapidly occurring within Kathmandu (Liechty, 2010). Anil noted that

kichkini are particularly popular stories in cities, where much "nighttime activity" takes place. Kathmandu has been greatly influenced by consumerist attitudes and foreign mass-media representations of "other ways of living," particularly in relation to sexual activity. Liechty argues that urban society may be shifting from "caste-structured" to "class-structured," a change that influences both gender relations and sexual practices.

Liechty also discusses several themes relevant to the *kichkini* story. One is the idea of fashion and beauty. The *kichkini*'s striking appearance—beauty, makeup, and clothing—is consistently emphasized. The colors they wear may represent sex (red) or death (white) (Bennett, 1983). All four interlocutors described *kichkini* wearing saris, a traditional garment. Makeup and bangles were also referenced. Traditionally, women were gifted saris and such accessories after menarche because these items represented sexual maturity and readiness for marriage (Bennett, 1983). However, fashions in Nepal are changing. "Doing fashion," or wearing Western-style clothing, is important for those who are "suitably modern" (Liechty, 2010). An interesting example is presented in a YouTube video, produced by a local Nepali rapper, which recites the *kichkini* tale but differs dramatically from the traditional legend in the way the ghost is represented.[7] In the video, the story of the *kichkini* is narrated while a woman dances seductively; however, instead of a sari, she is wearing a bralette. Her appearance is clearly influenced by Western images of fashion. Nevertheless, the essential concept of the dangerously alluring *kichkini* remains. Although belief in ghosts is often associated with tradition (Pigg, 1999), it is evident that these stories are surviving in new, modern forms.

Love and sexual activity in Kathmandu are also undergoing significant change. "Doing love" is increasingly regarded as central to modernity, again influenced by Westernization, encouraging people to reject the traditional concept of arranged marriages (Liechty, 2010). Extramarital sexual practices are reportedly on the rise, possibly influenced by media exposure and migration (Harman, Kaufman, Shrestha, 2014). These themes appear regularly in the *kichkini* story[8], in which notions of love and implied sexual activity are prominent.

Sexual activity has also been commodified around prostitution, which has been rapidly increasing over the last 30 years (Liechty, 2010). This aspect is of interest, as Anil referenced *kichkini* being found alongside prostitutes. Within cities, sexual activity may have undergone profound changes. Kathmandu is described as a "liminal" zone, where sexual activity can occur without being watched by close family. In cities, "bodies may lose their caste-based moral meanings" (ibid., 237). Thus caste hierarchies and traditional concepts of purity and pollution are threatened by these changing sexual practices, and this tension is reflected in the *kichkini* story, which serves as a warning to men.

Nepal's social change and development do not necessarily translate into improved positions for women. Women may remain passive within courtship or even experience coercion by men (Ahearn, 2001). "Although new structures in the village emerge, causing villagers to reconceptualize gender and agency, other ideologies endure, continuing to reinforce gender ideology and hierarchical relationships" (ibid., 69). Women still hold very little economic power, and many development-oriented ways of thinking remain male-dominated (ibid.).

Tamang (2000:130), referring to Nepali law, argues against a popular narrative that the legal rights women have gained have occurred in an "unproblematic linear progression" and that women have been rescued from tradition and liberated by new legalization. She shows how some changes have had negative consequences for women. The law has taken on a "Hindu template" of "high-caste" versions of "family" and thus inflicted certain gendered roles on communities that may have previously lived without them. The law's further involvement with women's rights and

family may simply have shifted society from "family-run patriarchy" to "state-run patriarchy" (ibid.).

In Kathmandu, due to increasing "freedom," more women are entering public spaces. This trend has led to a higher risk of harassment and violence toward women. As they publicly transition from "traditional" to "modern," women are more likely to face scrutiny than men. *Iijat*, or honor, for Nepali women remains susceptible to damage. As society changes and modernizes, the patriarchy merely appears to have been re-created (Liechty, 2010).

Kichkini may therefore symbolize vengeful women, striking back against both old and new forms of patriarchy. Ghost stories often provide an opportunity for discussion and critiques of underlying cultural norms, particularly issues of violence and injustice, in which the ghost often represents the victim (Torri, 2019). The *kichkini* story may challenge the patriarchal system at large, rather than targeting individual men, as my participants informed me that "any man" is potentially at risk. In one Nepali folklore blog, "societal pressure" is referenced alongside men's actions as a factor causing death in women.[9] It is also suggested that, while accounts of male ghosts in Nepal emphasize failures in funeral rites, accounts of female ghosts emphasize the manner of death. The *kichkini* may challenge both oppressive traditions, such as menstrual seclusion, and emerging practices, such as prostitution (Torri, 2019). Suicide, another important "bad death" in *kichkini* lore, is prevalent among young women in Nepal, with domestic violence given as the most likely cause (Karki, 2012).

In Shillong, India, the death of a pregnant woman killed by her husband coincided with an increase in stories about ghostly women accepting rides in taxis before suddenly vanishing. Shillong's social changes, together with an increase in violence against women, caused fear in the community, coinciding with an increase in such stories (Lyngdoh, 2021). As Lyngdoh notes, folklore has become the outlet to express ambivalence toward the changing position of women in urban settings.

Conclusion

Kichkini are important female figures in Nepali folklore. Ghost stories shift, merge, and change over time, and although ghost belief in Nepal is often associated with "tradition," these narratives persist, albeit in different forms. Such stories not only represent individual narratives; they also illuminate cultural or even transcultural ideas. Hitchhiking ghosts, vengeful supernatural women, and "back-footed beings," for example, are prevalent in folklore across the world. Scholars suggest that ghost stories perform multiple roles. Not only do they reflect cultural norms and customs and critique structural violence, but they also provide comment on social change. It can be argued that the *kichkini* narrative carries out these functions. It reveals traditional Hindu notions of death and gender, expresses concerns around women's sexuality, and highlights the dangers women face. As Nepal undergoes rapid transformation, affecting many aspects of life, including sex and gender, the *kichkini* story appears to be increasingly entering popular culture and reflecting the broader changes.

I conclude with mention of a YouTube video[10] released in 2020, which covers many of the themes discussed in this study. In several respects, the story resembles those told by my interlocutors; it addresses ghosts and death, emphasizes the importance of cremation and shamanic ritual, and portrays women as both alluring and profoundly threatening. As it tackles themes of assaults on women, it may also serve as a warning for men. However, it introduces a distinctly modern twist: the *kichkini* is not dressed in a traditional sari but in Western-style clothing, perhaps representing women in Kathmandu's new "middle class." Its circulation on YouTube demonstrates how ghost stories are changing with modernity and suggests that the *kichkini* is far from disappearing.

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Endnotes

1. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/fighting-the-war-on-women_1_b_5419285

2. https://www.fablednepal.com/?p=33

3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAr13EWNPAs https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAymZugoNSo https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJ7hQi1TcgQ

4. http://www.nepalspiritualtrekking.com/blog/tag/kichkanya/

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbEMqv1kDdc

6. https://www.facebook.com/nepalihorrorstories

7. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPCEAgHgZPw

8. https://www.facebook.com/nepalihorrorstories

9. https://honeyguideapps.com/blog/folklore-of-nepal

10. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rReN0Gdp5w&t=1040s

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