CHAPTER- 5

Culture and Mental Health: Perspectives on Culture Impacted Idiom of Women's Mental Distress

Pursuant to the moot argument of the study that mental health of individuals (in the present context that of the women) is shaped by the social context they are nested in, the present chapter studies select dissociative behaviours through the socio-cultural lens. Possession and trancing, both of which have been classified under the general rubric of 'dissociative disorders' by *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (DSM V), 2013 and *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problem,* 10th revision (ICD-10), 2014 are being deliberated upon in this chapter not so much as psychopathologies but as culturally conditioned metaphoric expressions of distress (Davar, 1999).

5.1 Understanding Dissociative Behaviour

In psychiatric parlance dissociative behaviour is understood as a ''disturbance or alteration in the normally integrated functions of identity, memory or consciousness'' (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 4th edition, 2000 cited in Somer, 2006, 213) and as having a probable post-traumatic etiology (Kluft, 1991; Spiegel and Cardena, 1991 cited in Somer, 2006). Dissociation or in other words disconnection with one's own consciousness is the central element in dissociative behaviours. Dissociation may also be understood as having a mind in which there can be at least two independent streams of consciousness flowing concurrently, allowing some thoughts, feelings, sensations, and behaviors to occur simultaneously or outside of one's awareness (Somer, 2006). Psychiatrists have identified traumatic events as the root cause of dissociation in individuals. The same may be viewed as a compartmentalization of consciousness that varies in the extent of compartmentalization and interaction and serves to keep stressful internal knowledge out of one's consciousness, so as to forestall conscious awareness of external stimuli (Spritzer et al., 2006).

Anthropologists and psychiatrists consider dissociation to comprise of a continuum of experience found cross-culturally with some types, though not all, occurring universally (Bernstein and Putnam, 1986; Borguingon, 1976; Goodman, 1988; Ray,

1996; Ross, 1996, 1997; Walker, 1972 cited in Lynn, 2005). Dissociation, in psychiatric parlance, is integrally linked with mental disorders such as acute stress disorder (ASD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as borderline personality disorder (Bremner and Marmar, 1998; Simeon and Nelson, 2003 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006). Dissociative psychopathology also features in certain mental disorders such as schizophrenia, affective disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and somatoform disorders (Spritzer et al., 2006).

Ross (1996 cited in Lynn, 2005) attributes psychiatric preoccupation with dissociation to the following four developments:

- ✓ Reports of childhood physical and sexual abuse brought to fore significantly by women's movement and the etiological correlation between such type of abuse and dissociative identity disorder (DID).
- ✓ Vietnam War that resulted in unprecedented sociological ramifications and called to attention post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among war veterans.
- ✓ Currency gained by dissociative identity disorder and multiple personality disorder (MPD) in popular culture
- ✓ Publication of DSM III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) which accorded formal recognition to multiple personality disorder (MPD) as a diagnosis and devoted a section to dissociative disorders. This initiative led to an increase in statistical record of the incidence and prevalence of dissociative disorders.

Dissociation, as postulated by some scholars, is a psychological mechanism adopted in order to cope with internal and external stress. Lynn (2005) refers to Walter Cannon (1929) and Hans Selye (1974) to explain the connection between stress and dissociation. As explicated by Lynn, the former's flight-or-flight model elucidates how dissociation can be conceived as a mental fight against stressful information and stressful external stimuli; therefore, the same is to be interpreted as adaptive behaviour. Drawing from the latter's general adaptation syndrome (which outlines the three-stage

immune response; the first stage in which the stressor is met with resistance, the second stage in which greater resistance is conjured up in the face of stressor and the final stage in which adaptive resistance is overpowered by exhaustion), Lynn explains how dissociation becomes adaptive upon the onset of stress and how in the face of protracted stress it can turn maladaptive culminating in psychological pathology. Lynn, in this context makes an important point that the mild forms of dissociation that are a played out in everyday life and in ceremonial forms (such as trance rituals) are specific to their contexts and of finite duration. The same, as is argued, serve to facilitate functioning and in some cases enhances well-being. Prolonged and unhindered dissociation, however, may turn to be debilitating. The theory suggesting dissociation as stress response imports the adaptive role of dissociation by suggesting that specific effector systems control stress responses through 'homeostats' or psychological regulators which act as compensatory mechanisms to maintain appropriate homeostasis for a body and its environment (Goldstein, 1995 cited in Lynn, 2005).

Towards the end of 19th century Pierre Janet (1889 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006) offered a systematic explanation of the concept of dissociation, which to him is a discontinuous phenomenon presenting itself in individuals with mental disorders, particularly hysteria (Putnam, 1989 cited in Spitzer 2006). Scholars of his time such as William James (1890 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006) and Morton Prince (1905, 1978 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006) and those that researched the subject thereafter, however, contested this view by positing dissociation as a dimensional process existing along a continuum from normal and relatively common dissociative experiences such as daydreaming to severe and clinically relevant forms such as the dissociative identity disorders. Though the concept of dissociative continuum held its own for long (Putnam, 1993; Ross, 1996 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006), the argument whether dissociation represents a dimensional or typological construct has resurfaced (Putnam, 1996 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006) and remains largely unresolved. In the face of this unresolved tension, Cardina's (1994 cited in Spitzer et al., 2006) postulation offers the much

needed clarity on the subject. He describes dissociation in the following three distinct ways:

- ✓ a lack of integration of mental modules or systems
- ✓ an altered state of consciousness
- ✓ a defense mechanism

The first and second categories are qualitatively different from each other and have been termed as compartmentalization and detachment, the third category being a function of the two other. These two types of dissociation have been adopted as a frame of reference by majority of the conceptualizations on the subject (Homes et al., 2005; Allen, 2001 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006).

- ✓ Compartmentalization is a condition characterized by a partial or complete failure to control mental processes and actions that in a normal state can be influenced by an act of volition, e.g. an inability to recall usually accessible information into conscious awareness. In this state the compartmentalized processes, information and functions continue to function normally (though not amenable to volitional control) and retain their influence on the emotion, cognition and behavior of the individual. Dissociative amnesia, conversion symptoms, somatoform dissociation are common manifestations of compartmentalization. (Nijenhuis, 1999 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006).

- ✓ Detachment on the other hand is defined by the subjective experience of an altered state of consciousness in which the individual experiences alienation of oneself or the external world. The altered state of mind is marked by an absence or numbing of emotional experiences. On a descriptive level, detachment becomes evident as derealization and/or depersonalization, e.g. out-of-body experiences. PTSD, peri-traumatic dissociation (i.e., dissociative experiences during a traumatic event) and emotional numbing are usual manifestations of this condition (Holmes et al., 2005 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006).

Albeit the clinical status accorded to dissociative behaviours, the same has been wrapped in criticism significantly on two counts. Firstly, owing to the fact that it "lacks a single, coherent referent…that all investigators in the field embrace" (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, 2000 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006, 82). The DSM and ICD have shown some variability in the criteria they have spelt out for diagnosis of dissociative disorders, with the academicians and clinicians having to grapple with a wide range of diagnostic criteria (Spritzer et al., 2006). Secondly, several studies have shown how the diagnostic criteria stipulated by ICD and DSM fail to encompass the wide range of symptoms associated with dissociation, which therefore has called for additional diagnostic categories within dissociative disorders (Kihlstrom, 1994 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006). For instance in India, 90% of outpatients with dissociative disorder were assigned to the subcategory of 'dissociative disorder not otherwise specified' (Saxena and Prasad, 1989 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006) as the symptoms reflected by them did not conform strictly to those defined by ICD and DSM. Clinicians in India, therefore, have suggested an alternative diagnosis of 'brief dissociative stupor', which in North America is popularly termed as 'dissociative trance disorder' (Alexander et al.,1997; Spiegel and Cardena, 1996 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006) and also encompasses the transculturally relevant syndrome of possession states (Gaw et al., 1998 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006). Clinicians and researchers are now alive to the semantic openness of the term dissociation and its arguably all-encompassing definitions (Cardena, 1994; Homes et al., 2005 cited in Spritzer et al., 2006). Attempts at refining and updating the emerging concepts have led to subdivision of dissociation into qualitatively different forms (Spritzer et al., 2006).

The present chapter works within the framework of understanding that dissociative behaviours cannot be conceptualized in terms of narrowly defined diagnostic criteria, rather dissociation encompasses a spectrum of symptoms ranging from conditions that may be understood as adaptive behavioural mechanism to severe psychopathologies that warrant clinical intervention. At this juncture it may be pertinent to explore the

epidemiological and anthropological model of dissociation, the latter being the frame of reference adopted for analysis in the context of the present study.

5.2 Explanatory Models of Dissociation

5.2.1 Epidemiological Model of Dissociation

Dissociation in medical patois indicates at the disruption in the integrated function of consciousness, memory, identity or perception of environment. Further, the same has been described as a psychological pattern of unconscious behaviour triggered at a young age by traumatic life experiences (Lynn, 2005). Eve Bernstein and Frank Putnam (1986, 727 cited in Lynn, 2005) defined dissociation as "a lack of normal integration of thoughts, feelings and experiences into the stream of consciousness and memory". Common dissociative disorders include dissociative amnesia, dissociative fugue, dissociative identity disorders, depersonalization disorder and dissociative disorder not otherwise specified (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, 2000 cited in Lynn, 2005). Much ubiquity shrouds the conceptualization of dissociation with psychiatrists holding up the same as psychopathology at one level while on the other indicating at the fact that normal dissociative behavior is not inherently pathological (Waller et al., 1996 cited in Lynn, 2005). Anthropologist Morton Klass (2003 cited in Lynn, 2005) in his attempt to explain the contradiction in the claims made by psychiatrists points out that the role of medical experts is to define and treat illness and not wellness. Nevertheless, an important lacuna in the epidemiological conceptualization of dissociation stems from the fact that it focuses little on everyday dissociative behavior which averts clinical intervention.

5.2.2 Anthropological Model of Dissociation

From the perspective of this model, dissociation is a form of adaptive behavior that escalates to psychopathology only under extreme and often culturally-relative circumstances (Bourguignon, 1976; Goodman, 1988; Walker, 1972 cited in Lynn, 2005). The anthropologist's preoccupation is, generally, with the exotic forms of

dissociation; therefore they are as much engaged with one extreme form of dissociation just as psychiatrists whose engrossment is largely with the pathological forms of the same. Noteworthy at this juncture is the point made by Erika Borguingon (1976 cited in Lynn, 2005) that there exists a hair breadth difference between the personally adaptive from the socially maladaptive dissociation. The fine line differentiating the adaptive from the pathological is crossed over when an individual's dissociation is so severe that it fails to conform to the parameters condoned by specific contexts. Lynn cites Borguingnon (1976) to posit that a community which ceremonially practices forms of dissociation, for instance spirit possession, may provide a supportive complementary environment for someone prone to severe dissociation generated by traumatic events of live. The opposite may be true in European and U.S. communities, where such people find themselves marked as outsiders or mentally disordered. However, it ought to be noted that even in communities that practice dissociation ceremonially, those that cannot contain their dissociation to ceremonial contexts are similarly marked (2005). There are, therefore, both culturally normal and abnormal dissociative behaviours (Walker, 1972 cited in Lynn, 2005). Castillo (1995) integrates the biological and cultural perspectives to suggest that institutionalized form of dissociation such as trance create alternative neural pathways that potentiate for a long term owing to repeated use. Therefore, he posits that dissociation is less of an altered state of consciousness and more of an alternate state of consciousness that does not necessarily occasion a disruption in the mainstream of consciousness.

Stanley Krippner's definition of dissociation, which Lynn claims to be most comprehensive, culturally as well as anthropologically, may be recalled where it is suggested that

> 'Dissociative' is an English-language adjective that attempts to describe reported experiences and observed behaviours that seem to exist apart from, or appear to have been disconnected from, the mainstream, or flow of one's conscious awareness, behavioural repertoire, and/or self-identity.

'Dissociation' is a noun used to describe a person's involvement in these reported dissociative experiences or observed dissociative behaviours. (1997, 8 cited in Lynn, 2005)

Lynn draws from Krippler's definition and adds his own formulations, to provide a broad and comprehensive understanding of dissociative behaviour,

> …the word dissociative attempts to describe reported experiences and observed behaviours that seem to have been partitioned from conscious awareness, behavioural repertoire, and/or self-identity; the word dissociation is an etic used to describe a person's involvement in these dissociative experiences or observed dissociative behaviours, which encompass a variety of emics. (2005, 20)

The important point harped on by Lynn is with regard to the emic, or the cultural elements which shape dissociative experience and its inherent meaning. Further, Lynn suggests that dissociation is an aspect of everyday living where the same serves to block negative stream of thought or information and contributes towards individual's effort to adapt to one's personal and social circumstances. Further, he suggests that inability to dissociate is just as maladaptive as excessive severe dissociation. Located between these two extreme poles is a transitional range beginning with mild dissociative experiences and culminating in severe dissociative disorders. While mild experiences are those of focused attention (such as day dreaming), the severe forms involve amnesia.

Seligman and Kirmayer (2008) draw from Hollan (2000) to point out that the anthropological model views dissociation as a way of articulating certain self-states that are congruent with cultural ideas related to personhood, rather than projecting a culturally discordant persona. Unlike the dominant Northern European-American culture, other cultures do not conceptualize the human person as unitary, coherent and autonomous, therefore discontinuities in the self, evident in dissociative states is neither

considered contravenous nor pathological (Ewing 1990; Littlewood 1996; Shweder and Bourne 1984 cited in Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008).

Anthropological interest in dissociation largely hinges on religious or spiritual practices and healing rituals. Nested within the framework of religion, dissociation offers discursive and rhetorical space for expression of the self and assertion of one's identity, for redefining one's social position and articulation of one's social roles in a manner that is not plausible in one's everyday life (Lambek, 1981; Boddy, 1993 cited in Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008). Dissociation brings about an unconscious suspension of the normal self and the social restrictions that impinge upon it, thereby paving the path for expression of a novel self, of aspirations, feelings and reactions that may be normally contraband by attributing the same to some agency other than the self. The anthropological model articulates its tenets in contraposition to that of the epidemiological model by emphasizing on the complex web of cultural ideas in which dissociation takes place and which includes cultural construction of self and personhood, local cosmology and its implications for the social world; further, how the personal, social and moral order is envisioned, endorsed or contested within dissociative experience is emphasized in this model. While the epidemiological account of dissociation focuses on the biological and psychological causal factors, the anthropological account largely concerns itself with social construction (Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008).

The anthropological approach holds up the socio-cultural context of dissociation, thereby expanding the vista of exploration in holistic understanding of the subject; nevertheless, this model is saddled with some limitations as pointed out by Seligman and Kirmayer. Firstly, this model ignores the trauma-dissociation connect which is the main argument around which the epidemiological model is built; therefore, there is a paucity of data clarifying whether participants in religious rites or other popular practices involving dissociation have experienced trauma or have a psychological predisposition towards experiencing dissociation (Castillo, 1994 cited in Seligman and

Kirmayer, 2008). Further, the anthropological approach fails to adequately grasp the psychological and emotional dimensions of dissociation except for that which is obvious in its social-communicative functions. To explicate it better one may recall the anthropological postulation that dissociation is an idiom of distress for the oppressed and the marginalized, however, this approach, fails to address the psychological and emotional consequence of marginalization to throw light on how specific affective and cognitive experiences and processes might contribute to dissociation. Seligman and Kirmayer, emphasize that the anthropological model fails to conjugate the socio-cultural dynamics that shape dissociative behavior with psychophysiological mechanisms that underlie the same, which would have enabled a comprehensive understanding of how bodily, cognitive and emotional processes interact with discursive practices to generate individually and culturally variegated experiences of dissociation. The salience of an integrated approach in the study of dissociation is well appreciated, however, the scope of the present study warrants exploration through the anthropological lens. Therefore, it the anthropological paradigm that is largely exploited in analyzing dissociative behavior as a culturally condoned expression of distress.

5.3 Culture and Dissociation

Many scholars have questioned whether dissociative disorders, particularly dissociative identity disorders are valid clinical diagnoses (Piper and Merkey, 2004; Spanos, 1994 cited in Somer, 2006). Colonial psychiatry promoted racially prejudiced ideas of biologic evolution and psychologic development to harp on the civilizational inferiority of non-western societies (Devereux, 1956 cited in Somer, 2006), with the consequence being that non-western illnesses were relegated as primitive varieties of taxonomic classes (Littlewood, 1967 cited in Somer, 2006). However following a spate of dissent on monolithic western conceptualization of pathology, comparative or cultural psychiatry insisted on inclusion of culture specifics in diagnosis and treatment of dissociative disorders. Citing Lewis- Fernandez (1992), Somer (2006) points out that most non –Western cultures exhibit culturally conditioned dissociative behaviours,

which reflect disruption of consciousness, memory, identity, and behavior which, however, does not necessarily indicate psychopathology. Rather, the same could be perceived as manifestations of normative idioms of disclaiming or detaching from certain experiences. In contradiction to psychiatry, which functions on the assumption that mental disorders are consistent across social and cultural spaces, anthropology, the discipline that is closely concerned with culture-bound dissociative behaviours, studies ethnic variance and cultural undercurrent in the expression of behavioral and experiential phenomena (Klienman, 1987 cited in Somer, 2006).

In his attempt to explicate dissociative experiences from cultural perspective, Somer offers a peek into the body and soul dualism, a notion harboured by non-western cultures.

> …ideas about the self, the soul, and the nature of reality influence the way society views the etiology of dissociative experiences, the way it shapes tolerance of these occurrences, and the way it determines attitudes to these phenomena and the need to treat or heal them… Behavioral and medical sciences consider the human being an integrated bio-psychosocial system, with all its experiences resulting from interaction of various subsystems within this integrated unit. The concept or theory of the soul is incompatible with this view. An alternative model assumes that humans consist of a shell that is occupied by an ethereal substance called a soul (Goodman, 1988; Golub, 1995). Among many non-Western cultures, the earthly casing, which we call self, yields to an alien entity whose character is culturally determined, resulting in an indigenous dissociative presentation (Borguingon, 1970; Lewis-Fernandez,). (Somer, 2006, 214)

The medical perspective views dissociation as a disorder, a conviction that has led scholars to view shamans as psychotic and shamanism as acute case of schizophrenia. Therefore, psychiatric classification of native manifestations of dissociative behavior as

psychopathology is inherently erroneous. Bartholomew (1990 cited in Davar, 1999) forwards the view that culture is analogous with text and any that action is rationalized within the text. Drawing from Bartholomew's postulation, Davar (1999) suggests that "Understanding culture specific behaviours, then, is a type of semiotic analysis, where meaning is explicated by reference to the internal grammar and semantics of the text itself. Rationality, then, is not describable in universal terms, but rather, to be defined internally with respect to each and every cultural discourse through a hermeneutic" (125). Therefore, conceptualization of dissociative behavior like trance and possession should be rooted in the internal logic of a specific culture as western conceptualization of the same based on mind body dichotomy would be flawed (Sharp, 1990 cited in Davar, 1999). To uphold the salience of cross cultural perspective in exploring dissociative phenomena like trancing and possession, Davar (1999) refers to scholars such as Kleinman (1977) and Littlewood and Lipsedge (1989) who underscored the idea that culture is a way of life where normal and abnormal behavior pattern remain inextricably woven, therefore, psychiatry has to assume a culture sensitive stance to gauge the complex reality of dissociative behaviours.

The present chapter assumes a socio-anthropological stand in studying dissociative behaviours. The study duly acknowledges the relevance of psycho-medical perspective of dissociation; however, it is the culturally conditioned forms of dissociation that are pertinent to the study. The moot point here is that some forms of dissociative behavior are culturally shaped expressions of distress. Select dissociative behaviours (i.e. possession and trancing) are studied here as idioms of distress. Idioms of distress, as Nichter (2010) articulates are socio-cultural mechanisms of experiencing and expressing distress in local worlds. To Nichter, they are suggestive of past traumatic memories as well as present stressors such as anger, powerlessness, social marginalization, insecurity and possible future sources of anxiety, loss and anguish. It may be pertinent to recall de Jong and Reis (2010 cited in Nichter, 2010) who emphasized that idioms of distress ought to be analyzed in their relevant socio-political contexts. Nichter also invites attention to the symbolic import of the idioms of distress

which, more often than not, are unstated reflections of social suffering that cannot be blatantly expressed without causing threat to the one who suffers from structural violence as well as evoking wrath of those in position of power. Idioms of distress encompass experiential states ranging from the mildly stressful to the severely pathological. Idioms of distress may at one level manifest as culturally and interpersonally effective ways of expressing and adapting to distressful circumstances while at the other may be indicative of psychopathological states that impair and individual's social functioning and overall wellbeing.

Cultural concept of distress is the latest addition in DSM- 5 which refers to the manner in which cultural groups experience, comprehend, and express suffering, behavioral problems, or distressful thoughts and emotions (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, 2013 cited in Kohrt et al., 2014). The inclusion of this category is a significant acknowledgement of cultural influence on psychological distress, which a strictly biomedical psychiatric diagnosis fails to account for. Further combination of research on medical anthropology which deals with social construction of psychiatric disorders (Young, 2013 cited in Kohrt et al., 2014) with innovations in gene-environment and social neuroscience research, which explicates how culture and biology are not neatly divisible categories (Cacioppo et al., 2000; Chiao and Ambady, 2007; Choudhury and Kirmayer, 2009; Caspi and Moffitt, 2006; Kirmayer, 2006 cited in Kohrt et al., 2014), demonstrates that all forms of psychological distress is shaped by culture. In sync with this claim, DSM states that all forms of distress are locally shaped including the disorders enlisted in DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, 2013 cited in Kohrt et al., 2014). The term cultural concept of distress conjugates two elements into an integrated whole; one that dissociative behaviours are experience and expression of distress and another that these states of expression are culturally determined. Cultural concept of distress operate on the aetiological logic inherent in a given cultural context, the attribution systems endorsed by the same and the vulnerability expectations apposite in the context; therefore, a comparison with psychiatric diagnosis would undermine the dynamics of the local

context relevant in comprehending the same (Hahn, 1995; Simons and Hughes, 1985; de Jong, Reis, and Kiyang-yang, 2010 cited in Kohrt et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is a growing body of epidemiological literature that compares the cultural idioms of distress with psychiatric disorders with the intent to validating the latter against the former and identifying forms of distress and dissociation not encompassed by psychiatric taxonomy (Kohrt et al., 2014).

5.4 Women, Distress and Dissociation

The present study hinges itself on the exploration of women's mental health from the sociological perspective. It is therefore, imperative to rationalize dissociative behaviours as idioms of distress that are largely manifested by women. As expounded in the earlier chapters, distress abounds in the lives of women owing to structural factors. However, the normative standards that regulate the lives of women hinder an uninhibited expression of distress. Therefore dissociative behaviours such as possession and trancing, may be viewed as mechanisms that allow for a ventilation of personal and social distress. The two forms of dissociative behavior selected for the study i.e. trancing and possession are particularly relevant for women who, as Davar (1999) articulates, can transact the symbolic mechanisms of expression with more ease than overt, unrestrained expression of distress. Subaltern thinkers, such as Hardiman (1995 cited in Davar, 1999) view dissociative behaviours as protests of the marginalized groups, the groups without voices. Anthropologists concern themselves with dissociative behaviours such as possession and trancing because of the "seeming subliminality of the individual consciousness within the macro-level sociopolitical consciousness. In these behaviours, it is as if the individual is matrixed in and mirrors the prevailing socio-cultural and economic ambiguities, dilemmas and negotiations. These anthropological analyses are useful and relevant to any discussion on possession and trancing" (Davar, 1999, 122). This postulation is salient in studying dissociative behaviour among women as the same logicizes the occurrence of trance and possession as experiences and expressions of personal and social distress.

Feminists who have studied Indian cosmologies and the spiritual import of the same, particularly relevant for Indian women, have articulated on the creative, empowering possibilities of religion (Chawla, 1994; Johnson, 1989). Religion is a repository of symbols and metaphors; symbols and metaphors which bind people at the level of meaning rather than at the cold and sterile realm of truth offered by scientific knowledge. Religious metaphors therefore offer women with a platform for empowering themselves and also have a cathartic effect on the women, who find themselves mired in problematic social circumstances. Therefore, these metaphors are amply exploited by women in dissociative behaviours, such as possession and trancing, in order to articulate an effective expression of inert distress. As an aside, it must also be noted that the greater propensity of women towards possession and trancing has been derisively attributed to their being hyper-imaginative and unrealistic, nevertheless, the fact remains that low negotiability of women in actual social situations propels them towards adopting metaphorical mechanisms to negotiate their low social credibility (Davar, 1999).

Resonating the idea that possession and trancing are culturally conditioned idioms of distress, Davar comments that,

> …they give the distressed women some breathing space and temporary relief. They are proverbial 'last straw' that the women grasp, to save themselves from mentally distressing and even life threatening situations….these indigenous distress behaviours are not to be seen as maneuvers of empowerment, but rather only as brave and public admission of powerlessness…they do not result in directly negotiating the social situation of powerlessness. They may give 'practical' solutions which are however not directly negotiated. (1999, 133)

In order to provide a holistic assessment of idioms of distress such as possession and trancing, caste and class dynamics need to be factored in along with gender. It has been observed that there is a higher incidence of possession and trancing among women

of the supposedly lower caste and class, while women of upper caste and class manifest distress differently e.g. *'suchi bai'-* syndrome among upper class Bengali women reflecting an obsessive compulsion with cleanliness and purity (Davar, 1999). Women of the low caste and class have a dual burden to bear, gender discrimination interacts with kinetics of caste and class discrimination to create the most oppressive circumstance for the same. Subjective distress is higher among poor, illiterate and low caste women. Further, these women have little opportunity for ventilating distress; therefore, their muffled and muted voice finds a creative expression through the phenomena of possession and trancing. As Davar succinctly expresses, "dissociation symptoms in culture specific expressions of distress are to be explained as the normal and the understandable responses of women in powerless situations to oppressive and inhuman social circumstances and life experiences" (134).

5.5 Perspectives on Possession and Trancing

ICD 10 classifies Trance and Possession Disorders as mental disorders which are characterized by temporary loss of one's sense of personal identity as well as complete consciousness of the surroundings. Commonly in such a state the concerned individual appears to be taken over by another personality markedly distinct from one's own (often claimed to be an ethereal spirit). ICD specifies that only trance disorders that are evoked without one's own volition and that which intrudes into ordinary activities by occurring outside (or being a prolongation of) religious or other culturally accepted situations should be included in this category. Trance disorders that occur in course of schizophrenia or acute psychoses with hallucinations or delusions, or multiple personality disorder is to be precluded. Further that, trance disorders that may be considered as closely associated with any physical disorder (such as temporal lobe epilepsy or head injury) or with psychoactive substance intoxication should not be brought within the ambit of consideration of the defined category (International Classification of Diseases, 10th revision, 2015 cited in Chaudhary et al., 2013).

DSM-V has incorporated pathological possession component in Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), whereas pathological trance component has been integrated into the category of Other Specified Dissociative Disorder – Dissociative Trance (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th edition, 2013 cited in Chaudhary et al., 2013).

Diagnostic criteria of DID include the following:

✓ Disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an expression of possession. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and may be observed by others or reported by the individual.

✓ Recurrent gaps in the recollection of everyday events, important personal information, and/or traumatic events which are inconsistent with ordinary forgetting.

✓ The symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, professional and other important areas of functioning.

✓ The disturbance is not a normal part of a broadly accepted cultural or religious practice

✓ The symptoms are not attributable to physiological effects of a substance (e.g. blackouts or chaotic behavior during alcohol intoxication) or other medical condition (e.g. complex partial seizures) (Chaudhury, 2013).

Dissociative Trance as conceptualized by DSM-V is distinguished by a reduced or complete loss of awareness of immediate surroundings that manifests as profound

unresponsiveness or insensitivity to environment stimuli. The unresponsiveness may be accompanied by minor stereotyped behaviours of which the individual is not conscious of and/or that she/he cannot control, as well as transient paralysis or loss of consciousness. Dissociative Trance, as posited by DSM is not a normal part of a broadly accepted collective cultural or religious practice (ibid).

The latest formulation of both the ICD and DSM, as reflected above, have shown a marked cognition of culturally conditioned dissociative behavior as non-pathological; therefore, culturally induced dissociation has been consciously excluded from the bailiwick that encompasses forms of pathological dissociative disorders. The present chapter intends to explore possession and trancing as culture impacted idioms of distress among women, rather than as psychopathologies. In keeping with the main flow of the study, the endeavor here is to analyse dissociation as a mental state that in some forms (e.g. possession and trancing) is conditioned by structural factors and therefore, may not necessarily have a neuro-biological genesis. The sections following hereafter undertake a socio-anthropological exploration of possession and trancing as metaphorical expression of distress, deep-seated in women owing to structural inimicalities that impede their lives. Once again, narrative enquiry has been employed to delve into the depths of the subject. Cases on possession and trancing have been collected from Tezpur sub-division. In order that possession and trancing may be studied across variegated cultural contexts, the cases have been drawn from different ethnic backgrounds

5.6 Possession- An Idiom of Distressed Women

Possession is widely regarded as dissociative in the literature on transcultural psychiatry (Bourguignon, 1976; Cardeña, van Duijl, Weiner, and Terhune, 2009; Huskinson, 2010; Krippner, 1997; Lewis-Fernandez, 1994; Suryani and Jensen, 1993; Swartz, 2011 cited in Ross et al., 2013). Possession is not an oriental phenomenon alone as some pejorative speculations have projected; rather occurrence of the same has been chronicled throughout history and is present in most cultures. Bourguignon (1970, 1973

cited in Somer, 2006) having studied 488 societies identified various forms of institutionalized alternative states of consciousness in 90%, possession beliefs in 74%, and possession trance in 52% of the societies. Substantial research on mental health of individual who experience possession states is lacking (Moreira-Almeida and Cardena, 2011 cited in Delmonte et al., 2016) owing to which the non-pathological dissociation has oft been classified as mental disorder. Clinical evaluation of possession, down the ages, has been rather ambivalent. In early 20th century, religious possession was treated either as pathological or as a phenomenon of the lower classes (Almeida, Oda, and Dalgalarrondo, 2007; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2005 cited in Delmonte et al., 2016). More recent epidemiological studies of possession have however averted the classification of the same as psychopathology; rather the same has been conceptualized as an adaptive mechanism, an expression of inner conflicts through cultural imagery. Possession is defined in Leacock and Leacock's (1972) canonical ethnography of Batuque, an Afro-Brazilian spiritist tradition as the presence of a supernatural being in the body of a human (cited in Budden, 2003). Budden identifies the characteristic features of possession as:

- ✓ A spontaneous interaction with or incorporation of a benevolent or malevolent ethereal entity
- ✓ A state that may occur without a trance state
- ✓ A dissociative experience of incorporating another identity (believed to be a spirit) which is coetaneous with cognitive and psychophysiological alterations in the conscious state (2003).

Spirit possession is one of the several variants of dissociative behavior. The same may be viewed as an attempt by marginalized women to change existing power relations in their favour and does result in temporary relief from feelings of oppression and modest elevation in social status (Lewis 1971, 1989 cited in Schaffler et al., 2016). Several studies have forwarded the view that possession is common among the women, particularly those with little education, high suggestibility and those hailing from rural areas. Major events that precede possession include interpersonal conflicts, subjectively

meaningful circumstances, illness, bereavement of close ones etc. (Chaudhary, 2013). Adopting a socio-anthropological perspective, possession is explored in this section, as ostended in behavior and experience, as an expression of distress of the otherwise voiceless, in the case of the present study that of the women.

Social structure across cultures and particularly in conservative societies such as India is unfavourable for women. The lives of women, their status, agency, voice etc. are largely controlled by norms operating within a given structural frame. It is a fact well known that social structure of traditional societies such as that of India functions as repressive mechanisms that thwart women's aspirations and suppress their voice (Castillo, 1994). These women, therefore adapt to their circumstances through phenomena such as possession; states that enable them to ventilate their pent up frustrations (Harper, 1963 cited in Castillo,1994) as also enables them to gain social attention that otherwise evades their existence. I.M Lewis (1989 cited in Castillo, 1994) opines that through possession women capitalize their distress and secure their material and non- material interests. Though an overstatement of sorts, it nevertheless draws attention to the space that distressed women attempt to negotiate through the phenomenon of possession (Castillo, 1994).

The Indian cultural context is replete with imagery related to polytheism, reincarnation and spirits (Verma et al., 1981cited in Castillo, 1994) which are amply exploited in possession states. Castillo informs that,

> …the idea that spirits can come in and out of a person is quite consistent with the Hindu view of human nature which is viewed as porous, transactional or fluid (Daniel, 1984; Zimmerman, 1980 cited in Castillo, 1994). Related to this, Marriot (1976 cited in Castillo, 1994) describes the Hindu person as "dividual", that is, susceptible to all sorts of penetrations by outside influences in a process of continuous exchanges with the environment and other beings. (Castillo, 1994, 156)

Islam also discusses about various classes of beings that populate the universe, for instance *jinn* (spirits), *shaytaan* (satanic beings), *marrid* (demons), *bhut* (evil spirits) and *farista* (angels) and projects the belief that these ethereal forms may possess human beings (Dein and Illaiee, 2013). Other Indian religions similarly reflect a belief in the spiritual world and endorse the possibility of spirit possession, thus possession is a culturally accepted phenomenon in the Indian context.

The cases discussed hereunder reflect how repressed personhood draws from the cultural receptacle of ideas and imagery to articulate protest and vent frustration through the phenomenon of spirit possession.

Case Illustration 9

Probha is a woman in her early 40's who was interviewed at her home where the researcher had met her. She was identified with the help of local villagers whom the researcher had known for long. Married for the last 25 years or so to a carpenter, Probha has four daughters from her marriage. Three of her daughters are attending the village school while the eldest one has dropped out of school and remains at home helping Probha with domestic chores.

Probha had an early marriage and lived under the domineering influence of her mother-in-law till the latter expired four years back. Probha's mother-in-law was a widowed woman with Probha's husband as her only child and source of all happiness. Probha's mother-in-law was, as Probha narrated to the researcher, an authoritative woman who had the entire house and her son under her control leaving no breathing space for the former. The relation Probha shared with her husband was also strained owing to her mother-in-law. Her husband's interaction with her was regulated by the mother-in-law, as a result of which the couple could not bond well. Probha felt neglected and slighted by her husband. Further, Probha could not give birth to a son

owing to which she had to bear the brunt of her mother in law's displeasure. Overall, her life was miserable under her mother in law.

After the death of her mother-in-law, as members of the house recall, Probha would be possessed by the spirit of the same. The first episode of possession occurred the day before her mother-in-law's *Shradh* (ceremonial closure of the mourning period following death of a person) and subsequently suffered more of such attacks which took place intermittently for a period of one year following her mother-in-law's death. Probha recalls nothing of these episodes, except of the onset of each episode which was characterized by sudden hot flashes, heaviness of the head, and palpitation of heart, followed by black-outs. She however does remember the fatigue and weakness of limbs she experienced on regaining her consciousness. Exorcism rituals performed by a local *ojha* (faith healer) eventually freed her from the spirit, as per the account provided to the researcher.

In the course of the interview Probha's daughter informed the researcher that when her mother would be possessed she would turn aggressive; shout, yell, and hurl expletives at all present near her. The bulk of the tirade would, however, be directed at Probha's husband, who would be rebuked for being neglectful and not performing his duties well. It was apparent from the account provided to the researcher that the invective of Probha's possessed self was largely directed at her husband. In the words of Probha's daughter,

"These episodes occurred soon after Thakurma's (grandmother) demise. The first time it took place, we were all shaken beyond words. Though we were aware that spirit of the dead comes back to haunt people… there have been many such incidents in our village, but we never thought it would happen in our house. Whenever the spirit would take over Maa (mother), she would turn to a different person altogether. It would be difficult to pin her down on the ground… five to seven people would have to put their efforts to restrain her. She, however, did not cause harm to anyone. She would only get very angry… very aggressive and rebuke Baba (father). The soul focus of her attention

was Baba… who she would remonstrate with. She would command Baba to be dutiful, to obey her. It seemed like she was very angry with him for being neglectful of his duties towards her. Baba perfomed several penances to assuage the spirit…finally after a year long struggle, the spirit left for good".

Probha's daughter narrated that after being troubled for a year, her mother had returned to her normal self and since then has resumed her domestic responsibilities. In conformity with the argument posited that possession is an expression of distress, the present case may be interpreted as the emotional outburst of a woman who had suffered domination under her mother-in-law for a considerable period of her life. Further her chagrin at the neglect she suffered from her husband, who failed to emote his attachment towards her for fear of his mother's displeasure, can be said to have found expression in her possessed state. Her repressed emotions vented forth after the demise of her mother-in-law, her oppressor. It may be interesting to note how Probha assumed the role of her oppressor in venting her frustrations especially at her husband. Probably the subconscious realization that her husband was firmly committed to his mother and valued the latter much above his wife led Probha to assume the persona of her mother-in-law in remonstrating with him. As the presence of the oppressor was effaced from her life, Probha's imagined graduation to the position of the power so long held by her mother-in-law perhaps played out in her possessed state. The researcher ventures the explanation that at one level Probha's possession by the spirit of her mother-in-law is reflective of her own imagined escalation to the position of power monopolized by her mother-in-law in her life time; and at another level Probha's cognition that her husband was forever eager to oblige his mother led her to visualize herself as his mother, the person who could exercise complete control over him. Probably at a subconscious level, Probha felt that only in the guise of his mother could she exercise control and enjoy respect from her husband, something she failed to achieve as his wife.

It may be pertinent here to draw the reference of Lewis (1966) who explains possession among women as "compensation for their [women's] exclusion and lack of

authority in other spheres" (310 cited in Wilson, 1967.) Lewis further suggests that through possession women "exert mystical pressures upon their superiors [i.e., men] in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when few other sanctions are available to them" (3I8 cited in Wilson, 1967). Wilson cites Lewis (1966) who explains possession as a common phenomenon among women in traditional male dominated societies, particularly among married women which invites attention to the structural contexts of married women. In situations where the identity and status of women are rendered ambiguous, possession by spirit may become mechanisms whereby identity is defined and status asserted. In Probha's case, the frustration that germinated within her owing to her long suppression at the hands of her mother-in-law coupled with the lack of warmth in her relationship with her husband found a vocal expression through her possession. Further, it gave her the opportunity to assert her authority and status, although by incorporating the persona of her mother-in-law, and command respect from her husband. This argument is a sociological conceptualisation better suited to elucidating possession than common and generalized notions of deprivation and social peripherality, which simply locate possession in social circumstances rather than explaining the process it entails and the end it envisions (Wilson, 1967).

Case Illustration 10

Firoza Khatun is a twenty four years old married woman with three children, two daughters and a son. As is a common practice in rural India, particularly among the economically impoverished, Firoza was married off to her husband at the age of 12. Her husband, 10 years older to her was than twenty two years old. As narrated to the researcher, Firoza's episodes of possession began three days after her marriage. Firoza and her family members claim that she was possessed by *jinn.* As recounted to the researcher, Firoza experienced possession for the first time in her life at her marital home. She recalls having seen shadowy entities in her dream, a few days prior to her marriage, who had delivered injunctions to her about conduct of living a pure and religious life. Her bouts of possession were sporadic, brought about by sudden feeling of heaviness in the head and shoulders followed by complete loss of memory.

" I have a distinct recollection of what I experienced. A few days before I was to get married, I would be visited by shadowy figures in my dream. The figures were that of men…I recall getting very scared by those dreams. After marriage, a jinn would often take possession of my body. I don't remember of what happened then…or of what I did. However, I still remember how I would feel just before possession. All of a sudden, a gush of warmth would spread across my body and I would be overcome with a feeling of heaviness …like some great weight was thrust on me. I clearly recollect the sinking feeling that would overwhelm me followed by abysmal darkness all around".

Her mother-in-law recalls how Firoza would enter into a frenzied state, a state in which family members found it difficult to physically restrain her. In the possessed state she would recite *'Zikir'* (invocation and remembrance of *Allah*) incessantly and chastise those near her for not adhering to the path delineated by the *Quran.* She would remain in the possessed state for days together during which she would be kept in seclusion, particularly away from her husband. She was finally released by the *jinn* after a protracted length of time following the intervention of a local *Imam* (prayer leader of a mosque).

However after the narrated episode of possession, Firoza has turned into a scrupulous follower of religious injunctions. She diligently performs *namaz* and is particular about cleanliness and purity of body. She told the researcher that, should she ever fail to neglect her religious duties or in any way violate the normative principles of purity, the *jinn* would appear in her dream even now and reprimand her for her failings. The word *jinn* derives from the Arabic root *Jann* which connotes the idea of protecting shielding, concealing or veiling. Jinn is believed to be one of creations of *Allah*. They are distinguished from human beings in terms of the elements they are made of. According to the *Quran,* the *jinn* are made of smokeless and scorching fire and have the physical property of weight. Much like humans they are assumed to possess moral and mortal attributes and can have benevolent or malevolent propensities. It is a commonly held notion that *jinn* attack individuals who are weak of will, lack self-confidence,

struggle for self-identity and acceptance by others, or are greedy for more and more pleasures of this earthly existence and desire power and control. Individuals can protect themselves from *jinn* by adhering to obligations to Islam and through prayers (Al-Ashqar, 2003; Al-Jibaly, 1998 cited in Dein and Illaiee, 2013). The concept of possession by *jinn* is quite common among the Muslims; in the present case, it may be averred, Firoza's subconscious expressed the conflict and tension it experienced owing to her marriage at an early age through the metaphor of *jinn*.

The case illustrated above bear's semblance with the oft cited case of Daya (Freed and Freed, 1964), a young girl who claimed to be possessed by the ghost of her childhood friends soon after her marriage. Freed and Freed had interpreted Daya's possession as hysteria that stemmed from sexual apprehension on one hand and the need for attention and love from her in-laws on the other. Referring to (Abse, 1959), Freed and Freed point at the gains that one may reap from episodes of possession, ranging from the release of tension resulting from intrapsychic conflict to attracting attention, gaining sympathy and manipulating other people and one's own life situation. The present case is analysed within the frame of explanation offered by Freed and Freed. However the case is not treated as one of hysteria rather as an articulation of distress experienced by a young girl in the face of marriage at an early age. It is posited here that in all likelihood marriage at a tender age of 12 to a man much older than her own self had caused Firoza much distress. Having had to leave her home and parents and to settle with people who were no more than strangers to her had probably compounded her distress. It may also be suggested that as a young girl she might have dreaded physical intimacy with her husband which, however, was a marital obligation she was expected to fulfill. These sundry factors may have contributed to the burgeoning distress within Firoza which was then vented through the episodes of possession. It may further be posited that her possession state had secured a few gains for. One, she was able to temporarily avoid physical intimacy with her husband (as in the state of possession she had to be kept in isolation); two, she gained the attention and sympathy of her in-laws. Thus, Firoza was able to negotiate her space in metaphoric

terms as realistic opportunities to voice dissent and create space is virtually absent, particularly for uneducated, deprived rural women such as Firoza, Freed and Freed opine that stressful situations generally precipitate possession and that the same serves as a mechanism to control the external environment one is situated in. This argument befits the present context and offers a viable explanation for Firoza's possession.

Case Illustration 11

Menuka is a Nepali Brahmin woman in her 50s whose son, an acquaintance of the researcher, introduced the former to the researcher. She has three sons, all of whom are employed in contractual services. Menuka, a scrupulous follower of Brahmanical values, insists on vegetarian diet for her sons and endorses caste hierarchy. Menuka spends a good part of the day performing *puja* at her household shrine.

Menuka has been experiencing recurrent episodes of possession for many years now. She, as claimed by her and her family members, is possessed by *'Devi'* (Goddess Durga) whenever her family members transgress religious norms. Her sons recalled a few instances to the researcher, two of which are depicted here.

Menuka zealously guards their household shrine with the intent to keep it pure. People belonging to the supposedly lower castes are not allowed to enter the shrine, as their presence is believed to cast an impure influence. Incidentally, once their neighbor, who hails from a low caste, had unwittingly entered the shrine, which had caused Menuka much chagrin. Following this perceived transgression, Menuka was possessed by *Devi*. During the bouts of possession Menuka transforms into a character markedly different from her usual docile self, beats her hands on the ground, strikes her head against the wall and twists and rolls over in an uncontrollable manner. As accounted by her son, she displays great physical strength and remains undaunted by the pain she inflicts on herself. She remains in this state of agitation until a lamp is lit before the idol of Devi Durga and a resolution is undertaken to perform penances for the transgressions

committed. One of her sons provided an account of her demeanour after being possessed,

" *Maa (mother) turns hysterical...it has always been the same whenever the Devi takes over her. She strikes her head against the wall and beats her hands on the ground with such force that we fear she would badly injure herself. However, strangely enough she does not complain of pain after the episodes of possession are over. Over the years we have understood that Devi, who has been worshipped by our ancestors for generations before us, expresses her displeasure through Maa. Whenever Devi is vexed at our wrongdoings, she communicates it through Maa. We remain careful so as not to violate the religious rules observed in our family. Nevertheless, we may still offend Devi by omissions we commit unknowingly...we then perform penances to pacify her. Only after diligent performance of penances, is Maa restored to her normal self".*

In yet another instance, one of her sons had entered the shrine after consuming meat. In the Hindu classification of food, non-vegetarian food is considered *tamas (*elemental quality of the food that renders it negative) and is believed to be defiling. After this incident Menuka was again possessed by *Devi*. She manifested the same behavior described above and was appeased after a lamp was lit before the shrine and the family had resolved to perform purgation rituals. As informed by her sons, Menuka's bouts of possession would be occasioned by violations of religious norms. In their view, the Goddess is displeased if religious norms are violated and expresses her displeasure through their mother.

The researcher however is convinced that it is Menuka's distress which is expressed through the metaphor of the *Devi*. The researcher makes the conjecture that Menuka had deeply internalized and logicized the Brahmanical values of purity and pollution, which however were not inculcated as much by her sons and others in her locale. As a simple housewsife she could exercise little authority in demanding compliance, of others, with the religious principles she endorsed. The figure of the Goddess imports the idea of invincible strength, therefore, at a subconscious level Menuka may have incorporated

the image to assert her own strength and to evoke fear and respect for herself in the minds of hers sons and others within her circle of interaction. Possession was her only resort, though as a subconscious level, to ensure that religious norms, which were personally salient for her, were endorsed by others in her vicinity as well. Possession offered Menuka the opportunity to impose her religious ideals on all members of her household, which she would have failed to achieve in her personal capacity. Cohen and Barett (2008) inform us that women of low status often assume the persona and power of a deity or ancestor in possession states with view to incorporating the authority of these figures into their actions and intent. They point out that a frequently recurring theme in possession cults is the temporary transformation of humble mortal into supernatural being for some personally relevant purpose. It may be worthwhile to refer to Obeyesekere (1981, 1990 cited in Bambi, 2008) who has reflected on how culturally salient symbols unconsciously incorporated in possession states affect transformation of the self in culturally meaningful ways.

Thus, possession may be viewed as idiom of distress which is exploited largely by the women to exert mystical pressure on those superior to them in circumstances of deprivation and frustration when other means of sanctions are hardly available. Such states offer the women (also other deprived sections) a means to protect their interest and promote their claims and ambitions in culturally condoned manner (Lewis, 1966).

5.7 Trancing - An Idiom of Distressed Women

Trancing is commonly understood as an altered psychological state (Leacock and Leacock, 1972 cited in Budden, 2003) characterized by the presence of an alter ego (Coons, 1993). Dissociation is a core aspect of trancing as it is in the case of possession and the hand of culture in affecting the same is implicit in both. Bourguignon (2004) forwards the view that trancing offers a scope for venting aspects of one's personality, aspirations and motivations which otherwise do not surface in everyday lives of the concerned individuals. Concomitant with alteration of consciousness, alterations in bodily gestures may also be evident. In the context of trance rituals these alterations are

attributed to the ethereal entity that takes over the body and the person of the individual whose self therefore shrinks to the outer pale of consciousness and that of the other, that is the ethereal being, becomes dominant. Bourguignon draws an analogue between trance states and masquerades and carnival which provides license to actors for expressions and actions that are not available to them in their ordinary states. However, the difference between the two states being that the former is executed with conscious intent while the latter is a manifestation of a total merger with and dissolution of one's identity with that of the spiritual entity which takes over the personality of the human individual.

The difference between possession and trancing has intrigued many scholars. Possession and trancing are expressions that converge on some counts while they diverge on many other. Lewis (1971 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010) distinguishes the two on the degree of control the practitioner or the possessed has over the possessing spirit. Erika Bourguignon lent her own inputs towards this discourse by associating trancing with "psychobiological" behaviour (1973, 11 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010) specifically, "alterations or discontinuity in consciousness, awareness, personality, or other aspects of psychological functioning" (1976, 8 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010), and possession with cultural belief, "when the people in question hold that a given person is changed in some way through the presence in or on him of a spirit entity or power, other than his own personality, soul, self or the like" (1976, 8 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010). Bourguignon's distinction courted much criticism particularly from Lambek (1989 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010) who asserted that trance is imbued with culturally salient meaning therefore is as much culturally conditioned as is possession. In contradistinction to Bourguignon, Lambek puts forth the idea that trancing and possession ought not to be distinguished and treated in isolation. Therefore attempts to define possession in dissension with trance would be misleading, as in ethnographic consideration such a dichotomy does not hold water. Religious beliefs across cultural spaces are so complex and variegated that dissociative behavior entrenched in the same are bound to be "complex, subtle and supple"

(Lambek, 1989, 37 cited in Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010). Possession and trancing evade monolithic universal definition, ideas promoted by early socio-anthropologists like Frazer and Eliade, rather should be conceptualized in correspondence with the cultural ethos of the contexts in which they are situated. Lambeck in this context suggests that possession and trancing are best viewed as systems of cultural communication which offer a peek at how specific cultures conceptualize the human and the spiritual world as well as the interaction of both these worlds. Consistent with the diverse cultural kaleidoscope in which the phenomena are located, trancing and possession are manifested as varied numinous experiences that cannot be encapsulated in one terse definition (Huskinson and Schmidt, 2010). In the present chapter possession and trancing are dealt with in separate sections. The study is mindful that treating each of these states as segregated and mutually exclusive domains would be erroneous; however, the two states are discussed separately for clarity of presentation. In the present chapter, possession is treated as a phenomenon that occurs spontaneously while trancing is studied as volitional, induced by religious rituals.

As in the case of possession, women predominate in trance rituals as well. Bourguingnon (2004), in this regard forwards the view that trancing or possession trance (a term used by Bourguingnon to suggest trancing) provides women with an opportunity to express unconscious and forbidden feelings that stem from situation of social subjugation. Bourguignon conceives possession trance as psychodynamic response to and articulation of women's powerlessness. It is not to be viewed as a means to acquire power for its own sake, rather to recompense the wishes that remain unrealized in the lives of women. The symbolic import of possession trance is important at it unravels the context of subjugation, particularly pertinent in the lives of women, and the articulation of protest against this subjugation in the form of trance possession. The context of subjugation entails an interplay of social, political and economic factors in which the women remain entrapped. Lewis (1971 cited in Bourguignon, 2004) in this context says that women's trance states are guised protest movements in which they exercise influence over the men by means of the spirits, that

ostensibly possess them. To elaborate further on possession trance as articulation of feminist protest, Bourguignon refers to Boddy (1989) who in the context of the Saar or Zar cult in Sudanese village put forwards her view that even if possession trance cannot ameliorate women's chronic subjugation it does cultivate feminist consciousness in the possessed and certainly does muster an attempt to domesticate male power. The moot point here is that trancing, especially that which occurs in the folds of religious rituals, invests women with power which may be wielded in their personal as well as communal lives.

Apart from the reasons accounting for women's predominance in trance rituals, it may be pertinent to note that women's frailty and inherently weak disposition have oft been cited, particularly in lay discourse, to explain their acclivity for trancing; while male virility has been projected to explain their resistance towards such experiences. Seth and Ruth Leacock (1972 cited in Bourguignon, 2004) in the context of trance rituals of Brazil, put forth the view that men's participation in such rituals holds against their dominant macho identity, therefore men do not dominate the scene. Further, submission to spirits is considered to be a reflection of passivity, more so submission to female spirits and impersonating the same is viewed as epicene. Bourguignon brings out yet another aspect related to women's engagement in possession trance. She explicates that in such a state the identity of the host is assimilated in that of the possessing spirit, so much so that the former is rendered a passive object of the active subject, in this case the ethereal spirit. Women deeply internalize their subordinated status owing to the manner in which they are socialized and they reproduce this subordination ritually, dramatically and symbolically in possession trance which they experience as the takeover by an ego alien powerful entity.

In the present section two cases of women who practice trance rituals have been studied. The argument mooted here is that trancing is a strategy to cope with stresses that women experience within traditional patriarchal set-ups. The symbolic import of trancing is being delved into with the intent to projecting how through this altered state

of consciousness women express distress, lodged in the deep crevices of their subconscious minds, and realize their aspiration for power and social status which are seldom available to them within the scope of their ordinary lives. It is interesting, however, that even in this altered state when the identity of the self is effaced and that of the possessing spirit becomes preponderate the latent, motivations and aspirations of the self find expression through the voice and imagery of the spirit. Therefore Bourguignon (1994, cited in Bourguignon, 2004) terms this state as 'dissociation in the service of the self'. An exposition of the motivations underlying possession trance is being attempted in this section. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, cultural repository of images and ideas provides the substance of trance states and therefore the cases need to be rooted in their emic context for appropriate analysis.

Case Illustration 12

Shreya Sharma is a Nepali Brahmin woman in her late 20s whose parents are devotees of Goddess Druga. She lives in a village near Tezpur town. Her father is a devout worshipper of Goddess Durga. He has erected a shrine of the Goddess in his house where all occasions related to the Goddess are observed and elaborate rituals are performed. It is claimed by Shreya, as well as her family members and neighbours that the divine spirit of the Goddess possesses her especially during religious festivals commemorated in honour of the Goddess (e.g. *Navaratri-* a religious festival, dedicated to Goddess Durga that spans across nine days). Further, trance rituals are organized regularly at Shreya's father's house, presided by Shreya herself, where tons of villagers throng to seek solution to their problems. Shreya, now married with a daughter holds this assembly on Sundays only. Prior to her marriage Shreya would enter into the trance state any time the need to invoke the Goddess arose.

As narrated to the researcher Shreya reflected signs of divinity since she her childhood. Her parents recall the point in time when it was first ascertained that the Goddess had 'chosen' her to be the receptacle of her grace. The researcher was informed by Shreya's father that when the latter was 10 years old, the divinity inherent

in her became evident. Shreys's father reminisces the fateful day when she stood facing a framed photograph of Goddess Durga (hanging on a wall of the house), shouted the words *'Jai Mata Di'* (Hail to the Mother Goddess) thrice and fell unconscious. In her stupor she claimed to be the Goddess herself. The local faith healer (*ojha*) was summoned, who then confirmed that the Goddess had indeed possessed her. This incident marked the beginning of Shreya's journey; she continued to be possessed by the Goddess thereafter till, as informed to the researcher, she developed spiritual maturity to control the sporadic and spontaneous episodes. Now, Shreya can exercise her volition in invoking the Goddess to take over her. Gradually people of her village began to approach her with their problems and her fame spread across the village as well those in its vicinity. She began to organize *durbar* (assembly*)* where people assemble to seek divine guidance on various issues of their lives. Shreya's mother unformed the researcher,

"Sherya was exceptional since her childhood. Early on in life, she revealed her divine attributes to us. We had to be careful to keep her away from all polluting influences. She is a blessing to our house…because of her we have experienced the grace of the Goddess… we have experienced the Goddess's divine touch. We feel blessed that Shreya is able to solve problems of the villagers and guide them in the right path. She is like a ray of hope in the lives of many villagers. We are fortunate that Shreya is the chosen one on whom the Goddess has showered her blessings".

As mentioned once before, after her marriage Shreya has been holding the *durbar* only on Sundays. The researcher had been present in one of her *durbars* to observe the proceeding of the same. As observed, at the outset Shreya took her seat on an elevated platform and settled into a tranquil meditative state, then she prostrated before the idol of the Goddess. Thereafter the spirit of the Goddess took over her and the assembled people began presenting their problems before her, one after the other. She communicated with the people in a placid, unemotive tone, offering each a solution for her/his problem. Some were directed to offer puja in some specific temple, some were directed to offer *daan* (donation of specific items) at some temple or to the poor, while

some others were directed to consume vegetarian food on specific days of the week. Wives of alcoholic husbands, childless women, mothers of ailing children approached her with their problems and were given *tabeez* (amulets and lockets) as remedial measures. Many attended her *durbar* just to get a glimpse of the Goddess and sit before her with tears in their eyes as they witnessed what they believe as, the Mother Goddess's grace.

Shreya's family members informed the researcher that sometimes the former slips into a state of frenzy (though the same was not observed by the researcher on the day she attended the *durbar*) when Shreya would behave in the most aggressive manner, beating her head and hands on the ground, swinging around her long tresses and shouting out aloud. However, she does not experience any pain in the body after she regains consciousness, nor does she remember having acted aggressively. Recounting her experience of trancing, Shreya told the researcher that as the divine spirit takes over her body she experience hot flushes and feels powerful, like she could perform just about any feat. However, she does not recall her activities once the spirit of the Goddess has completely possessed her. Shreya maintains that she does not perform trance rituals for commercial purposes, she only acts on divine inspiration. Shreya is quite respected in her village, her in-laws also feel blessed for having her in their house.

The symbol of the Goddess Durga is dominant in Hindu consciousness and conveys strength and invincibility. Hindu women who play lead roles in trance rituals commonly incorporate the images of Goddess Durga or that of Goddess Kali, the two most powerful symbols of female power in Hindu religious discourse. Spiro (1997 cited in Budden, 2003) puts forth the view that cultural symbols, or culturally constructed defense mechanisms as he terms them, are exploited to deal with intra-psychic conflicts. Trancing, as Budden (2003) suggests is a psycho-spiritual mechanism to assuage the internal conflict arising out of repressed, unfulfilled urges. Mythology, religion and other forms of cultural imagination are replete with images and symbols which are internalized by women in trance rituals to voice their distress and quiescent aspirations.

Trancing is a phenomenon commonly prevalent among the rural poor women who, as is argued here, seek self-fulfillment through this mechanism. As cultural practices, possession and trancing vary across cultural contexts and local idioms (Bourguignon and Evascu, 1977 cited in Budden, 2003) yet across cultural space these phenomena serve the purpose of individual and community coping with existential and pragmatic social and personal stressors. Ecstatic practices or trance rituals as Budden (2003) suggests are commonly found among people who lack the resources to manage their emotional, physical and, material problems. This widely accepted anthropological truism is applicable in the case being dealt with here. It is posited here that Shreya, who had grown up in an atmosphere where the Goddess is worshipped and revered as an icon of strength and power, had internalized the symbol of the Goddess in order to realize her own aspirations for power and social status. As a girl hailing from humble background, with little education and no opportunity for self- actualization, trancing became Shreya's psycho-spiritual means to articulate her aspirations. Further, trancing being a phenomenon that has wide acceptance in the cultural space she was situated in, the same allowed her to express repressed urges in culturally acceptable and meaningful manner. Budden refers to Obeyesekere (1981) who projects the view that possession trance facilitates the transformation of symptoms of emotional distress into culturally and personally salient symbols, thereby presenting the afflicted individual with an opportunity to resolve psychic conflict and achieve personal transformation. Obeyesekere in Medusa's Hair (1981 cited in Budden, 2003), an ethnographic study on priestesses of Kataragama cult center in of Sri Lanka, outlines how personal and public symbols exploited in possession have transformative potential. His book is an illustration on how the priestesses of Sri Lanka in their trance states draw symbols from the array offered by culture and rise above their psychic afflictions to transform into healthy cultural selves. Obeysekere, with reference to priestesses of Kataragama, elucidates how trancing enables women to voice their unconscious feeling and how internalizing public religious symbols of divine flavour become psychologically salient at a personal level. Thus, the marginalized and afflicted women are transformed to highly respected priestesses of Kataragama. Shreya's case is interpreted within the

frame of analysis provided by Obeysekere. The argument ventured here is that through possession trance Shreya is able to externalize her inert motivations in a culturally condoned manner. Further, by incorporating the image of the Goddess, Shreya is transformed from humble rural lass to a divine being who has received the grace of Mother Goddess. The same enables realization of her aspiration for power and invests her with authority to command social status, thus the transformation is affected at both personal and communal level.

This transformation of symptom of distress into culturally acceptable symbol involves the process of subjectification in which objectified cultural models of divine interaction are internalized and attributed personal meaning on the basis of intra-psychic experiences. Within the purview of what Obeyesekere (1981 cited in Budden, 2003) describes as culturally-sanctioned religious experiences, interaction with and incorporation of deities is an acceptable phenomenon. Therefore, trancing which is a part of a shared system of belief, behavior, and communication is not viewed as pathological (as in Western cultural context where such behaviours are not culturally endorsed). Experiences such as that of trancing are logicized by cultural knowledge or a social groups's myth model (Obeyesekere, 1981 cited in Budden, 2003); therefore in the case of Kataragama priestesses as well in that of Shreya, trancing is viewed as work of the incorporated deity and is therefore not considered contravenuous or pathological as the same would be in the West where the prevalent myth model is essentially different from that of South Asia (Budden, 2003).

Case Illustration 13

Manori Basumatary is a woman in her 50s who is well acclaimed in the Bodo community of Ghoramari (Sonitpur) as *Doudhini* (receptacle of the divine spirit). *Doudhinis* are *chosen* women among the Bodos who, as communicated to the researcher, are gifted with the ability to become mediums for divine spirits. *Doudhinis* are integral to the Bodo culture, as they provide a veritable link between the human and spiritual world. The Bodos seek the counsel of the divine and benevolent spirits on all

important matters including purchase of land, cure of ailments, marriage of children, communal harmony, preservation of indigenous culture etc. It is the *Doudhini* who performs trance rituals for those desirous of communicating with the divine spirits on matters related to their personal and social life.

Amongst the Bodos, *Kherai Puja* is an important religious ceremony where the presence of a *Doudhini* is mandatory. *Kherai Puja* is performed in honor of *Bathow Bwrai* (often identified as the Hindu God Shiva). The ceremony spans across the night and culminates in the morning, during which an elaborate trance ritual is conducted. The *Doudhini* acts as the vessel which receives spirits of various rungs and order, who then communicate with the community members on various matters related to communal welfare.

Manori, in the course of her interaction with the researcher, narrated how she realized her calling as a teenager when *Mainao* (Mother Goddess) would appear in her dreams and urge upon her to follow the spiritual path. Her parents, on learning of her persistent dreams, sought the intervention of a local *ojha* (spiritual healer) with the intent to stop the occurrence of such dreams. Manori's parents were keen that their daughter settles into a life of quiet domesticity, therefore, they did not want her to get embroiled in spiritual activities. With the intervention of the *ojha*, Manori was able to evade the disquieting dreams for some time. However, after Manori's marriage she started having similar dreams. According to Manori, her attempts to resist the divine calling brought great woes upon her family members. Her husband, children and she herself would often fall sick. Finally, she decided to abide by the divine injunctions she received in her dreams. As directed by *Mainao,* Manori starting observing fast on specific days, performing elaborate puja, and inculcating religious norms in her personal life. Gradually she started performing trance rituals. She is, at present, a renowned *Doudhini* of her community who is invited to perform trance rituals during the *Kherai Puja* organized by different Bodo organizations across Sonitpur, and

beyond. Apart from the *Kherai Puja,* Manori trances for her clients who seek spiritual intervention in the affairs of everyday life. As narrated by Manori,

"I have been time and again instructed by Mainao in my dreams to take up my calling as a Doudhini. However, I was too young and apprehensive of the implications of becoming one. Though my spirit yearned to respond to Mainao…my heart was full of self-doubt. With time I realized that I had to serve my community as a Doudhini, as that is what my destiny is. I have had to invoke the deity to communicate through me to our community members. Though it is a physically draining exercise, I have realized that I have an obligation to my community …that I do not exist for myself and my family alone. I exist for my community as well and also have to be considerate towards them. My community members respect me as I invoke deities at their behest and offer them solutions to myriad problems of life. As long as I can physically sustain it…I shall continue to oblige my community as a Doudhini".

The researcher had observed the *Kherai Puja* organized at Ghoramari by the local Bodo community where Manori was invited to perform the trance ritual. The ritual commenced at around 10 at night and culminated in the wee hours during which a host of spirits, divine as well as those of lesser order, were received by the *Doudhini* in her body. The spirits communicated through the *Doudhini* with the gathered mass on an array of issues which have been illustrated below. As the trance ritual commenced the *Doudhini*, the *Bailong* (chief priest), the Deuri (priest who assists the *Bailong*) and some of the men folk started dancing to the rhythmic tune of traditional musical instruments *viz. Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute) and *Jotha* (cymbal). The *Doudhini* sang as she and the others danced encircling the consecrated alter of worship termed as *sijousali* (a platform where the *Sijou tree* (Euphorbia Splenden) – considered as a form of Shiva - is planted and fenced with eighteen pairs of bamboo strips with five fastenings). In the course of the ritualistic dance, the *Doudhini* was possessed by spirits of Gods, Goddesses, *Ojha* (faith healers) and several other departed personalities, one after the other. As Gods and Goddesses possessed her, fowl were offered to them. The

Doudhini tore apart the head of the same and drank their blood, a gesture symbolizing that the concerned God or Goddess has accepted the sacrifice. As the *Doudhini* was possessed by different spirits her gait, body language and the tone of her voice changed in keeping with the character of the spirit that possessed her. In the course of the trance ritual several spirits possessed the *Doudhini,* only a few episodes of significant import are being illustrated here.

The first spirit to have possessed the *Doudhini* was that of *Lwkhi* (the Goddess of wealth). Possessed by *Lwkhi* the *Doudhini,* in a tone of lamentation, bemoaned the lack of proper care of crops grown in fields and the wastage of grains. She urged upon all to refrain from wastage of food items and to conserve natural resources. As the spirit left her body she lost consciousness. After regaining her senses with the intervention of the *Bailong*, she resumed dancing and singing till another spirit possessed her. Each spirit conveyed some message to the community which was accepted by the same as the oracle of God.

It is interesting to note that the *Doudhini* is possessed not only by gods but also by spirits of lower order. For instance, in the course of the ritual, she is possessed by the spirit of an old man who identified himself as *Abou* (grandfather). As the spirit took over her, she danced like a man and asked for a *bidi* (indigenous cigarette made of unprocessed tobacco wrapped in leaf). She then called all the young men close to her and advised them to acquire skills of different trades from the elders of the community. She also urged upon them to preserve the traditional way of life of the Bodos. The spirit was particularly keen that *Bathow* worship, the Bodo language and traditional attire of the Bodo men and women be preserved by the young generation.

One of the spirits to have possessed the *Doudhini* was that of an *Ojha* (faith healer). Once again she assumed a male persona, asked for a coat, tied a turban on her head and played around with mud. Finally the spirit identified himself as a traditional healer, chanted *mantras* (prayer) into a pinch of soil and handed the same to those in proximity as a healing mixture. The people around asked for an antidote to malaria, to which the

spirit advised that 3 grains of rice and *tulsi* (holy basil) leaves be consumed thrice in one breath as a preventive against malaria.

In the course of the night the *Doudhini* was possessed by several other spirits. At one point she was possessed by the spirit of a woman who was accused to be a witch and was eventually murdered by members of her community. She presented a woeful account of how she was persecuted in spite of being innocent and how her untimely death was brought about by mindless people of her community. She implored those present in the gathering to shun such mindless persecution of innocent women for ulterior motives. Despite the pain gnawing at her heart, she blessed all present in the gathering before leaving the body of the *Doudhini.* In this manner the *Doudhini* was possessed by several spirits till dawn when she declared closure to the ritual and passed out. The *Bailong* wakened her up by chanting *mantras* and sprinkling consecrated water.

In this case, as in that of the one discussed prior to the same, trancing becomes a mechanism to negotiate social status. Manori's ability to invoke spirits has accorded her a respectable status in her community. The phenomena of possession and trancing are largely exploited by those most vulnerable within the social structure (Bourguignon, 1979 cited in Chapin, 2008) with the intent to affect a ritual re-ordering of the relationships between self, others, and spiritual powers which may be best understood as "a process of self-construction and healing that takes place on several planes at once" (Boddy 1994, 422 cited in Chapin, 2008). It is important to note that the central motive immanent in these behaviours is the reordering of social relationships (Spencer, 1997; Kapferer, 1983, 1997 cited in Chapin, 2008). However, an aspect that merits special attention in this case is the important social message that Manori conveys through each episode of possession. Whether on conservation of nature, preservation of indigenous culture or on the bane of social evils such as witch hunting, Manori is able to articulate her voice on all relevant matters. As an ordinary woman, Manori would not have been able to effectively articulate on pertinent social issues. Even if she were to voice her

opinion she would have been largely ignored by her community members. However as a *Doudhini* through whom divine spirits communicate, as believed by members of the community, she is able to vent forth her opinions which are therefore accepted in all earnestness by the same. Her words assume the magnitude of divine oracle and hence become guiding principles in the lives of the community members. At this juncture it may be pertinent to draw from Bourguignon (2004) who forwards the argument that socialized to be subordinate and submissive, women negotiate through indirection. Spirit possession is an exemplar of how women work through indirection, by unconsciously doing what they cannot possibly accomplish consciously. The women do not own responsibility for their words and actions expressed during trance possession, thereby achieving ultimate deniability. Nevertheless, these idioms enable the women to negotiate from a position of strength. It may worthwhile to refer to the examples that Bourguignon cites to show how women transact from position of power to resolve issues that cause them distress, in states of trance possession. Bourguignon refers to the Haitian Voudou priestess who in her trance state would remonstrate with her family members for not paying heed to her and not respecting her, thereby incurring the wrath of the possessing spirit. Another case in point, brought forth by Bourguignon is with regard to the Umbanda religion of South Brazil where women medium, through the persona of the spirits that supposedly possess them, admonish their alcoholic husbands. Further, these women are able to exercise considerable social power, making life decisions for their clients and guiding them on important aspects of their lives. Thus they function as independent entrepreneurs wielding supernatural as well as earthly power (Lerch, 1982 cited in Bourguignon, 2004). In the case illustrated here, Manori in the capacity of *Doudhini* becomes a powerful commentator on environment conservation, on the evil of witch hunting and on preservation of indigenous culture. She functions as an ideologue on pertinent issues, whose words have the potential to affect social change. It is interesting to note how the antidote she suggests for malaria is accepted by members of the community as a sure cure; the same is suggestive of the power Manori, in the capacity of *Doudhini,* exercises over her community and the status that she thus enjoys. Thus reiterating the idea that runs through this chapter, it can be

asserted that trancing is an idiom exploited by the women, who are otherwise an oppressed lot, to articulate their muffled expressions and yield power that they in their ordinary state cannot. Another dimension that merits mention is the subtle revolt that is voiced through trancing states against the atrocities and oppressions that women are subjected to. De Jong (1987 cited in Bourguignon, 2004) reported on the revolutionary motives articulated through trance rituals by women of Guinea-Bissaou who, supposedly possessed by male gods, demanded the annihilation of expensive ancestor rituals and of arranged marriages, thereby reducing the power of male elders. In the present case, the *Doudhini's* imploration against witch hunting may be understood in a similar vein. By voicing protest against witch hunting she seeks to sensitize the community members and eliminate this baneful practice which has led to the victimization of many innocent women.

Thus, from the analyses of both the cases on trancing, it can be inferred that distress experienced by women owing to the inferior status in society as also that resulting from aspects of one's personal and communal life, is ameliorated through trance states which enables women to negotiate life from a position of power and assert their self-hood, albeit in metaphorical terms, which however is restrained in their real life situations.

Summation

To sum up the discussion, it is proffered here that an adequate understanding of possession and trancing merits an exploration of gender dynamics specific to the context in which these phenomena occur. Subjective realities of women are conditioned by symbols and metaphors of idealized femininity which thwart an uninhibited expression of individual self-hood. Possession and trancing offer an opportunity for self-renewal and enable women to defy the principles of an externally imposed female ideal (Boddy, 1966 cited in Seligman and Kirmayer, 2008). The anthropologists take a stand distinctly different from that of the psychiatrist and study the discussed phenomena as an idiom of distress, of resistance and of externalization of suppressed

motives that do no find expression in everyday lives of women. This connects with the central argument of the thesis that mental health is not determined singularly by biological factors but that sociological factors play an important role in shaping mental health. Whereas, from the medical perspective possession and trancing behaviours may be viewed as abnormal, psychotic, and symptomatic of mental disorder, anthropologists present a differing view by indicating at the social structural dynamics that shape such behaviors (Lewis 1989; Bourguignon 1979; and Boddy, 1994 cited in Chapin, 2008). Culture bound dissociative behaviour ought not to be conceptualized as psychopathology as they have their rationale and relevance in the specific cultural context they are rooted in. In specific cultural milieu, the socially weak protagonists, in the present context the women, recourse to dissociative behaviours such as possession and trancing as ameliorative mechanisms intended to modulate their circumstances in an otherwise uncontrollable and generally depriving or oppressive condition (Somer, 2005). Lewis (1989 cited in Chapin, 2008) terms the same as ritualized rebellion in which through the garb of spirits, aspirations latent in subordinated women find expression.

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