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REINVENTING FOLK NARRATIVES: VIJAYDAN DETHA'S TALES FROM RAJASTHAN

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The paper explores how Rajasthani folk narrative is reinvented by Vijaydan Detha to open up the folk tradition of the state for readers, scholars and critics to enjoy, appreciate, critique, interrogate, and arrive at an understanding that may facilitate indigenous theorization in areas like gender studies, translation and culture studies. Folktales have progressively transcended the boundaries of oral transmission to enter the arena of the written world. The reach of these scripted tales is further widened through inter-lingual and intra-lingual translations. They have a popular screen presence too. The culturally rich state of Rajasthan in India has a strong tradition of folklores that has survived the challenges of modernization and globalization. Rajasthani folktales have been given a new lease of life by the efforts of researchers and creative writers who have contributed towards their conservation and rejuvenation. Vijaydan Detha is a name to contend with when it comes to breathing new life in the genre of Rajasthani folktales. The resilience and the ability of folktales to transform and transmute without losing out on cultural specifics has been skillfully tapped by Detha. His works emphasize the continued relevance of folktales by highlighting their inherent dynamism that empowers them to adapt to the demands of the contemporary world and creative forms.

Keywords: Folktales, Oral tradition, Translation, Gender studies.

Introduction

Indian sub-continent is a burgeoning repository of folklores that emerge as important socio-cultural identity markers contributing to the rich cultural heritage of the land. Evolution, dissemination and conservation of folk aesthetics and wisdom through creative impulse have been the hallmark of the regional art forms. Predominantly oral, performative and participatory, folk forms reveal a keen understanding of the geographical constraints and ecological specificities that define and determine the way of life of the region. They also endeavor to convey allegorically and symbolically the indigenous understanding of the mysteries of human existence. Closed self-sufficient societal units have had to cope with the pressure of opening up to the exigencies of extraneous influences. Local mores with ethno-geographical moorings were challenged by the coercive forces of colonization, consecutive modernization, and globalization. Shifts in socio-cultural frames and politico-economic structures arising from the historical process have led to corresponding shifts in regional systems of subsistence as well as creative expression. Folk tradition in India has survived despite the swift, and largely enforced exposure to alien ways of life, languages, and cultures.

Phoenix-like, folklores rise anew from the ashes of the past through an incessant process of reinvention. In a socio-cultural milieu and political atmosphere marked by constant flux, folk forms adopt

strategies of subversion, appropriation and abrogation to safeguard, advance and propagate indigenous knowledge systems culled from the lived experiences of the community. Though folklores fall under the purview of anthropological studies, they have impacted and inspired creative writings incessantly. Folk literature, an important component of folk tradition, is open to interdisciplinary interrogation. It straddles Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science too. Anthropology, Sociology as well as Psychology get implicated in the study of folk literature. Though entrenched in oral tradition, with the passage of time folktales have been scripted too. Their roots can be traced back to the pre-historic times that preceded written script. Mazharul Islam holds:

> In the Indian tradition, oral literature seeped into written literature in a massive way and then in course of time the elements from written literature was again transmitted in the field of oral literature, thus making it impossible to separate the oral from the written and the written from the oral elements.(5)

Regional folk culture and tradition transmitted through folktales emerge as a counterpoint and an alternative to the established socio-cultural frames and systems of knowledge. Oral tradition empowers the folktales to incorporate changes and variations through the procedure of adaptation and adoption, in response to the altered socio-cultural demands. Each new rendition of a folktale is open to reworking of content and theme, giving rise to variants ensuring relevance even in a novel spatio-temporal context.

Folk literature across the Indian sub-continent was adversely impacted by colonization. The enforcement of British education system led to a move away from oral expression to written script, and from indigenous regional languages to cosmopolitan English. The diminution of regional languages resulted in the marginalization of the socio-cultural ethos and indigenous knowledge systems enshrined in the folklores of the land. With the ascendance of the written word, traditional oral 'enactments' had to give way to the descriptive script leading to 'a shift from the active, participatory world of orality to the linear, static world of print' (2009: 148) as referred to by C. B. Pattnayak in his article 'From Orality to Orality'. The unprecedented growth in the field of media and communication that followed saw another paradigm shift, and the folk world came alive on the silver screen. Walter Ong in his work *Orality and Literacy* refers to the change in language and thought initiated by radio, television and phones as 'secondary orality'. From oral art form to written word, and then from written to audio-visual representation, folk literature has met the demands of a world progressively mediated by technology.

Literary Review

Folktales are progressively being viewed as not merely belonging to the past but in relation to the contemporary ethos. Rajasthan has a strong tradition of scripted as well as oral folktales. There exists a tangible reciprocal relationship between the two, where each takes from and contributes to the other. Framed within the ethno-geographical parameters, they are expressions of the creative endeavors and folk aesthetics of Rajasthan. James Todd in his iconic work *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* traces the genesis and evolution of the state. Folktales of Rajasthan help construct, safeguard, as well as propagate the regional identity. The ecology of the land, the geographical terrain and environment, the feudal history and polity, the socio-cultural moorings, myths, legends and traditions come alive in the creative endeavors of the region. They interrogate and throw light on the way of life, events and customs, value systems, social configuration, legal and political structures as well as economic pursuits of a community. Though region-specific, folklores contribute towards the enrichment of the national identity too.

The vibrant folk culture of Rajasthan fascinates both academia and connoisseurs of art-forms alike. Initially on retreat, a resurgence of folktales has been initiated by writers in Rajasthan. Sitakant Mahapatra in his article 'Folk Literature in Modern Times' holds: "The most important shift of emphasis was from looking at folklore not merely as a theme of the past but to relate it to present; the shift from search of origins to the investigation and interpretation of the forms of modern culture, their meaning and

function."(2009:64) Transmitting and transcribing oral forms into written text is not new or unknown to Indian narrative tradition. Rajasthani folktales have been given a new lease of life and revitalized by the efforts of researchers and creative writers like Vijaydan Detha, Rani Laxmi Kumari Chundawat, Bani Roy Chaudhary, L. N. Birla, Dina Nath Dubey, G.L. Mathur, Govind Agarwal and Kamini Dinesh. Rustom Bharucha in *Rajasthan: An Oral History* presents an expansive study of Komal Kothari's engagement with the cultural and musical landscape of Rajasthan, exploring the underlying knowledge systems therein. Detha who was Kothari's partner in the enterprise had dedicated himself to the conservation and rejuvenation of the folktales of Rajasthan. His contributions to the area are widely acknowledged and he was honored by the government of India with Padamshri in 2007. Detha helped conserve folktales by collecting and transcribing them in Rajasthani to protect them from fading into oblivion. Though folktales lose out on their participatory and fluid aspect once fixed in written script, Detha had noted verbatim stories he heard from story-tellers and other sources to ensure their survival. Beginning with transcribing, Detha went on to write folktale inspired stories. He initiated a deft paradigm shift from oral to written, from transcription to creation, from page to stage and also on to the movie screen.

Vijaydan Detha went back to the folk tradition for inspiration, material (content) and ideas (themes) bringing to light stories that were on the verge of extinction and even ones that were still popular. He worked towards making folk wisdom relevant to post-independence generation immured in written text and in the thrall of audio-visual media. In its journey through time and space, his stories have cut across different mediums of representation, genres, and languages with corroborative shifts in patterns of expression. Detha's stories are a mix of past and present blurring the margin between then and now, idle gossip and moral enquiry, entertainment and wisdom, traditional folk tales and modern short story. Stories written by Vijaydan Detha bridge the gap between the modern short story writing and folktales through thematic concerns that transcend the temporal barrier with their unremitting relevance from ancient times to the present. He experimented with the form of folktales but took care to retain the 'orality' by adopting and incorporating narrative strategies of oral rendition. Folktale inspired stories by Detha create spaces for multipronged exploration due to their inherent ability to deftly balance the pragmatic and the esoteric, the traditional and the contemporary, humor and wisdom, compliance and interrogation. Detha also took the bold step of not writing in the dialect of any particular region and chose to write his stories in Rajasthani version of standard Hindi commonly used across the State exposing them to a larger audience. His works have been translated from Rajasthani into Hindi and English making them accessible to readership within India and abroad.

Folktales, which are predominantly communal experience, have transcended the boundaries of oral transmission and entered the arena of the written world. The reach of these scripted tales is further widened through inter-lingual and intra-lingual translations. They have a popular screen presence too. Since language actualizes itself in its own cultural context, translating folktales involves 'cross-cultural transfer'. In its journey through genres and languages, Detha's work has cut across different mediums of expression with corroborative alterations in translated text. His famous folktale inspired story 'Duvidha', was first written in Rajasthani dialect. It was translated into Hindi and then into English under the title 'The Dilemma'. 'Duvidha' was successfully adapted into a film by Mani Kaul who went on to win National Best Director award for it in 1974. In 2005, it was again made into a successful Bollywood movie titled 'Paheli' by Amol Palekar. This adaptation offers a fresh perspective through changed ending. From oral moorings to written text, from Rajasthani to Hindi to English, from a literary narration of the story to the representational movie script, 'Duvidha' showcases the inherent versatility that spans time, languages and genres. Ganesh Devy commenting on the emphasis on fidelity to the original as a mark of excellence contends, "The true test is the author's capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original". (15-Devy: 187)

Rewritings and translations keep alive not only an art form under threat but are also supportive of the inherent nature of folktales. Like folktales, translation too is a form of retelling that on one hand is bound to the original, and on the other, is participatory and allows creative inputs that enhance and expand the scope of the original. The critical and theoretical position that views translation as a cultural act transcending the barrier of fidelity and equivalence, to certain extent echoes and supports the inner

dynamics of folktales. Translated works involve dual involvement, that of a writer and a translator. However, when a community instead of an individual stakes its claim to a creative artifact, as in folklores, the ownership issue becomes problematic. The concept of intellectual property that reveals how different forms of creativity are accounted for ethically, economically and legally fall short of providing an answer to ownership issues related to folktales. The retellings of the folktales where the original is lost in the mists of time, is stamped by the participatory inputs of the listeners as well as the shaping sensibility of the teller who has the freedom to incorporate, reject, problematize, expand and experiment with the form. Every retelling is to that extent is a new creation. It is the sensibility of the story teller and the translator that filters, chooses, rejects, manipulates and incorporates with an aim to communicate. Detha's stories based on folktales work from a similar premise.

Folktales are rooted in local experience and result from the convergence of objective reality of the physical environment and the subjective response of the community to the lived experience. The narratives of Vijaydan Detha cannot be traced back to the original renderings though the traces of the same can be easily apprehended. The concern about what gets lost in the process of rewriting and translation does not take into account the gains made. The thrust of Detha was not on fidelity but on making the stories vivid and relevant enough to be able to engage the attention and interest of a readership vested with multiple options to choose from. Detha deftly combines modern literary techniques with traditional storytelling convention to create written versions of stories he has heard from different sources. He creates fleshed out characters with complex and layered inner life who are closer to characters of modern narratives in comparison to the representative characters of Folktales. The frame used is of folktale, but he fills it out with ecological and cultural details and specifics. He captures the folk images and the underlying moral and ethical issues presented in an engaging tone enriched by the reverberations of the dialects of Rajasthan. Whether translating from one genre to another, from one culture to another or from one language to another, the responsibility on the translator to be true to the original and not compromise the spirit of the text remains.

Detha combines his felicity with evoking the Rajasthani folk culture with the finesse of modern short story writing. Detha's stories are inspired by the enchanted world of folktales and aim at addressing contemporary socio-political issues. He highlights the wisdom inherent in folk tradition as a tool for resistance. The act of noting down the stories he heard trained him to appreciate the energy and potential of the folk form for active resistance. The irreverence and humor present in folktales is skillfully captured and used as tools to critique and address contemporary issues. He also employs the commonly used contemporary Rajasthani, spiced with pithy sayings and aphorisms to convey both humor and folk wisdom aimed at critiquing the existent socio-cultural structures. Detha retains the salient features of folktales: he begins a story with invocation or '*chougou'* whereby everyday language is transposed into language of performance and incorporates audience response in the form of *hunkara,* deftly approximating it to oral narration. He uses indirect discourse replete with local idioms, humor and folk wisdom. He adopts the modern technique of story writing by endowing the single dimensional characters of folktales with an inner life and providing a psychological insight into them. The stories have detailed descriptions and the plot too becomes layered and more complex.

The works of the master translator of Rajasthani folk tradition were in turn translated into Hindi and English languages. Kabir Kher translated select tales of Detha into Hindi with Rajasthani inflections. Christi A. Merrill took up the task of translating into English what had been written by Detha in Rajasthani and translated by Kabir into Hindi. Detha insisted in calling the language he used as Rajasthani and not Marwari to accord it a 'pan-Rajasthani' identity. Christi holds, "Detha's writing brought to prominence not only the richness of the storytelling traditions of Rajasthan, but the inventive form of locution characteristic of Rajasthani."(12) Christi attempts to retain the oral flavor of the stories as well as the charm of local idioms without rendering them exotic. Referring to the task on hand Christi avers, "I knew that I needed the English version to demonstrate a discerning embrace of local inheritances that was aware of the similarities and departures from traditions on other parts of the globalized world, a vision neither insistently nativist nor adamantly cosmopolitan, but committed to achieving equal balance between cultures historically unequal" (13-14) A text can be translated time and again the way folktales

can be narrated and rewritten time and again. The success of translation as is the case with folktales, rests in the ability of the translator to capture and convey the cultural details and subtle nuances of the translated text without compromising them.

Critical inquiry of literary works that tap into folktales for inspiration and content point at the significant contribution made by folktales to the field of literature. Gender-sensitive reading of folk literature has emerged as a field with the potential to make a relevant contribution to the study of women's issues. Interrogation of women-centric folktales countermands the concept of folk form as obsolete with not much to contribute to the challenges of present times. Detha makes a dexterous usage of folk elements to highlight the defining role women play in the folk tradition of the state. However, Susmita Chakraborty in her article warns: "Folklore- as an important manifestation of mainstream culture and communication- can express authoritarian and gendered ideas of the dominant class in society. Nonetheless…folklore can also articulate diversified cultural ideas that goes outside of, or contrary to, the dominant ideologies."(258)Though there are times when the tales sanction the social rigidities, it is balanced by an undercurrent of interrogation and also overt critique. The interdisciplinary approach facilitates an understanding of the inner dynamics of literature, culture and society in relation to the status of women in Detha's stories. This in turn gains greater relevance in the comparative study of the way women are perceived and presented in folktales vis-a-vis in creative endeavors of contemporary time. The convergences and divergences between the two, point at the continuities and disruptions in the expression of women issues through literary creations, across time and space.

The translated collection of Detha's tales *chouboli and other stories* (two volumes) include stories that present a broad panorama of gendered responses of both men and women to events and situations framed within the tradition of folk narration. The collection has four stories that stand out in their presentation of women: 'chouboli', 'press the sap, light the lamp' and 'the dilemma' in the first volume, and 'two lives' with which the second volume ends. The rest of the stories in both the volumes with humans, animals or birds as characters, have female presence making a relevant contribution to thematic concerns and philosophic input. As folktales are not bound by the established norms and social niceties, ideological movements and formal knowledge systems, these are playfully subverted raising questions about rigidities arising thereof. An emphasis on female bonding and support system find repeated expression.

Folktales are playful and hence entertain through humor and mind teasers like puzzles and riddles. Folk wisdom is conveyed via sayings, proverbs, irony, satire, and the way a tale moves towards its resolution. The irreverent tone that permeates the tales makes the listener/reader aware of the subterranean anomalies and paradoxes of the circumstances in question. Detha skillfully brings all these aspects together in his tales. Stories 'press the sap, light the lamp' and 'the dilemma' pose an open challenge to the rigidities that surround and stunt the sexuality of women: the expression as well as fulfillment of their physical and psychological needs. In both the stories the husbands leave their brides behind to attend the call of their duty: one is a warrior and the other a merchant. The soldier's bride takes a snake for her lover and the bride of the merchant accepts a ghost, who takes the form of the absent groom, as her lover. The difference between the two women is that while the former is unabashed about her needs and initiates the relationship with the snake, the latter has a moment of dilemma when the ghost reveals his true identity. Soldier's bride attempts to avenge her lover's death when the snake is hacked to pieces and gladly accepts death on being foiled. Conversely, the wife of merchant silently accepts her fate and mournfully embraces a life of marital duty as a model wife and daughter-in-law when her lover ghost is apprehended and done away with.

Detha reinvents the form of folktales to highlight thematic concerns that have contemporary relevance. There is a strident critique of the caste system and patriarchy in tales inspired by folktales that survive as socio-cultural artifacts. Materialism vis-à-vis emotional commitment is highlighted in stories where a groom leaves behind his bride in pursuit of wealth. Morality and ethics are put in the dock when the lonely wife transgresses the established norms and finds love outside marriage. There is an assertion of and acknowledgment of the sexuality of women and their physical needs. This does not discount tales that present women as troublemakers, vicious and vengeful. Such stories, however, do not have women as

central characters. Where women are at the helm of the tale, they emerge as strong and intelligent individuals who question, challenge and even reject the oppressive norms of the patriarchal society. The empowered feudal class is diminished in stature and the traditional role of women subverted. The stories highlight a perceptive distinction between women from different casts and class. Detha deftly intertwines caste, class and gender issues subverting them as the stories progress.

The tale 'two lives' defies the tradition that favors male child over female. The story brings to fore the fixations associated with patriarchy: the longing for male heir, the silence imposed on women, negligible role of a woman in decision making, the physical and psychological violence perpetrated against women, a man's undisputed claim over his wife and complete subjugation of woman's will to man's. Bonding between women is highlighted and there is a bold presentation of their relationship. The undemanding love and understanding between two women is destroyed when one of them is transformed into a man. Mutual love and tenderness are replaced by gendered power relation. Detha successfully raises the issues of marital rape and same-sex love through a tale with mythicizing characteristics of folk narrative. Robert Redfield refers to folklores as 'the little tradition' of largely marginalized communities rooted in oral tradition. Close study of Detha's stories reveals that the issues related to women were as much a part of 'little traditions' from which they draw inspiration and sustenance, as they are of creative writings today. The struggles of female protagonists depicted in the stories are in consonance with the conflicts faced by women in the world we inhabit today.

Female sexuality is a contested site and has an unavoidable presence in the feminist movement and gender studies. The stories of Vijaydan Detha establish a continuity in the journey of women towards self-actualization that spans mythical times, historical past and present era. Women characters of his stories struggle to define themselves, chart their dreams and set their own parameters of ethics and morality. Issues related to infidelity, sexuality, morality, ethics, patriarchy, tradition, matrimony are interrogated. The stories highlight the clash between duty towards traditional roles and individual aspirations. The need to rethink established moral norms and ethics as determined by the socio-cultural tents is underscored. They critique the patriarchal rigidities and make these stories relevant for contemporary India struggling against the mindset that perpetuates female foeticide, child marriage, dowry deaths, rape and other crimes against women.

Conclusion

The strength of the folktales is vested in its continued relevance and inherent dynamics that enables it to adapt to the demands of the contemporary world and creative forms. Faced with forces of globalization, folk culture is on decline world over, in terms of practice and participation at the level of community. Though the process of urbanization and industrial development are serious threats to folk culture, yet it is strong in Rajasthan due to its adaptability and capacity to imbibe and incorporate elements of change. State support too plays an important role in the continued survival and relevance of folk tradition. The resilient quality of the folktales has been used by Detha in stories by him, to ensure its survival and continued role in enacting and transmitting the regional identity, wisdom and culture. The politics of exclusion and inclusion, folk feminism and the dynamics of literature, culture and society and the folk aesthetics of the marginalized communities find expression in the creative endeavors of the writer. The stories of Vijaydan Detha reinvent folk narrative to revive, rejuvenate and open up the folk tradition of Rajasthan for readers, scholars and critics to enjoy, appreciate, critique, interrogate and arrive at an understanding that can facilitate indigenous theorization in areas like gender studies, translation and culture studies.

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