



Gender, Power, and the Politics of Patriarchy in the Folk Narratives of Vijaydan Detha

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Abstract

The central concern in literary and cultural studies of patriarchal societies is the interplay of gender and power. Folk narratives are significant reflections of collective cultural values. They provide spaces where dominant social norms-, may be questioned and reinterpreted. The stories of Rajasthani writer Vijaydan Detha revealed the layered dynamics and convoluted nature of gender, power, and the patriarchal system. His narratives confront the constraints imposed by the institution of marriage, family honour and community expectations. The paper is a selective study of stories: -'The Dilemma', 'Double Lives', 'Chouboli', 'Lajwanti', 'Sonal Bai', in which the culture of patriarchy is revealed. Resistance in these narratives does not manifest as overt rebellion; instead, it unfolds through silence, performative deviation, strategic wit, and solidaristic exit.

Keywords: Feminist resistance, folk narratives, patriarchy, subaltern, gender, power.

Introduction

Vijaydan Detha (1926-2013), an iconoclast and folk writer of the Marwar Region, dedicated his literary career to collecting and retelling folk tales. The richness of oral storytelling with modern literary sensibilities distinguishes his views. His magnum opus-*Baatan ri Phulwari (Garden of Tales)*, a collection of 800 stories, vividly captures the many hues of Rajasthan and offers insights into its culture. Detha, along with Komal Kothari founded Rupayan Sansthan in 1960, an institution

dedicated to preserving and promoting Rajasthani folk culture. He was a recipient of the Padam Shri, the Sahitya Churamani and the Sahitya Akademi Award. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011. The versatility of Detha is also brought out through cinematic representations, podcasts, and translations. Several of his stories have been screened as highly regarded films, the most famous of which are 'Duvidha' by Mani Kaul (1973), 'Paheli' by Amol Palekar (2005), and 'Parinati' by Prakash Jha (1989). The adaptations exposed his storytelling to a broader audience

and added to his legend as a master of layered narrative. With a modern feminist approach, Paheli, starring Shah Rukh Khan and Rani Mukerji, brings back the 'Duvidha' film. The film simplifies the original, and is a tribute to themes of love, identity, and choice. His tales are very local, yet have a universal nature that transcends linguistic and cultural borders. He reshapes traditional tales-, in ways that draw attention to issues of social hierarchy, moral authority, and gender relations. The female characters, in his stories, challenge the restrictions of patriarchal society. They deliberate on power through wit, emotional intelligence, and decisive action. Through narratives, he foregrounds Women's subtle negotiations of patriarchal constraints, offering a lens into the cultural politics of resistance.

Gender and Power in Folk Traditions

A. K. Ramanujan, in his famed compilation, *Folktales from India*, describes a "folktale as a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with every telling,". (xi) Folk narratives of Rajasthan emerge from collective cultural experiences and represent the values of communities that created them. Patriarchy in Rajasthan has historically manifested through rigid gender roles (Sangari and Vaid 12) Sylvia Walby reminds us that they do not merely reflect social arrangements; they contribute to reproducing the structures through which patriarchal authority is sustained. She defines patriarchy not as a fixed attitude but as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (20). In traditional Rajasthani societies, these narratives reinforce established social hierarchies, assigning authority to men and confining women to the domestic sphere. Antonio Gramsci's terms, sites of cultural hegemony: they naturalize the arrangements of power—male authority, female domesticity, caste hierarchy—by embedding them in story, in metaphor, in the pleasures of listening (Gramsci 12). His folk stories "keep the soul of

the folk tale alive" (Sharma, Representation 362). Many layers of deep meaning and sarcasm are hidden behind his simple stories. By portraying the socio-artistic terrain of the Rajasthani society, Detha's stories make sarcastic and poignant comments on inequitable and hierarchical gender relations. (Bose 3). Detha's storytelling foregrounds the complexity of gender relations and exposes the contradictions within patriarchal structures, related to honour, marriage, and social morality. Sharma asserts- Detha's narratives depict women as "multifaceted agents of transformation" (Narratives 35). Bharti posits "Detha's stories are no doubt grounded in the traditional Rajasthani society, but the realities about deeply rooted, inequitable male-female relationships." (150)

Patriarchy and Social Authority in Detha's Stories

The Social environment depicted in Detha's narrative reflects the hierarchical structures of rural Rajasthan, where community leaders embody the moral order of society and authority is vested in figures such as fathers, brothers, and husbands. Trivedi identifies him as a storyteller who "turns folklore into critique" (128), and Sharma situates Detha within broader politics of folk resistance to modernization's homogenization pressure. (74) Through these stories, he highlights how gender power operates within social interactions. Women are expected to conform to a strict code of behaviour, and the reputation of the family depends on the strict adherence to the social norms that emphasise modesty, loyalty, and obedience. His stories invite readers to reconsider the legitimacy of patriarchal authorities. It exposes conflict in individual desires that conflict with social expectations. His stories showcase an underlying revolt brewing among subdued women, leading to intense resistance against male justice.

Female Desire and Social Constraints in "The Dilemma"

'The Dilemma' story depicts a newlywed bride whose merchant husband leaves for a five-year business trip, prioritising profit over their relationship. A ghost impersonates the husband after confessing his identity, and she accepts him due to his genuine love. The love contrasts with the absent human materialism and objectification of her. The riddle in this story centres around the confusion regarding the real husband, where the wife has no say, ending up curbing her own desires under the pressure of social taboos, traditional norms, and patriarchy. Detha's practical words of wisdom and the importance of love are emphasized hinting at the unfortunate destiny of women where she has 'no say' depicted in the lines-

"Even the cattle are not used this way against their wish-they too resist. What choices are given to woman in her life? Till she reaches the funeral ground, she has to adorn the bed chamber and from the bedchamber to only way out leads to funeral pyre." (Detha 120)

Spivak's account of the subaltern is relevant here, though with a specific inflexion. The wife is not voiceless in the sense of being mute; she is voiceless in the sense that the institutions around her have no mechanism for hearing what she says (Spivak 297). Her experience and her declaration—"the love and care I received in the guise of a man brought me joy that is incomparable"—do not register as evidence in the community's deliberation. Trivedi is right that Detha "turns folklore into critique" precisely by making her interiority legible even as society renders it structurally inaudible (Trivedi 128). The story exposes the emptiness of certain social arrangements where personal desires are secondary to economic and familial obligations. It challenges the strict moral codes that ignore women's emotional state. The humanisation of the ghost is like arousing human consciousness into bringing the fast-receding value of love to the surface and

reminding the audience of its real worth- the real relevance. (Tiwari 86)

Gender Construction and Solidarity in Duidha (Double Lives)

The Story 'Double Lives' offers Detha's most explicit engagement with gender construction and dowry economy. Two fathers promise a future marriage between unborn children. When both bear daughters, one father raises his daughter as a son to secure dowry wealth. Masculinity is imposed through attire and recognition. This episode vividly illustrates Butler's theory: gender is socially scripted performance (Butler 179). Society accepts masculinity because it is convincingly enacted. Contemporary feminist scholarship on vernacular narratives highlights proto-queer possibilities within such destabilizations (Dutta 284). Detha's tale anticipates this insight. The father's deception also critiques the dowry economy. Recent analyses identify dowry as a structural mechanism reinforcing lineage and property consolidation (Chakraborty 523).

Bijja says: "*Marriage becomes a transactional contract. The daughter's body is commodified. The turning point occurs when the bride discovers the truth. Rather than react with shame, she expresses empathy and reframes deception as shared injustice. She understood immediately that she had been wronged unknowingly....The father had woven this web of deceit to uphold the false and hollow honour of the vow made at the time of their births and because of his greed of dowry. The poor mother had protested much, but she failed to make him change his mind.*" (Detha 260-261)

This moment embodies what Kumar terms "exit as feminist resistance"—refusal to sustain oppressive systems (Kumar 215). Female solidarity redefines honour as truth and dignity. Their departure from the patriarchal mansion symbolizes ethical emancipation. Society's silence reveals complicity. As Narayan argues, 'vernacular feminism' often operates through narrative repositioning rather than explicit ideology (Narayan 75). Detha's tale exemplifies

this embedded radicalism. His women are not merely ornamental or sacrificial figures; they emerge as interpretive authorities who destabilize patriarchal logic from within. This doubling resonates with Butler's idea of gender as performance, where identity is never singular (Butler 45).

Silence and Moral Withdrawal in "Sonal Bai"

The story 'Sonal Bai' initially foregrounds conventional motifs of beauty and marital expectation. Sonal's golden hair functions as symbolic capital within patriarchal exchange systems. Her body becomes a site of social negotiation. However, the narrative shifts toward her interior consciousness. When confronted with coercive authority, Sonal withdraws emotionally rather than engage in overt rebellion. "*Hugging the tree close she said in painted voice: Climb, climb, re, sandal tree, climb high!*" (Detha 43)

Through Butler's framework, this silence constitutes performative subversion (Butler 140). Silence, culturally coded as feminine compliance, becomes refusal. Sonal's withdrawal destabilizes patriarchal expectations by withholding consent. Spivak's notion of subaltern speech becomes relevant here: though Sonal does not articulate protest, narrative consequence amplifies her moral authority (Spivak 297). Nature imagery reinforces autonomy. Her luminous presence aligns with vitality rather than enclosure. In oral performance, pauses and restraint carry interpretive weight (Ong 45). The audience witnesses injustice, and the narrative's resolution privileges her dignity over male rigidity. Silence thus transforms into ethical resistance.

Honour and Reflexivity in "Lajwanti"

'Lajwanti' interrogates honour culture. The female body functions as a repository of communal prestige. Lajwanti outwardly appears obedient, yet her introspective awareness reveals honour's emotional burden. Butler's concept of repetition clarifies how

gender norms sustain authority (Butler 33). Lajwanti's internal questioning introduces slippage within that repetition. Honour, once naturalized, appears socially constructed. Recent analyses of honour-based systems note their entanglement with economic and kinship control (Chakraborty 520). Detha's narrative anticipates this critique by exposing the moral fragility of honour. The first line of the story "Shyness is good wherever needed." (Detha 98) reveals her silence is not passive endurance but interpretive strength. Vansina's emphasis on adaptive retelling suggests that such tales gradually reshape communal ethics (Vansina 35). Through narrative resolution, dignity displaces rigid masculinity. Honour becomes ethically suspect.

Marriage, Power, and Female Agency in Vijaydan Detha's 'Kenchuli' (The Slough)

In this retelling, Detha examines caste and gender intersections in rural Rajasthan, where a woman's body becomes a site of exploitation amid class divides. The narrative critiques how marriage sanctions unequal power dynamics, allowing men to exert control while women negotiate limited agency. It argues that folklore exposes the duality of social order, questioning patriarchal norms through female perspectives. In story 'The Slough', Laachi confronts age-old, and systemic gendered exploitation, but courageously refuses to tolerate injustice-, by acknowledging her own agency and personhood in confrontation with patriarchal, and marital oppression. (Jangid 41) Detha shows supremacy of power in these lines:

Bhoja maintained, 'Master, it is not I but Laachi who has made a blunder. She does not understand the ways of this place.' (Detha73).

Detha reveals how marriage is often romanticized as the primary source of emotional and financial stability for women; however, it simultaneously ensnares them, reducing them to mere unpaid domestic labour, vulnerable to the violent whims of greedy, powerful men in the village. Lacchi, found her submissive

position where the power dominates and realizes her husband's inability to protect her. Laachi thinks : *"If marriage was just this pumping of flesh, then why did they go holding hands in the front of holy fire? Why were the auspicious song sung before she set foot in the household....The thakur may be master but of his own house?... God only knows how people give up their marriage beds?"* (Detha 77)

Laachi is a powerful figure of resistance who attempts to defend her dignity within a deeply hierarchical rural society. Laachi, the beautiful wife of a Gujar, is widely admired for her exceptional beauty and the news spread everywhere in the village. However, this admiration soon turns into a source of danger, as male desire attempts to claim ownership over her body. Laachi becomes the object of attention for the village Thākur and his associate Bhoja, both of whom assume that their social authority entitles them to possess any woman they desire. Initially, they try to approach her through indirect gestures and subtle manipulations. When these attempts fail, their behaviour becomes openly aggressive, and they demand that she satisfy their sexual desires. Laachi's response is remarkable for its courage. Instead of submitting to feudal authority, she forcefully pushes the Thākur away and strikes him with her elbow, causing him to collapse unconscious. This moment marks a rare act of physical and symbolic resistance against patriarchal power. However, the story reveals that the greatest betrayal Laachi faces comes not only from the feudal elite but also from the patriarchal structure within her own household. When she narrates the incident to her husband, expecting sympathy and support, he reproaches her rather than defending her honour. His reaction to respect the dignity of the Thākur presents the deeply internalized fear of social hierarchy. The husband's submission to feudal authority demonstrates how patriarchal systems are sustained not merely through coercion but also through social conditioning and complicity.

Laachi then attempts to expose Bhoja's continued advances by devising ways to reveal his intentions to her husband. Yet her efforts remain unsuccessful because her husband deliberately avoids acknowledging the reality before him. Gradually disillusioned by his silence and indifference, Laachi loses faith in both her marriage and the possibility of justice. In a moment of despair, she decides to go to Bhoja herself. However, when she encounters him with another woman, she suddenly realizes the futility of the entire situation and the emptiness of male desire.

Detha's narrative highlights the intersection of **gender, caste, and class oppression** in Laachi's experience. As a lower-caste woman, Laachi's vulnerability is intensified by her social position. Unlike upper-caste women who may remain confined within protected domestic spaces, Laachi must engage in everyday labour that exposes her to the gaze and harassment of powerful men. The Thākur and Bhoja consider it their privilege to exploit women like her because of their dominant caste status. This dynamic illustrates how patriarchy and caste hierarchy operate together to reinforce women's subordination.

Laachi's reflections reveal the emotional and psychological consequences of this social structure. She begins to question the very institution of marriage when she realizes that her husband cannot protect her dignity in moments of danger. If he is unable to defend her against humiliation, she wonders why she had chosen to follow him and build a life with him. Her questioning echoes the broader feminist critique articulated by **Simone de Beauvoir**, who argues that patriarchal societies construct women as subordinate "Others," denying them autonomy and agency (26).

As Laachi continues to reflect on her situation, she recognizes that the behaviour of men around her—including her husband—is shaped by deeply embedded social norms. The values of caste hierarchy, community honour,

religious customs, and patriarchal authority regulate individual actions and silence moral resistance. Consequently, Laachi gradually loses all emotional attachment to her marital life. Bhoja's words " *Let Lacchi aand her pride go to hell.*".... *she did not stop at any door nor did she seek help from any man.* (Detha 97)

The story ultimately presents Laachi confronting the enormity of the structures that oppress her. She realizes that the obstacles before her are not limited to individual men but are rooted in an entire network of social institutions – family, caste, religion, and cultural traditions. Her rhetorical question about whether a single woman can challenge such an overwhelming system reveals the tragic limits of individual resistance. In the end, Laachi withdraws from the social world around her, still searching for a space where her dignity can exist in a society fundamentally organized by and for men.

Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Power in "Chouboli"

The Story of 'Chouboli' foregrounds the conflict between male dominance and female agency, and the issue of gender roles and the power mechanisms of patriarchal society. The image of the Thakur, as he shoots arrows into the nose ring of his wife daily, represents the domination of the female body and the normalization of male authority within feudal society. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological reality, but a set of repeated performances shaped by social expectations. (25-34) Millett argues that patriarchy functions as a political institution that legitimizes male dominance over women in both public and private spheres. (25-52) The Thakur embodies this patriarchal authority in its most overt form. Such acts demonstrate how patriarchal societies normalize violence and humiliation as tools for maintaining male supremacy. Bourdieu argues that systems of domination often operate through cultural symbols, traditions, and everyday practices rather than through direct

coercion alone. In many traditional societies, these symbolic practices reinforce the perception that male authority is natural and unquestionable. (23-27) The silent endurance of the Thakurani, is an instance of the fact that women are treated as objects, and follow the rules of patriarchy to subject themselves to violence and humiliation without any retaliation. Simone de Beauvoir has contended that woman is historically constructed as the 'Other' i.e. defined in relation to man rather than as autonomous subject. (26) However, the narrative simultaneously challenges this patriarchal framework through the actions of Seth's niece, who challenges him to prove his intellect to the princess in story chooses not to speak until a suitor demonstrates his worthiness. Her silence is a contrasting reversal in a social environment where women are expected to voice themselves under very limited circumstances, namely consent, deference, and grief. This can be understood as a narrative challenge to the economy of gendered speech. Both speech and silence function not merely as communicative acts but, within patriarchal structures, as mechanisms of power allocation. Men occupy the position of speakers, while women are positioned as those spoken of, spoken to, and inscribed in writing. In a societal context where women are anticipated to express themselves only within strictly defined parameters – consent, deference, grief – her silence represents a striking reversal. In *Chouboli*, the princess's refusal to speak – until a suitor proves his worth – inverts the trope of female passivity. Her silence becomes a weapon, critiquing male entitlement. The suitors who do not meet her challenge fail specifically because they misinterpret her silence as a lack of intellect. The narrative does not necessitate her to advocate for her value; rather, it compels the men surrounding her to realize, through their failures, that they had fundamentally misapprehended the nature of the interaction from the outset. This aspect of the narrative resonates strongly with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Seth's niece performs

masculinity by adopting male clothing and identity, thereby gaining access to spaces and authority that would otherwise be denied to her as a woman. Her success in completing the challenge demonstrates that the qualities traditionally associated with masculinity—courage, intelligence, and leadership—are not inherently male but can be enacted by anyone.

The storytelling strategy employed by the disguised heroine further reinforces the theme of female intellectual power. Instead of relying on physical strength, she narrates a series of riddling tales that provoke debate and compel the silent princess to speak. Each story functions as a test of reasoning rather than brute force, suggesting that intellect and narrative skill can challenge established power structures. In this sense, storytelling becomes a form of resistance, allowing female characters to negotiate and redefine their position within patriarchal society.

Another important dimension of the tale is the interaction between the two women—Chouboli and the disguised Thakurani. Their relationship suggests a subtle form of female solidarity. Although Chouboli is initially portrayed as an object of desire whose hand in marriage is the reward for the challenge, the narrative gradually reveals her own agency through her participation in the debates triggered by the stories. Her responses reflect cultural values and moral reasoning, indicating that she is not merely a passive prize but an active participant in the narrative process.

The resolution of the story also carries symbolic significance. The arrogant Thakur, who initially embodies patriarchal pride, is ultimately humbled by his wife's intelligence. When Seth's niece fulfils her vow by making him drink water in which she has washed her feet and eat chickpea fodder, the power dynamics between husband and wife are temporarily reversed. This moment serves as a critique of male arrogance and highlights the

capacity of women to challenge patriarchal authority through wit and determination.

Thus, when examined through feminist theoretical frameworks, *Chouboli* emerges as more than a traditional folktale. It becomes a narrative that exposes the contradictions of patriarchal power while simultaneously celebrating female agency. By portraying women who use disguise, storytelling, and intellect to overcome male dominance, Vijaydan Detha's retelling of the folktale transforms a popular narrative into a subtle commentary on gender relations and social hierarchy. The theme of female intellectual power is also supported by the storytelling tactic used by the disguised heroine. She does not use physical power but tells a series of riddling stories that make the audience contemplate and make the princess speak. Both stories provide a test of wit rather than a test of strength and imply that intelligence and storytelling ability can confront the existing power structures. In this regard, narration turns into a kind of resistance, letting the female characters negotiate and redefine their role in the society governed by patriarchy.

Conclusion

Detha's corpus thus constitutes a living feminist archive. Resistance here is embedded rather than declarative, communal rather than individualistic. By repositioning rural women as interpreters of justice, he transforms Rajasthani folklore into a vibrant terrain of gendered negotiation and ethical reimagination. His folktales demonstrate how traditional narrative forms can become vehicles for feminist epistemology through strategic transformation rather than wholesale rejection. His stories reveal the radical potential embedded within folkloric conventions while maintaining cultural authenticity and local resonance. Through sophisticated deployment of narrative voice, character development, and structural innovation, his work contributes to what might be called "decolonial feminism"—approaches

that challenge patriarchal authority while honouring indigenous knowledge systems.

This analysis suggests that feminist literary criticism benefits from attention to how narrative techniques themselves carry political implications. Detha's achievement lies not only in creating compelling female characters but in demonstrating how storytelling can function as a form of resistance and transformation. His work offers resources for contemporary feminist theory and practice by showing how local traditions can ground universal aspirations for gender justice.

The continuing relevance of his stories lies in their demonstration that cultural preservation and social transformation need not be opposing goals. Instead, his narratives reveal how deep engagement with traditional forms can enable radical critique and alternative possibilities. In an era of increasing cultural homogenization, his work reminds us that local knowledge systems contain resources for resistance that remain largely untapped by contemporary feminist theory.

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