

Vijaydan Detha's *Duvidha*: Adaptation beyond Transposition to Analogical Expansion

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Paper Received on 03-06-2026, Accepted on 03-07-2026
Published on 04-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.06

Abstract:

Vijaydan Detha is a celebrated writer whose stories are adaptations of the oral traditions and folktales of Rajasthan. His much-acclaimed short story, *Duvidha*, is multifariously translated into Hindi and English, besides being twice adapted into films as 'Duvidha' (1973) by Mani Kaul and as 'Paheli' (2005) by Amol Palekar. Interpreted as 'The Dilemma' in English, *Duvidha* explores the choices and intricacies confronted by a woman in particular, in a patriarchal society. The newly wed woman protagonist faces the predicament of choosing between her estranged husband and the ghost in the garb of her husband. Having yielded to her personal desires of embracing the life with the ghost husband, she defies the societal expectations for women within the traditional framework of marriage. This defiance, the *duvidha*, is finally resolved by a shepherd's wisdom, that bottles the ghost and so a woman's passion and aspirations and discards into the waters thereby ascertaining her allegiance to her wedded husband. Mani Kaul's cinematic adaptation of Detha's story, titled again as *Duvidha*, can be viewed in the form of a transposition vis-à-vis its close-to-literal translation of the source text to the screen. Whereas, Amol Palekar's film *Paheli* is more of an analogical expansion of *Duvidha*, wherein the core narrative goes beyond simply retelling the original storyline and adds parallel accounts, new characters and events to the extent of translating it into a novel and modern narrative. In the context of the present work, the paper understudy seeks to examine how these film adaptations of the literary texts are not merely derivative versions but complex interpretations shaped by creative reimagining of the directors, who are authors themselves.

Keywords: *Duvidha*, Dilemma, *Paheli*, interpretation, adaptation, transposition, analogical expansion

Folktales are oral traditions passed down through generations. They are the “travelling metaphors”, says A. K. Ramanujan, that find “a new meaning with each new telling.” Folktales travel across times and evolve with every retelling, reflecting the customs, beliefs and knowledge of a culture. The writers are largely drawn to folktales for their rich storytelling potential, their ability to explore universal themes and their role in preserving cultural heritage. For a litterateur like Vijaydan Detha, hailing from the Rajasthani Charan community, a lineage traditionally associated with oral storytelling; fascination with folktales comes naturally to him. He is a celebrated writer of native intellect whose stories are adaptations of the oral traditions and folktales of Rajasthan. He collects his narratives from the local milieu abounding in sand particles of desert, *baoli* stepwells, cool shades of *khejari* trees, massive havelis and recreates a panorama of human ambitions and desires along with man’s annoyance and resistance against the established social norms. In choosing to pen down the collective consciousness conserved in oral tradition of folktales; he subscribes to his native Rajasthani dialect. This is primarily to assert and preserve his indigenous culture and to prevent it from being considered as marginalized. Besides, writing in his local vernacular, allows him to grab the nuances and subtleties of expression and storytelling style of the region, making his work more authentic and relatable to the native people. Nishat Zaidi reviews Detha’s role as that of “a true storyteller who always meddles with these “travelling metaphors” and instills new meanings in them to appeal to his audiences.” Like a true craftsman, Detha refurbishes his narratives with contemporary themes to appeal to the modern minds. The timeless themes of his stories dealing with love, greed, fate, social justice, and his engaging narratives offering unique perspectives on Rajasthani folk culture, have led to the interpretation of his works in different languages.

Detha’s much acclaimed short story understudy, *Duvidha*, originally written in Rajasthani, is variously translated into Hindi by the same title and into English as *The Dilemma*. Later, it goes on to be adapted on-screen firstly, by the director Mani Kaul, as *Duvidha* in 1973 and secondly by Amol Palekar as *Paheli* in 2005. That is to say, the same plot finds adaptation by three individuals at three different points of time. One has taken from the oral storytelling tradition of Rajasthan and penned a short story in Rajasthani, whereas, the other two have drawn from this written text and transformed it into audio-visual versions, in their own distinctive ways, on screen. This study provides appropriate ground for the application of auteur theory of filmmaking in order to critically examine the narrative in films and short story. Named after the French term ‘auteur’ implying author, this theory identifies the

person who is the director of a film, as the author. It asserts that the director is the primary creative force behind a film, who narrates the story from his point of view and is no less than the maker or the author of that film. Alexander Astruc, a French filmmaker and critic formulated the concept of 'camera-stylo' or camera pen arguing that the camera could be used as a writing tool that allows directors to express their individual opinion and artistic vision directly onto the film. The directors are the artists all of their own, who use the camera as the writers use their pen, so they can easily be regarded as auteur.

The paper understudy, attempts to explore how the adaptation of the source folktale meets the creative reimagining of the author/ directors who write the story on paper/ on the celluloid and the end results take on a distinct auteur form. Taken in adaptation from Rajasthani folktale; Detha's short story's English version, *The Dilemma*, Mani Kaul's cinematic version *Duvidha* and Amol Palekar's contemporary film, *Paheli*, all share the core plot of a young bride's experience with a ghost disguised as her husband. Enamored by the bride's beauty, the ghost fancies possessing the groom's body and substituting him in absentia, as the latter sets off to make a fortune deserting his newly wed wife. The ghost is beset with a dilemma of acting on his desire or respecting the sanctity of marriage and the place of a husband. He deceives everyone and reveals his identity to the bride, now putting her in a dilemma, in a state where, "No woman could ever have had to solve such a riddle." Oppressed by her past of a subjugated stereotypical woman, who had absolutely no say in any matter of her life, now dares to defy the societal expectations for women within the traditional framework of marriage. Evidently, she yields to her personal desires of choosing the life with the ghost husband. This defiance, the dilemma, is finally resolved by a shepherd's wisdom, that bottles the ghost and so a woman's passion and aspirations and discards into the waters thereby ascertaining her allegiance to her wedded husband. Detha's story ends on an ambiguous note as the bride is ridden with guilt and confusion. She is left to wonder if women are "allowed to have any will of their own." Though she is hopeful that her sufferings will not go in vain and her new-born girl will never get to endure her mother's ordeal.

Mani Kaul's film adaptation of this story titled *Duvidha*, is more of a work of transposition that aims at close-to-literal translation of the source text to the screen. Though the final slide of the opening credits of the film in *Devnagari* boldly proclaims – *Mani Kaul dwara kalpit chhavi* implying that it is a film imagined by the director Mani Kaul. This claim sets it apart from Detha's version of the short story. So, while striving to maintain the core narrative and plot features of the original, the

film adds new shades to it and can also be regarded as the work of transcreation. Unlike Detha's crystal clear narration lending a greater visualization to the readers, Mani Kaul's portrayal runs through an interplay of static stills and fixed frames where narration and dialogues appear alternatively. The narration largely describes the actions and leaves room for the audience to perceive beyond what is visible on screen. The actors recite the lines with languorous indolence causing all the dialogues appear rare and far. This complements with the impassive acting style of the characters which is quintessential of Mani Kaul's style. Interestingly, Detha's tale does not reveal the gender of the narrator, whereas, Kaul balances the narration by more or less, an equal use of male and female voices in keeping with the demand of the scene.

The cinematic adaptation in Kaul's *Duvidha* represents his unique vision encompassing all the visual elements within a shot and his artistic style, known as *mise-en-scene*, a powerful tool of auteur directors. The bride's image is carefully crafted through a majority of closeups of her veiled face, her downcast eyes, her head bent to a submissive acceptance to bring out her internal state and societal constraints. The use of red color in her attire, her large bindi matched with her heavily kohled eyes denote the wedding fervor and entrapment, while, the use of stark white walls and deep contrasting colors signify bride's internal conflict. Her simple naïve desires are conveyed through the image of *dhaloo* or red berries that she gathers from the thorny shrubs and lets them go off her palms once she learns about the groom's plan of deserting her on business grounds soon after their marriage. The ghost serves as a potent symbol of suppressed feminine desire and defiance of patriarchal and traditional feudal structures. It encapsulates a woman's hidden love, identity, dreams and aspirations that remain unacknowledged in society, and if at all, these have to manifest, it is only through the medium of someone as surreal as a ghost whose existence can easily be denied or set aside.

Mani Kaul's preference of form and cinematic language over content in *Duvidha* is even more visible in his unique pattern of gestural symbolism where shots of static stills on hands and objects precede emotions on the faces of the characters. He uses several frames involving the hands when the gold coins are transferred every morning between the ghost and the father. It is interesting to see the exchange happening only through hands in the entire frame. Likewise, towards the end, when the shepherd dispenses justice by trapping the ghost in the leather bag, the camera focuses exclusively on the hands holding the bag and does away with unnecessary details of the scene. So, Mani Kaul's adaptation of Detha's *Duvidha*, while based on

the same plot, emphasizes formalist design and explores the complexities of desire and social constructs through the lens of metaphysical love.

“True literature is timeless and can be interpreted in different ways”, observes Vijaydan Detha as his short story *Duvidha* finds adaptation in another film called *Paheli* directed by Amol Palekar. The film is more of an analogical expansion of *Duvidha* wherein, the core narrative goes beyond simply retelling the original storyline and adds parallel accounts, new characters and events to the extent of translating itself into a new and modern narrative. Mani Kaul's use of minimalistic, symbolic and experimental approach in *Duvidha*, is substituted by Palekar's fantastical, visually rich and emotionally engaging adaptation in *Paheli*, where the main protagonists, a young couple, have a distinct identity, and are known by the names Kishanlal and Lachchi, unlike their earlier references as ‘the merchant's son and his bride.’ The central analogy is the contrast between the ghost and the lawful husband, Kishanlal, representing love and a woman's need for emotional fulfillment as opposed to societal expectation and obligations. It unfolds as Lachchi finds company with the passionately obsessed and adoring ghost in the absence of her pragmatic and emotionally repressed husband. The analogy is finally resolved as the film culminates in an uncanny merger of the heart-driven ghost with the mind-driven husband, rendering Lachchi genuine love, companionship and emotional fulfillment she craved. This marks the subversion of conventional and tragic ending of its source scripts where the bride is forced back to her suppressed reality, and goes on to provide a more convincing and empowering closure to Lachchi with an assertion that genuine love can become a reality and not remain just an illusion.

Amol Palekar's *Paheli* effectively combines visually striking mise-en-scene as regards the use of cultural elements to create a unique cinematic experience. The narrative of the film is interestingly framed by the two puppet narrators that serve as cultural custodians drawing parallels to traditional folktale narration and lending a magical, gossiping trait to the fantasy world. Their ubiquitous presence and commentary steer the audience through the plot's fairy-tale elements and character dilemmas providing an alternative perspective of events. The pleasing manoeuvres of the protagonists partaking in a puppet dance, displaying the end credits of the film, bring alive this dynamic art form. Moreover, the inclusion of camel race, a pivotal moment, where the ghost uses magic tricks to win the race for reclaiming family's lost honour, adds native colour and vibrance to the cultural aspect of the story.

In attempting to translate Detha's folktale for a new age millennial audience, *Paheli* introduces parallel stories and a more prominent presence of additional

characters to enhance the narrative. The inclusion of subplot of the Seth's fugitive elder son and his abandoned wife, Gajrobai gives an added dimension and insight into the main plot. She provides a counterfoil to Lachchi, who would otherwise have served as her younger version and met with the same fate had the ghost not entered her life and had she not conceded to his yearnings. The addition of this new character underscores the film's broader social commentary on the theme of abandonment and loneliness experienced by many women, adding a depth to the main story.

Palekar's film *Paheli*, as aforesaid, largely gives in to the demands of the commercial cinema and redefines its source versions by reinterpreting the entire text and changing the end of the story. It offers an easy and progressive solution to the mind-boggling dilemma of its earlier adaptations by making the lovable 'preetwala' ghost enter Lachchi's lawful husband, Kishanlal's body, validating the deserted wife's desire for happiness outside the bounds of conventional marriage and the ghost's illicit craving for the woman's love. It is also suggestive of a positive transformation of an acquisitive and impassive husband into an ideal and romantic one.

By and large, in attempting to assess Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* and Amol Palekar's *Paheli* as cinematic versions of Vijaydan Detha's short story *Duvidha*, through the traditional framework of fidelity criticism, both appear to offer contrasting approaches to adapting the original folklore source. However, in their adherence to the source text, both the films share the core plot of a woman finding love and companionship with a ghost impersonating her abandoned husband. They explore the common themes of loneliness, female autonomy, suppressed desires and the conflict between societal norms and personal identity. Nevertheless, as fidelity can extend beyond a literal retelling; in Kaul's *Duvidha*, it lies in capturing the folkloric spirit of the tale through minimalistic and symbolic approach of parallel cinema. Whereas in *Paheli*, fidelity is rooted in the act of preserving the story's fantastical nature through songs and visual grandeur of mainstream cinema. The central divergence of both the adaptations features in their final outcomes, where Mani Kaul's *Duvidha* strictly adheres to its source text by ending with a stark, conventional portrayal of a woman's pathetic resignation to her fate. On the other hand, Amol Palekar's *Paheli* significantly deviates from the source text and offers a more redeemed and liberated interpretation in keeping with contemporary sensibilities. Joy Gould Boyum, author and Professor of Humanities Education at New York University rightly observes,

“In assessing an adaptation, we are never really comparing book with film, but an interpretation with an interpretation...An adaptation is always, whatever else it may be, an interpretation.”

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