

“Subaltern Enchantment and Cultural Resistance in Vijaydan Detha’s Stories”

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to provide an insight into the interplay of magic realism and folk imagination in Vijaydan Detha’s translated work, from Chouboli and Short Stories, “The Dilemma” (Duvidha, year of publication will look good here) and “Press the Sap, Light the Lamp” (Resh Ras, Batti bal year of publication). These two seminal stories integrate supernatural elements into the fabric of everyday village life to address issues of gender, emotional neglect, and individual agency. Shedding light on the singular allure of folk literature of Rajasthan, the article situates these folk narratives as critical interventions in the global discourse on magic realism and gendered subjectivity.

Key Words: Folklore, Magic Realism, Gender Study, Vijay Dan Detha.

Introduction

Man is a social animal, and intrinsically, he cannot keep his experiences, emotions, observations, ideas, and imagination to himself, but on the contrary, he invariably strives to express them through many channels where he can verbalise his sociality. The richness of his expression encompasses a variety of forms for building connections and understanding in society. Telling tales has been an enduring and fundamental form of human expression since time immemorial. These tales, nuanced by cultural, social, and historical factors, are referred to as folklore. With no claim of authorship attached to them, they are an objective narration of a culture or a group belonging to the same background. As a means of transmitting cultural values, history and social customs, they travel across time, weaving a fabric of collective consciousness with their vast shades of cultural codes and values. During this journey, the content may change, but the message and context do not rather, they get embellished with each telling. A.K. Ramanujan writes that a folktale “carries some of its cultural context within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with every telling” (1). Spoken and shared in native languages, they not only reflect social values and morals of the time but also provide a rich source of entertainment, education, and cultural preservation. A writer, guided

by the paramount desire to transcribe the “relics of unrecorded past” (Burns 2), into literary creation with some degree of aesthetic and artistic skill, puts these tales into text. He ensures being efficient in oratory with the skill of adopting his voice to a myriad of characters in the folktale, as the characters in stories belong to different spheres of life moving through the fluidity of time, and adapting to the shifting, cultural, social and artistic landscape that defines each era. He seeks psychological insights into people and events: to re-create plots and characters befitting contemporary relevance, to make them adaptable, immersive and thought-provoking across generations, and to reach to the hearts of readers. Vijaydan Detha, a beloved figure in Rajasthan for reinventing Rajasthani folklore, has meticulously combined the “rollicking irreverence of folktales with the polish of literary stories”(Chouboli 7), “going into the greater detail to establish atmosphere, introducing commentary that conveyed psychological insight into a character”(Chouboli 10). The inherent dynamism of folktales, with their resilience and ability to adapt to the context of contemporary times, is fully harnessed by him. Detha has revitalised the oral literature of Rajasthan, reflecting the socio-political concerns of the time through modern literary conventions without losing cultural specifics. A writer exercises, his own ‘individual talent’ in the manner of presentation and selection of perspective and subject matter, likewise, Detha, transmuting oral form into a new medium of writing, does not compromise with the reductive role of transcribing as they were narrated to him, rather instills new meaning in them to appeal to the modern mind.

Dan Detha, born in Jodhpur in Rajasthan, belonged to the Charan community. He inherited a creative legacy from his father, who was a poet and who inspired him to become a writer. Influenced by Russian literature, he returned to his native village Borunda and decided to write in Rajasthani. For decades, he has received accolades for his contributions to Rajasthan cultural circles as a founder of Rupayan Sansthan, which works to revitalize the folk culture of Rajasthan. In 2005, he earned much recognition with the release of the Bollywood film Paheli, adapted from his story, “Duvidha”. A proud recipient of the Katha Chudamani award and Padma Shri award, Detha has, to his credit, two novels and 800 stories, which are translated into many languages and ported into the world of audio-visual media as well. His stories are a confluence of the long-lasting oral traditions and modern genre of short stories in which there is no sermonizing; in which modern techniques are incorporated for contemporaneity, and which, unlike folklore, is meant for readers, not listeners. Retaining the malleable essence of folk tales, Detha has reframed the tales within shifting artistic paradigms; ensuring their survival, not as the relic of the past but as a living text, reflecting the resilience of cultural tradition, and their ability to adapt to new context; bridging past and present; mirroring societal norms; ensuring essential continuity and incorporating modern elements of magical realism, psychological realism and social critique. The present paper investigates how Detha employs magic realism in his works as a powerful tool for social critique, challenging dominant discourse on gender, class, and tradition, using the surreal to highlight the contradictions within rigid societal structures.

Theoretical Background

In contemporary literary criticism, the term magic realism“ designates perhaps the most important contemporary trend in international fiction”(Faris,1). It emerged as a response to the tumultuous aftermath of World War I and has its origin in folk tales and storytelling. In a magic realist work, fantasy slips into seemingly realistic life, putting less focus on fantastic elements of the story and more on what those elements mean as a medium to external or some kind of internal conflict or dilemma. In 1925, French Roh gave the term “Magischer Realismus” (cite the source here) to define a realistic presentation within an air of mystery and subtle fantasy. The genre gained worldwide recognition with García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Influenced with Kafka’s “Metamorphosis”, in which Gregor Samsa awakes one morning to find he has turned into a giant insect, García in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, created a world where a very old man with enormous wings, Palayo finds an angel with huge Buzzard wings, dirty and half plucked in his courtyard after a rainstorm, a world where ghost converse with living beings, endless rain, flying carpets, and ports to heaven, and still the extraordinary is firmly rooted in the ordinary, highlighting the very real kind of magic that exist in our daily lives. In India, magic realism finds a natural home within the vast corpus of folk tales, oral histories, and mythologies. Here, the supernatural—spirits, divine interventions, or shape-shifting animals—is not a rupture from reality but rather an integrated dimension of it. Vijay Dan Detha exemplifies this synthesis as his narratives explore the richness of folk epistemologies, articulating the subtle happenings in rural India.

Magic realism, as discussed before, might have been coined by French Roh and later redefined in the literary arena by Western and Indian authors but its roots are global and diverse, extending into indigenous storytelling traditions that have long embraced supernatural phenomena as intrinsic to human experience and folktales are permeated with unbelievable characters and happenings placed in real and imaginary environments. “Things, very strange things happen in folk tales, and there is never much attention given to the whys and wherefores” (Silver 5). Detha draws his readers into the complex and quirky world of the common folk of Rajasthan, while bringing to life the magic realism of folklore. The landscape of his narrative world is populated by a gamut of characters, trees, animals, the wind, ghosts, gods and goddesses, exploring existence in varied manifestations.

The study uses a qualitative research approach, focusing on the textual analysis of the two stories “The Dilemma” and “ Press the Sap and Light the Lamp”, from the translated work *Chouboli and Short Stories* by Christi A Merrill. The research follows two main steps: First, understanding the folk traditions as a means of propagating cultural legacy. Second, to present an insight into the representations of magic realism in the selected narratives of Detha.

The plot of the story “Dilemma”:

The story, “Duvidha”, translated as “Dilemma”, is based on a folk tale about marriage and female desire for love. A wealthy son, returning from the joyous occasion of the marriage

of his son, decides to halt in the cool shade of a khejadi tree. A ghost that inhabits the khejadi tree is entranced by the bride's beauty. Meanwhile, the groom, sitting inside the ox-cart that is bringing the newlyweds, is engrossed in taxing his brain to clear accounts for all the wedding expenses. The bride's expectations of marital love are quashed when the groom takes the arbitrary decision of his departure to leave for a distant town for business for five years without even consummating the marriage. The ghost, already smitten by the bride's beauty, assumes the form of the husband and shows up at the family, making an excuse to the father, but he tells the truth to the bride and asks her to make her decision. She embraces the bliss of love for four years. The story takes a turn when the husband returns, leaving everyone astonished. A shepherd with his wisdom puts the ghost into a water-bag and is thrown forever. With the departure of the ghost, the bride's temporary bliss gets crushed under the wheel of patriarchy.

The plot of the story “Press the Sap, Light the Lamp”:

A Thakur who has just got married leaves his newlywed bride, owing to his obligation to return to court. The Thakurani's earnest wish to take her away with him is quashed, and he departs, leaving her with a blaze in her heart “like a live coal, following out her inside” (Chouboli 92). A cobra, tracking the horse's trail, steps into the bridal chamber of Thakurani, but is grabbed by the tail with her gentle hand. The Thakurani asks the cobra to live with her, and it bends to her will. With the touch of her lips, the cobra turns into a virile young man and turns back into a cobra as the sun rises. Both enjoy the immortal nectar of love, seeped into their lives. As fate could have it, the Thakur, drunk with desire, lands at the Fort, but she guides the cobra to send him onto the next world with its mortal bite. As soon as cobra flares its hood to deliver the mortal bite, it is slashed into four pieces with the single blow of the sword of the Thakur. The Thakurani decides to avenge this murder and pours the juices from the pieces of the cobra into a silver lamp with a wick of silk attached to it and puts the wrung-out remains under the bed. She asks him to solve a riddle, and the Thakur walks right into her trap of promising her that neither will he have anything pass his lips nor lay his hand on her until he solves her riddle. The Thakur's sister gets to know the truth of the love between the cobra and the Thakurani. She solves the riddle and reveals the infidelity to his brother, who, in rage, cuts off the head of his wife with the same sword that had cut her lover to pieces. The Thakurani dies smiling, as her life has been rendered worthwhile.

In both stories, Detha's masterful deployment blurs the boundaries between magic and mundane to inhabit a world where magic is woven into the fabric of everyday life. By presenting the impossible as plausible, these two tales present a setting where the surreal becomes tangible. In “Dilemma”, the bride is loved by a ghost who is readily accepted as commonplace. The ghost, the “sprocket by means of which action gets going” (cite the source), is treated as a living entity. He lives life like any other human being: “he helped everyone... He was always courteous, always polite... People's hearts filled with joy, just

taking his name (Chouboli 64). Thus, his presence is not a fantastical element that mesmerizes or needs to be explained, but is a natural part of the world. He is “completely at home in the Haveli” (Chouboli 165). The inclusion of ghosts is accepted with a calm and rather rational understanding, with no iota of disbelief. In “Press the Sap Light the lamp”, the snake is not situated in a far-off land of fantasy, but grounded in a familiar world of a woman who is left alone on her wedding night itself. It is accepted as normal, especially as it emerges from indigenous Indian epistemologies and becomes the medium with which the story moves with ease. He, instead of reacting with fear or scepticism, accepts its presence with love. “She served him saffron-scented milk from a golden bowl, and she herself drank the milk he left over. Then, the moment twilight succumbed to the darkness, she became one with the viral young men’s heart” (Chouboli 178). This nonchalant acceptance, presented without any narrative shock or disbelief, is treated as part of the everyday fabric of life, reflecting the folk beliefs and oral traditions of rural Rajasthan. In both stories, Detha does not attempt to explain the magical elements through rational metaphors. There is no effort to justify how a ghost impregnates a woman and how a snake becomes a man. This deliberate absence of explanation ensures that the magical is treated with the same ontological status as the real.

Detha’s amalgamation of magic and reality gives way to the exploration of deeper emotions and themes that surpass insipid realism, while still grounding the story in a rational world. The story “Dilemma” explores the themes of female aspirations through the supernatural agency of a ghost-lover, which, as an extended metaphor, helps to portray the feminine desire and revolt to remove the emotional void in life. The bride wants to enjoy her life with love and questions Seth’s son, “Did human beings exist for the sake of wealth, or was wealth for human beings? What was more precious – gold, or a living body?” (Chouboli 153), but the groom like a real patriarch crushes her emotions, telling her “How she should maintain the owner of the house. That she should look after her in-laws properly,” (153). The ghost becomes an articulation of the female self and dramatises internal and external psychology. The predicament of the ghost vanishes away into oblivion as the bride’s dilemma of prioritising her desires over social norms takes the central position in the story. While the act of consciously choosing to enjoy a conjugal life with the ghost suddenly provides the woman with a choice that she was devoid of until that moment. Her choice to accept him as her husband symbolises a subtle revolt against the societal restrictions thrust upon her, as the real husband is emotionally unavailable, prioritising money over love, whereas the ghost, by contrast, is caring and emotionally available. His presence debunks the patriarchal logic of marriage that privileges rituals and customs over emotional fulfilment. But the marital bliss and love she experiences with the ghost prove to be ephemeral as the element of fate again becomes the controlling agency. The ghost is finally caught as the “real husband” returns to the village. The intervention of a shepherd who exorcises the spirit signifies the confinement of women’s temporal bliss, suffocated in a patriarchal bag. Throwing the water bag in the river is symbolic of women’s desire to eventually submit their

existence to an indifferent societal order. She is left with “emptiness in her eyes, emptiness in her heart” (Chouboli 183).

Similarly, “Press the Sap, Light the Lamp” presents a thematically parallel yet narratively bolder exploration of feminine desire. Unlike *Dilemma*, this story does not pivot around ethical hesitation; rather, it asserts the legitimacy of emotional fulfilment outside socially prescribed norms. The woman’s emotions are considered unimportant by her husband. In his absence, the dissatisfied passion of love becomes excruciatingly painful. Her unmet longing for love and companionship leads her to alter the natural occurrence and to discard loyalty expected from women. She says: “I would not fear even a snake if it meant getting to life’s pleasure” (Chouboli 92). She becomes vocal about her needs, “a Naagin is hissing in my heart. You cannot see her, but your heart has melded with mine” (Chouboli 92). Negating the glory of self-sacrifice that legitimises and celebrates the absolute devotion in women, she prefers the snake-love over her unworthy husband. Detha explores the extremity of feminine love, depicting its intensity, power and capacity for self-expression. The desires and emotions of the women are presented as complex and nuanced: “women’s hearts are such that they can fall in love with a snake, you don’t trust these lips of mine? Then there is nothing in the world you can trust (Chouboli 94). She becomes a very strong voice against male injustice, presenting her revolt in deciding to get her husband killed and later to avenge the murder of her snake-lover. The master stroke of the story is her witty trap of a riddle, which has always been a consistent part of the narrative, serving as a tool to test wit and intelligence. Magic realism in these stories serves as a lens amplifying the nature of desire, fulfilment, and justice. The supernatural is not employed as a fantastical element but as a means of addressing the emotional voids created by social neglect and patriarchal oppression. By rendering these liminal spaces visible, Detha’s tales invite readers to reconsider definitions of reality, legitimacy, and morality within a culturally situated framework.

The two stories serving as fertile ground for exploring ethical complexities within indigenous frameworks, does not refer to mere moral messaging but extends to the deeper structures of human relationships to investigate the nuanced ways in which ethical representations subvert conventional moral binaries, and reimagine ethical subjectivity through magic realism which runs as an epistemic lens accommodating both the material and the metaphysical, the real and the surreal to pierce through rigid societal structures and access deeper emotional and moral truths. In “*Dilemma*”, the ghost, a supernatural entity, is ethically rich. He listens, cares, and acts with more humanity than the legal husband who is socially entitled but emotionally absent. What might superficially appear to be an act of deception unfolds into a profound ethical inquiry into love, desire, consent, and identity. As Martha Nussbaum observes, “Love... must ask what kind of person someone is... what attachments they have, what sufferings they undergo” (317). The ghost, despite being ontologically nonexistent, fulfils these emotional parameters. He confesses his real identity only to the bride, “but my conscience would not let me do that. How would I hide the truth from

myself?” (Chouboli 161). He becomes the embodiment of moral values and love. Detha shows how human beings are engrossed in worldly affairs, undermining the importance of love. The ghost, being deeply in love, even forgets that he is a ghost in human form. He says, “the only thing in this world is love, only love..... There is no equal happiness. But you humans are caught in a different web. You are busy cramming down all the food you can, breathing all the air you can, making all the money you can, before death comes and takes your soul away” (180). Through this, Detha ironically pointed out how human beings ignore the real essence of life in their futile chase of materialistic gains. Tarun Tapas rightly observes the role of spirits in providing some dialectic elements to follow human beings. “Sometimes, a supernatural agent is seen to provide some moral lesson for humans, The story concerns the neglect of a woman by her husband in favour of earning money, and a ghost is introduced to show how far things can go wrong. This ghost ultimately teaches the highest moral and, through its agency, the narrator strongly conveys what is missing in a money-making society (Tapas, 223). In “Press the Sap, Light the Lamp”, the woman’s love—tender, consensual, and compassionate—contrasts sharply with the neglect she faces from her human husband. Her vulnerability is not treated as victimhood but as a space of longing and spiritual openness. The serpent does not exploit the woman’s loneliness but rather responds to her unspoken emotional needs with gentleness and respect. Her initiation into love is an act of emotional discernment and ethical choice. Detha dignifies her decision, presenting her not as a deviant but as an ethical subject navigating loneliness and care within a morally barren social structure. The title—Press the Sap, Light the Lamp—itself is suggestive of emotional nurturing: the pressing of life’s essence and the lighting of spiritual illumination.

In both stories, patriarchal neglect underscores the gendered ethics of abandonment. Socially, the men are blameless; ethically, they are culpable. Detha’s fiction does exactly this. Meanwhile, the women, who form relationships outside societal norms, are portrayed not as fallen but as morally awakened. As Carol Gilligan argues, “an ethics of care is grounded in voice and response, in relationship and interdependence” (Gilligan 30). These stories might appear to blur the lines between the moral and immoral; however, through a deeper lens, they expose a form of ethical realism that privileges human empathy and choice and destabilise hegemonic logics of morality by treating the ‘unreal’ as ethically valid and emotionally profound. As Love, that resides in the heart of a ghost and in the skin of a serpent, reminds us that ethical truth often lies beyond the reach of normative binaries and instead resides in the crevices of human vulnerability, longing, and care.

In both stories, patriarchy, manifested through abandonment and emotional neglect and represented through the legal husbands who are absent both physically and emotionally, is critiqued by including magical figures—a ghost and a serpent—who, though fantastical, act with more ethical integrity and care than their human counterparts. This inversion reveals the absurdity of a morality that is tethered more to social convention than to compassion or justice. The stories aligned with feminist ethics shift the moral focus from abstract justice to

concrete relationships of care. As Carol Gilligan argues in *In a Different Voice*, “an ethics of care recognises connection and response rather than detachment and judgment as the basis of moral understanding” (Gilligan 30). Detha’s narratives resonate with this view, as they centre relational ethics over social duty. The magical elements in both stories function not only as narrative devices but as ideological correctives. They force the reader to confront the absurdities of inherited moral structures. If a ghost can be more loving than a husband, or a snake more caring than a man, then surely something is deeply flawed in the social morality that deems such relationships unnatural or immoral. Detha harnesses this folkloric treasure with magic realism, not to amuse, but to ethically destabilise rigid social norms and to articulate suppressed desires.

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