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Folklore: A Panorama of the Womanhood with Special Reference to Selected Folk Stories of Vijaydan Detha

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ABSTRACT: Vijaydan Detha (1 September 1926 – 10 November 2013), also known as Bijji, was a noted Indian writer of Rajasthani literature.^[1] He was a recipient of several awards including the Padma Shri and the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Detha has more than 800 short stories to his credit, which have been translated into English and other languages. With Komal Kothari, he founded Rupayan Sansthan, an institute that documents Rajasthani folklore, art, and music. His literary works include Bataan ri Phulwari (Garden of Tales), a 14-volume collection of stories that draws on folklore in the spoken dialects of Rajasthan. Many of his stories and novels have been adapted for the stage and the screen: adaptations include Mani Kaul's Duvidha (1973),^[2] Habib Tanvir and Shyam Benegal's Charandas Chor (1975),^[3] Prakash Jha's Parinati (1986),^[4] Amol Palekar's Paheli (2005),^[5] Pushpendra Singh's The Honour Keeper (2014),^[6] Dedipya Joshi's Kaanchli Life in a Slough^[7] (2020), Pushpendra Singh's Laila aur Satt Geet (2020)^[8]

KEYWORDS: Vijaydan Detha, folklore, panorama, womanhood, Rajasthani, literary, art, music

I. INTRODUCTION

Vijaydan Detha hailed from the Detha clan of the Charan community. His father Sabaldan Detha and grandfather Jugtitan Detha were also well-known poets of Rajasthan. Detha lost his father and two of his brothers in a feud when he was four years old. At the age of six he moved to Jaitaran (25 km from Borunda), where his brother Sumerdan worked in a civil court and where Detha studied until Class IV. Sumerdan had a transferable job, so Detha moved with him, studying in Bihar and Barmer. It was in Barmer, while competing with another student, Narsingh Rajpurohit, that Detha realised that he wanted to be a writer. Sumerdan later transferred to Jodhpur, where Detha studied at Durbar School.

Detha considered Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay as his first inspiration. He is equally passionate about Anton Chekhov. He was initially critical of Rabindranath Tagore, but he changed his mind after reading Tagore's 'Stri Patra'.^[1,2]

Detha joined college in 1944. By that time, he had already established his name in poetry. However, he credited his success to his cousin brother Kuberan Detha, who had left school after Class X. Detha used to pass off Kuberan's poems as his, and the appreciation he received for those poems made him want to establish his own name as a writer.

One of his first controversial works was Bapu Ke Teen Hatyare, a critique of the work of Harivanshrai Bachchan, Sumitranandan Pant and Narendra Sharma. This trio of authors brought out books about Gandhi within two months of Gandhi's death.

Nathuram Godse may have killed Gandhi physically, but these three writers killed his soul

— Vijaydan Detha, Bapu Ke Teen Hatyare

In 1950–52, Detha read and was inspired by 19th-century Russian literature. That is when he thought to himself: "If you do not want to be a mediocre writer, you should return to your village and write in Rajasthani." By that time, he had already written 1300 poems and 300 short stories.

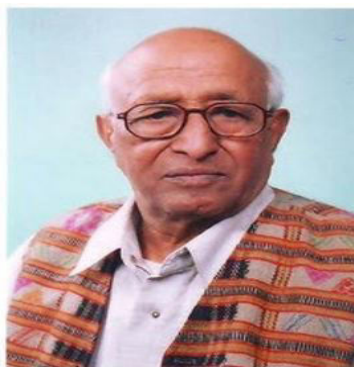
Detha's stories have been adapted into various films and dramas. In 1973, renowned filmmaker Mani Kaul directed Duvidha, based on Detha's story of the same name. The film, much of which was shot in Detha's village Borunda, received worldwide acclaim. Later, Amol Palekar directed Paheli based on the same story, starring Shah Rukh Khan. Paheli was also India's official entry to the Academy Awards. Prakash Jha made Parinati, a film based on



Detha's story. Habib Tanvir adapted his story into one of his most acclaimed plays Charandas Chor, which was later adapted into a film by Shyam Benegal. Later director Pushpendra Singh made a feature film The Honour Keeper on his short story "Lajwanti" and in the year 2020 Writer-Director Dedipya Joshii has made the Hindi-Rajasthani film Kaanchli Life in a Slough & Director Pushpendra Singh also made the Gojri film Laila aur Satt Geet on his famous story 'Kenchuli'.[3,4]

Talking to Mahendra Lalas in India Today, he said, "My land [Rajasthan] is full of stories, whatever I've written is just a drop of the ocean". Detha, was inspired by Shah Govradhan Lal Kabra to write in Rajasthani "till date I have not written in any other language", he said regarding his love for the language. He portrayed the sufferings of the poor in his writings and was also tipped for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2011 which ultimately went to Tomas Tranströmer.^[9] Vijay Dan Detha is survived by four sons and a daughter.

I envy you if you already know of this man, and more so if you have read his stories. A folklorist from Rajasthan's Jodhpur, Detha spent his childhood listening to his grandmother's tales. It is said of him that he spent his life collecting stories from people, especially women, from marginalised sections of the society. Inspired by the likes of Camus, Sartre and Dostoevsky who wrote in regional languages,[5,6] Detha's original writings are in Hindi and dialects of Rajasthani.



Folklore is most commonly defined as consisting of customs, rituals and beliefs carried through generations by word of mouth; they tend to be region-specific and carry moral lessons. Detha did not just tell these tales in beautified language, he modified them to an unrecognizable extent of profundity. His genius lay in his ability to draw upon underlying philosophical insights into human nature. This is captured in his story Anekon Hilters (Many Hitlers), where he provokes his readers to question and address their similarity with the likes of Hitler and propagators of the most heinous crimes that one would naturally feel incompetent of taking part in. Mention and criticism of capitalism, patriarchy, religion and nation states was common in his stories; and his stand against them made him a precious mouthpiece for the marginalised.[7,8]

It is no surprise that despite having won the Padma Shri, having been nominated for the Nobel Prize and after film and theatrical adaptations of his stories, he is still little known in his own country. His significance lies in the wisdom of his tales and, his power, in his savage yet beautifully written attacks on a society like ours wrought with gender based crimes, communalism and obsessive nationalism. Do yourself a favour and allow yourself to be led on and be shown the mirror by Detha, the writer and philosopher we should dearly hold on to.

III. DISCUSSION

Words they are a-plenty. Numbers two or twenty. With the blessings of the lords of words there was once a man weaving them into worlds. Vijaydan Detha, the fabulist, folklorist writer would have been pleased if one were to start talking about him with a chougou – a form of mostly nonsensical rhythm or rhyme he employed in most of his stories much in the oral tradition of storytelling that he found himself most attracted to. That and the language. Language flows in one's blood, he believed. The mind then plays tricks adulterating the language – a victim to the hegemonies and hierarchies languages face in the wake of power and its endless tyranny.[9,10] The writer then resorts to counter that very power with a word and text so mighty it shakes things up.

Vijaydan Detha, popularly known as Bijji, was one such champion of language. Negotiating the promiscuous relationship of language and literature, he wrote much to be read, told and cherished for generations, quite in the spirit



of what he believed stories are meant for. And then on the sad day of November 10, 2013 he passed away. He was 87 years old. I picture him sitting in his room lost in a book, a pencil in his hand. When I last visited him he gave me a copy of one of his story collections with his own comments in the margins. By deliberately writing in Rajasthani, a language yet to be constitutionally recognized in India and considered a poor cousin of the dominant Hindi, as well as compiling folklore, he gave a new life to the language by translating the oral to the written and transforming it richly in the process. His fourteen volume *Batan ri Phulwari* ("A Garden of Stories") is an unparalleled work compiling folklore from the desert state which he adapts with his inimitable style and decorates with commentary, often also citing the source of most of these stories. It is perhaps the only one of its kind available in India. Shying away from notions of ownership and copyright, he always insisted on his role being that of a storyteller as opposed to a story writer. A raconteur of sorts. Literature, like language, belongs to everyone. Stories are a collective wealth that the writer, according to Bijji, sifts through, adds to and mirrors to society. Well illustrated in the fact that he used to pay a daily wage to women in the village who came and told him stories that they shared with each other in angans (courtyards in traditional rajasthani households), or behind closed doors in their veiled and secluded lives as men were out either ploughing fields or amassing wealth in nearby towns. His stories then have a sharp sensibility attributed mostly to the feminine, the music of a whirling sandstorm or as he put it – [11,12] "the stories of the desert – like its sand, fine and transparent." And an imagination of the bonded. His freedom to create, he used to say, came from bondage – the bondage of society, the bondage of languages foreign, the bondage of a caste-ridden feudal existence. A reaching-out, almost Freudian, to his early childhood, as pointed out by several people who know him and his work well, including his own son Kailash Kabeer, who has translated most of his works into Hindi, reveals a strong recognition of the power of the word as a force for social dissent. The leitmotif in his stories being a rebelling against the caste-based feudal system symbolized and perpetrated by powerful brahmins and thakurs (mostly landlords), the systemic hold of power and its inherent nature of exploitation. Anecdotal references and his own candid confessions bring one to the conclusion that his writing was a form of retribution, a pun instead of a gun. The genetic memory inherited as a prodigal son of a family of charans – courtly poets – excelling in their art of metric poetry informs and enriches Bijji's stories and the architecture of his sentence. More than the power of meaning attributed to words he lays an emphasis on the 'arrangement of words' (shabdo ka niyojan as he aptly puts it in Hindi). The form then makes his storytelling unique in ways that leave the reader hooked to a story with its musical, lyrical, visual and sometimes very complex yet mesmerising structures. This same richness of his stories' texture has led to adaptations on stage as well as cinema.

That he chose to start writing in his mother tongue, Rajasthani, and that too after having established himself as a writer writing in Hindi, also came with its own set of challenges. Using idioms and phrases situated in the local presented a uniqueness to his stories and a chance to break free from the languages imposed on him by teachers in his childhood. However, he faced some resistance from his peers writing in the same language, who discredited his colloquial use of the language, which many considered polluting. And then the rather shocking fact of the absence of a Constitutional recognition [13,14] for the language failed to bring his stories to a wider readership. It was in the 1970s however, that Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters, recognised his contribution by awarding him, the first for a Rajasthani writer. This gave an impetus to the language largely and inaccurately considered a dialect of Hindi. Thereafter he got recognition nationally by being awarded some of the most prestigious awards – the Padma Shri, the Sahitya Akademi fellowship and the Katha Chudamani award among many other accolades. A book published by Sahitya Akademi titled *Vijaydan Detha: Rachna Sanchayan*, and edited by his son Kailash Kabeer, contains a comprehensive range of his brilliant short stories, some essays and other writings. A storyteller mastering the short story form, he often mentioned that his thought, among other things, was hugely inspired by Chekov, Tagore and his most beloved Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, but his style he claimed – rather emphatically – to belong to his surroundings, his rural environment, to the inherited lyric of his forefathers. Of dust-laden bookshelves and thirsty throats on a summer afternoon in the small quaint village called Borunda, where he had been living for half a century, collecting stories, re-telling them and inhabiting a cosmos both fantastic and rustic. His stories almost always bubbled with a socio-political undercurrent. A political writer, he insisted on not wearing his politics on his sleeve but enjoyed the layering of it in folds of his stark stories which deal head-on with a wide spectrum of social ills ranging from the oppressed state of women, satipratha – the now banned horrendous tradition which forced the immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre – to the feudal hierarchies still prevalent in a post-independent post-liberalisation India. The subtlety though at times betrayed his pen and he rendered stories with a force that hits the reader irrespective of the contextual reading that might colour it even more radical. That he deals with them in an unconventional manner would be a dangerous allegation that the urban reader often inflicts on a presumed 'simple' rustic, someone categorised to be of a conservative convention. [15]



Take his rather famous story Alekhun Hitler (“Untold Hitlers”) a story of a day in the life of post-independence India sampling the reader with a taste of the modern. Farmers and their new found affluence, the contrast of the urban with the rural and the backdrop suffused with the Hindu karmic ethos (in a rather critical light) informing a collective understanding of the universe for his immediate and national environment. Visual imagery so powerful it recreates landscapes of a still painting interspersed with visuals of cinematic grandeur; the story with its poetic idiom builds up to a crescendo as the protagonist – a cyclist – races alongside the newly acquired tractor of the rich farmer family, symbolism ripe with a critique of a cruel society without sparing the individual responsibility. Or his more popular Duvidha (“The Dilemma”) also adapted to the screen twice, once by the late Mani Kaul and more recently by Amol Palekar (Paheli) – a story that deals with love, adulterous and pure at the same time, of giving voice to a woman’s desire in the physical absence of an indifferent husband, of the prejudices rampant in a society that decides and dictates codes for pre- and post-marital existence. He weaves here an intricate story about a woman falling in love with a ghost who takes on the guise of her husband. She knowingly furthers the masquerade revelling in a clandestine love of an absurd manner where the truth is veiled from all except the two lovers, till one day when the husband returns. Painfully aware of the inevitable the story paints a loss of love – of how one buries desire and hope. That this dealt with adultery is made digestible for a conservative society by making the protagonist a ghost, a non-human. In Bijji’s hands the story takes on a humane role, almost feminine in its handling of love, a bold statement on the woman choosing her fate, her love. And daring to fulfil her desires. This was originally a tribal folk tale from the eastern part of Rajasthan which was apparently narrated to cure patients suffering from a certain kind of fever.

Of the more radical of his stories, though one uses that word with some amount of urban prejudice as I mentioned earlier on in the essay, is his story titled Dohri Joon (Two lives/New life). The story of two women choosing to spend their lives together given the turn of events that brought them together speaks of nothing short of a rebellion against patriarchy, challenges notions of gender and openly celebrates same-sex relationships. One wonders though if Bijji was talking more about the freedom a woman needs from an oppressive marriage? There is an indirect critique of the greed for dowry among the parents and the twist in the tale brings to fore the underlying assertion of a desire to be loved and treated equally. Many Indian feminists have expressed wonder at the rendition of the feminine psyche in this story. Bijji was told by many that ‘only a woman could have written so lucidly about feelings emanating from such inhibited and repressed desire’. The story, my personal favourite, is rich also in language, and shows the expression of love and accompanying lust handled delicately with a suggestive – and at times explicit – sublime eroticism. It was also adapted for the stage in the 1980s.[16]

A more satirical story Putia Chacha (“Uncle Putia”) is peppered with very local humour. It has at its centre a man always found in ‘the company of women’, a neo-Krishna- the flirtatious Hindu God known for his penchant for seducing women- revelling in female attention. The lurking sexual tension and a certain control Putia chacha (uncle) exercises on the teachers in the school that he manages is comical and at times hilarious. The patriarch here being the object of everyone’s humour. The pandering of his desire – to be at the centre of everyone’s attention – by all the women in the school is sure to remind an Indian reader of that one uncle or neighbour who is the butt of all hushed jokes for his apparent machismo, the wannabe alpha-male. His position of this dubious power when threatened by a young woman asserting her desire for his arch-rival presents the reader with an emotional story – both funny and sad. The story is dotted with conversations written in a flow escaping simple dialogue. And several gems of retorts and repartees that Bijji employs famously in a lot of other stories.[17]

IV. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Translating his works is as much a challenge as a delight for any translator who knows Rajasthani. A language with its mostly oral existence, the script being a borrowed Devanagari, poses a challenge, as does his style, which is deliberately colloquial and situated strongly in the local environment with its own smells and sounds. Universal themes relevant to the human condition and of power and powerlessness also manifest in ways very fantastical and other-worldly – talking animals, or ghosts for example. This has however been negotiated brilliantly by Christi A. Merrill and Bijji’s son Kailash Kabeer, who have brought out a two-volume collection titled Chouboli and Other Stories (Published jointly by Fordham University Press, New York and Katha in India). The choice of stories offers a good range of Bijji’s works from the essential folklore to the more topical stories that he wrote prolifically for the last half a century. Bijji



having compiled the idioms of Rajasthani has generously used them and even created newer ones in his stories. This finds its way very loyally and suitably in the translations in these two volumes. Particularly fascinating is the story of Chouboli – a labyrinth of stories within stories true to a storyteller's magic of knitting a quilt of tales, as Bijji described his own craft. Other stories in the collection are equally engaging. 'The Crafty Thief' for example is a lively and gripping tale of a thief who vows never to lie, something that lands him in situations bizarre as well as complex. Other stories include translations of the stories I mentioned earlier as well as some fantastical tales like 'The Dove and the Snake' and some very political ones like 'Weigh your Options' and 'A Hound's Pride.'

A writer for writers and artists, he hoped that his writing offered one the surprise he himself liked to have when he read his own creations. In his 80s he still sat in his study re-reading and correcting his books, re-visiting stories and still getting surprised at what his pen magically poured out over decades of un-tiring and sincere writing. He was mostly shy of narrating in person but his body of work reveals an unearthing of a huge treasure of stories to be shared, cherished, re-told and celebrated. I was most touched and thrilled to hear about Bijji's wonderful stories by an auto-rickshaw driver in Jodhpur, the city closest to his village, who has known of his stories for over forty years and was proud of having once even driven Bijji to some place. This detail is particularly relevant in the light of the fact that many upper class (mostly upper-caste) educated Jodhpuris I met were oblivious of such genius in their vicinity. This could though be considered a reminder also of the reach of Bijji's works beyond the educated elite. Bijji was being considered for the Nobel Prize in 2011. He was unable to write in his last years due to an accident that left his limbs affected. Never missing a chance to offer a witty repartee, he attributed this to mathematical justice: 'the need to stop writing as his input and output according to him seem to have matched well.'

Hailed commonly as the Shakespeare of Rajasthan, a crown that sat uncomfortably on his head as he deserves more than being a parallel, Bijji ever offered you a stale word.[17]

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