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Transgressive Death, Dead and Lifelessness in Vijaydan Detha's Folk Narratives

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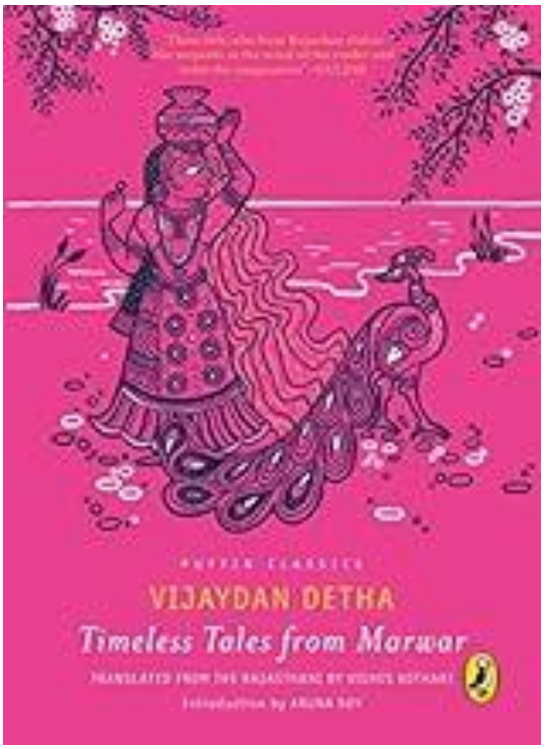

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Abstract

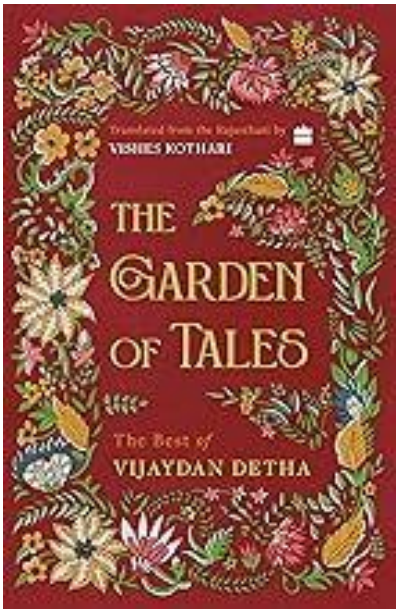
While folktales are stories from and for the (common) folk, they are often transgressive at both literary and socio-cultural level. For instance, the phenomenon of death that holds a close affinity to human beings, at personal and social level both, is not always addressed with the same seriousness, gloominess, and philosophical perspective as the real world of the folk. Death and dead, lifeless bodies, embody myth and mystery transgressing biological and social boundaries. This playful approach is used for different contextual and textual fulfilment. Even

so, the playful transgression itself dispenses the gravitas of the phenomenon of death, especially in socio-cultural contexts. This paper analyses three folktales of Rajasthan, credited to Vijaydan Detha, that engage in such playful transgressions with the idea of lifeless bodies and death. The tales, as examples of Corpse Literature, reveal and question at the same time, the role and influence of folktales in its contribution to the narrative of death. How then does one regard these playful transgressions on death in terms of meaning and discourse?

Keywords: Folk Narratives, Marwar, Vijaydan Detha, Corpse Literature, death, folktales, lifeless bodies, playful transgression

When traced through the yarns of history and literature, the 'corpse' as a text transitions freely to the 'corpse' as a tool. The body and the phenomenon of death are often intertwined to develop genres of horror, gothic and trauma narratives. To be brought together as a disciplinary field of study, 'Corpse Literature' is yet to synthesise the available diversity of approaches, including anthropological and medical. Nevertheless, an ongoing dialogue on the literature of the body, coexists with the ever-growing list of texts and genres that experiment new dimensions of playing with body and death narratives. Disability and trauma narratives, specifically, associate the concept of identity (self and/or social) fervently to the body-mind binary.

This literary symbol of 'body', attached or detached to identity and life, is blurring boundaries of socio-textual sense, while adapting to transgressions as dauntless as the stories of spirit and purgatory. The body runs, not merely against conventional and biological theories, but is also brimming with experimental approaches to metaversal elements. With or without life, a body becomes more than just an entity. A body without life is not necessarily a corpse anymore; the shifting of the spirit, and the phenomenon of the spirit are played with, in renewed artistic enthusiasm.



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Lifeless body here, may refer to both a corpse or a non-living human frame; it pertains to the processes of life to lifelessness and of lifelessness to life, both. Such a body devoid of life, has often been a rich, lively symbol of literary and narrative rigour. Both death and lifeless bodies within literature have been shifting their roles and positions in the meaning-making process. Within a literary enterprise, death is used both as a symbol as in Emily Dickinson's poems, and as a tool as in the 2015 Spanish thriller film *The Corpse of Anna Fritz*. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* upholds a pioneering position in this literary corpus of corpses, constantly broadening approaches to literary representations of death as a phenomenon and dead body as more than just a symbol of death.

In postmodern narratives of cinema and literature, close affinities between death and experimentation are noticed. The trope of life after death is explored to include resurrection, that is no more exclusive to divine beings. Kass Morgan's *The 100* and its cinematic adaptation explore experimentations of this nature where the role of body, consciousness (mind) and consequently death is logical but unconventional. A mixture of technology, indigenous advancements and apocalypse, this unlikely series forms, transfers, and experiments with the medical existence of a human body, integrating narratives and social sense to it. Such transgressive and pro-progressive experimentations and representations of body and death in narrative, invites modifications to the discourses on "body" in literature.

In the "Preface" to *Lingering Shadows: A Literary Journey into Memory and Death*, this affinity between the humans and death is established with apparent clarity:

> ... as humans we have been trained to constantly brood about Death as an inevitable phenomenon. Reverence for the dead is one of the markers of humanity, bound up with the development of societies and cultures. Dramas and films use dead bodies to explore fear, sex, greed, guilt, innocence and grief. (viii)

Death and dead bodies in the narrative structures, therefore, play diversified roles. They have formed and mutilated the conception of various literary genres. It no more appears to function only as a simple plot twist or a conventional ending. It has moved from a non-living and fixed antonym of life to an ongoing phenomenon within the living world. Traces of this could be clearly seen in the early horror texts, both films and stories, like Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, where a ghost-like figure moves around in the narration often confusing the lines between the living world and the world of the dead. Meanwhile, many literary texts, while avoiding the genre of horror altogether, have indulged in the exploration of this 'world of the dead'. George Saunders' 2017 novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, sets the entire narration in the purgatory of a graveyard. Similar to this is Shehan Karunatilaka's *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, the winner of the 2022 Booker Prize.

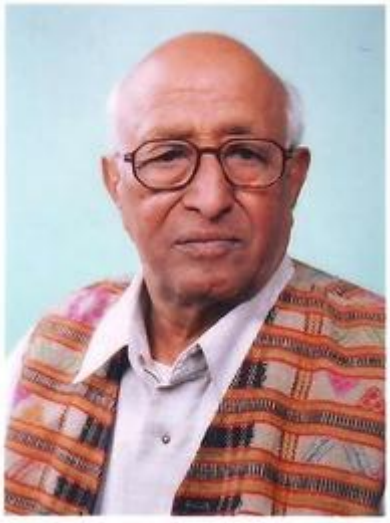
Within this dynamic movement, the lifeless body finds its special place in Indian folklore. The literary and associated role of 'corpse' in narratives of all kinds, has therefore become prone to constant experimentation. The scope of such literature and performative narratives is increasing multi-fold every minute, while the discovery of lost, oral and regional stories of death and dead bodies are simultaneously contributing to this bulbous corpora of Corpse Literature. This corpora has been conceptualised by numerous scholars and with various terms of importance: death, temporality, ghosts, cadaver, corpse, lifeless, body, etc. (Hakola and Kivistö) With contextual difference in meaning, these terms have been associated with literature of death and dead bodies widely, along with studies of various literary genres.

In folktales especially, where playful transgressions (Merrill defines folktales as playful transgressions themselves) are most common, how they synthesise discourses around the deep-seated concerns of socio-cultural nature is a riveting scope of the research. The pro-mystical figurines of witches, ghosts, transforming humans, dolls and animals, slaughtered bodies, etc. have forever been a recurring phenomenon in folk literature.

Folktales as a genre themselves transgress the idea of one life in one body. Here, the author doesn't die, but keeps on shifting. In fact, as Christi A. Merrill puts it, the conventional and western notion of author as the owner doesn't fit to how folktales are constantly shifting owners and are in fact not even communally owned. While folktales do reflect and formulate culture and sense of a community, it works equally well, if not more, on human experiences and communal feeling in general. In this sense, folktales may be both communally owned, and unowned at the same time. The friction between the ownership of folktales metaphorically highlights how lifeless bodies are mystically and unnaturally shifting lives and hence meaning within a folktale.

Terri Windling in "Death in Folklore and Fairy Tales" makes innumerous comments on the nature of alliance between folklore and death. She writes, "there are many tales in which Death is out-witted … The depiction of death as male or female depended on the culture, the times, and the storyteller, but examples of both are widely found in folk tales the world over." When not personified, death -

> moves like a force of nature, invisible and ubiquitous. Death happens … death is not always final; it's sometimes an agent of change and transformation … death is not always an ending, or at least not just an ending. It can have within it the seeds of new life, of change, of transformation — which is what these tales, at their most basic level, are so often all about.



Vijaydan Detha (1926-2013)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijaydan_Detha

Death takes a riddle-like shape in many folk narratives; for instance, when a dead body re-lives, ignoring the scientific impossibility of it. The famous tale of the transposed heads (as narrated by Thomas Mann in his novella of the same name, by Girish Karnad in his two-act play written in Kannada, titled *Hayavadana*, by Somadeva in his collection titled *Kathasaritsagara*, and as recorded by Vijaydan Detha as a tale within the Rajasthani folktale titled *Chouboli*) is one example of how folk and folk-influenced tales deconstruct the realist notions of death and life. There is an easy freedom to what a lifeless body can do within a folk narrative, in contrast to how the newer genres of novels, short stories and poems look at death, often with the utmost seriousness of spirituality, philosophy or simply violence and war.

The broken body, now lifeless, becomes a hopeful point of contention when the only character medically alive urges divine intervention to undo the catastrophe. This particular turning point is depicted and used differently in different narrations to fulfil the author's vision and purpose. The urge for divine intervention is often used as casually in folktales as it was done in Classical Greek drama. However, unlike Classical Greek drama, divine presence is neither common nor an exemplary feature of folklore. Gods, in the documented Rajasthani folklore, for example, are not in constant communication with the human world as is the case in Classical Greek drama.

Yet the divine and the mystical occur as naturally in these folktales, as common sense. The mystical is more evident in Rajasthani folktales than the divine. In one of the folktales, "The Gulgula Tree", recorded by Vijaydan Detha, there is deep-fried food growing on a tree and a daakan (witch) disguises herself to trick the little boy who owns the tree. The story starts with the little boy wishing he never falls short of the ghee laden sweet gulgulas (local Rajasthani dish, similar to sweet fritters) his mother makes. He plants this cooked piece in the earth leading to the growth of a gulgula tree, which he then guards dearly. Although the narrative follows the folk form of rhythm and repetition, the shift from a culturally realistic world to a world filled with unscientific, magical elements is quick and unmarked. The sweet little common boy tricks the daakan eventually, and cooks and feeds the daakan her own daughter. The violence of this act is in stark contrast to the initial description of the boy as a common boy just desiring gulgulas more than anything in the world.

The folktale blurs these lines of real and magic very swiftly. The transgression is apparent, fantastic yet unchallenging to the narrative. These easy shifts enable the folktales to

work the unnatural notions of death and the dead, lifeless bodies around the cultural and social conceptions of life, often regarded as the most prominent theme of folklore. In Detha's other tale "Naagan, May Your Line Prosper", the sethani builds a life size doll of flour dough to fool everyone into believing it to be her twelve-year-old son. This lifeless doll of flour dough is given life when a naag (snake) puts his own jeev (loosely meaning 'life', however would also include references to 'soul' or 'spirit') in the doll.

This mystical shift from a lifeless doll into a living human is another instance in Detha's folktales where life and lifelessness are fluid. This easy fluidity pacifies other concerns and themes of the tale. Without shocking the reader, such transgressions enable a reception of various socio-cultural norms, weaved into the mystical, without conscious attention. In the same tale, we see a naagan's (female snake) empathy towards a newly married bride, and urges her husband, the naag to transfer his life into the doll made of flour dough. The deception on every character's part here, especially towards the bride and the society, is made acquiescent in the midst of these mystical transgressions. No questions of morality or ethics are insinuated.

The simplicity with which Detha's tales record the cultural narration of Rajasthan's folk affects the narration of lifeless bodies in turn. These tales weave together the common folk, their tradition and customs, costumes and food habits, with unreal and unscientific notions of life and death. In another tale titled "The Kelu Tree", we see a sister slaughtered by her brother over an insignificant domestic conflict with her sister-in-law. The ease with which such severe violence is woven, detaches the listeners' sense of relatability of the tale to reality, while still engrossing their attention, awaiting at the same time for the ultimate act of poetic justice. This slaughtered body, which is unceremoniously buried to hide the crime, doesn't dictate the end of the character's life or story. A kelu (most probably banana) tree grows over the burial spot, and the *jaan* (baraat, or the wedding procession of the groom) for the dead sister passes by it. While trying to cut off a branch for wedding rituals, the procession hears a voice from the ground, urging them to not cut the tree. The jeev of the dead girl, now captured in the kelu tree, is only the first shift of life from one body to another. Only when the husband comes up to the tree, does the voice allow him to cut the tree, which in turn frees the jeev of the girl from the kelu tree, and the girl herself emerges, alive. The transmission of the girl's jeev from her own body to the kelu tree and back to her body (in the absence of the old physical body) is both folkloric and mystical. This disinterment brings a sense of poetic justice, if not on the culprits,

at least to the victim. Additionally, such elements, richly and freely captured in the Rajasthani folktales, broadens the discourse on death.

If one can imagine the response and the reception of such a mystical discourse on the folk (audience), one might be able to map the effects of it too. The original function and form of these folktales has been oral. By engaging the audience in an ephemeral world of life-changing and shape-changing bodies, folktales displace the gloominess of death with poetic justice. Death becomes a hopeful and adventurous junction in the literary text, involving a do-undo-redo movement. It is no more the enunciative ominous end, something not to be spoken of, but an anomalous movement of entertainment. Just as certain children's stories draw upon uncanny characters to install and maintain fear of the wild and the unknown, these folktales work to strip fear off the idea of death and lifeless bodies.

The lifeless and mutilated bodies in all the three tales mentioned earlier carry an internal discourse on violence in close connection to both death and the plot. While in the tales, "The Gulgula Tree" and "The Kelu Tree", physical violence in the form of manslaughter is apparent, in "Naagan, May Your Line Prosper" the violence is mental and personal. The desire and pressure of bearing a son carries two-fold aggression on the Seth and Sethani; it devises a negative comment on both a childless marriage and the preference of a male child.

Folktales often move past the traditional and western genres of horror, comedy, tragedy etc. The most common element is in fact poetic justice. It is this literary element of folktales that drives the plot and makes the audience root for a just ending. To weigh the system of justice in these folktales, hence becomes important. In the tale "The Gulgula Tree", violence and slaughter become the act of justice against the cannibalism of the dakkan. Before she murders the boy for her dinner, the boy tricks her by murdering and then cooking the dakkan's daughter for her dinner. The bloodbath here is symbolic of nationalism, where the boy, like a soldier, protects his mother's tree as though it was his mother land. The gulgulas, a regionally savoured dish, represent the culture, which the boy is willing to share with the foreigner (the cannibalistic dakkan), but not to let it be conquered.

In "The Kelu Tree", the sister's happiness is regarded as the responsibility of the brothers, at which not only do they fail terribly, but one of them becomes the executioner of her death. Despite this failure, nature in the form of the tree shelters her and becomes the executioner of her happiness and resurrection to life.

The folk discourse on death begins at various such intersectional plot paths that trace at the same time cultural and sentimental sense of a community; be it the little boy's fierce defence for what belongs to him in "The Gulgula Tree", or the wife's aggressive dislike for her sister-in-law in "The Kelu Tree". These recurring cultural tropes of social and familial systems of India, when put through the oral tales, ingrained additionally with ideas of death and dead body familiarise and to a large extent normalise how death is perceived in literature. There appears a deliberate need to disassociate the listener/reader from the seriousness of death and dead body, to not live/relive personal experiences of grief, but to be able to look beyond to the possibilities of justice, not divine but magical. Emotions of love, compassion and justice win over, even at the face of death. Here, the acts of justice against death are not played by heroic actions. There is a show of wonder, coincidence, compassion and craftiness, parallelly placed against socio-cultural norms, conceptions and relations.

"For a folklorist all death-related aspects of human life can be divided in two groups:

1. ritual, beliefs that begin to operate at the instance of death in the neighbourhood.
2. general death-related beliefs in daily life." (Arukask)

The tales of Vijaydan Detha mentioned throughout, introduce a third, transgressive aspect of death and human life, where death and lifeless bodies are not the gloomy and terrifying objects of human truth, but tools of mystical revelations. It is characterised by transgression and playfulness.

This observation, when placed against the idea that folktales are instrumental in transferring social behaviour and understanding through their oral and memory-based transmission, furthers the analysis and relevance of such transgressions. Socially acceptable and unacceptable norms, learned through folklore are not as direct as one accepts. This learning process is based on engagement; it is characteristic of repetition, rapid exchanges and passive reception, instead of active and direct learning. Death and dead bodies are, therefore, as transgressive and playful as riddles, and as fables, especially as part of folktales.

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