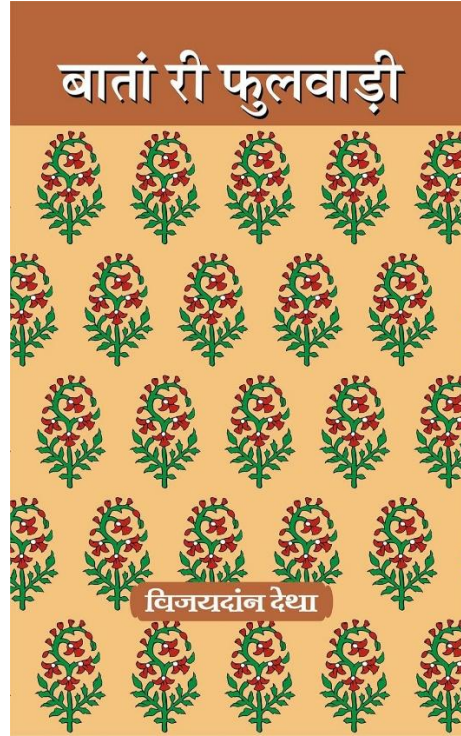# Women Antagonists in Vijaydan Detha's Folktales of the Domestic Space

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Abstract

The transgressive narratives of Rajasthani Folklorist Vijaydan Detha's folk literary corpus has embedded innumerable patterns of socio-cultural and domestic sensibilities. Folktales are at once fictional but communal, their meanings therefore expose discourses of folk understanding. Vijaydan Detha's folktales are domestic in the nature of the plot as well as in their sources. Such tales have been circulated and collected by Bijji (Vijaydan Detha) from women of Borunda. As such, tropes of domestic villainy and

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familial relations are prevalent. The methodology of such tropes of violence and evil is, however, as transgressive as Bijji's folktales. In the present research we trace such characters and their relations that are villainous towards other characters. A set of women antagonists, i.e., vamps can be characterized who embody indirect relations to the victims, and eventually display apparent villainy and violence. Four folktales of Detha are studied in the present research to uncover specific patterns, tropes and character traits. The idea of domestic space and women antagonists in the presence of other characters reveal an ingrained sense of family relations between a woman and her husband's family.

Keywords: Vijaydan Detha, Bijji, Rajasthani folklorist, Antagonist, Domestic Spaces, Folktales, Re-telling, Stereotyping, Trope, Vamps.

Folktales from across the globe have held one very important and common contribution. They have represented a world that exists constantly, even when it doesn't necessarily exist in reality. This constant communication of man between his real world and a world of tales, influences his very being. Cross-influences in fact are more than just common here; they evince the fact that folktales are mirrors of society and culture (Dundes).

Of this significance of folktales, shoots the need to characterize and categorize the tales to ascertain their immediate role. The orality of these tales has shaped factors that assess the meaning of the tales in changing contexts and time. Along with this, the form and literary identity of the tales gets modified too, due to trends of translation and digitalization. Hence, folktales in the present times exist in multiple versions, offering multiple meanings. While culture and structure of folktales evolve, the issues – both serious and subsect – are broadly static. The motifs are common and recurrent, the themes are social and cultural. With movement elsewhere, the folktales foreground these series of meaning within relevance of the context, rather than replacing one with the other.

Komal Kothari explains this movement as the very nature of folktales:
… folktales transmitted orally with numerous variations may have fixed motifs embedded in their structures, not unlike refrains in folksongs, which never change. These fixed motifs in turn may be linked to written versions of the tale, which may have precipitated their oral renditions in the

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first place. So, it's deceptive to assume that an oral tradition necessarily precedes a written one, because their relationship is a lot more volatile and multivalent. (Bharucha)

Overall, folktales are primarily shifting, in one way or the other. The forms transform, the language and context change, the meaning gets appropriated; but the relevance of these tales remain. Through a mountain of changes, they continue to exist and circulate. They continue to carry markers of human culture and emotion. Bijji's tales are not only testament of the folk life and the folk sense, but of the transgressive powers of folklore.

Detha and Folktales of the Domestic Space

In his conversations with Rustom Bharucha, Komal Kothari holds that "no folk story whatsoever is anything like a moral or a maxim added to the story itself. Folk stories were never meant as teaching aids … they were taken to be some sort of realization – but you must be prepared to 'realize' your answer." Komal Kothari and Vijaydan Detha from Rajasthan had been the forerunners in documenting and studying the folklore of their native land. They saw folktales as parts of memory that have existed and influenced generations.

Vijaydan Detha's enormous corpus of tales were collected from a variety of informal sources, many amongst them from the woman folk. Too, his tales draw a vivid picture of the common man's life and dreams. A large number of these tales are situated within the domestic spaces, dealing with the dynamics of varied familial relationships.

Contextual Significance

The tellers of these tales of Detha were often voices that were otherwise unheeded. And a parallel trend of unheard voices was replicated in the approach Detha took to present these tales. Vijaydan Detha ventured to document the Rajasthani language, and chose the orally existing cultural artifacts, as a two-fold response against the mainstreaming of the selective. He was

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concerned with how history restricted itself largely to documentation by the powerholders, and contrary to that folklore focused on smaller truths of man's life. (Detha 1996).

Detha's approach and understanding of folktales and folklife, resounds along with Gramsci's thoughts on the same. He believed the folklore largely formulated not only a shared notion of socio-cultural codes of understanding and behavior, but also a collective "common sense", that guided and explained the people their role and behavior as part of a community. (Gramsci)

Hence, the notions on a variety of topics that folktales formulate and/or circulate are directly proportional to the code and sense a community share and believes in. Detha powers this by incorporating storytelling elements, be it the initial phrase of the story invoking the blessing of the god, or the child-like rhymes, repeating and emphasizing points of importance. As Kothari points out, these tales function through the memory of the teller and the listener. (Bharucha)

Domestic Space

While folktales credited to Detha cover a myriad range of themes, a significant number of these tales draw upon the four-walled domestic space and life of the common man. The socio-familial relations are a major outlining theme of Detha's folk universe.

In an attempt to understand the nature and features of the domestic space, one must take into account also the nature and purpose of the tales themselves. While the tales may not be lessons in morality or humanity, they definitely present themselves as representatives of a way of life. Dundes and Ramanujan have both argued that the authentic socio-cultural image of a community is reflective in folklore, and that this is often reflective of the conscious, subconscious and the unconscious. The oral tradition shapes a sense of commonality.

These domestic spaces that conjure up in Detha's universe are parallel to and affected by the sources of the tales too. As is noted by a number of Detha's translators and scholars, including Christi A Merrill, Vishesh Kothari, and Kalpana Purohit and Gunjan Detha, these tales were orally transmitted to Detha in formal and informal situations by the woman folk, who were found to have

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a rich depository. These tales of domestic space have therefore circulated within the real domestic spaces, from women of all age groups and social statues.

Another factor that reflects this parallel cross-influence is the commentaries added by the translators, both Merrill and Kothari, that traces the genealogy of various tales, and the playful banter that issued before the tellers recited it. This parallel relation ensures the relevance and survival of tales through changing trends. These tales majorly focus on issues of infidelity, domestic violence and social dynamics, while Detha offers not a solution but a revised outlook.

Female Folk Antagonists

Overview of the Tales

To identify the trail of vamps or women antagonists in Detha's stories, four folktales translated by Vishesh Kothari are considered here. He has published two collections of folktales, written by Vijaydan Detha in Rajasthani Language. *The Garden of Tales* published in 2023 has 18 stories on diverse themes, including power, infidelity, abuse and exploitation, and social identity amongst others.

"Kanha the Cowherd" from this collection is a tale about a man characterized in the image of Lord Krishna. This boy is an exceptional cowherd, unmarried and dedicated to his cattle. His elder brother however is a "lazy and irritable" man, an exact opposite of his brother.

While the wife of the older brother is aware of the fact that the younger brother is the source of their livelihood, and therefore prepares him the same kind of delicacies she offers her husband, a neighbor jibes at her and insinuates illegitimate relation between the brother and his sister in-law. In order to avoid such false accusations and to maintain her own and their family's honor, she urges her husband to get his brother married. Since, the younger brother is religiously devoted to his cattle he refuses to any discussion on marriage, stating it would become an obstacle to his work.

Enraged the sister in-law devoid him of his meals and eventually instigates her husband to kill the younger brother. While the rest of the tale brings in major shifts to the narrative, the violent

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act of one brother attempting to murder another in outright confrontation, alludes to a discourse on the source of such evilness. The sister in-law, related to the protagonist through her marriage to his brother, goes through a swift transition to become a ruthless and uncaring woman, who cunningly brings about not only rift, but socio-criminal violence on a member of the family.

The other collection translated by Vishesh Kothari is titled *Timeless Tales from Marwar,* with 17 tales of Detha translated into English. "Sonal Bai", the fifth tale in the collection, tells a story of a beautiful woman named Sonal who has hair made of gold. When she loses a strand of her golden hair, she is scolded by her mother, and upset she climbs a sandal tree. In the course of the tale, she not only refuses to come down, but takes her dear nephew with her.

In a short time when she encounters a prince who offers to marry her, she along with her nephew agrees to go with him. In the ensuing journey, her thirsty nephew turns into a peacock by drinking water from an enchanted lake, and she is forced to leave him behind with a promise of visiting him every day. One day, one of her co-wives requests her permission to visit the nephew in her place. Out of jealousy of Sonal's beauty, nature and her hair made of pure cold, this wife in-law brutally kills the nephew.

Here again, we see a woman, related through her marriage to the protagonist, turns into a vile villain, and mercilessly kills a young child. This kind of violence characterizes the antagonist as a woman of inherent evil, while giving her a common social identity.

The next story from the collection which bring into light another villainized relation is "The Kelu Tree". The sister of seven brothers is mistreated and exploited after the death of her parents. The seven sisters-in-law are inconsiderate and abusive towards her. The evil reaches its peak when the youngest sister in-law lends her clothes to the protagonist on a festival eve and puts a fierce condition on her husband; if the sister spoils the clothes, the brother must kill her and dye the garments in her blood. As this comes to pass, the readers witness a bloodthirsty woman, who would not eat a morsel unless her husband kills his sister on a trivial matter.

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Yet again, one witnesses unnatural evil in a common woman, and sees the villainy of unmatched vigor. The brother slaughters his sister on his wife's command, and carries out the outlandish act of dyeing the spoilt garments in his sister's blood.

The last tale is titled "Eternal Hope", which tells the story of two children left locked up in their homes to die of hunger and thirst. When bad times befall a poor farmer, his wife suggests moving to another village and trying their luck. Being a step mother to her husband's two children, she suggests they kill the children or leave them behind to die, so as to avoid the burden of extra mouths to feed.

The children, naïve and innocent, desire nothing but the love of their step mother, whom they regard as an absolute replacement of their dead mother. Unaware and unforthcoming of the evilness in their step mother's heart, they continue to regard her as their mother. He husband spiritlessly agrees to her proposition. He however, requests her to show compassion one last time, so that the children don't perish with ill in their hearts. An archetypal step mother, the antagonistic character in this tale refurbishes the negative affinities of a step mother's relation to her step children, even when she is a poor farmer's wife, part of the common folk.

The uncommon in these common man's tales is the apparent act of violence, carried out without serious hesitation. In three out of the four tales, the husband of the vamp is the doer of these villainous actions.

Stereotyping and Antagonizing Family Relations

In all these stories of domestic violence, the role of a female antagonist remains constant, and their relation to their victims remains common. These gendered villains of the domestic space are related to their victims through their marriages, and often drive the husbands with them. Such a trope is recurrent in all four tales. These vamps have no blood relation to the victim and yet are part of their immediate families, respectively. These domestic tales of everyday people result in extraordinary villainy, with unexpected and violent crimes towards their own family members.

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The sister in-law in "Kanha the Cowherd" is a simple homemaker in the beginning of the tale, but later with the progress of the tale her character makes a swift change and elements of villainy come to light as though they had always existed hidden within her - "the foremost shelter of a woman is her deviousness. If she wants, she can make even stones quabble and mountains battle. Inciting a man, then, is something she can easily accomplish." (Detha) The trope of such deviousness and swiftness with which it is introduced in the narrative normalizes it as an obvious characteristic of the female antagonist.

In "Sonal Bai", the entire tale focuses on the character of Sonal, and only towards the end, we see the introduction of the only female character related to her by marriage. This co-wife of the prince, driven by her jealousy alone, deceives Sonal and brutally kills her nephew who was earlier transformed into a peacock – "the older queen's heart was full of malice. She thought of neither the good nor the bad. Mad with rage, she grabbed the peacock's neck and twisted it." (Detha) Her jealousy resulted in her desire for revenge which had her kill the little boy with cold brutality. Such intense acts of crime and violence, against an obvious feeling of jealousy is striking.

In both "The Kelu Tree" and "Eternal Hope" the vamps are inherently evil from the beginning of the tales. The husbands in both cases are easily swayed in their wives' plans. The victims in both the tales are blood relations to the husbands, and yet they become the partners in crime along with their wives. While the brother in "The Kelu Tree" carried out the actual killing of the sister, the husband in "Eternal Hope" tries to ease his wife's plan on his children, but eventually carries on with her plan and leaves his children to die.

In both the tales, the husbands make a choice of following their respective wives' plans over saving their blood relations and avoiding a crime. The brother's turmoil in the former tales is resolved with a simple argument: "One can Live without a sister, but how can one live without a wife!" (Detha). The husband in the other tale choses to follow up with his wife's plan, as they see no other way to survive but move to a different region, and she refuses to take the children with her. He chooses to try and build a life with his wife, rather than to call out to her criminal plan and keep his children against the financial issues.

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Conclusion

Enlisting these domestic vamps, one can trace a trope of relation dynamics between the antagonists, the victims and the other characters who partake in the acts of crime. These relations developed on marriages offer a discourse on the dynamics of the people involved. The foul intentions of the vamps towards other members of her husband's family, processed through folktales, develop a shared sense of stereotypes and expectations. Such social factors are cross influenced as part of folklore, where repetition, memory and relevance rein. Whether true or not, such stereotyping of women antagonists through folktales is problematic as it ensues a collective notion of what relations are, over what they look like. It categorizes a shared belief and normalcy that need to be carefully functioned through the subconscious of the folk. One such endeavor is brought about by the endings these tales reach, whether the victims regain life and prosperity through supernatural intervention, or the account ends on a sad note of their deaths, Detha and his translators approach the issue with careful consideration. They bring together pity and playfulness, through elements of oral tradition to situate the sympathies of the reader while allowing the lines of fact and fiction to blur.

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