



## **From Relic to Du Jour: Discussing Contemporariety of Vijaydan Detha's Folk Tales with an Analysis of 'Two Lives'**

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### **Abstract:**

Folk tales are souvenirs of the bygone generations that contain some of the perennial axioms of human experiences. We read them to understand how certain values never lost their relevance though their idiom may have changed with time. The paper will try to encapsulate the evolution of the folk tales genre and then more elaborately focus on the efforts of Vijaydan Detha in this field. Popularly known as, 'Bijji', Detha has given a new lease of life to the folk tales of Rajasthan in particular by refarming them according to the topicality. A very interesting aspect of Detha's commendable work is his inclusion of such tales that challenges the norms of a society and defy the social codes. The paper will undertake an analysis of such a story, 'Two Lives' which tells the daring defiance of two girls who decide to live like a couple. The paper will try to gauge the significance and relevance of such tales in the modern context.

### **Keywords:**

Folktales, breaking the norms, contemporariety, cultural codes

The earliest evolved modes of socio-cultural expression such as fairytales, legends, nursery rhymes and proverbs, to name but a few, are all part of a verbal folk art that for a long time has been the fulcrum of our native understanding of the world. They provide a basic framework for generations of people as being the common philosophical guides from childhood to old age. Being living artefact, these tales and legends may be in a process of continual change, but at the same time they provide a certain permanence and a linking device to our whirlwind existence.

There are two diametrically contrasting viewpoints regarding literature: one idea is that literature feeds on the lived experience. However, there have also been counter-arguments that seek to undermine the mimetic properties of literature. These attempts are generally directed towards establishing an unconventional form or genre of literature that does not neatly fit into the reflection theory framework. But despite all such subversive, anti-traditional, anti-reflection-theory, expansionist, revisionist or radical subterfuges, a core identity of literature as a representation (if not direct reflection) of a given society of a given period has survived to date. literature projects what is less known and unknown about a society and gives it a universal reach and wider readership. It delineates culture, history and identity of a place and depicts age-old traditions with a unique touch and sensibility.

Each civilization boasts of its trove of folklore that serve as staple fare of nighttime stories for children. Besmirched with fantastic elements including fairies, monsters, evil agents and benevolent anthropomorphic nature, the folk tales mostly sings of the smart ways a common man uses to deal with uncommon problems. It is in this aspect that a folk tale is distinctly different from a regular story which are generally about great kings and heroes.

Folklore or Lokavidyā are umbrella terms which includes many other aspects of human ‘lore’—mentioning etymology of lore, it comes from an old English word ‘lar’ which means learning, knowledge, doctrine, art of teaching or science; but the interesting part is the Proto Indo European root of this word, ‘leis’, which means to track or to furrow—like attire, sewing, embroidery, cattle-breeding, armaments, ornaments, literature, customs, rituals or, to say in a nutshell, a holistic, and academic at the same time, approach towards lifestyle of the folk or loka.

Known as ‘Saga’, ‘wondertale’, ‘löögschen’ (i.e. lies) and ‘Rûpkatha’ in different languages, these predominantly oral tales have gone through much condensation and elaboration, before being put down in writing. It is to be noted here that as literary genre, folktales didn’t receive much scholarly attention till the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century as they were considered to be part of children literature. Even more considerable point in this context is that the folktales were treated as a relatively inferior literary genre being associated with the marginal group of people who constituted the lower stratum, as opposed to the so-called elite of that society. As Andrew Lang highlights in his essay “The Method of Folklore”,

“Folklore, ... collects and compares the similar but immaterial relics of old races, the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are in our time but not of it... folklore is only concerned with the legends, customs, beliefs, of the Folk, of the people, of the classes which have least been altered by education, which have shared least in progress”

One main reason behind the pejorative assumption regarding these folk tales would be that these were generally relayed by the illiterate servants or women and so they can only be told either in informal setting or to innocuous children only without fear of being derided.

However, the present academic inclination to reinterpret and sometimes to reinvent the cultural codes of a society has led to deeper exploration of the folktales. The rising interest in the anthropological dimension of a literary genre has further attracted the attention of the scholars towards the unpeeling of the semiotics of folktales. Folktales definitely help us in recognizing the underlying emplastic forces that shape a society’s cultural mores and social ethics. The literature of a culture is inescapably inscribed by that culture’s conceptual mappings and linguistic undergirding. Folktales reflect the world of their audience—with familiar characters, occupations and terrains. So, these precious literary artefacts are no more considered just as the handed down legacy of our unsophisticated ancestors but more of a multilayered conundrum which, when unspooled, can reveal the hidden voices and invisible frameworks of a society. Angela Carter strikes a similar note when she says:

For most of human history, literature both fiction and poetry, has been narrated, not written, heard not read. So fairy tales, folk tales, stories from the oral tradition, are all of them the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labor created our world.

In the Indian subcontinent, though folktales have existed for thousands of years, a systematic effort to collect and preserve them in writing was made only after the arrival of the British. The earliest folktale collections in India made by British amateur folktale collectors (mainly British officials and persons related to them, and European missionaries) were between the years 1838 to 1878. With the establishment of the Folklore society (which included scholars like Edward B. Tylor, Max Müller, Andrew Lang, and G.Laurance Gomme), and the publication of the Folk-lore Record in 1878 in England, a new scholarship grew up which greatly affected the attitudes of those collecting Indian folklore in the period 1878 to 1920. The first collection of this period was Indian Fairy Tales by Maive Stokes. Apart from the collections compiled by individuals, oral folktales were also published in journals like The Indian Antiquary, The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal and North Indian Notes and Queries.

Being a geographically and culturally a greatly vast territory, India offers a large repository of folk tales. From the North to the South, and from the East to the West, one can witness a rich tradition of folk tales. These tales originated eons ago and were orally transmitted generation to generation, Gradually, especially post-independence period saw a growing interest in the collection and preservation of these tales. Each region has its own local flavor to these tales which basically follow some set patterns. Thus, the folk tales of Kashmir appear to be as distinctly different from that of Tamil Nādu and the same stands valid for the tales of Rajasthan and the North East.

One extraordinary preserver of such cumulative experiences of the people of Rajasthan in India is Vijaydan Detha whose life-long service to the culture, language and literature of Rajasthan is now known worldwide. An epitome of local wisdom and global awareness, Vijaydan Detha is an internationally acclaimed short-story writer and fabulist. His unparalleled contribution in assorting the local folk tales and giving them both freshness and longevity with an added verve has earned him rave praises from round the globe.

Detha has collected an unwieldy body of folklores, folktales, songs, proverbs, idioms of Rajasthani and by so getting imbued with the cultural-historical ethos of his place, he set off to create fictional worlds that bore direct resemblances to his own cultural-historical contexts. Christi A. Merril, who has extensively translated Detha's work into English, makes a very apt observation with respect to Detha's immense contribution to the genre:

“...With this national award (the first for a Rajasthani work) and many others that followed, Detha's writing brought to prominence not only the richness of the story telling traditions of Rajasthan, but the inventive forms of locution characteristic of Rajasthani.

The folk tales redesigned by Detha are not just a relic from the dusted shelf, they possess a vital topicality which make them relevant in the present context also. He has put into these folktales, the condiments of contemporality and given them a new lease of life. His retelling of these traditional folktales shifts the focal point from mere moral allegories to some of the unexplored and covert issues that increases the topical validity of these renderings. In fact, while studying folk tales academically, one is bound to counter certain radical features that are presumably not part of the elite literary genres. The largely independent role of women, the street smartness of children, the magic of nature, the devility and civility of the animal kingdom, all these factors make the array of folk tales quite different from the routine convention of literature. While exploring the extensive oeuvre of Vijaydan Detha, one may be surprised to find stories dealing with themes of homosexuality, incest and adulterous relationship presented with modernistic approach. Detha don't feel shy to talk about these so-called tabooed topics as one can expect from a writer coming from quite a traditional society and writing down folk literature of his region. This remarkable quiddity of his stories has forced the scholars to reread and reinterpret his stories again and again. Here we will try to analyze two of his most iconoclast stories that delve into the complex psyche of human desires and the fragile and limited social expressions of these desires which sometimes fail to address the unusual and the quirky dimensions.

'Dohari Zindagi' or 'Two Lives' is the story has two Marwari seths, friends with each other, who got married on the same day and promised each other that they would marry their respective children when the time arrive. Like a typical folk tale, the story follows certain traditions that are particular for that area. Family relations are established only with the ones who have equal status in terms of social respect and family history. Children are also married off in the families that have equal social standing.

Now, it so happens that they both beget daughters. One of the seths thinks of a quirky plan and announces publicly that he has beget a son. On the birth of a baby-boy, some specific traditions are followed. A copper plate is beaten. Molasses and sweets are offered to the community people. If the boy is born at his paternal home, a barber and a

family member are sent to his maternal home with a green branch of khejri tree which symbolizes the birth of a boy. In the story, on the birth of a daughter such rituals are performed so that others take her as a boy.

His wife, at first, thinks it to be a prank, but the seth is actually quite serious in his intentions. He thinks that by this trick, he would be able to save the money of dowry and rather would get quite handsome sum from his childhood friend.

His wife is nonplussed by the illogical and seemingly implausible contumacy on the part of her husband. She tries to bring some sense in his mind by pointing out how he would hide the bare fact once the girl would grow up into a woman. But the seth is not ready to listen to anything and insists on his plan of marrying the girl to another girl. Even, his daughter, born and brought up as a boy, thinks of herself as a male. When once bathing with a friend, she is told that she is a woman not a man, the girl doesn't pay heed and says it doesn't make much difference to her.

The seth on the other hand, has made up his mind to bring a daughter-in-law and when his wife tries to argue with him, he just shuts her up with his resolute words. Determined to do what he considers to be a profitable venture, the seth pompously takes the marriage procession to his friend's village and ultimately the two girls are married. The few who knew the reality had to remain silent thinking of the scandal it will cause and still unable to guess what will be the outcome of such a travesty.

Now, when the time for the first night arrives, the women of the house push the comely bride into the room and wait with excitement outside the door for the ritualistic consummation of the marriage. The bridegroom and the bride, actually both girls, just see each other face and are so much drawn to the feminine tenderness of each other that they do not think of anything else. The bride is mesmerized by the gorgeous looks of her husband. So, she ties a black thread on his wrist so that no evil eye spoil him.

This goes on for a couple of days and from here the story takes a quirky turn. The moment of truth has to come and the bride suddenly realizes that she is married to another woman. Initially, she is so dumbstruck and feeling betrayed that she doesn't know how to response. But when two talk together and the bride realizes that her 'husband' is almost innocent, she decides to take an unprecedented step. She dresses her 'husband' in girl's clothes and says that from now onwards, they will live like a couple, not a husband and his wife, but as two women together. They will call themselves, Teeja and Beeja and show the world that such an unheard relationship is also possible. As soon as they come out of the room in the morning, there is uproar as the skeleton has come out of the closet. When the girl disguised as a boy reveals her identity openly, the father takes off his pugree, and, places it her feet, and, pleads to save his face. The seth tries to settle the matter by trying to dissuade the girls from parading their true identity, but seeing that there is no use of his words, he asks them to leave the house at the very moment.

The villagers, too, astounded by this outrageous discovery, try to stop the girls from going away as they find it highly objectionable an instance and a grave insult and threat to their customs and practices. But Teeja and Beeja don't pay heed to their challenges and cocking a snook at all the protesting males of the society, they just vanish from the village.

They soon reach a deserted area in a nearby forest, a place known to be haunted by ghosts. The villagers don't dare to go near the well which is supposed be the gathering area of the ghosts and uninhibited by any supernatural force, the two girls indulge in their intimate talk and exploring their bodies. Soon they encounter the leader of the ghosts who seems to be enamored by them and who invites them to stay at their place, unperturbed by any human interference. The girls find it as if their very wish is magically fulfilled and they begin to live in this magical place like a couple. They don't feel scarcity of anything, the ghosts provide them every comfort and luxury. The girls are

also happy with each other, feeling more bliss than any typical man-woman married couple. The ghosts even allow visits from the female members of their family and they invite some of them to the magical palace. Observing the opulence, the ladies are awestruck and even felt the pangs of jealousy looking at their independent and carefree lives.

The story takes a turn when one of them, the one who is brought up as a boy, suddenly cherishes the desire to be transformed into a male as she wishes to have their own child. The ghost king agrees but reluctantly, providing them an option of turning back the things in the original way if they wish so in the future. Now, it so happens, Beeja, the newly converted man, begins to feel that he owns the house and his wife being the male. Suddenly, he starts to boss around Teeja as the typical male ego guides him to dictate her actions. Teeja is taken aback by this unwelcome and unexpected change in their relationship in which there was no one superior to other.

The story ends as Beeja realizes the poisonous futility of having a male body because it brings with itself the will to dominate the other in the relationship. He asks the ghost king to retribute 'her' femininity and once again the both women start living their harmonious existence like before.

Now, even the surface reading of the story can astound a folk tale reader who comes to it with a prefixed mindset, expecting to find certain elements in a folktale. To expect a lesbian relationship and even that in an orthodox society with an ending which seems to promote rather than question it seems to be an exorbitant supposition. But it is very much there, the story not only exudes fragrance of homosexuality but also debars the entry of heterosexuality into the lives of these two women. Like the Western myth of Tiresias, one of the two girls experiences the biological morphs of both sexes and the final choice of remaining a woman says it all about the preference.

As such, we can safely assume that Vijaydan Detha took a phenomenally radical step in rewriting a story that can raise eyebrows of the moral police and purist pundits even in the modern times of LGBTQ campaigns. There is no judgmental stance offered by Detha and even if there is, it is apparently in the favor of the status quo of two women living together as a couple. It is with such stories, that Detha has leveraged the longevity of these relics of past and given them a contemporary dimension. The folk tales as collected and rewritten by Detha become the living proof of the necessity of the articulation of the complexity of human life where the queer and the quirky has the same importance as the normal and the formulaic has.

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