

Narrative Tropes of Female Desire and Sexual Innuendoes in Bijji's Folktales

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Folktales embody multiple narrative and cultural elements, floating through memory and language. The categorization of such stories therefore since long, has been based primarily on plot. While one recognizes the necessity of pillaring the study of folktales on the plot narrative, the need to dwell further to address concerns of nuances of narrative elements, movements and cultural components.

The patterns of plot and characters develop a set of senses (similar to Gramsci's 'common sense') familiar to the listeners and readers of folktales. This idea of common sense, embedded in the narrative of the folktales results also in reinforcement, emphasis and cross influence. The movement of such plurally owned tales, therefore creates versions, founded heavily on the narrative patterns and adapted promptly to the setting and context.

As such, the variables of form, medium, language, teller-listener, etc. are often left behind in the process of categorization based on narrative patterns. The monumental contributions of Propp's *Morphology*, *Aarne-Thomson-Uther Index*, *Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* and *French Fairy Tales* by Dundes and Brehmond respectively, have ensured an effective method of studying the oral tales beyond their constant shifts and movements, by focusing on narrative units and patterns. However, there is a need to attempt an incorporation of the folktales' shifting nature amongst other variables while reading a 'version' of any folktale. In this context, Christi A Merrill terms these versions of a folktale 'retellings' to eliminate hierarchy of superiority between different versions, as well as to identify one from the other. She also attempts to resolve the conflict of origin of such oral tales, refocusing

on the completeness of a retelling in the midst of the various elements of its existence. Folktales credited to Vijaydan Detha (including Merrill's and Kothari's translations) are found to be such complete retellings in their own existence, with the influence of oral traditions, and translation in English Language complementing the holistic meaning rather than branching to diverse directions.

In this completeness is also to be found, a network of meaning and sense, and its contextual dynamicity. To study, therefore, such shifting tales, the narrative structures have to be read parallel to the pragmatics of context of both plot-structure and culture. In the context of Rajasthani Folk Literature and folk-sense, the ideas on cultural and communal behaviour can be traced throughout the folktales of Vijaydan Detha and Vishes Kothari's translations of Detha. Conventions and discourses rich with cultural foregroundings are presented through language and narrative tropes both.

To assess such embedded conventions of female desire and sexual innuendoes, that represent and contribute to the 'common sense' of the folk, this paper studies four folktales by Bijji (a name used fondly for Detha). The English translations of these tales are part of the collection titled *New Life*, published by Penguin Books in 2008.

Since the tales considered for study are translations in English language, and belong to the same collection, they are translated by the same translators with a unified vision. It therefore becomes vital to address concerns and relevance of this vision. The translators, Mridul Bhasin, Kailash Kabeer and Vandana R. Sing, combine their scholarship and practice in translation to assess Bijji's folktales on the grounds of their literary and cultural attitudes. They have then pursued to unify such tales that build a discourse on the representation of the rural women to also include the timelessness and universality of feminine concerns. Mridul Bhasin observes in the "Translator's Note":

As the women have remained unseen, one wonders if they have been presumed to be unimportant from a literary standpoint. This also brings to the fore the fact that not many of our writers or our readers know

much about rural women. Though generalizations are not always befitting, one cannot help noticing the fact that regional literature carries the burden of portraying the poor as well as women. Translation of such literature in English would, perhaps, help to nullify the unstated presumptions that regional characters are regional only. In these stories, the lines dividing regional, national and international literature disappear. (xi-xii)

The translators have also focused to incorporate nuances of the language used by Bijji, by first assessing the linguistic characteristics of his folktales, and replicating such nuances in English language;

A style of idiom popular in the rural areas of Rajasthan is used. Sentences are short and pregnant with meaning and there is liberal use of proverbs. The descriptive sentences are followed by on-word adjectives or adjectival phrases. The tone is conversational and it links well with the narrative or the storytelling mode into which the narrator slips in unobtrusively. In contrast with these, conversational paragraphs are more poetic, internally rhyming; they can be taken as the narrator's observations or the character's thoughts. (xiii)

These affinities of the English translations to their sources, allows the new readership to discover discourses and patterns of such folk conventions that are universal in nature, but otherwise remain regional.

The recent study aims to explore through narrative tropes, the discourses on female desire, especially of married women. There is a definitive attempt in folktales, to address or comment on such topics of taboo. Alan Dundes and Komal Kothari, in different textual contexts, agree that folktales are not focused on morality. Beyond morality, folktales often concern themselves with human relations with nature, with their immediate community, with the larger human community and with each other.

To identify examples of such relations and their nature of discourse in folklore, this paper focuses on narrative tropes. The term 'trope' is more of a functional concept than a conceptualised framework. Various

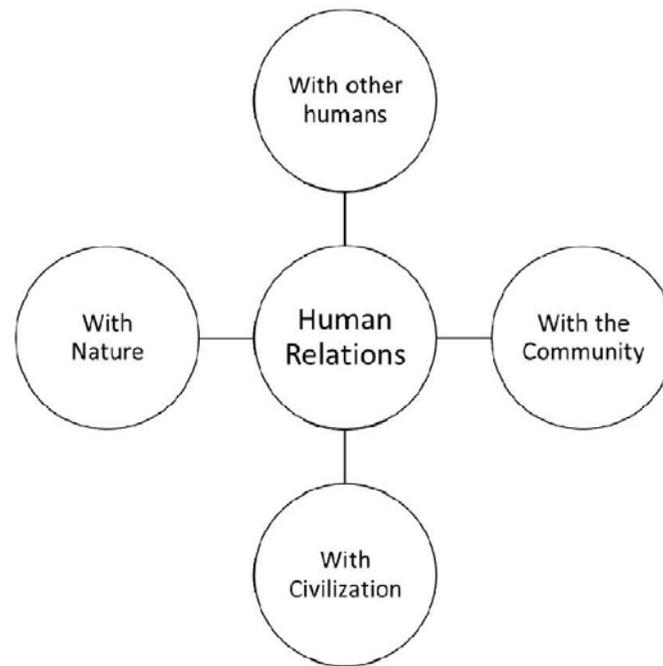


Fig. 1: The Scope of Folktales

independent bloggers, scholars and fan clubs have used the term ‘trope’ to identify patterns in the narrative. This popularised notion of narrative pattern is helpful in identifying folk discourses, when applied to read folktales.

As such, narrative tropes that display themes of female desire in the present set of folktales are identified. They are read in alignment to the vision of the translators and the author Vijaydan Detha himself. They are additionally studied in the backdrop of the observations made by various scholars on the role and relevance of folktales, especially Indian.

These tropes are enlisted amongst heterogeneous married pairs. The parallel conventions of marriage, desire, patriarchy, adultery, and gender-based differences in the socio-cultural acceptance of a husband’s role versus a wife’s role, are also identified and considered for the further analysis of the tropes.

The stories collected and translated in *New Life: Selected Stories* focus on discourses about rural women. Evidently, marital relationships, social norms, and sexual taboos are explored; nuances of such norms and taboos are exposed alongside unvoiced perspectives from the women characters. These unvoiced discourses are identifiable in the conventional plot of the tales, as well as the commentaries made by different characters. One such metacomment is presented by Lakhu in the tale “The Crow’s Way”:

The sum total of stories of all the women in this world is only one - be cheated by men and to pay for it all one’s life. No woman is spared this. This grim reality is however hidden by the illusions of family and home (Detha 61).

This “grim reality” that Lakhu talks about here has definitely stayed hidden behind the “illusions of family and home”, if not for all women characters of Indian literature, then at least for the rural women. Mridul Bhasin writes in the “Translator’s Note”, that folktales of Bijji have a unique quality of dealing with women characters, where he brings into perspective, deliberately, the voices of these unheard rural women. “The stories are unique in the way they reveal the psyche of rural women whose silence is taken to be ignorance” (xi).

Bijji’s Rajasthani folktales “. . . are an expression of the collective memories of people who lived in simple though feudal times” (xi). The hierarchical relationships, therefore, between the lords, kings and the common man, constantly unravels codes of social and communal conduct. Parallely, the hierarchical relationship between man and woman, society and woman, and husband and wife, is similarly loaded with unsaid codes of behavior. These cultural units coded and encoded in the folktales, are closer to the communal psyche and thereby more relatable and relevant for reading.

The tropes of sexuality are manifested in various ways. But the question of morality is primarily associated with the sexual upstanding of a married woman. As such, the nuances of the moral and sexual well being of a married woman, in the context of various social atrocities, marital

disappointments and humiliation, and innate human desires are placed parallel to the cultural symbol of social morality, resulting in dispersed sympathies.

Dundes explains that the symbolism of a culture will manifest itself through its folklore. Culture is not just to be identified and analysed in folktales, but is to be put parallel. And through this act of parallel reading, tropes of cultural coding are to be identified and compared, to consequently develop the socio-cultural discourse on the apparent folk discourses embedded in Bijji's tales.

The tale "Lajwanti, the Shy Woman" is about a young and beautiful woman, who keeps her face hidden beneath her veil even in the presence of the women of her community. She likewise refrains from and detests the inappropriate conversations these women make. In the first part of the tale therefore, we see Lajawanti as a beautiful, virtuous woman, an embodiment of social morality. The other women of her group often try to test her, by implicating socio-sexual digressions. They tease and envy the virtue of this young beautiful woman. Where these other characters expect a revelation of her hidden character, the reader discovers a shift in her sense of individual morality. Lajwanti graciously ignores and reprimands the rest of the women, when they point to a strange man and make him the subject of their sexual innuendoes:

She asked innocently, 'Aren't you ashamed of discussing all this behind your husbands' back?'

One of the women responded immediately, 'All beauty and modesty are for you, there is nothing left for us.'

There was no point in arguing with them. In any case, she was a woman of few words and from that day onwards, she began to remain silent. She often remembered her wedding day when she had felt as if the very sky and earth were married. How could anyone abandon the oaths taken before the fire-ogd, she thought (Detha 124).

However, when she detaches herself from the group for this distasteful behavior, her own curiosity towards the strange man initiates a shift in her behavior. The apparent irony of her sexual involvement with the

strange man, is presented in the tale as more than just immoral adultery. The more the strange man ignores her, the more she develops an attraction. She is subconsciously pulled towards him and tries to stay close, but he shuts her subtle advances, and is constantly preoccupied with pigeons that he obsessively collects.

Vijaydan Detha's approach to voice the unheard concerns of rural women, has been often presented with a shift in sympathies. While Lajwanti stands out from the rest of the women, becoming an example of the morally right, who not only follows but believes in the virtues that are socially set, the shift of her character creates a shift in the sympathies of the reader even when she is contradicting her previous beliefs. Rather than question the honesty of Lajwanti's virtue, Bijji makes the reader question the constructed social morality of a married woman. The mystical description and natural pull between Lajwanti and the strange man, is not narrated as an act of sexual misconduct, but rather a curious, wondrous and natural course of action. The final act of their meeting is presented like a coming together of destined lovers:

Suddenly, Lajwanti whisked her veil away and spoke sharply, 'The innocent pigeons have taught you to be vile like a fox! I can see the evil in your eyes. You want to take advantage of me in this deserted jungle!'

'But I have pigeons in my hands!'

'So what? Can't the pigeons be put in the pitcher and the pitcher be covered?'

Her words made him dance with ecstasy. He said, 'It's exactly like my dream! I remember it like yesterday. My beloved pigeon, you have come to me after twenty-two years. Perhaps you were born the night of the dream itself. Let these pigeons fly. The sky is theirs.'

Lajwanti was overcome with joy as she heard him whisper, 'My dear beloved, now I can't be away from you even for a minute.'
(Detha 130)

The irony also plays at the fact that the other women had pointed Lajwanti in the direction of the strange man and made sexual innuendoes,

her curiosity rising only later. Additionally, the strange man's behavior was mystical, replicating tropes of fate and destiny. By initiating such shifts in the plot narrative, Bijji makes the reader wonder if Lajwanti's sexual desires towards the strange man were deliberate or natural, hidden or prompted, thereby resulting in dispersed sympathies.

In the tale "The Crow's Way", the woes of patriarchy are presented through a series of misfortunes falling on a young woman. This newly married wife and her husband are living a blissful life. It happens so that the husband while visiting swans of Mansarovar comes across a prophecy concerning his own self:

'This young man has a lot of wealth, but no offspring. If he cohabits with his wife at midnight tonight, a son will be born to them. That son will cough out pearls and rubies wherever he clears his throat.'

The swan eagerly asked the young man, 'Did you hear that?'

The young Man sighed, and said to the swans, 'What is the point of listening to this. I can't reach my wife at the auspicious hour in my dreams.' (Detha 47-48)

With the help of the swans, the young man is able to fulfil the prophecy. However, the son is born in the absence of the young man, and society questions the wife's character. They doubt her of infidelity and her father-in-law asks her to leave with her newborn son. The wife is scorned and disowned by society, her in-laws and even her own parents. Later, her son is stolen because of his ability to cough up pearls and rubies. Her plea for help is discarded from every direction, even her husband refuses to help her. He says:

When my father turned you out, you should have hit your head and died on the threshold of this house rather than stepping out of its boundaries. I am not one to drink leftover water.

. . . It is bad enough for a woman to be out of her home even for one night, and god alone knows who you have been with all this time. No matter how much you beg and cry, no man will believe you. (Detha 55-56)

The wife even approaches the king for justice, but rather than get her son back, she is punished and sold to Lakhu for prostitution. Such scorn and helplessness is contradicted by Lakhu's realistic and confident reassurances. The wife eventually learns the trade of prostitution, and thrives her way. Years later her grown up son shows up as a customer and the young transformed woman accepts him without hesitation.

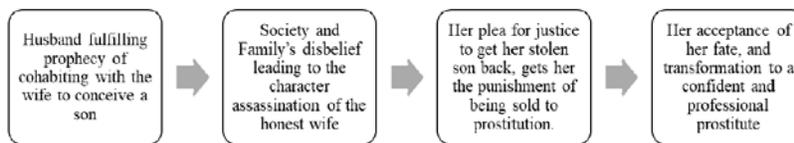


Fig. 2: Tropes of Sexual References in “The Crow’s Way”

The plot movements are rooted in sexual references from the very start. The husband's fulfilling of the prophecy, the character assassination of an honest wife, her wrongful punishment of being sold to prostitution, and finally her son becoming her customer, are all innuendoes to the socio-sexual identity of the woman. Such tropes become the basis of the narrative movement here, bringing the conflict of social conventions and individual experiences in the forefront. While the folk will identify with the safety of set social conventions, Bijji attempts to redefine the sympathies of the readers. The taboos of a woman's sexuality that easily brandishes against social perception, in such instances are not solely reliant on her.

The other two tales, “The Slough” and “To Each his Own Morality” are tales of married women who are fed up with their marital disappointments, and pursue adultery as an act of rebellion. In the tale “The Slough”, a strong-minded Gujjari, Laachi rebukes the illicit advances of the Thakur and his Estate Supervisor Bhoja, by hitting the Thakur. However, when she informs her husband about it, he advises her to keep her anger down, and to be mindful of the Thakur's power over the Gujjar's family.

Laachi is disgusted by the callousness of her husband. She tries to instigate him by setting up Bhoja multiple times. Every time her husband disappoints her by easily believing Bhoja's shrewd excuses. While she

is disappointed with her husband, she is continuously impressed by Bhoja's resilience and intelligence. Gradually, she comes to wonder about her own circumstances:

Yet these circumstances were beyond Laachi's control. House, home, society, caste, duty, ritual, the preservation of a good name and customs and traditions, there were many hurdles and problems to overcome. How could a single woman fight such a veritable whirlpool of barriers? The untrammelled freedom of animals is but a dream! Questions and thoughts such as these burnt in Laachi's heart. Which path should she choose? Which path was right for her? (Detha 89)

Yet again the reader sees a woman turning against the social norms in the form of adultery. Her initial adherence to her role as a dutiful wife, yields her insult and disappointment through the vile acts of all three men. Such sexual innuendoes transforms her to follow her personal desire. Towards the end of the tale, when Laachi finally chooses Bhoja over her husband, and walks to his house, she overhears him cursing her. The egoistic response of Bhoja devastates Laachi and she realizes that Bhoja is no different. The Thakur, her husband, and then Bhoja, are all men who act out of their own will and convenience, treating her no more than an object of desire of belonging.

The tale of Laachi resonates with Vivek Bharati's observation on Bijji's tales and the female characters in them:

Detha's stories graphically capture females' efforts of adjusting with social dictates to the best of their capabilities. When it becomes almost impossible for them to bear the stark injustice, they meekly voice their concern and the foregone result is their perpetual doom. (Detha 144)

The tale "To Each his Own Morality" is a political parody on the socio-sexual identity of men versus that of women. The two married women here, the Queen and the Thakurani are tired of their respective husbands' unruly and misogynist behavior. Not only do they take up lovers, but also overturn their husbands' political status. As such the tropes of

adultery, sexual misconduct, and gender-biased social norms are repeatedly aligned together to align with Bijji's vision.

The tale constantly dialogues about differences between the sexual and social conventions of men and women. A number of such comments and innuendoes made by the bard exposes the misogynistic attitude and outlook of the people towards the woman:

Women's faces and men's knowledge are best when veiled. Laughter unveils a woman's modesty besides adding to the danger of loss of character.

The King brought up a new doubt. 'You are a pleasure seeker yourself. Tell me, why is man not satisfied with one woman? Why is he ever-thirsty?' he asked.

The bard replied, 'My lord, we all know that we tire of even the best of sweetmeats! gratification demands change. repetition kills all enjoyment.' (Detha 154-58)

Since the beginning of the tale the Thakurani and the Queen, both display a sense of rational understanding, enabling them to question their husbands who authoritatively discuss and jibe at matters of social and philosophical concerns that are in reality of sexual nature.

The Queen one day asks the bards in Court:

When you men tire of sweetmeats and women, you opt for a change of taste. What of us women? Change is a taboo for us though we too may tire of our husbands. A widowed woman either dies of hunger or she burns herself at the pyre of her husband. (Detha 159)

The men in the stories, especially the King and the bard are described as overtly sexual, and even exploitative, considering every female an object of their satiation. The wives of both these men, i.e. the Queen and the Thakurani, are fed up with their degradation, and the apparent hypocrisy of morals representing social conduct. They therefore decide to rebel, by each one choosing a lover to spite their husbands and the society that glorifies the biased state of existence for both the genders.

The Thakurani chooses the illicit son of her own husband, while the Queen chooses her horse-riding instructor, who belongs to a significantly lower class.

The trope of adultery by socially upstanding married women, who carry the burden of modesty, family name and morality, is at once complimentary and contrasting to the behaviour of the men who rejoice in their exploitative conduct, both socially and sexually. The irony in the rebellious actions of the two married women, once again prompts the reader to question their sympathies.

In two of the tales, “The Slough” and “To Each his Own Morality”, adultery by the married woman is presented as an act of rebellion against apparent patriarchal norms. In “The Crow’s Way”, the married woman who turns from a devoted wife to a prostitute is also motivated by patriarchal and social conventions that leave her no better option. Only in “Lajwanti, the Shy Woman” do we notice the absence of apparent patriarchal push. The very title of the tale foregrounds the narrative shift. However, the seed of sexual desire for a strange man is planted in Lajwanti’s head by the female companions. It later evolves into natural attraction and mystical realization for both Lajwanti and the strange man.

In all the four tales, Bijji’s primary vision is outrightly fulfilled. He constructs tales to portray the perspective of the female characters. In this process, Bijji recounts the experiences, taboos, and natural instincts that guide man and woman alike. He contrasts this to the gender-based and biased set of socio-cultural and moral norms, inviting the reader/listener to question their personal sympathies. This obvious politics of social understanding becomes more nuanced in the context of transgressive folktales. While the folk remains the tradition-bearing community, these tales of entertainment and leisure, incorporate transgressive dialogues on set conventions and tabooed topics of social relevance.

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