

# Subversion of Patriarchal Ideology and Alternate Sexuality: A Gendered Anatomization of Vijaydan Detha's New Life

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of sexuality, gender, and folk culture in the context of Vijaydan Detha's short story "Dohari Zindagi" translated as "New Life". The paper delves into the ongoing debate between essentialism and social constructivism in understanding sexuality, highlighting the challenges of defining sexuality across different cultures and times. It discusses how Detha's storytelling draws from Rajasthan's native culture and combines it with contemporary socio-political themes, promoting a more democratic and inclusive mindset through narratives of dissensus and resistance. It argues that Detha's work blurs the lines between traditional folklore and modern storytelling, emphasizing the relevance of these themes across time. Furthermore, the paper references Judith Butler to provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the fluidity and performance of gender and sexuality. It also explores how Detha's narratives challenge normative structures and open up possibilities for reshaping gender identity and subjectivity. It examines Vijaydan Detha's storytelling as a means to subvert patriarchal ideologies, challenge gender norms, and explore alternate sexualities within the context of Indian folk culture. Detha's work is seen as a bridge between traditional folklore and contemporary socio-political discourse, shedding light on the complexities of gender and sexuality in society.

**Keywords:** Performativity, Gender Studies, Culture, Inclusion, Binary

Discourses dealing with the understanding and interpretation of sexualities in literary contexts highlight the ever-evolving debate regarding the causes and subjectivity of sexuality. This controversy can be understood as the dichotomy of essentialism and social constructivism, or as the normativity and performativity of sexuality in the given social context. Carol Vance argues,

[To] the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual acts, identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical factors, the object of study-sexuality becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear. If sexuality is constructed differently at each time and place, can we use the term in a comparatively meaningful way? (Vance 6)

It has to be understood that the general formulations of sexuality revolve around a radical incoherence with the constructed and universalized notions of society. It is this complex construction of sex, sexuality, gender and desire that gives rise to Judith Butler's argument that "identities figured as feminine or masculine do not axiomatically require the anatomical grounding which has traditionally differentiated sex and gender identities" thus questioning the universalized models of sexual identity that exist around the "assumed stability of heterosexuality" (Purvis 441). Gender cannot be defined in a

single and unifying way. As a psychological construct, a cultural practice and a philosophy, it is dynamic, fluid and plural. Gender Studies, in association with postmodernism and poststructuralism, demands a plethora of debate, conflict and negotiation as it undermines the principles and practices of any given definition in any global or regional cultural space.

Indian folk culture, like many traditional cultures around the world, often recognizes a plurality of genders beyond the binary concept of male and female. The recognition of non-binary and third-gender identities has a long history in India, dating back centuries. Hijras are one of the most well-known examples of a third-gender or transgender community in India. They have a distinct presence in Indian society and have been recognized for centuries. Hijras often have specific roles in rituals and ceremonies, such as blessing newborns and newlyweds. While they have faced social stigma and discrimination, their place in Indian culture is deeply rooted. Some Indian festivals, like the Koothandavar Festival in Tamil Nadu, celebrate the hijra community and their unique cultural roles. These festivals provide a space for hijras to come together, express their identity, and participate in cultural activities. In Hindu mythology, Ardhanarishvara is a deity that represents the union of the male (Shiva) and female (Parvati) aspects in a single form, embodying the idea that gender is not strictly binary. This representation can be found in various folk art forms, sculptures, and rituals. Even *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian text on performing arts, describes a classification of genders known as *Tritiya Prakriti*. This classification recognizes a third gender that is neither completely male nor female and discusses the roles and characteristics of these genders in the context of theatre and dance. Such fluidity is further reflected in many folk dances in India including gender-fluid and cross-dressing elements where performers switch between male and female roles, challenging the strict binary concept of gender. Folk songs and folklore in different regions of India often depict gender diversity and non-binary characters. These narratives reflect a broader understanding of gender beyond the binary.

James Todd in his iconic work *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India* (1829) traces the genesis and evolution of Rajasthan which has a strong tradition of oral as well as written folktale. There exists a tangible reciprocal relationship between the two, where each takes from and contributes to the other. Framed within the ethno-geographical parameters, the ecology of the land and geographical terrain, the feudal history and polity, the socio-cultural moorings, myths, legends and traditions come alive in the creative endeavours of the region. They interrogate and throw light on the way of life, events and customs, value systems, social configuration, legal and political structures as well as economic pursuits of a community.

Vijaydan Detha puts his mark by combining his felicity evoking the Rajasthani folk culture with the finesse of modern short story writing. Detha's stories are inspired by the enchanted world of folktales while aiming to address contemporary socio-political issues through his stories. He highlights the wisdom inherent in folk traditions as a tool for resistance. The act of noting down the stories he had heard trained him to appreciate the energy and potential of the folk form for active resistance and social reform. He employs the commonly used colloquial Rajasthani language, spiced with pithy sayings and aphorisms to convey both humour and folk wisdom aimed at critiquing the existent socio-cultural structures. This paper focuses on Detha's immense contribution to promoting the face of Rajasthani folk culture and tradition that rejects the epistemological certainty and authority of the gender binary. The paper takes instances from Detha's short story titled "*Dohari Zindagi*" translated as "New Life" to express how Detha has dealt with the theme "that moves towards a more democratic mindset only through a spirit of

dissensus, a tolerance for difference, a move to the marginal, and through small, localized resistance” (Snipp-Walmsley 408).

Detha was honoured with the Padam Shri Award by the Government of India in 2007 for his dedication to the conservation and rejuvenation of the folktales of Rajasthan. Though folktales lose out on their participatory and fluid aspect once fixed in a written script, Detha had noted verbatim stories he heard from storytellers and other sources to ensure their survival. He initiated a deft paradigm shift from oral to written, from transcription to creation, from page to stage and also onto the movie screen. He worked towards making folk wisdom relevant to contemporary generations immured in written text and the world of audio-visual media. Detha’s stories are a blend of past and present blurring the margin between then and now, idle gossip and modern enquiry, entertainment and wisdom, traditional folk tales and modern short stories. He excels in bridging the gap between folktale and modern short stories through thematic concerns that transcend the temporal barrier with their unremitting relevance from ancient times to the present. Folktale-inspired stories by Detha create spaces for multipronged exploration due to their inherent ability to deftly balance the pragmatic and the esoteric, the traditional and the contemporary, humour and wisdom, compliance and interrogation. He has, to his credit, two novels and eight hundred short stories, which are translated into English and other languages.

Detha retains the salient features of folktales - he begins a story with invocation or *chougou* whereby everyday language is transposed into language of performance and incorporates audience response in the form of *hunkara*, deftly approximating it to the oral narration. He uses indirect discourse replete with local idioms, humour and folk wisdom. He adopts the modern technique of story writing by endowing the single-dimensional characters of folktales with an inner life and providing a psychological insight into them. Christi A. Merrill, an American translator, who works on Detha, in her introduction to *Choubali and Other Stories*, observes, “Detha’s writing involves conservation and creation, notation and invention” (qtd. in Choudhury). For his lifelong dedication to revitalizing Rajasthani and Hindi, besides the Bihari Puraskar and the Akademi Award and Fellowship, he was honoured with innumerable state and national awards, including Rajasthan Shri (1977), Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad Award (1992), Sahitya Chudamani Award (2006), Padma Shri (2007), Rajasthan Ratna Award (2012) and Emeritus Fellowship by Doordarshan and Akashvani.

Ganesh Devy, commenting on the emphasis of fidelity to the original as a mark of excellence, contends, “The true test is the author’s capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original” (Devy 187). Detha wrote touching stories about different aspects of vibrant and traditional Rajasthani society. His stories, combining Rajasthani folklore with a symbolic and imaginary world, create a mesmerizing environment. Many layers of deep meaning and sarcasm are hidden behind his simple stories. By portraying the socio-artistic terrain of the Rajasthani society, his stories make sarcastic and poignant comments on inequitable and hierarchical gender relations.

“*Dohari Zindagi*” or “New Life” is one of the strongest stories by Vijaydan Detha that deals with the story of women breaking the barricades of society to live lives of their own. Beeja and Teeja, who are fooled into a same-sex marriage, after knowing the truth, choose to continue their lives as it is. Though, in the beginning, Beeja is devastated by her father's betrayal, later agrees to Teeja and reveals her true identity as a woman to society. Instead of agreeing to what her father says, Beeja decides to stay with Teeja as a homosexual partner and leaves the family and the village to stay peacefully. Detha, in the story, narrates how the women choose to go against the norms that have been made for different genders in society. Beeja has always been dressed as a boy since childhood due to her father’s greed for

money and his respect in society. But only when both the girls know how they have been exploited by the greedy Seth, do they decide to take control of their lives. On being advised by their mother, “A woman can live without water, but not without a man... get rid of your false pride. Have a family”, Teeja laughingly says, “We are the victims of this idea of carrying forward the name of the family. We have to root this out” (Detha 23). After listening to their hearts and doing what they feel like, Beeja and Teeja find their true happiness.

Harold Beaver in the essay titled “Homosexual Signs” opines that homosexuality is an arrangement of signs, when understood in terms of structuralism and the texts that talk about the dynamics of sexuality are not only multiple but problematic as well. The fluidity of gender is not a mere social and psychological concept but a fluid linguistic landscape as well. The study of sexuality in textual terms offers the idea that the former is conceived in terms of signifier, signified, discourses and representations. However, the arbitrariness and plurality of signs within any discourse suggest that no singular sign can adequately contain the structure of sexuality. The texts dealing with sexuality while breaking the barriers of gender binary have the power to reconstruct and re-establish the politics of gender, sometimes strategically within the context of the texts and sometimes outside the boundaries of the sign system.

The decision of Seth to provide and keep Beeja's identity as a man so that he can get her married to Teeja, his friend's daughter expresses the normative structure of sexuality in the society that manages gender roles. When another woman enquires about Beeja's apparent manhood by looking at her body, she faces a sort of existential crisis as she has been performing a man since childhood. She says, “What is it that is lacking in me as a man? I have a dhoti, the angarkhi and the sixteen-hand-long pugree of a man,” (Detha 4). Also, Beeja's cousin remarks on their relationship and says, “Your marriage was a farce since even your shadow is untouched by a man's sweat” (Detha 23). “Butler enquires about such basic vocabulary that belongs to the pervasive heterosexual assumption in society. Judith Butler's definition of gender states, “Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (Butler 43). For her, gender performance is the entirety of actions and behaviour of a person following the gender and sex in society. However, she further says, “Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 15). This definition is materialised in Detha's “New Life” as Beeja, who has been performing a boy since her childhood when realizes that she is a female, starts performing a girl. Similarly, when Beeja and Teeja start living at the Single Pillared Palace and the former decides to turn into a man with the help of the ghost chieftain, her body language changes, and

... a new feeling begins to simmer in the husband's mind- the idea that the man was more powerful than the woman. The unlimited power of man could in no way be compared with a woman's fragility. Man was, after all, the Supreme Being... Man's vigour and power seemed to have risen in the sky, while the woman appeared to be a mere shadow. (Detha 30)

The Single Pillared Palace which was formerly owned by both the women later belonged only to Beeja, the man and the husband of the house as per prevailing societal notions. The dichotomy of man and woman does not allow Detha's characters to think of another alternative contrary to the universalized norms. The only alternative left with them is to get separated so that they can live in

peace. As Butler opposes the concept of certain notions of sexuality as stereotyped norms, Detha also narrates that the adoption of stereotypical gender norms and lifestyle blackens the pure self of Beeja and the relationship between Beeja and Teeja gets eclipsed and darkened and a strange bitterness creeps in. The stereotypical binary oppositions prevailing in society bring limitations to the lives of his characters. Butler opines that the acceptance of gender norms forms a huge hurdle in the survival of people who do not fit into the binary and what remains behind is psycho-social violence and elimination from the society.

Monique Wittig argues that society naturalizes history by naturalizing the gender binary thus making it impossible to deconstruct the view. However, the omission of gender configurations and acceptance of gender fluidity and the idea that it is performative, dynamic and can keep shifting and changing can bring about the idea of deconstructed and subverted gender roles in society and literature. William Wordsworth in Book VII of his *The Prelude* says,

How often, in the overflowing streets,  
Have I gone forward with the crowd and said  
Unto myself, 'The face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery...' (qtd. in Snipp-Walmsley 409)

These lines can be read as call to accept the mystery of every individual in terms of their sexuality and sexual orientation. The '+' in LGBTQIA+ calls for the acceptance of diverse genders and their fluidity. The character of Beeja in Detha's story is an apt example of the above-mentioned idea. Though Detha sourced the story from some regional tale and later adapted it in his own words for a larger readership, it cannot be denied that the ancient and rural cultures of India have always accepted the lack of definitional coherence in terms of gender. Beeja, a female, keeps shifting between the identity of a man and a woman, sometimes due to her father's obsession with a son in the family and sometimes to enjoy the powers and privileges of a man in the stereotypical society. There is no doubt in the fact that the uncontested binary oppositions have shaped cultures and identities for a long time by utilizing the power of unquestioned bifurcation of presumed genders. With the ever-prevailing confusion between sex and gender, the position of active and passive gender has been formulated with the idea that the active position has been assigned to the penetrative body and the passivity has been assigned to the receptive one. However, moving further away from Freud's concept of psychoanalysis where sexuality is considered as a biological instinct aligned with the genital, Foucault's theory of identity construction as discussed in his *The History of Sexuality* (1976) views gender identity as the "principle truth of the self, something which has to be brought into cultural visibility" (Purvis 435).

Vijaydan Detha, by bringing forth the rejection of normative heterosexuality in folktales of Rajasthan shatters the morphology and semiology of gender binary. Beeja's shifting sexuality in "New Lives" reiterates the formulation of gender performance and performativity thus simultaneously rejecting Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation of the subject and accepting Derrida's speech act theory that offers reiteration of gender norms in the prevailing social ideology. Detha's story disengages the discourse of gender normativity calling for a possibility to reshape the contours of individual subjectivity. He affirms the place of culture and language politics in the construction of gender and identity while also suggesting that there are no ready-made moulds which can "free desire from normative heterosexuality" (Dean 216). Detha's story opens the door for the recognition of fixity, instability and excitability of gender norms, opening up the space for an alternative model of a subjective structure of gender hybridity "within a discursive matrix of citation and iteration, [which] is



nevertheless open to potentially restraint acts of re-citation and reiteration” (Purvis 443).

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