

## SPECIAL FEATURE

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### **Folklore, Social Constructs and Gender in Vijaydan Detha's “Double Lives”**

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**Abstract:** Folklore, as an organic repository of indigenous knowledge, resists the Western critical hegemonies that focus on fixed textuality and prioritises community epistemologies over individual authorship. This research attempts to understand the social constructs that shape the gender roles as represented in Vijaydan Detha’s story. The story is located in Rajasthan’s rich oral traditions that subvert dominant critical paradigms by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, communal storytelling, and performative aesthetics. This paper analyses the story through the lens of gender studies and social constructivism, exploring how Vijaydan Detha deconstructs normative frameworks of identity, power, and societal expectations. His use of regional dialects and cultural motifs not only reinforces the authenticity of the setting but also serves as a tool of resistance against hegemonic structures. The study analyses the story *Double Lives* by focussing on reinterpreting traditional tales, using folklore both as an aesthetic device and an instrument of social resistance.

**Keywords:** *Folklore, Rajasthani literature, society, women.*

#### **Introduction**

Folklore is an expansive art form that refers to the expressive traditions, beliefs, customs, narratives and rituals that are transferred from one generation to another within communities over a period of time, mostly through oral or informal means. It is, therefore, a dynamic form of cultural communication that ensures both continuity and creativity, constantly adapting to the evolving identities and values of social groups. Alan Dundes explains, “Folklore is a form of artistic communication in small groups” (1), highlighting its communal and performative

nature. Similarly, Richard Dorson defines folklore as “the traditional beliefs, practices, customs, stories, legends, jokes, and songs that are passed through generations largely by word of mouth” (4). Bowman and others define it as:

Folklore encompasses the vernacular expressive culture of social groups, including narrative, ritual, custom, belief, and material culture, transmitted across generations in a variety of forms and media. (Bowman, Marion, and Ülo Valk, 2012)

In Indian tradition and culture, folklore comprises a rich and diverse corpus of orally transmitted traditions including myths, legends, folktales, ballads, songs, proverbs and rituals. They are ingrained in the everyday lives of our communities and mirror the pluralistic cultural, linguistic, and religious identities of our country. It therefore appears to be a means of entertainment but functions as a channel for collective memory and subconscious, while also becoming a vehicle for moral instruction and social regulation. The oral nature of folklore enables it to be more flexible and dynamic. Indian folklore such as the *Panchatantra*, *Jataka* tales, *Baul* songs of Bengal, *Villu Pattu* of Tamil Nadu, and *Kathputli* puppetry of Rajasthan signify the regional specificity and thematic universality of Indian folk traditions. In contemporary India, folklore continues to evolve through both preservation and reinvention, finding new expressions in print, performance, and digital media, while maintaining its role as a dynamic and living tradition.

Western literary criticism, structured on notions of textual permanence, authorial authority, and linear narrative progression, often struggles to engage with the fluid and performative dimensions of folk traditions. These models do no justice to indigenous texts, and the literary compulsions of Western scholarship to fit them into its structures have resulted in homogenous narratives that marginalise non-Western epistemologies. This paper examines the folklore through the fiction of Vijaydan Detha, a celebrated Rajasthani writer whose works are deeply embedded in Rajasthan’s rich oral traditions. His narratives subvert dominant critical paradigms by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems, communal storytelling, and performative aesthetics.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study critically examines the representation of gender and social constructs in Vijaydan Detha’s “Dhohri Zindagi,” focusing on how the narrative challenges conventional gender

binaries and societal expectations. It explores the intersectionality of gender, caste, and class, analyzing the protagonist's defiance of rigid social norms in a rural area in Rajasthan. The study investigates how Detha deconstructs socially imposed identities through his storytelling and thereby examines the role of Rajasthani folklore and oral traditions in both reinforcing and subverting dominant cultural narratives. By analyzing the socio-political commentary embedded in the story, the study contextualizes "Dhohri Zindagi" within broader feminist and postcolonial discourses. Furthermore, it assesses Detha's literary techniques that include symbolism, language, and narrative structure, to understand their contribution to the thematic exploration of identity and resistance. Ultimately, the study highlights the contemporary relevance of the story in discussions on gender inclusivity, identity politics, and the ongoing struggle against hegemonic gender norms in Indian society.

### **Methodology of the Research**

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing textual analysis as the primary method to examine the gender and social constructs in Vijaydan Detha's "Double Lives." The research is conducted through a close reading of the text, focusing on its narrative structure, character development, and thematic concerns. Literary criticism, particularly feminist theory and gender studies, forms the theoretical framework for the analysis, with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity serving as a key lens to explore how the story challenges rigid gender binaries. Additionally, the study adopts a socio-historical approach to contextualize the story within the cultural and social realities of rural Rajasthan. This involves an exploration of Rajasthani folklore and oral traditions, assessing how Detha integrates indigenous storytelling techniques to critique patriarchal structures.

### **Folklore and Decolonial Praxis: Theoretical Framework**

Decolonial theory and subaltern studies provide a critical lens to examine how folklore functions as an autonomous epistemological system that resists Western literary hegemony. Walter D. Mignolo (2000) posits that decoloniality involves delinking from Eurocentric epistemes and validating indigenous knowledge systems. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasizes the need to decolonize the mind by reclaiming indigenous linguistic and literary traditions. Folklore, as a lived and evolving form, disrupts the static textuality that characterizes

Western literary canonization. It operates through orality, performance, and communal participation, which challenge the individualistic notions of authorship and textual ownership predominant in Western criticism.

Detha's fiction exemplifies these decolonial strategies by adapting Rajasthani folk narratives into literary forms that resist Western narrative conventions. His stories foreground the collective voice, embracing ambiguity, multiplicity, and non-linearity—features that are often marginalized in Western literary discourse. By privileging oral traditions and folk aesthetics, Detha's narratives function as counter-discourses to dominant Eurocentric literary paradigms.

### **The Story: A Subversive Folk Retelling**

This story was written by Vijaydan Detha in the 1980s for the first time and later published by Penguin Books as part of an anthology. The current translation is from Vishes Kothari's *The Tales from the Garden*. The story has also been adapted to the theatre with success due to its rich thematic elements and narrative. "Double Lives" offers a reimagining of a traditional Rajasthani folktale that critically engages with themes of gender identity and social norms. The narrative centres on the daughter of a *zamindar* who is raised as a male due to her father's deliberate decision. The *zamindar*, characterised by his extreme miserliness, had made a promise to his close friend who was also expecting a child, that their offspring would be married to each other. However, when both families were blessed with daughters on the same day, he decides to tell a lie and declares the birth of a son. Initially, his wife assumed this declaration to be a jest, but the *zamindar* proceeded to enforce this deception, raising his daughter as a boy. She was made to wear masculine attire and was socialised into a male identity, both in appearance and self-perception. This deception was presented as an act of promise-keeping but actually was a strategy to circumvent the financial burden of dowry for a daughter's marriage.

The charade does not end even when she grows up and the mother is scared for her daughter and confronts her husband to which he says, "When men go to foreign lands, good women patiently wait it out for eight to ten years. If they end up with a slow soft husband, wives manage in some way or the other. Child widows, too, somehow spend their days without anyone." (68). Rajasthan, known for its vibrant mercantile traditions, has a long history of men—particularly from trading communities such as the *Baniya* and *Marwari* castes—

traveling to distant lands for extended periods in pursuit of commerce. These traders often established businesses across India and even abroad, leaving their wives behind to manage the household in their absence. Social norms dictated that women remain chaste, patient, and self-sufficient during these prolonged separations. This expectation of unwavering fidelity and endurance was not only idealized in folklore and literature but also reinforced through familial and community structures.

Moreover, the reference to “slow, soft husbands” and child widows highlights another dimension of patriarchal control over women’s lives. In many cases, women were expected to adapt to difficult marital circumstances, whether through managing indifferent or incapable spouses or enduring widowhood in isolation. Child marriage was historically prevalent in Rajasthan, and many young brides found themselves widowed at an early age, forced to live under restrictive social norms that dictated their seclusion and austerity.

By invoking these cultural precedents, the *zamindar* normalizes his daughter’s predicament, equating her forced male identity with the sacrifices traditionally imposed upon women. His perspective underscores the rigid feudal hierarchies that dictated women's existence, presenting their suffering and adaptation as an expected, even natural, aspect of life. In doing so, the narrative not only critiques the social constraints placed upon women but also exposes the deep-seated economic and gendered anxieties that drive such practices.

As the daughter grows up under the constructed identity of a man, she internalises this gendered performance to the extent that she genuinely perceives herself as male. Her conditioned belief system is so deeply ingrained that she experiences joy at the prospect of marriage to a woman, unaware of the fundamental deception that underlies her existence. This moment highlights the profound impact of social conditioning, where identity is not merely biologically determined but shaped through lived experience, external reinforcement, and societal expectations.

The mother, though deeply distressed and sceptical, remains silent, caught between her maternal instincts and the rigid patriarchal structures that govern her household. Her reluctance to intervene is not simply a matter of personal hesitation but rather a reflection of the limited agency afforded to women in traditional patriarchal societies. Her husband, fully aware of her moral dilemma, employs coercion to ensure her compliance, threatening, “If you do any further meddling, I will kill myself! I’d rather die than go back on my word.” (264) This statement is

laden with both emotional blackmail and a rigid adherence to the male-centric concept of *pratigna* (solemn vow or promise), which was often idealized in traditional Indian narratives.

The *zamindar*'s threat of suicide serves multiple functions within the social and psychological framework of the narrative. First, it reinforces the idea that a man's word, once given, is absolute and irrevocable, even at the cost of personal or familial destruction. This emphasis on honour and vow-keeping is deeply rooted in the feudal and patriarchal ethos of Rajasthan, where a man's social reputation is often placed above the well-being of his family. Historically, such rigid adherence to verbal commitments can be seen in Rajput traditions, where warriors and noblemen upheld their pledges even in the face of death. In this case, however, the insistence is not motivated by honour in the classical sense but rather by economic self-interest and an obsessive desire to maintain control over his constructed reality.

Second, the threat of suicide operates as a manipulative tool to silence the wife, showcasing the gendered power imbalance within the domestic sphere. Women in traditional patriarchal households were often conditioned to prioritize their husband's well-being over their own moral or ethical concerns. The mother's silence, therefore, is not merely an act of passive submission but a survival strategy within a deeply unequal power dynamic. The emotional burden she carries—of knowing the deception yet being unable to intervene—exemplifies the struggles of women who were often rendered voiceless within rigid familial and societal frameworks.

The marriage takes place; however, the truth does not remain concealed for long. The new bride is soon confronted with the shocking revelation that she has, in fact, been wed to another woman. Initially overwhelmed by the discovery, she gradually comes to recognize that her spouse bears little culpability, having been raised under a lifelong deception. Acknowledging the depth of this predicament, she reflects:

I have endured this deception for merely seven days, whereas you have been ensnared in its falsehoods for years. Your suffering runs far deeper than mine. The same deceit has been inflicted upon us both. Now, we must navigate this hardship together. (280)

Beeja and Teeja, despite the unexpected and unsettling circumstances of their union, ultimately decide to remain together. Recognizing the profound impact of the deception that has shaped their lives, they choose solidarity over separation, forging a unique companionship that transcends societal norms. Their names, Beeja and Teeja, are finally conferred upon them,

symbolizing their acceptance of a new identity—one that acknowledges both their struggles and their shared destiny.

However, their decision to live together is met with staunch disapproval from both their families and the larger community. Traditional expectations dictate that their relationship is an aberration, a defiance of the social and cultural conventions that govern marriage and gender roles. Unable to secure acceptance within the rigid structures of their upbringing, Beeja and Teeja are left with no choice but to leave their homes and seek a life beyond the confines of societal judgment. Their departure marks both an exile and a liberation—an enforced severance from their past but also an opportunity to define their future on their own terms.

Beeja and Teeja, having been cast out by their families and rejected by society, find refuge in an abandoned haveli, a space that exists outside the rigid boundaries of the world they once knew. This haveli, however, is no ordinary dwelling—it is inhabited by benevolent ghosts who offer them protection and sanctuary. Under the watchful presence of these supernatural beings, the two women carve out a life of quiet companionship, free from the oppressive scrutiny of the outside world. For the first time, they experience a sense of peace, untouched by the dictates of gender expectations and societal judgment.

However, this fragile equilibrium is disrupted when Beeja makes a startling discovery. Upon undergoing the transformation into a man, Beeja not only acquires physical masculinity but also begins to embody the traits historically associated with patriarchal dominance. The shift in gender identity is accompanied by a profound psychological and behavioral change, wherein Beeja, now a man, begins to assert authority over Teeja in ways that reflect traditional power structures. No longer constrained by the vulnerabilities of her former existence, Beeja adopts an increasingly authoritative and domineering demeanor, fundamentally altering the dynamics of their relationship.

This transformation brings forth an unintended consequence—Beeja’s evolving sense of self is increasingly shaped by the very societal constructs that once marginalized and victimized her. Masculinity, as it manifests in Beeja, is not merely a bodily transition but a conditioned identity infused with notions of power, control, and entitlement. The nurturing bond between Beeja and Teeja begins to erode as Beeja asserts dominance over Teeja, treating her with a newfound arrogance and disregard. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she argues that “gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act...a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’.” This performative aspect of gender challenges the notion that gender is

fixed; it is constantly shaped by mannerism, clothing and society. Beeja's behavioural changes can be explained through Butler's concept, where gender is performed through everyday discourse. It is evidenced in her shift where she starts behaving like a man keen on ownership of everything: "Who is the owner of Ekthambiyo Mahal?" and "Who is the master of all this wealth?" These inquiries signify Beeja's internalization of the patriarchal imperative to claim ownership and authority—over space, material wealth, and, by extension, Teeja herself. What was once a relationship defined by mutual resilience and shared adversity is now distorted by the very hierarchies that once oppressed Beeja.

Beeja's transformation into a man, initially perceived as a means of empowerment and social legitimacy, soon becomes a source of discord and alienation. The very masculinity that grants Beeja authority also distances her from Teeja, replacing their once compassionate bond with hierarchy and subjugation. As Beeja begins to recognize the consequences of her newfound dominance, she undergoes an internal reckoning, realizing that power, as defined by patriarchal structures, has come at the cost of love, equality, and companionship.

The turning point in Beeja's journey arrives when she comprehends the depth of her transformation, not just in physical form but in behaviour, mindset, and emotional detachment. The qualities that had once made her and Teeja resilient allies against societal oppression are now overshadowed by an inherited sense of entitlement. This self-awareness prompts Beeja to confront the reality that masculinity, as she has experienced it, is not inherently liberating but is instead deeply entwined with systemic dominance. The realisation is profound: true freedom does not lie in adopting an external identity dictated by societal norms but in embracing an existence where mutual respect and emotional harmony prevail.

With this newfound understanding, Beeja appeals to the ghost, the supernatural force that had granted her transformation, and implores it to restore her to her original form. Her request is not merely about reclaiming her former self but about rejecting the power structures that had shaped her behaviour. The reversal of the transformation symbolizes a conscious choice to relinquish hierarchical power in favour of equality, love, and self-acceptance.

Once Beeja is restored to her female identity, harmony returns to their lives. Beeja and Teeja continue to live together in peace, free from the constraints imposed by societal expectations. The world that once sought to control and define their existence no longer holds power over them. Their sanctuary in the haunted *haveli* remains undisturbed, and no man ever



dares to approach them again—perhaps out of fear, or perhaps because they have transcended the need for external validation.

Their story, then, becomes a powerful allegory for gender, power, and self-determination. Rather than conforming to prescribed identities, Beeja's journey illustrates the struggle of those who seek to define themselves on their terms. The *haveli*, once a site of exile, transforms into a space of ultimate liberation, where they construct a life beyond the dictates of patriarchy, unbound by the expectations of men or society.

### **The Cultural Significance of Words and Language in Folklore and Culture**

Language serves as a powerful vehicle for cultural preservation, particularly in folklore, where words carry deep socio-historical and emotional connotations. In folk narratives, specific terms encapsulate not just their literal meanings but also the values, customs, and traditions of a community. When folklore is translated into another language, retaining key cultural words ensures that the essence of the original narrative remains intact. The use of untranslated words in English versions of indigenous stories reflects an effort to maintain cultural authenticity and to preserve the nuances that might otherwise be lost. It also ensures that the culture receives representation through those words which sometimes do not have an exact translation. It also forces the reader to take a moment from reading and reflect on the use of the word, which is never without power at play. These words break not only the monotony of language but the power structures of language. It creates a hybrid space in reading and writing and thereby breaks the hegemony of language.

### **Cultural Context and Embedded Traditions in the Translation:**

In the translated version of “Double Lives,” several words—*Hathleva*, *Kalewa*, *Sedal Mata*, *Bavdi*—have been deliberately retained to uphold the cultural essence of the narrative. These terms are not merely linguistic markers but are deeply embedded in the socio-cultural framework of the story.

*Hathleva* refers to the wedding ritual in which the hands of the bride and groom are joined during the pheras, symbolizing their union. This ritual is more than a physical gesture;

it represents the sacred bond of marriage, the beginning of a shared life, and the intertwining of destinies within the larger social and familial structure.

*Bawari* signifies a 'denotified tribe,' a term that carries significant historical weight. Denotified tribes in India have a fraught history of marginalization, as they were once classified as 'criminal tribes' under colonial rule and continue to face discrimination. By retaining this term, the story preserves the historical realities and lived experiences of these communities, drawing attention to their social struggles.

*Kalewa*, the ritual breakfast of the groom, is an important ceremonial tradition in weddings. This meal is not just a feast but a symbolic act of acceptance, marking the groom's official integration into his new family. By keeping this term intact, the translation respects the ritualistic and communal importance of food in marriage customs.

*Sedal Mata* (Shitala Maata) references a goddess associated with health and disease prevention, particularly smallpox. The phrase describing the mud huts in the settlements of men as resembling the "mould on the food offered to Sedal Mata" is rich with symbolic meaning. It conveys notions of purity, contamination, and societal neglect, emphasizing the ways in which marginalized groups are perceived and treated.

*Bavdi*, or stepwell, is a historically and architecturally significant structure in many parts of India. Stepwells were not only water sources but also communal spaces where social interactions took place. Their mention in folklore reflects the deep connection between the environment and cultural practices, signifying both life-sustaining resources and the continuity of tradition.

### **Preserving Cultural Identity Through Language**

The story ensures that readers engage with the cultural specificity of the narrative rather than experiencing a diluted version. These terms carry emotions, beliefs, and historical memories that cannot be fully captured through direct translation. They invite the reader to step into the cultural world of the characters, fostering a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. The preservation of linguistic markers in folklore also highlights the importance of oral traditions and storytelling in maintaining cultural heritage. Words, as carriers of memory and identity, function as bridges between the past and the present, allowing traditions to persist

across generations. In doing so, they reinforce a sense of belonging and continuity within a community.

The retention of culturally significant words in translated folklore is not merely a linguistic choice but an act of cultural preservation. It allows the narrative to retain its authenticity, ensuring that the depth of meaning embedded in these terms is not lost in translation. Through language, folklore continues to serve as a vessel of history, identity, and collective memory.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative offers a compelling and realistic portrayal of the cultural ethos of Rajasthan, particularly through its detailed representation of enduring social traditions. The story foregrounds the gender biases inherent in the societal perception of girl children, highlighting how daughters are often viewed as burdens by their parents. The relationship between Beeja and Teeja, set against the rural backdrop of the village, reflects a progressive stance and captures the playful, dynamic spirit characteristic of folklore. Beeja's transformation into a man, followed by his subsequent misconduct toward Teeja, reflects the entrenched patriarchal attitudes prevalent in rural societies—attitudes that centralize female experiences while often disregarding male accountability in such narratives. The intervention of the ghost functions as a form of divine agency—akin to the literary device *deus ex machina*—which serves to protect the female protagonists at pivotal moments. Vijaydan Detha skilfully interweaves elements of rural gender constructs with the supernatural to explore and critique the complexities of social structures. Moreover, the inherent flexibility of the folktale form allows for thematic and narrative experimentation, enhancing the text's layered and nuanced commentary. The sensibility of Vijaydan Detha can be compared to Ismat Chughtai in the depiction of same-sex love as a means of liberating women from the limitations of social constructs. It also raises pertinent questions concerning whether it is possible to accommodate this nature of the relationship in the framework of the mainstream society.

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