

## **CHOUGAS AS NARRATOLOGY & THEME IN VIJAYDAN DETHA'S *KENCHULI***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper analyses the use of the narrative technique of chougas in by Indian folklorist and storyteller Vijaydan Detha. The tale selected for the analysis is Kenchuli. Proceeding with the meaning of chougas, the paper also highlights its importance in folktales and its use by the storytellers throughout the world. The focus is on the metaphorical use of chougas (robes/skin) with the help of the protagonist's struggle in 'disrobing'- literally and metaphorically- to break out of her suffocating marriage. Further, the paper brings forth many layers of a woman's mind and introspection on her own battle as explored in the story. It depicts the anxiety of the mind of Lachi arising out of the extremism of the landlord, Thakur, infatuated with her beauty, and his sycophant Bhoja, and the neglect of her husband Gujar. The end of the story carries the gravity of the title in a woman who breaks the social shackles, becomes free like a snake, coming out of the kenchuli, who wanders in exile in the whole world.*

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**Keywords:** Detha, Chougas, Narratology, Folklore, Folktale, Gender, Metaphor.

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### **Introduction**

William Bascom in his paper titled "The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives" defines folktale as:

Folktales are the prose narratives which are regarded as fiction...they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously...folktales may be set in any time and any place and in this sense they are almost timeless and placeless...Fairies, ogres and even deities may appear but folktales usually recount the adventures of animal or human characters. (4)

Contrary to Bascom's idea of fictionality of folktales and serving no purpose, Satyendra throws light on the emergence of folktales according to which folktales served deep rooted purpose drawing directly from Nature- the very first inspiration of folklore- and showcasing the progress of man (14).

With Vijaydan Detha, folklore finds its specific interpretation as a culture that derives from the lower classes with the function to oppose the hegemonic culture, the latter being the product of dominant class. It is used to maintain as well as challenge the status quo prevailing within a community and as a tool to establish consensus as well as contestation. Vijaydan Detha mocks middle class values regarding respectability while highlighting how the upper class exploits the lower class.

Vijaydan Detha, fondly known as Bijji, was born in 1926 Borunda, Jodhpur in Rajasthan. He hailed from the Charan community which used to have close links with literature in royal courts in the princely states. He won Sahitya Academy award and founded Rupayan Sansthan, Jodhpur which documents the folklore, folk art and folk music of Rajasthan. His excellent literary work *Batan ri Phulwari* (Garden of Tales), is a fourteen volume collection of folk stories that are based on folklore in the spoken dialects of Rajasthan. He heard all grandmother, aunts from his childhood days, potters, barbers, shepherds and farmers all became the rich source of tales for him. He recreated these tales into stories where one can see how Detha ridicules the feudal lords, the moneylenders, the merchants, the kings, and the patriarchs while the common men, peasants and even prostitutes are honoured in his folk stories. Many of his folk stories have been translated into Hindi and English and have been adapted for stage and screen also.

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The paper attempts to analyse the complexities of hierarchy and the individual self entangled within its web by highlighting the issues in marital relationships in the matrix of discrimination occurring in historically peripheral communities. To this purpose is dedicated the select tale from Rajasthan- *Kenchuli*. To get a clear understanding, the summary of the tale has been incorporated as well.

A local cowherd of Rajasthan, Gujar gets married to the immensely beautiful Lachi. Her beauty has been elaborately described which makes it the pivot of the tale:

“दुध- दही के साँचे में ढली देह...मानो तमाम कुदरत बेजोड़ सुंदरता ने कजरी की देह में  
शरण ली हो...”

The Thakur of the village, deeply rooted in the aristocratic indulgence in having the best of wine and women, hears stories about Lachi's beauty and assigns his henchman Bhoja to win Lachi for Thakur. Lachi, being a loyal and loving wife, thwarts the advances made by Thakur. However, things take unexpected turns when Bhoja falls for Lachi and starts making advances for himself which she smartly refutes while making Bhoja getting caught red-handed in front of her husband Gujar. But Gujar, who is suppressed by the power of Thakur and his gratitude towards him, overlooks the bad intentions of Bhoja. Lachi is stunned by her husband's behaviour and finds herself trapped in a slough. Torn between fidelity towards her husband and his insensibility towards her trauma caused by the greedy Thakur and Bhoja, Lachi has to make a decision and take a stand.

The author/narrator has provided a context and a small co-text at the beginning of the tale situating it in particular geographical space and time. Co-text imparts an extra-linguistic environment to the tale which is of crucial help in analysing the tale. A co-text in a folktale includes the people involved in a particular tale, whether it is an old tale or has been in vogue only recently, the origin of the tale—whether it is in-group or borrowed from another culture and modified according to the listeners' beliefs, the popular motif employed in the tale and the purpose served by the motif. It can precede or follow the tale (Toolan 263).

A similar feature appears in Rajasthani tales which is termed *chouga*. It extends beyond narrating the tale and conveying an important feature of the oral nature of storytelling. However, it is also employed when the tales are compiled as texts. This feature is not limited to the Rajasthani storytelling tradition alone. It has been used in a variety of manners throughout the world: Lewis Carroll uses a rabbit hole through which Alice slides down to Wonderland, C.S.Lewis uses a wardrobe to enter Narnia, J.K.Rowling uses a bus, train, flying car, a broom to transport the reader/listener to the world of the tales. According to Merrill, *chougas* are “a signature of Rajasthani oral convention” used to bridge the gap between real/tangible world and the fictional world of *rajas*, *ranis*, *rajkumaris*, *Thakurs* and the ordinary people as well. It familiarizes the reader/listener with the context of the tale as well as challenges him to fill the semantic gaps between the two worlds.

The selected tale also does not stand alone. The author/narrator has provided a context and a small co-text at the beginning of the tale situating it in particular geographical space and time. The importance of this co-text/*chouga* in the larger narrative is also the focus of the paper:

सड़ता पानी पड़तल, नीर बहे सो निर्मल  
अपनी अपनी नजर, अपना अपना नजरिया  
दया का दरिया, देव-पुरुष, दोस्त-दुश्मन को समान सुमति बखशे की किसी ठिकाने में .....

The literal meaning of the first two lines is that the stagnant waters have no life and become the organisms living in it die of decaying and the water that flows keeps itself clean and has the ability to create new life. As evident from the language it has a distinctive Folk Speech. It is a distinctive way of speaking a regional dialect used by people of a community with a unique style living within a particular geographic area. It differs with time and places and does not follow particular grammatical pattern and established norms and rules but it is an outcome of comfort and fluency in routine vernaculars. It is region specific and people specific. Folk speech includes local proverbial expressions, riddles and poems. It is mostly confined to oral circulation.

The *chouga*, a “signature of Rajasthani oral convention” (Merrill 24) was used by Rajasthani storytellers to transport an audience from the physical space where they were sitting into a fictional environment—one that was peopled with familiar characters like *rajas* (kings), *rajkumaris* (princesses), *thakurs* and *thakuranis* (landlords and their wives), weavers, potters, and every day ordinary people that the audience could relate to. By using it to frame the narrative, Detha took the *chouga* a step further from its original intention of ringing the ‘show is about to start’ bell for the audience.

Information about the tale is woven in the *chougas* which does not necessarily speak about the tale and its characters but creates a challenge to connect the co-text and the text. The expression employed creates a familiarity with the real world issues. Some other important techniques that have emerged from the tales relate to the construction of the tale.

There is a degree of artificial fabrication or constructedness in the tale as practised by Detha in many of his tales by incorporating *chougas*. This has been done keeping in mind the relevance of the tales for the communities in contemporary times. He establishes the relationship between the thematic concerns of folk tales with the collective expressions and activities of the society and articulates not only Rajasthanness but also the folk culture of entire Indian society in his fiction. He chooses folk elements and traditions and weaves them according to the contemporary contexts and thematic concerns.

*Chougas* lend a strength and uniqueness to the tale. Detha's objective, as an author, extended beyond capturing and narrating the content of the folktale, he also wanted to convey the oral nature of traditional Rajasthani storytelling. Writing in the capacity of a folk writer, he transforms the folktales to reveal the power dynamics and intricate workings of the contemporary milieu, as Merrill aptly observes:

Detha's stories showcased the vivid, common sense wisdom of Rajasthani traditions...Detha did not promote an ossified, top-down version of folk culture, but instead nurtured the dynamics of these traditions from the roots as a source of on-going, vibrant resistance. (8)

Many of the *chougas* are didactic, containing ethical life experiences, some are sentimental, somewhere social inequalities are described and the mixture of supernaturalism and fantasy is seen in many others. Proverbs are also given a place in them and sometimes they are related to the subject matter of the story. According to Merrill, the energetic rhyming syllables of the *chouga* playfully mock "elite (literary) expectations [and] ... like Lewis Carroll's famously nonsensical poem 'Jabberwocky,' the grammar follows just enough of the rules of meaning-making to make you conscious of the language's attempts to communicate" (65-66). That is, although the *chouga* follows the lexical and structural rules of Marwari or Hindi, it challenges the reader to fill the semantic gaps—especially the parallel frame for the social justice issue.

Detha took the notion of the *chouga* one step further by customizing each one to the story that was about to unfold. Spicing familiarity with the absurd, he maintained a rhythm, while weaving social issues, such as class and caste discrimination, into the frame of the narrative being outlined by the *chouga*. Merrill observes that Detha uses its "subversive potential ... [to] think through issues of caste discrimination and spouse abuse all in a playful manner that pretends that such violence does not exist in the real world and that no one has ever had to face such situations" (67). In this manner, Detha surreptitiously broaches issues that are traditionally taboo and cannot be acknowledged publicly or in private using the *chouga* to introduce the issue(s) and then weaving them into the narrative. He has used a culturally accepted tool to skirt around uncomfortable topics in a manner that makes the subject both comprehensible and digestible to his audience.

Invocation in oral tradition begins on an appeasing note to a deity or god, a judicial demand and social assistance as it appears in the third line and after that the storyteller quickly moves towards the prose portion of the story. *Chougas* are mostly in the form of couplets and poetic lines and the purpose of using them is that before telling the story, *Baatposh* (a storyteller) can attract the attention of the audience and arouse curiosity among them. The last line of *chouga* then continues into the first line of the story- "की किसी ठिकाने में ....." These words and phrases are collectively called "deixis" (Toolan 67). Although the place and time in oral narratives may not be actual and precise, yet they develop proximity between the teller and the listener and remoteness between the tale and the listener. This is also an instance of paratactic style of writing where the co-text joins with the main portion of the narrative. A paratactic style is one in which the members within a sentence, or else a *sequence of complete sentences* are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the noncommittal connective "and" (Abrams 284).

Coming to the meanings and theme incorporated in the *chouga*, not only does it speak about the rigid hierarchy in a society which controls the creation, production and transmission of culture stifling any individual creative capability but on an individual level also it speaks about a stagnant and lifeless marriage of Lachi which she renounces at the end. There are certain instances in the tale where life gets stagnant while the hierarchy is appeased and continues to thrive.

Unlike the other women of the village who believe in keeping the hierarchy functional and satisfied by whatever means possible ("सड़ता पानी परतल"), she is aware of her demands- a secure bond with her husband

and is ready to cast away her skin, metaphorically, if the bond is one-sided. Once becoming aware of her truest self, no matter how grey it is, she is not ready to go back to the same toil again as the opening line says- "नीर बहे सो निर्मल". Further, her husband's retorts and passive empathy towards Lachi's trauma and active acceptance of the hierarchy is another instance- "समुद्र में रहकर मगर से बैर निभ सके तो रियाया का ठाकुर से बैर निभ सके। चूल्हा फूंकने की खातिर तेरे जैसी इस गवाड़ी में सत्रह-बीसी औरतें ला सकता हूँ लेकिन अन्नदाता का आसरा छोड़ कर कहाँ जाऊँ?"

Thakur belongs to the category of the creator of values and execution is done by Bhoja but the decisive actions of Lachi bring the hierarchy under question. The monologues and means that she resorts to prove that her action of leaving her husband and Bhoja do not reinforce the prevailing gender beliefs, that is, holding onto marital vows falls under the purview of wife's duties solely. In the process of provoking her husband's jealousy to realise his responsibilities, Lachi on the other hand, understands her own character. Unlike her husband who could not take a stand for his wife's dignity, she is strong-headed to use her beauty as bait against her harassers to inspire her husband. The absence of jealousy in 'husband' sets the events in motion and becomes a liberating factor for her- she is aware of her demands, a secure bond with husband and is ready to cast away her skin, *chouga* in metaphorical terms, if the bond is one-sided. Interestingly enough, while Lachi realises her predicament seeing the shredded snake skin that her life is similar to a slough, moves out of the house, naked, in the middle of the night stripping away the metaphorical clothing of tradition which moulded her, leaving behind the *kunbaparasti* (word often occurring in the tale). Here the *kenchuli* becomes the motivator for her to accept the fact that casting away the fear of social ladder can only free her: "अब तो कुनबापरस्ती की केंचुली छोड़ने पर ही उसकी मुक्ति होगी".

It is interesting to note here that this self-realization is double layered. It is not just about the meaning of marriage that she understands and demands. Had it been simply this, then she would have gone to live with Bhoja but no sooner did she see him sleeping with other woman than the awareness hits her hard and she leaves the support of any kind of bond that she had been longing for. The connection between the core idea of snake shedding its skin and the flowing water in the *chouga* gets established. The former symbolically connects with the plight of Lachi- a married woman letting off her skin of fidelity and charmed by the risks of another man only to find him waiting to appease his carnal desire which helps her to create a new identity moving out of the rotten, stagnant existence. It questions the true meaning of marriage in a male dominated society and if a woman is not happy in a relationship seeks to address her right to live independently with dignity and pride.

Addressing the snake as a symbol used commonly in folklore Ramanujan opines:

A snake in a male- centred tale is usually something to be killed, 'rival phallus'. In woman- centred tale where women are the protagonists snakes are lovers, husbands, donors and helpers. Thus the meaning of the elements, the interpretation of the symbolism depends on what kind of tale it is: a snake in tales is not the same animal for different genders. (413)

Detha ends his stories, the transition back to reality, with a provocative thought—one that he would like his audience to take away with them. At the end when Lachi moves out of the village, stark naked, it rains heavily. The rains complete the circle started with the water imagery in the *chouga*. The tale begins with the idea that flowing water can create anew similarly the flowing water of the rains create Lachi's awareness and a new identity washed off the rottenness and stagnancy of exploiting hierarchy and lifeless marriage.

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