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Gender Politics: A Feminist Reading of Vijai Dan Detha's Selected Stories

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Males and females are two inseparable parts of society. Despite being almost equal in number, there is a sharp divide between them as far as societal powers and privileges are concerned. In the hierarchical social condition, males are having control over the norms and regulations of the society. Females ideologically accept the male sway but when the control becomes overbearing denying them their bare minimum human rights, they are compelled to raise their voice against male perpetrated injustice. However, their attempt to get themselves be treated as living human being is severely repressed as a social aberration on the excuse of maintaining family honour and societal morals. The female situation is worse in feudal traditional pockets of Indian sub-cultures. The present paper takes up four selected stories (originally written in Rajasthani and later on translated in English) of Vijai Dan Detha, a renowned writer of 'Bhasha Saahitya' to analyze the subdued female situation in the rural India and the ruthless attempt of male dominated gender politics to keep male control intact over the society.

The complementary but competitive relationship of male and female is an inalienable reality of human life. Except for some small sections of maternal society, the universal reality is the paternal social structure. There is a hierarchical relationship between males and females where males have the control of societal powers and privileges. Simone de Beauvoir voices this inequitable relationship in clear words:

This has always been a man's world . . . when two human categories are together, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon others . . . If one of the two is in some way privileged, has some advantage, this one prevails over the other and undertakes to keep it in subjection . . . man would wish to dominate woman. (61)

In male dominated relational paradigm, the socially sanctioned gender divide is a clever ploy on the part of males to uphold their hegemony over females. Women are subjugated before the insolent might of males and life is a constant struggle for them for the basic human rights. However, females are not a homogenous category and there are many sub-groups among them because of varied contextual cultural situations. The females who are the part of feudal societies are more vulnerable to male exploitation and injustice. They have to fight hard for getting themselves recognized as living human beings. The demand for equitable female rights is currency in urban middle class women but their counterparts in the rural areas even do not know about them. Their bare attempt to live with human dignity is taken as a bold attempt to revolt against the accepted social norms based on male domination. Ramamoorthi rightly hints at the situation of females in India, "The culture that created a Sita and a Gandhari has denied existence to woman except as a daughter/sister, a wife/daughter-in-law, and a mother/ mother-in-law. The Hindu Society has denied woman the possibility of being "SHE," a person capable of achieving individuation" (115). The present paper highlights the realities of male-female relations in rural India and brings out the subtle nuances of gender politics through the selected stories (originally written in Rajasthani and later on translated in English) of Vijai Dan Detha.

Detha, a renowned writer of 'Bhasha Saahitya', wrote touching stories about different aspects of traditional Rajasthan society. His stories, combining Rajasthan folkore with a symbolic and imaginary world, create a mesmerizing environment. Many layers of deep meaning and sarcasm are hidden behind his simple stories. It is because of the strength and powerfulness of his stories that he was nominated for Nobel Prize for Literature in 2011. He

was also a recipient of Padma Shri, Sahitya Akademi Award and Sahitya Chudamani Award. By portraying the socio-cultural milieu of the Rajasthani society, his stories make satirical and poignant comment on inequitable and hierarchical gender relations. Detha indicates that the exploitative power politics is behind the innocuous talk about maintaining societal morals and family honour. The present paper has taken up his selected stories (translated in English) namely, “New Life”, “The Dilemma”, “The Slough” and “The Crow’s Way” to analyze the working of gender politics in the traditional Indian society. The female protagonists of these stories are working in different familial and social contexts but their lives are indicative of the fact that females need a lot of courage to stand before the discriminatory behaviour of the male dominated society. The large exploitative system is working in a way that other females who are associated with them are either helpless or ideologically subdued to be the part of male duplicity. Detha cleverly employs some super-human agencies like ghosts or outcasts like prostitutes to indicate that there is a need of extra-ordinary courage on the part of trapped females to counter the subtle nuances of gender politics.

The concept of gender though having a base in biological differentiation between male and female is more social, cultural and political in nature. It has emerged as a means to get ideological acquiescence for maintaining male supremacy over females by perpetuating certain accepted social stereotypes. Simone de Beauvoir indicates the reality:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in the society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (267)

It is an accepted social fact that in paternalistic social structure, male supremacy and corresponding female subjugation is a rule. The rule has been readily accepted by the female folk by and large. Abrams while defining feminist criticism analyses the working of the patriarchal system:

. . . it is male centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic. . . . Women themselves are taught in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal *ideology* (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination. (89)

Males are considered physically and ideologically superior to females because of the socialization process but the matter becomes worse when in the garb of maintaining social order, females are so ill-treated that their basic humanity has not been recognized. In such cases, females after bearing up to a limit, begin raising their voice for bare minimum human rights but the irony is that even this is considered as their revolt against society. 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’s story “New Life” is a very poignant portrayal of the tyranny of male authority over frail and poor females. In the story, a female namely Beeja has been given an upbringing as a male by his father to fulfill his greed of getting a handsome dowry in marriage. The girl has begun to consider herself as a male and has readily entered into a marriage relationship with another female namely Teeja. Later on after realizing the reality, she tries to come out of

this complicated situation. However, the greedy father tries to save the situation with the clever excuse of maintaining the family honour and requests the female duo not to say anything outside the house. He pleads with Teeja in these words, “Daughter-in-law, my prestige is in your hands. Make your husband see sense and make her wear the clothes she used to” (12). His innocuous appeal hints at the ideological weaponry available to males to keep their hold intact over societal situations. Teeja later on accepts the grave reality, “We are the victims of this idea of carrying forward the name of the family. We have to root this out” (23). She emerges as a bold female protesting against unnatural male demands. She is also sympathetic about Beeja’s family situation and becomes her consoling partner. She knows the social position of females and mentions clearly that they are at the receiving end in such traditional society. She speaks to Beeja, “You have been wronged more than I have. Both of us have been struck by the same lightning. Now we have to pay the price for it together” (10). Both of these wronged females refuse to surrender before the unnatural greed of the father and ask for their bare minimum right to be accepted as their true self. This leads to a trail of their misfortune and they are now social outcast.

Detha highlights the extreme inhumanity of the gender politics which looses the father free without chastising him. The male centric society is neither ready to accept the real self of Beeja, nor allowing the pair to live separately in the socially sanctioned married relationship. The bold attempt by the pair to face social injustice has been taken up as their revolt against the set standards of the society. Other females including the mother of Beeja are so feeble on the social scale that they can only sympathize with the pair and that too in silence. Detha symbolically indicates the gravity of the inequitable gender relations by employing the agency of ghosts. Without their support, it is impossible for the pair to survive in front of the collected might of family, society and state. Only superhuman courage can break the shackles of the age long gender discrimination in the society. Teeja mentions in clear terms the reality of the symbol of ghost, “You are not that ghost. You are the invisible, eternal flame of the times to come” (25). The effort of the Beeja-Teeja pair is a bold but meager attempt to be treated as a human being before the combined insolent power of males. Such courage usually does not get registered in the societal documents directly but whenever it is voiced, it generates ripples in the otherwise apparently calm ‘pond’ of the society. Detha portrays how the ‘revolt’ of the pair helps other females to see their own situation though they are not bold enough to stand up against the male politics. The mother points out the reality, “You couldn’t have done anything worse. Your liaison has flattened every male ego” (22). A female relative of the pair accepts the boldness of their effort but she feels helpless to come out of her unjust family situation, “Though your courage and happiness have given me support, I’m not strong enough to live with you” (25). Teeja understands the dilemma of the relative, “...you are haunted by the ghost of traditions” (25). Certainly, Teeja is a strong female voice to expose the finer strand of the politics of males to keep their hold intact over females.

The masterstroke of the story is the change of Beeja from a female physical being to a male being and this highlights the different cultural construct of male and female behaviour. This symbolic gesture indicates the social acceptance of the male behaviour as haughty, intimidating and possessive without any qualms for his unjustness. Rivkin and Ryan observe while analyzing different feminist paradigms:

Essentialist feminists argued that men think in terms of rights when confronted with ethical issues, while women think in terms of responsibilities to others. Women are more caring because their psychological and physical ties to physical being remain unbroken. (530)

Beeja becomes a male with the help of the ghost only to shun this role later on. Detha clarifies the situation:

Man's vigour and power seemed to have risen in the sky in the shape of the sun, while the woman appeared to be a mere shadow. Earlier the Single-Pillared Palace was owned by both of them and they had equal rights. But now, things had to be clarified....(30-31)

The ownership over all assets becomes the part of Beeja's male reality and even the female body of Teeja is just another item of property for him. This shows the accepted belief system of the society and ultimately Beeja rejects the male status by reverting to her female self. Strangely Teeja does not accept the offer of turning to be a male categorically in the very first instance, "But I don't wish to be a man in any birth!" (27) In the story, Detha clearly indicates that the power clash between males and females is for holding male sway intact. Female voice is restricted to mere asking for the bare minimum human rights. It is very difficult to break the socially accepted male hold and bold females like Teeja are considered as a social aberration and a spoiler of the society at large. Simultaneously, the overbearing attitude of the society makes such females a recluse. The male hegemony is so complete that any other possibility is scoffed at with full might of the society.

Detha's another story "The Dilemma" also highlights the feminine revolt against the unnatural demands of males and in this attempt the support is provided again by a metaphoric agency of ghost. The story presents the position of a female in traditional family. A newly wed bride has to follow the irrational dictates of her in laws and her husband without betraying her actual emotions. She seems to be in ready acceptance of her husband's advice to defer the consummation of marriage for another five years as he has to leave the place for some business engagement. It is rightly said, "Whatever her lord, the husband wished, was also her wish" (103). Very few options are available to her but when a symbolic call comes from an unknown quarter, she after initial hesitation accepts it. Detha highlights the lack of avenues before females to register their voices. He points out that once a means is available, females will not remain non-communicative in raising their concerns against male apathy about their feelings and emotions. The gender politics is to keep females non-existent and subdued under the garb of social and other responsibilities.

In the story, the bride has been portrayed as the beauty incarnate and even the ghost is bewitched by her beauty. She is described as, "It seemed like essence, tenderness and scent of roses had been transformed into the form of a woman" (98). Her pristine beauty transforms a ghost into a compassionate being, whereas her beauty makes no difference to her business oriented husband. Detha makes a stark comparison between the characters of these two, on one hand, the ghost thinks, "He would rather torment himself than cause any pain to the beautiful bride" (99) and on the other hand, for her husband, "real happiness lay in calculation and business – the rest is useless" (99). The groom has his own way of justifying his apathetic ways in the name of family honour and social and business responsibilities. He rationalizes, "why awaken desire for just two days when they must live apart for five years" (102). She raises a big question mark on her identity and the relevance of the institution of marriage:

It was for this husband that she had left her home and parents, she thought. She remembered all her playmates, relatives, the bank of the village pond, the game of hide and seek and all the revelry that she had forsaken to come away with him.

Deserting the loving care of her mother, she had hoped to gain love from her new home and here her husband ready to leave for business. . . (102)

However, she cannot express her anguish because of social constraints and is destined to accept the dictates of her husband. Her subdued position is ironically commented upon by Detha while she accepts the advances of the ghost, “She could not hold back the one who deserted the bedchamber and now could not she resist the one who was entering it” (109). She has no choice but to bear the burnt of the harsh realities of her life. The situation of a female is well captured by Detha towards the end of the story where the bride, though is reunited again with her husband, and she cannot say anything about her emotional relationship with the ghost:

Within this very bedchamber she would have to spend, god knows, how many lives! . . . even the cattle are not used this way against their wish – they too, resist. What choices are given to a woman in her life? Till she reaches the funeral grounds, she has to adorn the bedchamber and from the bedchamber the only way out leads to funeral pyre.”(120)

The story is a pointer to females’ subdued position in the society where the male whims are the rule and genuine complaints of women are exceptions. Silently following the male authority is a pre-condition for their survival in such a restrictive society. They need ‘super’ human ways to face the inequality and to make themselves heard.

Detha not only comments upon the constraining familial situations but also graphically portrays the reactionary and feudal nature of traditional Rajasthani society. There has been a clear cut class divide between the landlords and their subservient serfs and peasants. There has been a very subtle system of cruel exploitation and human degradation prevalent in such society. The position of females is all more vulnerable here as they are at the receiving end not only of their family situations but also of the society as well. Detha’s story “The Slough” presents not only the impotence of males in the face of insolent might of feudal lords but also portrays the travails of females in such society. Females have to bear double burden of insensitivity of their male counterparts and insinuating advances of feudal lords and their privies. There is always a demand on them to prove their faithfulness and chastity without the required physical, moral and emotional support from their family. The story is about a beautiful rustic girl Laachi who is very loyal to her husband. She rejects the advances made by thakur and gives him a befitting reply by hurting him physically. Her husband who is fearful of the authoritative landlord is not happy with Laachi’s reaction. He chides his wife for her audacity and snubs her, “This is terrible. You should have at least kept the thakur’s prestige in mind” (74). Laachi is totally confused with his behaviour and begins questioning male domination and authority. She casts doubt on male duplicity:

Birds and animals are simple beings and with them, what you see is what you get, it is men who live in contradiction. They think one thing, say another and do something totally different. With humans what you get is the opposite of what you see. The regulations of home and community, caste and attitudes never free men from their restrictions. (75)

Laachi is not able to accept the inequitable restrictions on human behaviour and is in search of a negotiable point where she can balance the social constraints and a natural human desire to live with dignity.

She tries hard to shun all overture of Bhoja, takhur's privy, and remain true to the conjugal vows to her husband. Ironically, her husband is oblivious of the intentions of Bhoja and makes every effort to appease him so that he can keep himself in good books of takhur. She thinks, "Such a cowardly husband would be hard to find even if she looked for one with a lamp" (93). Laachi though fulfils all the demands of her husband is not happy with him because he takes her devotion for granted. She is compelled to do her duty as a wife, "If she had not been married to him she might have made some excuse and expressed her willingness" (93). She is confused about the relevance of marriage when the husband is more concerned about his safety than the physical and moral dignity of his wife. She questions the very institution of marriage and finds it more as a ploy to uphold male sway on females. She raises some fundamental questions about the socially sanctioned male-female relationship,

Why, then, had the marriage been organized with so much pomp, show and noise? Why did they bring an unwitting girl into a new household? Was it to propagate progeny and satisfy bodily lust? Or was it only to slog like a bull yoked to a mill all day long in the household? Was it to lick the feet of thakur and his subordinates? . . . Her husband had no objection to anything that served his self-interest. (95)

She indicates the hypocrisy of the well established social institutions like marriage and highlights the subtle nuances of the gender politics prevalent through them.

Detha provides a very strong voice to the female tirade against male duplicity by presenting bold revolt of such trapped females. After a prolonged resistance to the unauthorized and anti-social male attempt on her female body, Laachi comes out of her wedlock when she has noticed the coward unconcern of her husband for a long time. She feels that Bhoja has shown courage to come close to her and she can have some genuine intimacy from him. She revolts against the institution of marriage and male apathy towards feminine feelings:

The one who had taken her hand had taken no risk other than seven rounds a sacred fire. Yet, Bhoja had taken endless risks for her. How could one deny such longing? And what was value of such a youth? To slave away just for food and clothes? Or to have her body brutalized? Was it all that life was worth? If this was so, then why should woman answer to just one master? Her freedom lay in shedding the slough of conjugal fidelity. (96)

However, her bold attempt to get accepted as a female self and not a mere puppet to male wishes ends in fiasco. Here again, she gets deceit by the male logic as she is desired only as a female body to fulfill temporary bodily lust. Bhoja has her replacement in the form of another female when it seems to him that Laachi is a hard nut to crack. Beauvoir points out that female is not more than a sexual object for a male, "Woman? . . . she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult, yet he is not ashamed of his animal nature . . ." (3). Laachi does not accept this situation and revolts against the human society as a whole. She moves out naked away from all sham human relationships and related pretensions. Detha poignantly presents her situation, "With eternal hope in her womb, she still roams the universe, naked. She has no destination and knows no rest" (97). The difficult female reality is that either they have to submit to the irrational and inequitable behaviour of male society and to live without an identity of her own or to leave the human world forever. A female is doomed in both options and the salvation from the puzzle of gender power politics no doubt needs new strategies.

The female chastity and loyalty is much desired social value in Indian families. The complete burden of maintaining family honour is on females and males are given the final authority of passing the judgments without owning any responsibilities. A minor slip may cost a female her life but for male it is nothing but an opportunity to begin his life anew. Detha's story "The Crow's Way" is a pointer to deplorable position of females in Indian society. The young bride in the story is very virtuous and is doing all her duties with care and compassion. Her husband has been given a blessing by swans to come out of his impotence but this leads the female protagonist to a long trail of miseries. Nobody is accepting her conception through her husband during her brief meeting with him as this is not in public knowledge. She is asked to make sacrifice for the honour of the family and no pleading of her is accepted. Detha indicates the hard fact of Indian woman, "A woman, forsaken by her in-laws, is not welcome even in her parents' house" (50). Moreover, even her son who is blessed to spit out pearls has been stolen from her by a cunning voracious goldsmith. All the more, her husband who knows the complete reality is satisfied by marrying with some other woman. He shows his male 'theatrics', "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" (56). She is suffering for no fault of her own and her misfortune is just because of innocently accepting the norms of the male society. She is a victim of human greed before which all human considerations come to a naught. Detha compares her with Sita who has to go through proverbial 'agni pariksha', "Sita, the virtuous wife of Lord Rama, was sent to the wilderness only once and here was this Sita who had been thrown into wilderness thrice" (56).

Male politics is to hide the duplicity and to crush completely the subdued females. The female protagonist, in the story, is declared witch and is doomed to meet her daily death by becoming a prostitute. A momentary comfort comes from an unknown quarter, Lakhu, the head prostitute. She does not force prostitution on her and provides her time to decide on her own, "You have full freedom to do what you like. I bargain for a woman's body, not for her life" (57). Lakhu becomes a female voice to lay bare the hypocrisy of male society. She satirically compares between Indian household and Prostitute's home, "What is the need for deception in a prostitute's house! Family homes are more suitable for that" (58).

The desperate female protagonist tries her last bit to remain a respectable member of the society. She approaches her all social connections but gets 'saner' advice from her relatives, "All relationships are maintained as per customs. The ways of the world cannot be overlooked" (58). The words of her mother are just like bolt from the blue, "It would have been better to carry a stone in my womb than one like you! ... Even death has shunned you. ... You have put your mother's milk to shame!" (59)

She has no way out except to be a part of Lakhu's prostitution business. Lakhu knows the reality of the world:

'Daughter! Religion, devotion, welfare, non-violence, rituals, traditions, faith are all fake. The only truth is "the crow's way". All scholars, sages, avatars, prophets and holy men outdo each other in following the way of the crows. Self-service is the ultimate service. ... Men lose their balance when the truth is exposed. How much of man-created filth exists behind the facade of sunshine....'(61-2)

The joining of the prostitution is a sort of revolt on the part of the young lady to expose the inequitable and exploitative nature of male dominated society. Her revolt becomes all the more vociferous when towards the end of the story she accepts her son as her client and this shows that the female body is just a means for males to satisfy their lust. The story brings out

that human dignity is a far cry for a female and her basic survival is a fundamental issue in her life. It raises a strong voice against male exploitation:

‘...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.’ (61)

Moreover, ironically the house of prostitutes is presented as a reflection to inner male psyche, “The rotten beliefs of a household have to be discarded here . . . What is done on the sly there, is done openly here. . . .No relationships based on caste, creed or families are nurtured” (62). In this story, Detha, again, employs an unacceptable social agency in the form of prostitutes to compare the norm and the exception and points out that the norms of justice, equality and security are non-existent for females. Their life and stake is dependant on the whims of males and they have no voice in the matter. Only thing which they can do is to show finer nuances of their revolt against male exploitation but at a great cost of complete destruction of their self.

Detha’s stories are no doubt grounded in the traditional Rajasthani society but the realities about deep rooted inequitable male-female relationships which they portray are valid for other pockets of different Indian sub-cultures. The unjustifiable gap between males and females can be sensed even in the present Indian society after having a look over different news related to male excess on females. The legion instances of male chauvinism are an attempt to restrict the entry of females in hitherto uncharted terrains of the society. Detha sensed the wide discrimination between males and females and graphically presented the unjust conditions of the society. His stories imaginately highlight the female situation and make very poignant comments upon the male orchestrated gender politics. The combination of natural imagery with the realistic portrayal of social situations adds a deeper meaning to his stories. His stories are always with a message that an underlying revolt is brewing among the subdued females and this might come out in the shape of unnatural resistance against male injustice. The unequal conflict between males and females is hinted at by the presence of symbolic ghosts and other agencies as prostitutes against the accepted social forces. No doubt, his stories are strongly anti establishment giving voice to females who are at the margins of the society and are fighting hard to get bare minimum subsistence. Finer nuances of the gender politics of keeping intact the male sway are captured effectively in his stories. These small pieces of fiction by Detha have indeed become a chronicle of the inequitable social conditions which need immediate amendments to create a human society in real sense.

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