



## **Social Critique and Subaltern Perspectives in Vijaydan Detha's Folk Tales:**

### ***A Marxist Analysis of Class, Power, and Resistance in Selected Tales***

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#### **Abstract:**

This article applies a Marxist reading of selected folktales of Vijaydan Detha's oeuvre of Rajasthani folktales. The folktales selected include "Aasmaan Jogi", "New Birth", "Power", "Lajwanti", "The Dilemma", and "Press the Sap, Light the Lamp". The present article draws on the theoretical framework of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially their concept of false consciousness, class struggle, ideology, base and superstructure, commodity fetishism, and alienation. The article argues that Vijaydan Detha's folktales are a repository of Rajasthani oral tradition and present a sharp social critique of the patriarchal, feudal, and bourgeois structure of power. Subaltern voices such as women, thieves, ghosts, potters, peasant women, and farmers' shared experience in feudal and patriarchal structures are taken into consideration. Through subaltern discourse, he dismantles the mechanism by which dominant classes maintain hegemony, discloses how ideology naturalises exploitation and unveils how resistance erupts from marginalised communities. Thus, the article also contends that he presents a counter-hegemonic position, asserting the voice of the oppressed and excluded. The argument is that his folk-narratives are not merely means of entertainment but also serve the purpose of subaltern perspective on the social world, challenging the dominance of caste and class hierarchy while celebrating and asserting the agency of the downtrodden.

**Keywords:** Folktales, Marxism, Subaltern, Patriarchy, Hegemony, Hierarchy.

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## 1. Introduction:

Vijaydan Detha was born on 1 September 1916 in Boranda, a small village under Jodhpur district in Bilada Tehsil. Embarking on his writing journey from folk life, Detha made rural settings, people's poverty, suffering, festivals, and customs the subjects of his stories. His works reflect dedication to promoting folk traditions and social awareness, striving for a more just and equitable society.

In Rajasthani literature, his notable contributions include *Batan Ri Phulwari* in fourteen volumes, *Rajasthani Hindi Katha Kosh* in eight volumes, and *Rajasthani Lokgeet Ka Sankalan* in six volumes. His critical works include *Bapu Ke Teen Sapne* and collections of essays *Sahitya Aur Samaj*. His personality was as vast as his creative works, and countless writers have drawn inspiration from his creations. His corpus is a testament to his dedication to breaking chains of oppression and servitude, establishing him as a significant figure in Indian literature who successfully championed the struggles of common people through folk narrative traditions.

This article applies a Marxist theoretical lens with concepts such as false consciousness, class struggle, alienation, base and superstructure, and commodity fetishism to selected folktales of Vijaydan Detha's oeuvre. The argument is that his folk-narratives are not merely means of entertainment but also serve the purpose of a subaltern perspective on the social world, challenging assertive practices and ideologies.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Marxism Defined

Marxism, as a theoretical perspective and political philosophy, is grounded in the joint intellectual contributions of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). Their groundbreaking works— “The Communist Manifesto” (1848), “Capital”(1867), and “The German Ideology”

(1846)—laid the foundation for the core principles of Marxism. In its fundamental form, Marxism offers a materialist interpretation of human history. Its central premise is that the structure of economic life—specifically the prevailing mode of production and the social relations arising therefrom—constitutes the primary force that determines a society's thought, governance, and organisation.

According to Marx, every society rests upon an economic base, which encompasses both the means of production (land, tools, technology) and the human relations constructed around ownership and labour. Upon base stands the structure that Marx termed the 'Superstructure'—namely, the entire apparatus of law, politics, religion, culture, and ideology. The superstructure is not independent of material interests. As Marx and Engels argued in "The German Ideology", the dominant ideas in any given historical epoch are, in fact, the ideas of the economically dominant class. Consequently, culture, religion, legal systems, and prevailing common sense are not neutral forces; rather, they function as instruments to justify and perpetuate existing systems of power and ownership.

To further elucidate this framework, there are several auxiliary concepts. In the Marxist sense, 'Ideology' refers to the set of beliefs and values through which class hierarchies are portrayed as natural, inevitable, and morally justified. Closely associated with this is 'False Consciousness'—a state in which the exploited class assimilates the worldview of their exploiters and begins to support the very systems that operate against their own interests. 'Alienation' denotes the profound estrangement that capitalist and feudal modes of production impose upon workers—severing them from the objects they create, the act of production itself, their fellow human beings, and their own full human potential. Finally, 'Commodity Fetishism' points to that peculiar inversion wherein relationships between human beings assume the guise of relationships between objects, thereby

rendering invisible the human toil and exploitation concealed beneath the surface of market exchange. (Marx 47-50)

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”(Marx and Engels 14). At the heart of Marxist thought lies the theory of ‘Class Struggle’—the irreconcilable and ceaseless conflict between the owners of the means of production (the bourgeoisie, or ruling class) and those compelled to sell their labour for a livelihood (the proletariat, or working class). For Marx, this struggle is not a peripheral element of history, but rather its fundamental constitutive force. Every social order is merely a temporary and contested resolution of this fundamental conflict (Marx and Engels 14-20).

When Marxist analysis is integrated with the study of postcolonial and regional literature, it encounters a productive point of dialogue with the concept of the ‘Subaltern’ (Spivak 37-41). This term was introduced by Antonio Gramsci and subsequently elaborated upon by the Subaltern Studies Group. This concept designates those individuals whose subordination operates simultaneously across economic, social, cultural, and political spheres: women, lower-caste communities, landless peasants, and tribal groups. Detha’s folktales—deeply rooted in the vibrant oral traditions of Rajasthan—are situated precisely within this subaltern terrain. They rise from below, embodying within themselves the accumulated sorrows and wisdom of the silenced, and address power structures through the oblique, evocative—yet unerring—language of metaphor, folk humour, and narrative tradition (Green 1).

### **3. Marxist Analysis of Selected Tales**

#### **3.1 New Birth:**

‘New Birth’ is a folktale selected for analysis from *Garden of Tales*, a collection of folktales by Vijaydan Detha. The story demonstrates how commodity fetishism — worshipping and prioritising gold and wealth — destroys the humanity of subalterns. At the beginning, the Kumbhar (potter) couple who run the pyau (charitable rest house) live their lives on the Marxist concept of use value. They serve travellers honestly and eat whatever they have. They are living a very modest and simple life, chanting the name of God day and night. Sethani argues, “ what do we need wealth for? We sit here in this pyau in the service of travellers, take the name of God morning and evening, get rotis to eat on time, people sing your praise, and the seth has trusted you and spent so much on building the rest house, the pyau, the rooms, the reservoir and the well...” (Detha 11). A dramatic change occurs in their lives when Seth approaches and proposes to take their son away for sixteen years. Here, the subaltern family is seduced to the allure of wealth, preferring exchange value over use value. The couple think that their son’s worth lies not in his presence but in accumulating wealth. The kumbhar's initial resistance — “If the body can survive without the soul, I can survive without my son” (Detha 9) — showcases the use value world view but gradually his thoughts are overcome by wealth he says “Don’t you want to see the son you have brought into this world become a big man? If a trunk full of gold jewellery glitters on your body, will you be bitter about it?” (Detha 12).

Son’s departure produces class consciousness in the couple where greed for accumulation of wealth surpasses their love for their only child. Gradually, they weave dreams of accumulating wealth and a comfortable life ahead: “The Kumbhari said, we will build a separate mansion for ourselves. And I am warning you, I won’t wear less jewellery than our beendni. If you grumble later, I won’t listen to anything you say” (Detha 19). In Marxism, this is the ideology of false consciousness, an escape from ground reality by accumulating fetishised commodities. Allures of

wealth make them so selfish that they become serial killers, which Marx calls literalisation of primitive accumulation, where, through means of violence, one possesses the wealth of others. The social capital, their good reputation and position of trust, enables them to perform this duality of nature.

The story ends through irony of commodity fetishism: the very wealth for which they killed others is brought by their son they sacrificed. In this manner, the family confronts the tragic end through their action of dreaming of class ascent.

### **3.2 Aasmaan Jogi:**

Aasmaan Jogi — the sky-dwelling supernatural predator who abducts women and imprisons them in his Cloud Palace — demonstrates Vijaydan Detha's dismantling of how the ruling class dominates subalterns through power, and in counteraction, subaltern voice asserts itself, challenging dominant ideologies. Through Marxist analysis, the concept of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci is exhibited where the powerful, by consent and coercion, exert their power, making it natural. Aasmaan Jogi's argument, which justifies his ideology of dominance and power, is based on the rule of nature: "I have power, so why not exert it? Leave aside humans, even God cannot do anything when confronted with my power!" (Detha 35). He naturalises his power by saying, "This is the foremost law of nature. How can powerless compels others to do their bidding? If a rabbit had the strength of lion, would it let other animals go free without killing them? If a pigeon had the power and daring of a hawk, would it go about meekly pecking grain? The wailing of pigeon or a rabbit won't change the ways of justice" (Detha 36). Through this assertive argument, Aasmaan Jogi naturalises the ruling class's ideology of domination.

Subaltern voices such as Kumbhari and Seth's daughter present counter-hegemonic arguments by asserting and empowering the subaltern presence. Kumbhari, who serves Jogi and knows all his secrets, resists his imposed ideology of power and exploitation, which James Scott calls the 'Weapons of weak' where the powerful do not actually realise the power of the subordinate and are betrayed by them. Seth's daughter knows the secret of the death of Aasmaan Jogi and, with the help of Kumbhari's son, managed to kill him and liberate thousands of women from Badal Mahal, which corresponds to the concept of productive labour in Marxist theory. The collective emancipation of the oppressed and the shattering of Badal Mahal are, indeed, the collapse of the superstructure, and the assertion and empowerment of the subaltern according to Marxism.

### **3.3 Power:**

In the story 'Power', ideological domination is exemplified where Vijaydan Detha critiques the apparatus of power, the way in which power is worshipped without any rational assessment. "In those times Kajis were feared even more than thakars and lords. Religion and God were, of course, important in their own ways, but everyone was frightened of the Kaji. And owing to this dread, small and big, young and old, none dared forget the name Koel" (Detha 67). The story is about the Kaji and his dog named Koel, where everyone flatters Koel and thereby internalises and performs the ruling class ideology. For example, when it comes to naming the dog of Kaji, people say to Kaji, "It will be as you say our minds can agree to nothing that you don't agree to. But you are the one who will have to name her" (Detha 67). People's collective grief over Koel's death is what Althusser calls interpellation: the process by which ideology 'hails' individuals into subject positions that serve the ruling class. The dominance of power is visible in the mourning where people actually do not mourn the death of Koel, nevertheless participate in it because of their

servile attitude towards the powerful. But with the death of Kaji, the institution of power collapses; the same people do not even think as if nothing happened. “But what was most surprising, given the Kaji’s stature, was that no chaos broke out in the neighbourhood following his demise. Forget the sun and the moon, not even a green leaf on any of the trees in the settlement seemed to grieve his passing” (Detha 73).

Now with Kaji’s demise, the structure of power changes altogether, where people start worshipping the new Kaji. The moment the object loses its exchange value, it becomes worthless. Thus Detha exposes that the loyalty of subalterns is no loyalty at all but a selfish calculation where survival depends on proximity to the powerful.

### **3.4 Lajwanti:**

“Lajwanti” presents a Marxist feminist analysis of patriarchal discourse which exploits and subjugates female assertiveness and forces her to confine herself to the domestic sphere of patriarchal subjugation, thus subordinating the female body and desire. Lajwanti, a shy and veiled woman, is the product of what Judith Butler calls ‘gender performativity’, where gender is a socially constructed ideology imposed upon a person who is part of society and through performance one’s gender is constructed (Kakoliris 61). Lajwanti, initially a submissive and shy woman, asserts her voice of protest by going against patriarchal discourse: “As he came closer, she unconsciously started to raise her veil, as if that hand and that body weren’t hers but belonged to some other woman” (Detha 108). This clearly indicates that Lajwanti aspires for freedom and wishes to break the shackles of patriarchal discourse. Lajwanti exposes the depraved state of men of society who try to control women in each sphere of life, but themselves are of depraved character “But the other men of village had filth in their minds. Despite being married, they were so depraved

it was as if they had never seen the face of woman. They'd not even refuse the roasted meat of a beautiful woman!" (Detha 105). The dove man passionately waits for the dove of his dreams; he does not force Lajwanti, who herself, in the end, proves to be the dove of the dove man's dreams, thus presenting counter-patriarchal discourse. Lajwanti's self-liberation through her revolt against patriarchy showcases the empowerment and assertion of subaltern voices, though this assertion takes place outside the stifled sphere of patriarchy in a soulless wilderness; being outside the surveillance of patriarchy underlines the spatial politics of subaltern desire.

### **3.5: The Dilemma**

The "Dilemma" presents Detha's pondering upon confining human relationships only to exchange value as Marxism observed it. The newlywed groom harbours the greed for wealth, obsessed with accounts, profits, and matters of trade, showing the least concern for the newlywed bride. Detha sheds light on the state of mind of the groom on his day of marriage which showcases his greedy and materialistic attitude. "He had been taxing his brain for two hours straight, and still he could not account for all the wedding expenses. His father was going to be furious. They had overspent a bit. Such oversights invariably displeased his father: the joy of playing accounts and trade was the greatest in this world! Everything else was a trifle. Bhagwan himself was a supreme accountant! He counted every single breath every living being breathed. Counted every drop of rain, every gust of wind, every grain of sand, and his books always came out exactly right. If nature had never made a mistake in her ledgers, then how could a baniya permit any? ( Detha 149). His wife merely serves the purpose of domestic economy for the groom's family, and the groom's immediate leaving the house the day after marriage confirms it. The groom explained, "The wedding is over and done with. But the accounts are still outstanding. I have to submit all the

accounts from the wedding before I can leave to do business this coming Teej festival. Such an auspicious astrological moment won't come again for another seven years." (Detha 151). The bride's needs, desires, and emotions are only commodified, leaving her a lifeless vessel. The ghost who replaces the groom after his departure to foreign lands demonstrates the use value of love as opposed to exchange value, which is seen in the character of the groom. The bride's genuine feelings of love for the ghost after the ghost confesses everything related to his identity represent subaltern resistance by a marginalised character. Her choice of an authentic relationship over a socially imposed, lifeless relation is a voice of resistance by a subaltern. With the disappearance of the ghost, the old social order is restored again, revealing the strongly rooted domain of social construction which Detha indicts, where women's choices are always suppressed by property relations.

### **3.6 Press the Sap, Light the Lamp**

"Press the Sap, Light the Lamp" is Detha's unveiling of a feudalistic power structure and patriarchal subservience of women regardless of their class standard. Thakurani falls in love with a cobra, a supernatural figure which can change its form into a human whenever required. Detha unmasks the frailty of human character; even animals and supernatural creatures are more reliable and loyal than human mates. Thakurani's love for the cobra and reciprocal attitude of cobra showcase shallowness of societal constructions of rituals like marriage, which use women as exchange value, but, on the other hand, animals understand the use value of human love. Thakurani kisses the cobra on his lips and utters "Women's heart are such that they can fall in love even with a snake. You don't trust these lips of mine? Then there's nothing in the world you can trust" (Detha 94). The Thakur who murdered three of his wives exposes the frailty of patriarchal and feudal

discourse. Thakurani counters this dominant ideology by loving a cobra, an act that symbolises the voice of subaltern resistance and the logic of survival through strategic discourse. The riddle she poses is part of the passive resistance of the subaltern.

“Press the sap, light the lamp, trunk below the bed.

True love felled by one untrue, below the champa bled.” (Detha 98)

She speaks the riddle in a coded language, realising that direct accusation of the cobra’s murder against her husband will not make any sense from her subaltern position. Her beautiful smile when Thakur comes ahead to cut her throat with his sword is the voice of assertion of consummation of love even in death. Detha exposes the limitations of subalterns and their rights in a feudal patriarchal structure.

#### **4. Discussion: Detha's Folk Form as Counter-Hegemonic Practice**

These tales serve the purpose of countering hegemonic discourse. Vijaydan Detha, through systematic use of dominant forms (Folk tales, oral narratives ), subverts and challenges dominant social values. Detha exposes the stereotyped and conservative aspects of society, protecting the voice of the subaltern from extinction in oral form, strengthening it through literary timelessness and critical sharpness. Across these tales, subaltern insight and their powerlessness are visible. Characters such as Kumbhari in “New Birth”, women in “Aasmaan Jogi”, Lajwanti in the tale “Lajwanti”, Bride in “The Dilemma”, and Thakurani in “Press the Sap, Light the Lamp” arrive at clarity about their position in social surroundings. The exploitation, silencing of their voice and the hollow imposed ideologies of social construction compelled them to resist and empower themselves. Detha presents a Marxist insight, making characters conscious about their social

position, but he could not protect them from dominant ideology and patriarchal domination. Their circumstances force them to raise their voices when patriarchal organisation exceeds its limit. In most tales, women's circumstances do not change, and they seem to be trapped in the clutches of patriarchal discourse. Female consciousness must be awakened through collective efforts. For example, a folktale such as "Aasmaan Jogi" conveys a powerful message that emancipation requires collective efforts. Through collective efforts, women liberate themselves from the clutches of Aasmaan Jogi.

## **5. Conclusion:**

Vijaydan Detha's folk tales, read through a Marxist lens, unveil themselves as a sharp critique of social structures that yield and promote inequality, subjugation, and oppression in any feudal, patriarchal form of social structure. From the commodity fetishism that destroys the kumbhar family in "New Birth" to the naturalisation of power in "Aasmaan Jogi", from the performative sycophancy of "Power" to the subaltern desire of Lajwanti, Detha consistently locates the elements of exploitation in oppressive social structures rather than in the individual itself and continuously celebrates and empowers the people who are at the bottom of social structures. Detha's Marxist perspective is unique in itself as it does not cause triumph or heroic victory to alienated characters, but their ending sometimes comes with unattainment of their desire and sometimes in tragedy, dismantling an authentic difficulty in subaltern resistance against the entrenched power structure. Vijaydan Detha's folk form is itself a political strategy, asserting that truth worth knowing remains in the hearts of common and ordinary people, transmitted from generation to generation in the form of story, song, and memory.

Future research might fruitfully extend this Marxist framework into dialogue with postcolonial theory, Dalit literature studies, and feminist materialism, investigating how caste — a dimension that Marxism has historically poorly conceptualised in the Indian context — intersects with class and gender in Detha's social world. Such an expanded framework would allow for an even more nuanced and complete account of the subaltern perspectives that Detha's extraordinary body of work makes available.

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