

Accents of Universality in Select Short Stories of Vijaydan Detha

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“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” (Shelley 55)

With the arrival of ‘theory’ in 1910, all literature with elements of universality has come to be called “liberal humanism.” (Berry) As a consequence of this, Literature has been conceived of in various different ways. One way is to see it as a ‘mediated representation of reality’, so not necessarily objective and universally applicable. Nevertheless, despite all attempts at foregrounding the contingency, historicity and location of literature, there have been writers acknowledged as international and regional. This is a big paradox of our time. One more view is that some literatures speak more readily to the entire humanity while others do less. Despite the fact that there exist categories of writers and literatures such as regional and international, the writers who are casually dismissed as ‘regional’ may actually record human emotions and thoughts more sincerely and minutely than so-called mainstream/international writers do. One such case is Vijaydan Detha’s. Though he is routinely labeled as a regional writer from Rajasthan, his writings do contain accents that loudly proclaim his cosmopolitan world-view and sensitivity as a writer.

The paper is an attempt to explore how Detha despite being duffed as a regional writer appeals in his fiction that raises issues and concerns of humanity. The paper, further, analyses some stories by Detha to bring out elements of universality in his observations embodied in his fictional worlds.

An epitome of local wisdom and global awareness, Detha long remained in relative obscurity before finally being recognized as a strong voice in Rajasthani Literature. The first national level recognition of Detha’s talent came with the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1974; around the same time his story “Duvidhya” was made into a film by Mani Kaul. Besides these, he received many more awards and accolades but the fame that probably suggested him for award of Padma Shri in 2009 and later for his nomination for the Nobel in 2011

took a fillip in 2005 with the coming of the Bollywood film *Paheli* starring Shahrukh Khan and Rani Mukherjee.

It was soon discovered that while his fame rested mainly on his work as an archiver of Rajasthani folksongs, tales, idioms and proverbs, and the Rajasthani language in general, his creative oeuvre was also by no means ordinary. His creative writings cover a wide range of themes and styles that genuinely reflect his intellectual stamina and artistic maturity. His choice of language in which to articulate his creative world-view also further demonstrates his courage of conviction, the mark of a genuine writer. He avers: “If I didn’t return to my village and write in Rajasthani I would remain a mediocre writer.” (*Tehelka*, 21 Jan. 2006)

What, probably, accounts for his being seen as a regional writer is mainly due to his refusal to write in no other language except Rajasthani. The politics of languages and their hierarchised use being what they are, it is no surprise that a writer like Detha had long languished in obscurity before he was eventually catapulted into the limelight.

His fiction breaks all man-made barriers and encompasses all times. His local characters imbue the contemporary socio-political milieu and cultural arena of the society. He gives voice to the marginalized through his vociferous advocacy of their cause and challenges the dominant regimes and social hierarchies. His fictional world provides a platform of cultural and linguistic resistance and offers a platform for equal opportunities for the marginalized. Sri Aurobindo, India’s sage-poet of 20th century, remarks:

The work of the poet (writer) depends not only on himself and his age but on the mentality of the nation to which he belongs and the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic tradition and environment which it creates for him. (Das 230)

Vijay Dan Detha has largely followed this method wherein he first collected an unwieldy body of folklores, folktales, songs, proverbs, idioms of Rajasthan and universalizes them with local colours. Of course, a writer exercises his own ‘individual talent’ in the manner of presentation and selection of perspectives and subject-matter (Eliot). But, he largely stays close to his first-hand experiences.

In his conception of the relationship between society and literature, Detha broadly falls in the socialist realism tradition that Marxists once espoused. On this view, literature becomes an instrument of depicting the social

totalities with utmost fidelity. What such depiction aims is to change the way things are customarily done as these customary ways are loaded with subtle biases that keep certain classes in positions of power while others in a subordinate state.

Analysis of Stories:

The story “**The Dilemma**” essentially presents the dilemma of a woman who is caught between desire for love and societal expectations of chastity from her. On face of it, it may seem like a story embedded in the traditional experiences of women in a typical Rajasthani household. On a deeper level, it poses a problem almost universally felt by women in different social set-ups. This is the question of what Judith Butler calls ‘performing the gender’ (Butler). Since she is traditionally expected to perform a certain gender stereotype, she is no way free to be herself. She must ‘fit in’ to live a peaceful life. Traditionally, she is not expected to have any desires of her own. If her husband chooses to go to ‘distant lands for trade’ the next day after her wedding, the social customs demand that she must learn to restrain her passions and wait for her husband’s return. The question posed here is: what does it have to be the man alone who decides what is best for them as a couple? Don’t her desires matter?

The narrative may have come down to Detha through folk-tales but the elements of contemporary relevance as well as essential human nature are purely his additions. This is a creative transformation that Detha effects with finesse. Likewise, in the string of stories titled “**Chouboli**” (it is a series of seven stories that are embedded in one eponymous frame-story). The skeletal form of the narrative is: there is a Thakur who tortures his wife by daily exercise his archery skills on her and this act is out rightly condemned by a village girl, who is a seth’s niece. To punish this effrontery, the Thakur marries her also and as he tries to inflict the same torture of having a hundred arrows pass through her nose-ring daily, she dares him to meet the challenge thrown by the princess Chouboli. The Thakur fails and ends up in a dungeon. Eventually, the Seth’s niece (the junior Thakurani) meets Chouboli’s challenge in the guise of a man. Detha expresses his views in *Sahitya Aur Samaj*:

The exploited life and exploited love of a woman will attain complete freedom only when she will cross the four walls of the house and step into the open arena of the society. All her works will be

recognized for the prime importance as family's necessity and only then, her ever imprisoned life will experience genuine bliss. (147)

The three women i.e. the Thakurani, the Seth's niece and Chouboli are three versions of a woman. If she can be docile like the Thakurani, she can as well be headstrong like the Seth's niece and as well be independent-minded as Chouboli. Such portrayal of women has all that it makes characterisation of universal type. Simone de Beauvoir observes in her seminal study *The Second Sex*:

Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly. Let but the future be opened to her, and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the present (692).

The issues, therefore, raised are not the issues that concern just the women of Rajasthan. These are universal problems and hardships of women.

In a similar vein, the story "**The Ninety-nine Rupee Snare**" depicts how a cotton carder lives a happy life until he falls in the snare of greed. Once caught in the coils of greed, he gets pressed tighter and tighter. Eventually, he succumbs therein. This message of the evils of greed has a scriptural tone to it. Is it not the problem of entire humanity? Isn't T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* about greed and lust? Isn't Tolstoy's story "How much land does a man need?" about the same issue.

If Detha depicts the throes of inequality suffered by women, he also depicts the inequalities and injustices suffered by the masses and inflicted upon them by ages-old systems of exploitation like usury, caste system, *begari* (bonded labour), religious fanaticism, hypocrisy etc. In the story, "**Charandas Chor**", which has been adapted into a film by Shyam Benegal and a play by Habib Tanvir, the way Detha attacks the hypocrisy of the society is simply a sure sign of literary maestro. It is about a thief who has taken a vow not to tell a lie ever. After all the thefts he commits, he gets killed for not accepting the queen's behest to tell a lie about her. So, it is not his thievery that costs him his life; rather, it is his honesty. How reliable then are the societal norms and standards of morality?

Another story by Detha titled "**The Dove and the Snake**" relates a universal experience of the struggle between the powerful/evil and the innocent/powerless. The dove in the story is a symbol of both innocence and powerlessness while the snake is that of evil and powerfulness/lethality. The dove is regularly tortured by

the snake. Out of fear, the dove keeps shifting its locations but how far can one run away from the evil? The snake follows wherever the dove takes shelter! Eventually, the dove has to take help of a mongoose to get rid of the snake. The narrative has strong symbolism. It carries the Marxian touches too. If the hitherto powerless people want to survive, they will ultimately have to unite as the dove, the crow and the mongoose in the story do. Likewise, the story “**Press the Sap, Light the Lamp**” portrays the basic human desire for being loved. When a woman prefers a snake-love to her real husband who never bothers to satisfy her desires, is it not a genuine expression of women’s anguish?

Similarly, there is a story titled “**A Straw Epic**” that depicts how a spark can flare up into an all-consuming fire that can engulf communities altogether. It represents a gory fight between the Rajputs and the Banjaras of a certain village. But, the crux of the matter is that it all got triggered off with a straw that the Banjara took off some jaggery that he was buying at a Baniya’s shop. One thing led to another, and soon the entire village was up in arms and bloodbath ensued with no survivors.

Though there may be many and various conceptions of a writer in our post-modern world, the one image of writer that has almost universally spread and survived the ravages of time is that of someone who stands up for the righteousness and justice. Judging by these standards, Detha stands tall as a writer. He remarks:

My spine may bend but not my pen. My alphabets should never have a fancy for wealth, my words should fear no power/authority and my creation should never smell off will for recognition- this is the most important credit for a writer. (Roonkh 525)

Now, a regional writer talking so sensitively as well as artistically of issues and challenges of such magnitude is a clear refutation of equating regional character with parochialism. While the latter is necessarily an indicator of the narrowness of outlook, the former carries the fragrance of local soil yet by no means remains limited in the breadth of outlook. Detha’s writings abound with such illustrations as amply showcase the range of his themes and styles. Sarveshwar Dayal Saxena comments:

Vijaydan Detha is not just an institution in himself, but also such a distinguished story writer of Rajasthani, who can be called the creator of an era...upcoming story writers can learn a lot from his stories and for the readers these stories are a precious treasure. (Roonkh 544)

This is how Detha accomplishes his feats from *Chaupal* to Nobel. *Chaupal* is a local Rajasthani word which refers to a public place where community people often share their experiences, discuss local issues and celebrate their pleasure whereas Nobel is an international award given for extra-ordinary contribution in a field. This phenomenal journey is a record of Detha's universal appeal and his touching portrayal of human experiences that cut across time and space. In this way, his voice takes on accents of universality.

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