Chouboli and Other Stories (Vols. I & II)
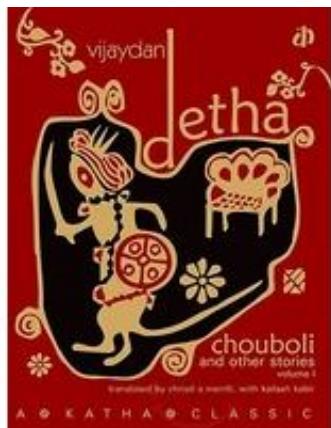
Vijaydan Detha
Translated by Christi a Merrill with Kailash Kabir

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Translation has always been considered a secondary activity, and as such is the literary fate that almost no discussion of a translator can be found in textual analysis. Whether creative or not, no one can deny that a good amount of love and labour go into the making of a good translation. Then, when it is a collaborative project involving two or more people from different cultures, certain other things become necessary too. This is what seemed to have happened with the translation of Bijayan Detta's stories from Rajasthani into English by Christi A. Merill with Kailash Kabir. The outcome is an extraordinary translation and transcreation of texts from one cultural and linguistic context to another while aiming at assimilating capacities of languages. In the introduction to the volumes, "Translating as a Telling Practice", Christi A. Merills speaks of the translation as a collaboration at different levels: first with Vijaydan Detha, the collector/writer of the stories and then with Kailash Kabir, a Hindi poet and translator. The long introduction to the volumes is important for many a reason: on the one hand, it introduces Detha and his collection to unfamiliar readers in India and abroad, on the other it explains the practical and theoretical justifications of the translation. While talking of the genesis of the work Merrill rightly pointed out an adverse effect of hegemony of Hindi in India, a fact which thwarted the development of Rajasthani language and literature. This shows that the centre-margin relationship operates not just on one level, but on many levels. Merrill also carefully puts in how once translated in Hindi some of the stories could be adapted on the stage and into film quite successfully even in the contemporary context. The adaptability on the artistic and commercial spheres points to the acceptability of the folk-stories irrespective of time.

The selection contains stories with complex themes which raise certain complex cultural issues. The translator seems to have been fascinated more with the stories

having some anti-patriarchal and so-called feminist elements. In fact, the leading story 'Chouboli' can be said to be a feministic inversion of the dominant fairy-tale structure where a prince rescues a princess. 'Chouboli' is an exception and an inversion of the pattern in that here an oppressing husband is challenged and instigated by his wife to go for a test, and humbled and tortured by others and then rescued by his wife who inflicts final punishment in the form of pornographic domination of horse-riding on a humbled husband. The women finally draw a strong generalized conclusion: "For women, there's no great difference between one man and another except how they look".[i] This sounds formulaic but it must be remembered that such perception operates in India and in any patriarchal society.

Two other stories in the volume "Press the Sap, Light the Lamp" and "The Dilemma" have strong feminist elements. The stories have their origin in the neglect of women, in the absence of love and in taking it for granted that woman is passive object, which does not have nor can have desire. The consequences of such foolish belief of the patriarchal order are shown to be very disturbing for all. However, in order to expose the cruelty and torture of the society the demonic/supernatural agencies have been introduced and sometimes they provide what is missing in the human society. For instance, in the story "Press the Sap, Light the Lamp", the narrator comments on the woman who is ready to be killed by her husband after the death of her snake-lover:

> "Instead, she smiled. A beatific smile whose glow didn't lessen even after her head had fallen."[ii]

Sometimes the supernatural agents are seen to provide some moral lesson for the humans. In "The Dilemma" the story concerns the neglect of a woman by her husband in favour of earning money, and a ghost is introduced to show how far things can go wrong. This ghost ultimately teaches the highest moral and through its agency the narrator strongly conveys what is missing in a money-making society:

> "The love and care I experienced in the form of a man gave me unsurpassable joy. There is no happiness its equal. But you humans are caught in a different web."[iii]

The story ends on a sad realization about a woman's grinding fate in such a male-dominated society "Until the day she is taken away to the cremation ground"[iv]. The other four stories in the volume—"The Ninety-nine Rupee Snare", "The Dove and the Snake", "A Straw Epic" and "The Crafty Thief"—deal with peculiar human situations where the themes of greed, anger, pride and truthfulness have been treated quite effectively in order to explain human follies and foibles.

In the Volume II the stories are of mixed nature, ranging from very old to the contemporary. But the best of them is the story "Two Lives", a story collected by Detha strangely from a Jain sadhu. More surprising is the fact that it presents a story of same-sex love between two women. Here too a money-making male-dominated society forms the backdrop as it forces two women in such a humiliating position that they decide to leave it and enter a demonic world. Once out of the socially demarcated area and out of the norms of the society, they can enjoy same-sex love. The inhuman nature of that kind male dominated society is re-enacted when one of the women through the agency of a spirit chief is transformed into a man only to experience the same kind of domestic

violence and greed for material possession. After realizing the very nature of the society as a torture-machine, the women decide to destroy the foetus in one of the women's womb in order to avoid the structured cycle of violence.

The Volume II contains, however, other stories having varied and complex themes on human nature and human situations, and some of them can be called political allegories in the contemporary contexts.

The book has been designed beautifully in a special way—following the publisher Katha's motto of "enhancing the pleasure of reading"[v]: right from the cover and through the pages the pictures and illustrations have been drawn by naïve bold and thick brush to supplement the reader's aesthetic experience of the texts. In our age of digital productions when publishing is increasingly taking e-turn, this book proves once again that book-making itself is an art that contributes to the pleasure of reading.

The only fault with the book or rather the translation at first seemed to be with the translator's not providing the equivalent English terms or explanations or notes for the native Rajasthani terms. But this has been deliberately done following the publisher's conscious policy of "including bhasa words that have made their way into the everyday English of readers, without italicizing or glossing or apologizing"[vi] This must have been necessary also for maintaining the oral and performative nature of the words which intervene in the discourse to create certain disturbances in the perception of meanings.

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Notes

[i] Vijaydan Detha, *Chouboli and Other Stories*, *Vol.1*, trans. Christi a Merrill with Kailash Kabir (New Delhi: Katha, 2010) P. 81.

[ii] *Ibid.*, p. 102.

[iii] *Ibid.*, P. 180.

[iv] *Ibid.*, p.183.

[v] *Ibid.*, p.2.

[vi] Christi A Merrill, "Translating as a Telling Practice", *Chouboli and Other Stories*, by Vijaydan Detha *Vol.1*, trans. Christi a Merrill with Kailash Kabir (New Delhi: Katha, 2010) p.27.

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