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The Sociolinguistics of Silence: Unspoken Norms and Marginalisation in 'Batan Ri Phulwari'

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ABSTRACT

This article examines silence as a social and linguistic resource in Vijaydan Detha's 'Batan Ri Phulwari', the fourteen-volume Rajasthani story cycle drawn from oral tales of the Marwar region. It combines sociolinguistic accounts of silence (Basso, 1970; Saville-Troike, 1985; Jaworski, 1993) with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of linguistic power and Spivak's question of subaltern speech, and distinguishes three levels at which silence operates: performative silence in the oral frame, normative silence around marriage, desire and hierarchy, and institutional silence surrounding the Marwadi Language. It focuses on involving narrative address, withheld speech, indirect communication, social hierarchy, gendered constraint. The article argues that Detha's tales do not simply depict marginalized characters as voiceless; rather, they show silence as a constrained yet sometimes strategic mode of social action.

Keywords - Sociolinguistics; Silence; Vijaydan Detha; Rajasthani Folktales; Marginalisation; Orality; Subaltern

INTRODUCTION

Silence is often treated as the opposite of language, an empty space where speech is absent or where language fails. Sociolinguists challenge this assumption by showing that silence can be a meaningful part of communication. It may signal respect, discomfort, uncertainty, consent, refusal, grief, fear, or strategic withdrawal, depending on the social relationship and cultural context in which it occurs (Basso, 1970; Saville- Troike, 1985). This article takes that position into the literary world of Vijaydan Detha's 'Batan Ri Phulwari', the fourteen-volume story cycle that Detha (1926–2013) built from tales told by the people around him in Borunda, a village near Jodhpur. The cycle is dated by one reviewer to 1960–76 and began as stories published in the folklore periodical Lok Sanskriti (Zaidi, 2012; Purohit, n.d.). The central question is how do tales from Batan Ri Phulwari represent silence, and what does that silence reveal about social hierarchy and marginalisation? The article asks not only who speaks and who remains silent, but also who is permitted to speak, whose speech carries authority, and whose silence is treated as natural, necessary, or invisible.how the stories represent what a community does not say aloud, and who bears the cost of that reticence.

The argument has three parts. First, the cycle's oral frame builds regulated silence and response into the act of telling. Second, the stories repeatedly circle subjects that social convention leaves unspoken: who decides a marriage, what a woman may desire, and how the lowborn must behave before the powerful. Third, the language of the stories has itself been placed in a silenced position, because Rajasthani still lacks constitutional recognition. Taken together, these levels suggest that Detha's retellings work less by announcing protest than by making the unspoken audible.

The Batan Ri Phulwari and Its Tellers -

Vijaydan Detha was born on 1 September 1926 in Borunda and belonged to the Charan community of hereditary bards (Zaidi, 2012; Purohit, n.d.). With the folklorist Komal Kothari he founded Rupayan Sansthan, an institution devoted to documenting Rajasthani folklore, art and music, and the two began by publishing from a press in Borunda (Sahapedia, n.d.). Archival catalogue entries from the British Library's Endangered Archives Programme describe individual volumes of Batan Ri Phulwari as published from Borunda and edited by Kothari, who also wrote prefaces on the structure and significance of the folktale (British Library, n.d.-a). The series earned Detha the first Sahitya Akademi Award given for Rajasthani, in 1974 (Zaidi, 2012); the catalogue entry for volume ten states that the award was for that volume (British Library, n.d.-b).

Detha's own account of his sources, reported by his translator Christi Merrill, is that he heard the stories from aunts, neighbouring potters, peasants, court servants, visiting holy men and thieves (cited in Pathak, 2012). The point matters for a study of silence, because these are largely tellers whose speech seldom entered print. Merrill and Kailash Kabir rendered selected stories into English as Chouboli and Other Stories (Detha, 2010).

These tellers occupied social positions from which speech often did not enter official literary history. The tales give narrative space to people whose voices were often excluded from print, education, administration and elite literary culture. Yet they also preserve a paradox: many original tellers remain anonymous. Their stories are heard, but their names and individual authorship are not always recorded. The oral tale thus becomes a space in which marginal voices may be transmitted while the conditions of their social recognition remain incomplete.

Theoretical Framework:
Silence as a Social Fact:

Keith Basso's study of silence among the Western Apache of Cibecue, Arizona, silence is not simply a failure to speak. Drawing on sixteen months of observation between 1964 and 1969, he argued that speakers may withhold speech in situations marked by social uncertainty, unfamiliarity, or unequal relations, including encounters with strangers and courtship. Basso shows that the meaning of silence depends on context: the same absence of speech may convey respect, awkwardness, caution, or withdrawal (Basso, 1970).

Saville-Troike (1985) extended the point by arguing for an integrated theory of communication in which silence helps to structure interaction rather than standing outside it. Pauses, non-responses, turn-taking and culturally regulated silence contribute to the organisation of social exchange (Saville-Troike, 1985).

Adam Jaworski (1993) argued that silence can be analysed by the same pragmatic principles as speech, and devoted part of his study to the politics of silencing. These accounts treat silence as meaningful but do not by themselves explain why some groups are silent more often than others. A character may remain silent because she has no socially legitimate way to speak; another may remain silent because speech would be dangerous; another may use silence strategically to avoid conflict, preserve dignity, or expose the inadequacy of a more powerful speaker. **Linguistic capital and symbolic violence:**

Bourdieu (1991) supplies a missing element. For him language is a medium of power: speakers operate in a linguistic market in which some ways of speaking carry more capital than others, and they adjust what they say, or whether they speak, to the demands of that market. His related concept of symbolic violence describes how dominated groups come to accept the terms of their own domination. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is especially relevant. Symbolic violence occurs when domination is accepted as natural or legitimate, often because dominated groups have internalised the categories through which they are judged. In relation to silence, this means that some people may refrain from speaking not only because they are explicitly prevented from doing so, but because they have learned that their speech will not count as authoritative. In Detha's tales, this framework helps explain why silence may appear around caste, gender, class and language. A woman's silence before marital authority, a labourer's silence before a landlord.

Subaltern speech and representation:
Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) carries the question into postcolonial politics by asking who is able to speak, and who is spoken for, when the subaltern is represented. Merrill (2009), writing directly on Detha, asks whether the subaltern can joke, and answers by turning to riddling, oral-based fictions that laugh at what traditions often keep hidden. For analytical purposes this article separates three kinds of silence: performative silence, built into the roles of teller and listener; normative silence, imposed by unspoken social rules about marriage, desire and hierarchy; and institutional silence, in which a language is left outside the official recognition granted to others.

Method and Scope:
This is an interpretive, qualitative study. It reads Detha's Batan Ri Phulwari and through published reviews, scholarly commentary, archival catalogue descriptions and official records, The analysis focuses on tales and episodes in which silence can be identified through character's refusal or inability to answer directly, indirect speech, euphemism, or evasion, narrative omission or unresolved reference, a pause, hesitation, or interruption in dialogue, listener's regulated silence or minimal response within the oral frame and a social rule that is enforced without being explicitly stated.

Analysis : Performative silence orality as a structure of response : Pathak (2012) observes that the stories open with nonsense rhymes and that the hunkara , the nods or sounds of assent from listeners, makes telling a two-way transaction; questions put to the listener or reader in the middle of a story draw the audience into the tale. Zaidi (2012) notes a similar device in "Alexander and the Crow", which begins and ends with teasers that challenge the audience's judgement. Sahapedia's account adds the opening invocation and the chouga refrain (Purohit, n.d.). Read through

Saville-Troike (1985), these devices form a grammar of permitted silence. A listener's silence is not empty: it is bounded by minimal responses that signal that the telling is accepted and may continue.

The inference here is the author's and is not stated in the sources, but it follows from Pathak's description: withholding the hunkara would break the exchange, so the audience takes part through a regulated alternation of speech and silence. For marginalisation, what matters is who holds each role.
The tellers Detha names, among them potters, peasants and servants, speak in tales that circulated without authorship, and Pathak notes that the stories keep the anonymity of their original tellers. The cycle therefore gives these tellers a hearing while leaving them unnamed: they are heard, but not credited. Two passages from Volume 10 illustrate how Detha's tales make meaning through withholding and indirectness. In "Nagan Tharau Bans Badhai," the narrator states:

"जिण अजोगती बात सू थानै इत्तौ इचरज व्हियौ उणरौ औ म्यांनौ है। समझ परवांण इण मेंसार लाधला " (Detha, Batan Ri Phulwari, vol. 10, p. 156). "From that incomprehensible matter, such curiosity arose in me, and my mind. On reflection, I found its essence in this." The tale acknowledges that its central matter is initially incomprehensible; meaning emerges only through reflection. This makes silence a narrative resource rather than a failure of communication. In "Asamann Jogi," Detha writes: "साच मांनणिया कुम्हारी रैबेटा री गळाई सखी व्हैला। गाजां-बाजां मनचायौ ब्याव व्हैला। अर अभरोसौ करणिया मर्याउपरांत ठौड़-ठौड़ आक-धतरौ बणनै ऊगैला"

(Detha, Batan Ri Phulwari, vol. 10, p. 241). "In truth, the potter's son's throat would have been relieved. The desired marriage with music and celebration would have taken place. And after the trusted one died, thorn-apple and datura plants would have grown here and there. Here, marriage is imagined through public festivity, while death introduces a contrasting register of loss and transformation. It shows how the tale connects desire, social recognition, and mourning without reducing them to explicit explanation.

Normative silence: marriage, desire and the unsaid:
Detha's women characters repeatedly confront decisions made over their heads. The question of who has the right to tell us whom to marry (Fordham University Press, n.d.), and a recent discussion of the stage adaptations observes that women in Duvidha , Lajwanti and Dohri Zindagi are trapped in patriarchal structures while longing for love, dignity and freedom (The Wire, 2026).

In "Duvidha", a ghost falls in love with a young bride and takes her husband's form so convincingly that even her in-laws are fooled.

The tale sociolinguistically, shows that the household's recognition of a husband rests on appearance, and that the wife's own judgement has no recognised channel through which to be voiced. (Duvidhya), the bride's hesitation and lack of authoritative response are repeatedly marked through silence. When her husband dismisses her wish for daalu, "बिदनी कोई जवाब कोनी दियो"; she sits silently and thinks of her parental home. Later, after receiving instructions about household honour and service to his family, she "silently listened," because "it was not within her power to say or do anything".

These moments show that her silence is not a simple absence of speech. It is produced by a patriarchal structure in which the husband, the elder brother, and material calculation control the terms of recognition The tale itself names this condition when it observes: "जहाँ वाणी अटकती है , वहाँ मौन काम सारता है" At the moment of recognition between the bride and the ghost-husband, silence becomes a medium of understanding. Yet this silence remains ambivalent: it allows an intimate truth to pass between them, while also reflecting the bride's restricted access to authoritative speech within marriage. "Two Lives" (Dohri Zindagi) is the clearest case of silence at two levels.

Two girls are married to each other through their parents' deceit, motivated by greed for dowry; they come to love each other and choose to go on living together. Beeja refuses to treat the revelation of their sex as a reason to abandon the marriage. Although the marriage has been arranged through parental deception, she affirms the emotional bond between the two women. "Even if I were not a man but a woman, I would still not refuse this marriage.

This is a matter of hearts joining. If hearts join, why can there not be a marriage between two women? The Wire (2026) notes that when Detha wrote the story about four decades earlier, same-sex relationships were hardly discussed openly in Indian society. The parents' concealment and the public reticence of the period are thus two forms of one silence, and the ending gives voice to a relationship that public discourse did not openly name.Detha's fictions as daring to laugh at what traditions keep hidden, including spouse abuse and ethnic violence, supports this reading of the cycle as a way of speaking around prohibition.

Hierarchy, deference and the strategies of the low-born :

A second group of stories concerns class and caste hierarchy. “The Thakur’s Ghost” as a story of the wisdom of ordinary people and a dig at feudal lords who take pleasure in the hardships of the poor. In “To Each Her Own”, a fisherwoman forced to spend a night in the royal gardener’s house cannot bear the scent of flowers, while the gardener is sickened by her fishy smell; she quietly tiptoes out and sleeps on the floor outside with her empty fish basket over her face (Zaidi, 2012). the fisherwoman does not argue. The story is told through smell and posture, and her withdrawal is consistent with Basso’s (1970) hypothesis that silence follows uncertainty in unfamiliar social relations, here sharpened by distance of rank. That is the author’s reading, not Zaidi’s. “Untold Hitlers” extends the theme to violence. a professional cyclist dares the arrogant owners of a newly acquired tractor and meets a tragic end. Detha is reported as saying that there is a Hitler in everyone, drawing strength from condescension towards another being. As the story closes, it sets the great atrocities of the twentieth century beside this small event in an ironic comparison.

It would be wrong, however, to equate silence with powerlessness. Pathak (2012) notes that apparently powerless characters in Detha’s tales may embody power while the apparently powerful prove vulnerable, and Zaidi (2012) adds that the subjugated in these stories survive their hardships. In Bourdieu’s terms, the tales show symbolic violence at work without conceding that the dominated always accept it; reticence appears as a tactic as well as a constraint.

Institutional silence: the language of the stories :

The third level lies outside the stories, in the status of the language in which they were told. Sahapedia’s account suggests that ridicule over his weak English at school may have prompted Detha’s decision, in Classes VIII–IX, to make his mother tongue his medium of expression (Purohit, n.d.). Rajasthani is still not listed in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India. The Rajasthan Legislative Assembly unanimously supported its inclusion in 2003, and the proposal is reported to remain pending with the Union government (Rajasthani diaspora, 2026). On 21 July 2023 the Supreme Court dismissed a public interest petition seeking inclusion, holding that whether to add a language to the Schedule is a policy decision for the appropriate constitutional authority (Rana, 2023). In the Census of India, Marwari, Mewari and other Rajasthani mother tongues are tabulated under Hindi (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011; People’s Archive of Rural India, n.d.). Bourdieu’s (1991) analysis fits this pattern: a language whose speakers are counted under another’s name has a low position in the linguistic market. A development in July 2026 suggests a partial shift: the Governor of Rajasthan, as Chancellor, directed eleven state-funded universities to set up Rajasthani Language Study Centres (Rajasthani diaspora, 2026). Detha’s stories have reached wider audiences through translation, with Hindi versions by Kabir and onward translations from Hindi into other languages (Purohit, n.d.), which echoes Spivak’s (1988) concern with who speaks for whom.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that silence in Batan Ri Phulwari operates at three connected levels. In the oral frame, silence and response are regulated roles shared between teller and listener. In the stories, normative silences around marriage, desire and rank are made visible through plot and image, often by characters who withhold speech as a strategy. Beyond the stories, the language itself stands in an institutionally silenced position. This study is based on close reading of selected stories from the original Rajasthani text of Batan Ri Phulwari.

Its first limitation is that it does not examine all fourteen volumes or every tale in the cycle. The findings should therefore be read as interpretive observations about recurring patterns in the selected stories, rather than as exhaustive claims about the entire corpus.

Second, the analysis is interpretive rather than empirical. Although it identifies linguistic and narrative markers of silence in the original text, it does not measure their frequency or compare them systematically across all stories, tellers, or social groups. A quantitative or corpus-based study could test whether particular forms of silence are more strongly associated with gender, caste, class, age, or narrative role.

Third, while the article distinguishes silence within the tales from the institutional marginalisation of Rajasthani as a language, the latter is an analogical extension of the concept. It concerns the sociopolitical status of Rajasthani outside the text rather than communicative silence represented within the narratives. Future research may expand the corpus across all fourteen volumes, analyse dialectal variation in dialogue and address forms, and examine contemporary oral performances to determine how the hunkara and other response practices function in live storytelling.

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