

South Asia

Coralynn V. Davis, *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal-India Border*
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How do women voice their everyday critiques of social inequality? Coralynn Davis's book *Maithil Women's Tales* shows that even though women may not directly speak truth to power, their stories provide a nuanced analysis of the hierarchies that define and circumscribe their worlds. Drawing on rich ethnographic material gathered in and around Janakpur, a city in southeastern Nepal near the India border, Davis deftly

weaves an engaging analysis of storytelling that places women's traditional expressive art within its broader social context.

In the introduction, Davis describes the research experience, explains the methodology for her fieldwork, and introduces the twelve storytellers whose narratives she presents. Throughout the book, she puts the narrators' and audiences' social situations into conversation with the stories. She illustrates how the text (the folktale, i.e., the narrated events that take place in the imaginary "taleworld") interweaves with the context (the real world, or "storyrealm," inhabited by the storyteller and her audience). Davis shows the reader how, when, for whom, and by whom a story is told, thus revealing the strategy a narrator takes with a particular audience. Language is social action; storytelling is "a form of discursive political engagement" (23). Women craft their identities through speech, simultaneously reproducing and transforming the folktales that they tell and the social situations in which they tell them.

Chapter 1 begins with an amusing folktale about an embarrassing secret; the secret gets itself told despite the forces that seek to suppress it. Davis theorizes the concept of the agentive story within a discussion of micro-politics, subaltern speech, and silencing. Maithil women's perspectives easily get written out of ethnographies and other forms of dominant discourse, due in part to *purdah* rules for female modesty that limit women's mobility and sociability. Men's perspectives seem to rule the day. However, women indirectly voice critiques of master narratives and institutional power. Folktales passed down from generation to generation "serve to mitigate [women's] suffering and maintain a counter-system of ideational patterns and practices" (161) amid a patriarchal world. These irrepressible stories index female solidarity by offering implicit advice on how to keep each other's secrets, support one's daughters, manage one's menfolk, and match wits with one's mother-in-law. Maithil women, Davis asserts, "tell their otherwise suppressed and circumscribed personal truths through the medium of the folktale" (32). This book provides the key for how to listen for these truths.

Davis focuses in chapters 2 and 3 on issues of virtue, destiny, and karma. Maithil women's folktales often emphasize the cyclical nature of good and bad fortune. Despite the hierarchical social structures of caste, class, and gender that contain them, tales "almost invariably conclude in favor of the underdog" (64) when protagonists take righteous actions and receive divine assistance. The stories highlight the importance of devotion, patience, and chastity during times of trouble, and they urge the prosperous to be humble, generous, and hospitable during times of plenty. Davis's skillful analysis explores the dynamic between agency and destiny, mediated by the effects of karma (the repercussions of past virtuous and vile actions and intentions). Stories illustrate that good qualities, passed down through mothers, promote social order.

Many Maithil women's folktales deal with family relationships and the challenges of successfully negotiating patrilineal and patrilocal social structures. As Davis considers in chapter 4, a woman's natal family can raise her lovingly and arrange a good marriage with an ample dowry, but they cannot control events in their daughter's marital household. When brides wed and join their husbands' homes and villages, they simultaneously acquire mothers-in-law.

Davis argues that Nepali social structures can lead to a "jealous, zero-sum quality of relations" (175) and competition for scarce material resources (e.g., food) and emotional benefits (e.g., affection and attention from the husband / son). Women's stories deal with conflicts with spouses, stepparents, and in-laws. The texts empha-

size women's self-sufficiency and agency, despite taking place in contexts over which young, in-marrying wives have little overt control.

Forests and ponds are particularly significant locations in women's folktales, as Davis explores in chapters 5 and 6. In forests, civilized norms do not necessarily apply. Men who venture into forests undergo transformations and return home with knowledge, wealth, increased status, and a wife. Women who venture into forests can act more effectively and take more leadership; if a man in this more egalitarian taleworld succeeds, it is often because he does what a woman in the story tells him to do. Ponds augment women's powers even further. Stories about "pond women," with their affiliated liquid imagery of the lake, the lotus, the navel, and the placenta, emphasize women's procreative powers and reveal women's cosmological perspectives. Such stories indicate that although men may shape society and rule daily life, the divine energy that drives the universe (*śakti*) is feminine. Ponds and, to a lesser extent, forests are places of women's knowledge and authority, and they figure prominently in women's taleworlds.

I found this book uplifting. As a scholar of South Asia, I have often wondered where to locate women's resistance to oppressive social structures, and Davis aptly argues in chapter 7 that folklore presents a rich and varied venue through which women critique local hierarchies and strategize how best to navigate and subvert them. I urge readers to join Davis in exploring issues of power, politics, and identity through the medium of the stories, including the tales of the king with two horns, the daughter with a smiling-but-not-smiling box, and the cobra with the illuminated jewel. This ethnography about the strategic use of expressive arts in creating women's solidarity and resistance will edify, entertain, and delight. *Maithil Women's Tales* makes a significant contribution to feminist anthropology and folkloric analysis. The volume will appeal to scholars and students in gender studies, anthropology, and South Asian studies.

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