

Exploring the Folklore of Love and Identify: A Comparative Study of Vijay Daan Detha's Duvidha and the Film Paheli

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Abstract

In the world of Indian literature and cinema, themes of love, identity, and the supernatural often intersect, creating compelling narratives that provoke deep emotional and philosophical reflection. Vijay Daan Detha's short story Duvidha (Dilemma) and Shahrukh Khan's film Paheli (The Riddle) offer strikingly similar premises, yet their treatment of these themes reflects the differences in medium, cultural context, and narrative style.

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Introduction

Both the story and the film centre around a female protagonist who is forced to confront an emotional dilemma—torn between her human husband and a supernatural figure, a spirit or ghost. The tension between the fantastical and the real, as well as the question of selfhood, duty, and desire, provides a rich ground for comparison. This paper will analyze these works side by side, focusing on their thematic concerns, the moral and emotional dilemmas faced by the protagonists, and the cultural contexts that shape their narratives. We will also explore how the medium of literature and cinema, respectively, influences the portrayal of these themes.

Vijay Daan Detha's *Duvidha* (1960)

Vijaydaan Detha Bijji is a renowned writer of the Rajasthani language who tried to establish the claims of Rajasthani as a respectable language, and tried to enrich the corpus of its literature through his writings. The recipient of Padma Shri and Sahitya Akademi awards, Bijji has explored the psychological workings of unconventional protagonists and tried to understand the make-up of the human psyche through his engaging writings set in the rural havens of Rajasthan. *Duvidha* is a short story set in the desert region of Rajasthan, rooted in local folklore and traditional storytelling. The plot revolves around a young woman who is married to a man who soon has to leave for work. While he is away, she is visited by a spirit who takes on the appearance of her husband and forms a romantic relationship with her. As the spirit and the woman fall in love, the boundaries between the real and the imagined, the human and the supernatural, blur. The woman is left to navigate the conflict between her loyalty to her husband and her desire for the spirit. Ultimately, the story reflects the consequences of her choice and the eventual realization that the supernatural cannot fulfil the needs of human life in a sustainable way.

The story presents themes of desire, moral conflict, and the fluidity of identity. Its minimalist style and the psychological complexity of its protagonist are central to its emotional impact. Detha's narrative is subtle, allowing readers to interpret the motivations and consequences of the characters' actions through inference and personal reflection.

Amol Palekar's *Paheli* (2005)

Directed by Amol Palekar, *Paheli* is a Bollywood fantasy-romance film that draws heavily from the folklore of Rajasthan. The film centres on a newly married woman, Geet (played by Rani Mukerji), who is faced with a dilemma when her husband (played by Shah Rukh Khan) leaves for a business trip shortly after their wedding. During his absence, a ghost (also played by Shahrukh Khan) takes on the appearance of her husband and woos her with his charm and affection. The

ghost offers the woman a life of love and fantasy, free from the burdens of reality. Geet is thus torn between her real husband, who embodies duty and responsibility, and the ghost, who represents idealized romantic love.

Unlike *Duvidha*, *Paheli* features a more explicit supernatural element, with the ghost becoming a central character whose presence shapes the entire narrative. The film is a blend of fantasy, romance, and drama, using vibrant visuals, music, and sets to create an immersive world of magical realism. The film plays with elements of magical and romantic idealism, while also addressing the question of true love and personal choice. “Amol Palekar adds parallel stories, other characters, and events like a camel race to the original story. The biggest difference is the end, which has been made a happy ending... Amol Palekar’s ‘Paheli’ has been created as a commercial cinema. It carries the soul of the story and puts the dilemma of the ‘Duvidha’ or ‘Paheli’ in simple words and manner for a larger audience to understand” (Shrivastava G.). **Comparative Themes Love and Desire**

Both *Duvidha* and *Paheli* examine the tension between mundane reality and romantic fantasy through the prism of supernatural love. The female protagonists in both works are caught between the real and the ideal, navigating complex emotional landscapes.

In *Duvidha*, the young woman is initially devoted to her husband, but as she is visited by the spirit, she is drawn to his idealized, passionate love. The spirit represents an escape from the routine and the limitations of reality, offering the woman a glimpse of emotional and sensual freedom. However, this love is fleeting, and ultimately, the woman faces the consequences of abandoning her duties for a transient fantasy.

In *Paheli*, Geet’s relationship with the ghost embodies a similar emotional conflict. The ghost represents an unblemished, perfect form of love that contrasts with the limitations and ordinariness of real-life relationships. Yet, while the ghost offers excitement and romance, it is ultimately not a sustainable path for her emotional fulfillment. Geet must reconcile her idealized notion of love with the practical, enduring love embodied by her real husband. “The story of ‘Duvidha’ reflects reality, while ‘Paheli’ is the progressive thinker’s yen to lend a modern twist to my tale,” said Detha (“Duvidha’ Is Realism, ‘Paheli’ Reflects Modern Yen”).

Both works raise essential questions about the nature of love: whether it is something idealized and fleeting or something grounded in responsibility and human connection. The spirit or ghost, in both works, serves as a symbol of an unattainable, idealized love, highlighting the tension between fantasy and reality.

Identity and Selfhood

A key theme in both stories is the exploration of identity and the way in which it becomes malleable in the face of love and desire. Both protagonists wrestle with the notion of their own identities, as their relationships with supernatural entities force them to reexamine their sense of self.

In *Duvidha*, the woman's sense of self is challenged by the appearance of the spirit. She is no longer merely a wife; her desires and emotions are caught between two conflicting identities: the dutiful wife and the passionate lover. The woman's dilemma is not just about the husband and the spirit, but about her own sense of personhood and autonomy. The final tragic resolution—where the woman loses both the spirit and her husband—suggests that when one's identity is fragmented by unattainable desires, there is no simple reconciliation.

In *Paheli*, Geet's journey is also a search for self-knowledge. When the ghost takes on her husband's form, Geet's identity becomes tied to a choice between what she is "supposed" to feel (duty to her husband) and what she "wants" to feel (romantic love with the ghost). The ghost's idealization of her represents the way in which love can shape a woman's identity, but Geet must eventually return to a more grounded sense of self, where she balances love with real-life commitments.

The fluidity of identity in both works reflects the tension between external roles (wife, daughter, mother) and internal desires (passion, freedom, self-expression). In both cases, the supernatural element brings about a profound shift in how the protagonists see themselves and their place in the world.

Supernatural vs. Reality

The use of the supernatural in both *Duvidha* and *Paheli* plays a central role in the narrative, though each work integrates the supernatural differently.

In *Duvidha*, the supernatural element—the spirit—is subtle and functions as a catalyst for the moral and emotional conflict. The spirit's presence is integrated into the fabric of the everyday world, where mysticism and folklore are accepted parts of life. The supernatural is not questioned; it exists within the realm of possibility but is ultimately shown to be untenable, leading to the story's tragic ending.

In *Paheli*, the supernatural is more pronounced and serves as both a literal and symbolic representation of desire and ideal love. The ghost is playful, charming, and confident, offering a form of escapism that contrasts with the mundane, sometimes oppressive realities of married life. While the film integrates elements of folklore, it presents them through a modern, commercial lens, making the supernatural both a visual spectacle and a metaphor for emotional liberation.

The supernatural, in both works, challenges the boundaries of reality, yet the way in which it is framed—either as an accepted part of folklore in *Duvidha*, or as an escapist fantasy in *Paheli*—shapes how the narratives explore the consequences of choosing fantasy over reality.

Moral Dilemma and Consequences

In *Duvidha*, the moral dilemma results in a tragic resolution. The woman's choice to pursue the spirit leads to her alienation from the human world, symbolizing the consequences of forsaking duty for an illusion. The tragedy lies in the realization that the spirit, though alluring, cannot provide a sustainable or fulfilling life.

In *Paheli*, the dilemma is similarly rooted in the conflict between love and duty. However, the film ends on a more optimistic note. Geet's eventual choice to accept both love and responsibility, even if it means living apart from her husband, reflects a more contemporary, progressive resolution. Geet ultimately embraces self-determination, asserting her emotional and moral agency in the face of the dilemma. Both works suggest that the choice between idealized love and real-life commitment comes with significant consequences, but where *Duvidha* explores the irreversible loss caused by fantasy, *Paheli* offers a more hopeful vision of emotional reconciliation.

Cultural and Contextual Differences

Rural Rajasthan as a Setting

Both works are set in Rajasthan, and this cultural backdrop is integral to their narrative. Rajasthan, with its rich folklore, mystical landscapes, and traditional norms, provides the perfect setting for stories about supernatural forces and emotional dilemmas.

In *Duvidha*, the rural setting represents a traditional, conservative society where societal norms and expectations place heavy burdens on women. The woman's inner conflict is framed within the boundaries of rural social structures, where female autonomy and sexual agency are limited.

In *Paheli*, while the rural Rajasthan setting is similarly central to the narrative, the film reflects more contemporary attitudes toward gender and relationships. The film's treatment of women's agency is more liberal, offering a space where Geet can ultimately choose her own path, even if it challenges traditional roles.

Feminist Perspectives Both works, in their own ways, engage with feminist themes, particularly regarding women's autonomy, sexual agency, and the limitations imposed by societal norms.

In *Duvidha*, the woman's choice reflects a critique of the constraints of traditional marriage and the expectations placed on women. Her dilemma is emblematic of the emotional repression many women experience in patriarchal societies.

In *Paheli*, Geet's journey reflects a more modern, feminist perspective. While she is still bound by the traditions of marriage, the film gives her the agency to make her own emotional choices. Geet's eventual resolution signals a more empowered stance, where emotional fulfilment and romantic love are not relegated to the background.

Conclusion

Both *Duvidha* and *Paheli* offer profound insights into love, identity, and the supernatural, with their respective settings in rural Rajasthan providing a rich cultural context. While Detha's *Duvidha* offers a tragic, introspective exploration of emotional conflict, *Paheli* presents a more fantastical, optimistic take on love and personal choice. Despite the differences in medium and tone, both works explore the age-old question of what happens when love is complicated by the supernatural and the tension between duty and desire.

Ultimately, these works challenge their audiences to question the nature of love, identity, and self-empowerment, providing both a critique of traditional societal expectations and a space for exploring the complexities of human emotions within a magical, yet very real, world.

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