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A 'New Way of Living': Exploring the Complex Dynamics of Queer Counterculture in Vijay Dan Detha's "A Double Life"

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Abstract: Vijay Dan Detha's short story "Dowari Joon", translated into English from Rajasthani by Ruth Vanita as 'A Double Life', centres around the lesbian couple Beeja and Teeja whose union in marriage, ironically, result from one of the many chinks in the faulty fabric of a patriarchal society, and its aftermath. In this paper, I argue that the text, in permitting a same-sex union within the parameters of a Hindu wedding ceremony, opens up a discussion on the queer counter-culture that continually thwarts and subverts the pervasive dominant culture of the times. Interestingly, instead of righting the wrong and setting things straight, the narrative's queer trajectory offsets the naturalised heterosexual matrix and interrogates the fallacies of heterosexual bliss by contrasting it with Beeja and Teeja's miraculous lesbian utopia. The story allows for a close analysis of the queer heterotopia materialised by the ghost chieftain for the lesbian couple to reside in, thereby launching a queer counterpublics where a "new way of living" (98) is created outside society's dominant heteronormative logic. Given that the lesbian couple stands outside of the normative temporality of "marriage - reproduction - child rearing - retirement – death" (Halberstam 182), this paper will also explore the text's engagement with queer temporality.

Keywords: Counterculture, heterotopia, lesbian, queer, queer temporality

Introduction

Vijay Dan Detha, a literary luminary shining brightly on the landscape of Rajasthani literature, was a recipient of several prestigious awards like the Padma Shri in 2007 and the Sahitya Akademi award in 1974 among others. What is most striking about the body of work produced by this writer is his stance of non-negotiability when it comes to portraying his roots, so much so that he spoke in defence of his literary allegiance to his land: "My land [Rajasthan] is full of stories, whatever I've written is just a drop of the ocean" (Detha). Detha's imagination is steeped deeply in the wealth of the Rajasthani cosmos. Of particular interest is his persistent focus on the folkloric and mythic roots of his native land and all the stories carefully balance the quotidian and that which is out of the ordinary. Paralleling this penchant for the fantastical is a crude realism that reveals a critically penetrative view of the world and all its shams which shroud human existence.

Detha's short story "Dowari Joon", or, as translated into English by Ruth Vanita, "A Double Life", centres around the lesbian couple Beeja and Teeja, whose union in marriage, ironically, result from one of the many chinks in the faulty fabric of a patriarchal society, and its aftermath. Detha's story tackles the cruelty of patriarchy, the fallacious rubric of gender, and is a vivid exploration of and experimentation with nonnormative sexuality. For context, the narrative begins with two Seths whose unusual attachment to one another propels them to get married on the same day, and miraculously, their wives conceive on the same day, consequently giving birth on the exact same date and time. At the moment when the two Sethanis conceived together, the Seths took the opportunity to strengthen their bond and arrange a generous dowry, by promising

their children's marriage. The promise was based entirely on the premise that one Seth would have a boy, and the other, a girl, and that the father of the boy would come out richer in the end for a hefty dowry. Their confidence at such a presumption was thwarted by nature's play when both the Sethanis gave birth to daughters, but one Seth hatched a great deception by announcing the birth of a son by "beating a copper plate instead of a winnowing basket" (85).

This deception is carried on till the two girls' marriage, for Beeja was brought up under the misconception that she is a man and was always dressed thus. Once the betrayal is revealed, Beeja and Teeja accept their union not as a pathetic outcome of patriarchal machination, but a wilful choice of cohabiting together as legally married individuals. Since society cannot accommodate such nonnormative coupling, the girls abandon their village and venture into uninhabited lands, having only themselves as companions, until they chance upon the ghost chieftain and the story takes a turn towards the fantastical where supernatural agency intervenes to create a lesbian utopia. In this paper it is argued that the text, in permitting a same-sex union within the parameters of a Hindu wedding ceremony, opens up a discussion on the queer counter-culture that continually thwarts and subverts the pervasive dominant culture of the times. Interestingly, instead of righting the wrong and setting things straight, the narrative's queer trajectory offsets the naturalised heterosexual matrix and interrogates the fallacies of heterosexual bliss by contrasting it with Beeja and Teeja's miraculous lesbian utopia. This opens up the possibility of viewing Beeja and Teeja's newly found home as a counter-public challenging the logic of heteronormativity followed in mainstream society.

A 'New Way of Living': Dan Detha's Queer Counterculture and Counterpublics

In the short story, Detha consistently draws attention to the 'new life' that Beeja and Teeja embark upon as a nonnormative couple. There are scattered references to the newness of this alternate way of life that the lesbian couple embraces without any inhibition. At the same time, it is also important to note that nowhere in the narrative does Detha attempt to define or describe the nature of their relationship. What Detha implicated then by suggesting a "new way of living" (98) now has a significant political weightage. This queer way of living that marks Beeja and Teeja's cohabitation as a legally married same-sex couple is a politically charged state of existence which invites theoretical interventions from Fraser's theorisation on subaltern counterpublics, Michael Warner's discussion on queer counterpublics, and even Foucault's conceptualisation of a "homosexual way of life" (30). Whether the revelation of Beeja's true gender automatically nullifies the couple's marriage is something that remains unaddressed in the story, but the couple's decision to keep cohabiting as a married couple can be viewed as a manifestation of a queer counterculture which resists the dominant ideology of heterosexual hegemony. This section of the paper discusses the ways in which Beeja and Teeja's nonnormative relationship upsets the social order in place, consequently embodying a counterpublic that comes into "conflict with the norms and contents of their cultural environment [entailing] distortion" (Warner 63).

Once the lesbian couple abandons the conniving Seth's home by accepting the "deception" as a "blessing" and a gift, they come face to face with a society that refuses to acknowledge the validity of their relationship. The villagers, who can also be seen as Detha's representation of a miniature society, or, in Warner's terminology, "the public", refuse to accept such a gross violation of societal norms. The reason behind their rejection lies in the fact that the lesbian couple have now become an outlier to society's dominant logic of heteronormativity, as a result of which they can no longer be integrated into the fold of mainstream society. Their existence has now been marked by their outsider status and they are relegated to the margins literally as they exile themselves from the village. However, in interrogating the reason behind the villagers' aversion to the lesbian couple, their reasoning mostly borders on how the unusual pairing completely cancels out any masculine presence in their lives:

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> Marriage between two women! Oh no, two girls have got married to each other! What a slap on the face of manhood! This new way of living will destroy both kinship and community! […] If a woman marries another woman, what is a man to do – go and find a mousehole for himself? (98)

The logic behind the villagers' outcry is also reminiscent of what Bonnie Zimmerman (1981) had to say about lesbian existence, that the lesbian is a threat to both masculinity and patriarchy simply because they are a testament to the fact that women can survive without needing a man, thereby making the lesbian a symbol of danger (464). It is the possibility of a world without men that makes the lesbian a threat to traditional hetero-patriarchal discourses. Culture also has a role to play. In India, culture becomes a site of a complex amalgamation of issues ranging from the literary to the political, and the nationalist framings of femininity becomes the apotheosis of such cultural ideologies. Consequently, it is culture, constitutive of beliefs and practices, that is the prime agency through which hegemonic forces are enacted (Panjabi and Chakravarti ii). Indian queer feminist scholars have analysed the repercussions of locating the figure of the lesbian within the country's socio-cultural context and arrived at the conclusion that being Indian and Lesbian comes with politics of invisibility and a creation of independent feminine cosmogonies (Thadani 10).

To understand the larger significations of the figure of the lesbian in Indian literature, it is imperative to first chart the country's ideation of womanhood. Partha Chatterjee has observed that the 'Indian woman' as a historical project was formed at the crossroads of colonialism and nationalism, thereby leading to essentialist assumptions, one of them being that the true Indian woman is akin to a Goddess which strategically effaced her sexuality (622). Similarly, Suparna Bhaskaran notes that women are held responsible not only for maintaining honour and purity, for preventing shame, but also for reproducing national culture (26). Madhavi Menon points out using historical and mythological instances how sexual morality has been policing women's desires since ancient days (ii-iii). Thus, the 'Indian woman' as a historical construct remains trapped within frameworks of essentialisms.

Detha's narrative underscores the role that patriarchy plays in constructing and deconstructing roles for women according to the convenience of men. Beeja is allowed to enjoy the rights of a man because prolonging the charade allows the Seth to amass a large dowry, hence benefitting him economically. The Seth's mercenary tendencies and indifference towards the outcome of the marriage and the tragedy of the daughter's lifelong façade shows the ruthless extent to which patriarchy would go to serve the selfish motives of men. However, Seth's presumptions are frustrated when Beeja and Teeja welcome the deception as their reality without a fuss.

Beeja and Teeja's relationship becomes a veritable threat to the very cultural and ideological structures of society, and in doing so, they come to embody Warner's postulation on how queers have the potential to upset the embedded sexual hierarchy of a majoritarian straight culture: "lesbians and gay men have found that to challenge the norms of straight culture in public is to disturb deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behaviour and eroticism that are appropriate to the public" (25). The couple's transgression marks a paradigmatic shift in the sanctified and sanitised traditional values upheld by society, and thus stands out as a counter-norm. Noting the outsider status granted to the lesbian couple, the queer counterpublic thus established, subverts the social order while simultaneously remaining conscious of its "subordinate status".

> Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussion within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without

> saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (56)

In countering the normative standards of living, Beeja and Teeja together come to constitute a counterpublic which is marked by a subordinate social status. In her work "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1990), Fraser reconceptualises Habermas's notion of "the public sphere" by proposing the concept of "subaltern counterpublics", which she describes as standing "in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics" (70). According to her, members of groups who have been historically subordinated, like "women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians" engage in subaltern counterpublics when they "invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (67) that allow the proliferation of alternate identities and "help expand discursive space" since they are excluded within the "dominant public" (67). Borrowing Fraser's terminology, the "subaltern counterpublic" that the lesbian couple now come to represent and embody, leads to an inevitable movement from the centre of society to the margins – a move physically demonstrated through their self-imposed exile as they abandon the village on their own accord and proceed to begin a new life in a new place. Detha was very much conscious of the radical implications that Beeja and Teeja's liaison has and hence reiterates its newness in the story as a way of underscoring its larger significance: "They wanted to set up house together in a new way of their own, making enemies of the village men" (101). Even Ruth Vanita notices the recurrence of Detha's focus on the newness of Beeja and Teeja's alternate way of life and mentions in a footnote:

> The words translated as 'set up house together in a new way' are nayagharvās; these words appear several times in the story. Gharvās refers to grihasthāshrama, the householder stage in the Hindu understanding of life. This stage includes marriage, sexual relations, domesticity and companionship. Detha plays on the word several times in the story. (101)

By embarking upon a "new way of living" (98), Beeja and Teeja rework the public's understanding of gender and sexuality. The iteration of the word 'new' can also be seen as a byword for a radical and paradigmatic representation of a subversive understanding of gender and sexuality that questions the fallacies of a hegemonic and binarised societal division. Beeja and Teeja's cohabitation contribute to the generation of alternate forms of association and queer relationalities that galvanises discourses surrounding nonnormative erotic practices while dismantling heteronormative hegemonic ideologies. It is certainly interesting to note that even Warner, while theorising on queer counterpublic, underscored the possibility of "new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship" (57), thereby allowing readers to map Beeja and Teeja's nonnormative erotic association in the context of this theoretical lens.

Portrayal of Heterosexual Relationships

Vanita rightly observed that Detha's story "introduces an unsettlingly radical analysis of male oppression of women" (121), and by extension, it is also a biting criticism of heterosexual marriages. Detha's portrayal of heterosexual relationships is frequently and deliberately contrasted to the homosexual union of Beeja and Teeja. Significantly enough, the narrative opens not with the marriage of Beeja's parents, but with the strong affection that Beeja and Teeja's fathers had for one another:

> In these two villages lived two Seths who were similar in their wealth and their miserliness. *There was no limit to their greed or to their love for each other*. So united were their fortunes that the weddings of both took place on the same night. At the same moment, their hands were joined to those of two beautiful brides, and at the same moment, pearls were generated in the two oysters. In their joy, the two Seths promised each other that regardless of which of them had a daughter and which a son, the offspring would be united in marriage. (84-85; emphasis added)

The readers are introduced to the world of Detha's story through homoerotic undertones undergirding the 'friendship' shared by the two Seths: "Intoxicated by their love for one another…" (85). The trajectories of the two Seths' lives, particularly marriage and conjugal union, are paralleled in such a manner and clothed in such an ambiguous language that it almost seems like it is the two Seths who have been united while their wives fade into insignificance. It is this suggestive, unarticulated, and consequently unfulfilled same-sex desire of the two Seths that finds fulfilment in the marital union of their daughters, Beeja and Teeja. Marriage becomes a crucial leitmotif in the story as the Sethani finds the idea of their daughter marrying another girl to be ludicrous: "Have you ever heard of a girl being married to another girl?" While the Sethani's response is understandable, the Seth's pronouncement is at once problematic and liberatory as it throws the validity of the institution of marriage into doubt: "Why not? What does it take to get married? You decide to do it, and it's done" (86).

As a statement on marriage, it is problematic because it calls into question the purpose of the institution: the Seth's apathetic rendering of marriage reveals the way in which he views his own marriage – as a union devoid of emotional attachment and something that was done just for the sake of it. Such a view fuels conversation surrounding how marriage as a social construct promotes heteronormativity in the name of procreation. This interpretation of the Seth's remark makes the author's iteration of his affectionate relationship with the other Seth come across as a deliberate attempt to mystify the aggrandised concept of marriage as a symptom of compulsory heteronormativity. On the other hand, another interpretation of the remark would lead curious readers to view the statement as a radical denouncement of the equational relationship between heterosexuality and marriage, thereby taking on a more queer-coded appeal. In this sense, the desire to marry is enough, the genders of the individuals involved become insignificant.

The vignettes of heterosexual marriages as depicted by Detha paint a pathetic picture of womanhood. Beeja and Teeja's friend married a wealthy man whose impotence enabled her father-in-law and her brother-in-law to take sexual advantage of her. She is consistently abused by all the male members of the family. As she does not get pregnant, she is socially reduced to an object of ridicule. The Sethani's parents' relationship is far from perfect – her mother was known to be unfaithful to her father multiple times, and the Sethani herself is a living testimony to her mother's rampant infidelity – once again proving the baselessness of heterosexual marriages. In such a context, Beeja and Teeja's lesbian relationship offers not only sexual liberation, but also a fulfilling emotional bond which the other heterosexual marriages depicted in the story could not offer. Susan Sontag in her work "The Third World of Women" discusses the centrality of sexuality in giving women agency in relationships. She writes that "[w]ithout a change in the very norms of sexuality, the liberation of women is a meaningless goal" (48). This is primarily because according to her most "sexual relationships act out the attitudes which oppress women and perpetuate male privilege" (47). Elaborating further on the relationship between sexual liberation and women empowerment Sontag wrote:

> The notion of 'sexual liberation' seems to me even more suspect. The ancient double standard, which imputes to women less sexual energy and fewer sexual desires than men (and punishes them for behavior condoned in men), is clearly a way of keeping women in their place. (47)

Sontag seems to be claiming that heterosexual sex victimises women by reifying the sexist gender hierarchy. It is after stating this that Sontag makes the most important point: "What sexuality are women to be liberated to enjoy? The only sexual ethic liberating for women is one which challenges the primacy of genital heterosexuality" (48). The dialogue between Detha's story and Sontag's argument is significant because both seem to articulate, in their own ways of course, how institutionalised heterosexuality has battered women,

forcing them either to be subjects of violence and abuse (as is the case of Beeja and Teeja's friend), or to seek out sexual and emotional fulfilment outside of marriage (as is the case of the Sethani's infidel mother). This idea has been brilliantly explored in the story as Beeja, after submitting in to the lifelong delusion of being a man, finally decides to temporarily adopt the identity of a man. The ghost chieftain obliges, but things end horribly for the lesbian couple as Beeja, donning manhood, is cruel to Teeja and establishes dominance over her: "I am not one of those fools who become enslaved to their wives and put up with women's nonsense" (119). For Sontag, sexuality is of central importance when it comes to dismantling the extant gender hierarchy:

> In a nonrepressive nonsexist society, sexuality will in one sense have a more important role than it has today – because it will be more diffused. Homosexual choices will be as valid and respectable as heterosexual choices; both will grow out a genuine bisexuality. (49)

Detha's narrative dissects the ways in which heteronormativity and gender inequality is related. It is heterosexuality, according to both Detha and Sontag, that is at the root of the gender problem. The argument that Beeja's mother's puts forward to separate the lesbian couple lays bare the extent to which the heteronorm has been the dominant logic. Beeja's mother thus articulates:

> A woman can survive without water but not without a man's sweat. Your father has received a great many offers. The finest and wealthiest young men of the province are willing to marry the two of you – separately, of course. Give up this false pride now. Settle down and be happy. Start a family. Bathe in milk, have many sons and prolong a lineage like a creeper with many leaves. (108)

As society's mouthpiece, the Sethani vocalises mankind's eternal cry for the necessity of procreation, the antithesis of which has been for long believed to be queerness, and as such, the narrative creates the opportunity to invite discussions on Detha's exploration of what Jack Halberstam had termed as "queer time". Halberstam defines "queer time" as "a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (4). It is also a "perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of [...] marriage - reproduction - child rearing - retirement – death" (182), the temporal logic of which is disrupted as the lesbians do not enter into heterosexual marital alliances. Together the couple decide to chart out a new path untraversed by anyone before them:

> We will have to find our own path to liberation. What's so wonderful about marriage between a man and a woman? Everyone knows that the sun rises in the east. Were it to rise in the west, that would be something really special! (94)

Interrogating Beeja and Teeja's Lesbian Utopia

Considering Beeja and Teeja to be social actors within the world of Detha's short story, their performance marks the presence of a queer world outside of the narrative space offered to them. It is in the forest, which according to Vanita, in "Indic as in Indo-European narrative, is a liminal space of secrets and transformations; it may be dangerous but is also miraculous" (120), that Beeja and Teeja performs, as it were, their love. Performances like these lay bare the faults in heteronormative sexual cultures and in the process lead to a "new formation, a future in the present" (Munõz 62). The opulent castle accorded by the ghost chieftain to the couple is politically positioned away from the village. In doing so, the positioning of Beeja and Teeja's new place of cohabitation is automatically marked off as an alternate space where an alternate way of living is accommodated under the protection of supernatural intervention. This section of the paper will attempt to evaluate this new territory presented to the lesbian couple via the existing theoretical lenses of

Munõz's queer utopia and Foucault's heterotopia and investigative ways of engaging in a discursive discussion on the heterosexualisation of spaces and how they can be queered.

When talking of the "subaltern counterpublics", Fraser had proposed the idea that such counterpublic is necessarily accompanied with an exclusionary politics of their own. In the story, the ghost chieftain makes it known that male presence will not be tolerated in this utopia which is solely reserved for feminine presence:

> You can set up house here without fear. Near this lake I will erect a palace which a king might envy. The state treasury may run dry, but you will never be in want. All the wishes of your heart, small and big, will be fulfilled. I can never repay you for the joy I've found in the sight of your pure love. Women can come here, but no son of a woman will be able to cast a sharp glance at you. (102-103)

The heterotopia as a place that is "outside all places" is a subversive space where normative codes of conduct are turned topsy-turvy and non-normativity is embraced. Such spaces offer a completely different spectrum of experiences for queer people. Theorists like David Bell, Jon Binnie and Gill Valentine began to bring to light the special experiences of the sexual other in the mid-1990s. They posited that "just as individual persons do not have pre-existing sexual identities, neither do spaces" (Oswin 90). Binnie wrote: "space is not naturally authentically 'straight' but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized" (Binnie, 1997a, 223, as cited in Oswin, 2008). In the story, heterosexualised spaces, that of the village, have been presented as a waste land:

> The same encirclement of walls and barriers. The same huts and roofs. Each with its own limits and boundaries. Each with its own kitchen and stove. Each with its own fires and smoke. The squabbles of thine and mine. Heaps of rubbish lying here and there. Amid all the squabbling to secure peace and happiness, bankruptcy show its face. Worries and anxieties over children. Stinking baby clothes. Filth everywhere. Conflicts and quarrels in every house. (104)

Noting the contradictory aspect of heterotopias, Foucault wrote: "Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the emplacements in the interior of which human life is enclosed and partitioned, as even more illusory," or, "on the contrary, creating another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill construed and sketchy" (21). Likewise, the story, in setting up two alternate spaces with distinct geographical and ideological boundaries, implicates the "illusory" supremacy of normativity, while exalting the "perfect[ion]" of non-normative spaces. Upon visiting their village after receiving the boon of an elegant palace from the ghost chieftain, Beeja and Teeja cannot help but think to themselves: "How had they lived in this hell for so many years? How had they grown up here? Today, remembering that past life, they were filled with disgust. How dreadful!" (104). The heterosexual world of the villagers and the queer space of the lesbian couple's newly found homeland are held in a contestatory relationship. By invoking Munõz at this juncture, the subversive politics of Beeja and Teeja's relationship aided by supernatural intervention allows for the possibility of queer world making:

> Certain performances of queer citizenship contain what I call an anticipatory illumination of a queer world, a sign of an actually existing queer reality, a kernel of political possibility within a stultifying heterosexual present. I gesture to sites of embodied and performed queer politics and describe them as outposts of actually existing queer worlds. (49)

Detha was cognisant of the message which the story would be imparting and hence it had been a careful and calculated decision to portray Beeja and Teeja's lesbian utopia as a place far removed from the reach of heteronormativity. What is even more significant is how men are relegated to nothing, their power and influence being rendered useless in the queer space materialised by the ghost chieftain. Interestingly, Susan

Sontag had postulated that "[w]omen cannot be liberated without reducing the power of men" (43), and this is the approach undertaken by Detha in the story. As long as the ghost chieftain is present, men will not be able encroach upon the territory marked exclusively for women and queer women. In providing Beeja and Teeja with a land of their own, Detha is ensuring that the narrative space offered to nonnormative people translates into actual geographical locales where they can exist without heteronormative society's persistent hindrance.

Conclusion: Burnt Womb and the Myth of Chrononormativity

Given that the lesbian couple stands outside of the normative temporality of "birth, marriage, reproduction and death" (2), Detha's final stance remains a brutal denial of reproductive futurism and a dismissal of chrononormativity. Teeja is not impregnated by Beeja's violent bouts of love-making as a man and the author expresses relief at this stroke of good fortune: "Thanks to the ghost chieftain's miraculous powers, not only the filthy seed of man but Teeja's womb burnt up forever" (120). Procreation is the ultimate end point of a heterosexual culture and Teeja's miraculously "burnt" womb becomes a potent symbol that stands against the imperatives of heteronormativity. In this regard, Warner wrote:

> Het culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of inter-gender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist. (xxi)

Queer temporality reigns supreme as the heteronormative framing of time is done away with. While the necessity of supernatural intervention to materialise, sanction, and protectively promote an alternate mode of existence can indeed be scrutinised, Detha's story leaves a pleasant aftertaste. Beeja and Teeja's ethereal lesbian romance, the invocation of natural beauty and its oneness with the exiled lesbian couple, and Detha's masterful handling of spatial and reproductive politics underscores the significance of the text in today's time. Readers who might be tempted to dismiss the story as mere fantasy cannot be blind to the gravity of the issues raised in the narrative, and Detha himself assures his readers at the end that Beeja and Teeja's romance lives on, for he himself had been an exception to the ghost chieftain's imperative that no man would be allowed to enter into Beeja and Teeja's sacred lesbian utopia by being a most fortunate witness:

> …just once I visited them, on Teeja's invitation. I saw that wonderful palace with my own eyes, and I wrote this story at Teeja's dictation, in her words. Would the ghost chieftain have spared me if I had dared add a word to her account? (120)

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