

**Coralynn V. Davis.** *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal-India Border.*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014. 272 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03842-6.



**Reviewed by** Jessica V. Birkenholtz

**Published on** H-Asia (December, 2016)

**Commissioned by** Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

In *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal-India Border*, Coralynn Davis proves herself to be a masterful storyteller as she weaves together a rich, textured narrative about the tales that Maithil women tell and the lives of the women who tell them. The Maithils are a distinctive linguistic and ethnic community who inhabit both sides of the Indo-Nepal border zone in eastern India.

Over the course of the book's 222 pages, Davis presents 140 stories as told by twelve women, who represent a spectrum of caste, class, age, and education. The folktales are accompanied with extensive discussion and commentary that contextualize their telling--such as who might tell the story and under what circumstances--and highlight the layers of meaning and voices--explicit, muted, or silently understood--that are contained within and expressed through their telling. The vibrancy of these narratives is further illustrated through the inclusion of well-known Maithil paintings. Each chapter opens with a custom-made painting in the traditional Maithil style that corresponds to

one of the main stories discussed in the chapter. This visually reinforces the dynamic ways in which the storyworlds of Maithil women are locally visualized and articulated through different expressive traditions. The book is organized into seven chapters and an introduction.

In the introduction, Davis outlines the three main foci of the book: the "cultural work accomplished by Maithil women's storytelling"; "the ontological and epistemological relationships among folktales, life experiences, and personhood" for Maithil women; and, a discussion of "how Maithil women's perspectives evidenced in their stories complicate our understandings of South Asian Hindu conceptions of the self, the social, and the sacred" (p. 1). Davis draws on over two decades of research in the Maithili region and skillfully employs overlapping ethnographic, critical folklorist, and feminist methodologies to excavate the multiple layers, meanings, and functions of Maithil women's taleworlds (the events in the story) and their utility for storytellers in navigating their storyrealms (the telling of the story and its mitigat-

ing social, cultural, and historical context). She also introduces and implements in this chapter the framework for the book, which pivots on the full retelling and detailed discussion of at least two Maithil women's folktales in each chapter, supported by additional examination of numerous other tales that together exemplify key aspects of Maithil women's lives, the specificities of Maithil patriarchal culture, and the variously fantastical and magically real taleworlds that serve as a critical, depersonalized outlet for expressing personal challenges and non-normative perspectives in a society in which women are marginalized and silenced. To this end, Davis notes here too that Maithil women's narratives simultaneously provide a complement and alternative to the pervasive and often hegemonic story of the *Ramayana* epic and its idealized heroine, Sita, whose birthplace is Mithila's Janakpur; that there are "alternative cultural and social constructions" (p. 14) is an important point that becomes clearer over the course of the chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundation for the book through an examination of three aspects of Maithil women's narratives: (1) their "irrepressibility," which is significant in light of the often socioculturally constrained speech of women in their patriarchal, purdah culture, (2) their frequent movement and morphing, which mirror the movement and transformation of Maithil women in different contexts, and (3) their discursive political engagement that reveals "social configurations of power" (p. 23). Davis argues that Maithil women's folktales "mediate silence and speech in a way that requires listening for what might not be, from another perspective, the central or 'loudest' or sanctioned message of the story" (p. 35). For her, the question is not just about who can speak, but about who can hear and when and what they hear. The point that Davis drives home in this chapter is that Maithil women's folktales are a critical medium for the expression of personal and political agency and voice (for use

or intentional disuse) in a culture in which women have little of either.

Chapter 2 examines metaphysical questions of fortune and social stratification, of the "fixity and fluidity of identity and social station," evident in Maithil women's tales (p. 37). Davis explores the tensions between personal agency, *karma*, and *bhagya* (fate/destiny) to consider the ways in which Maithil women understand the interplay of human and divine forces, and influences in one's life. Further, she considers the cycles of *sukha* (happiness) and *dukha* (sorrow) in these women's tales to highlight the fact that ultimately Maithil women's tales are stories of hope that illustrate the ways in which patience and perseverance can eventually give way to (re)new(ed) prosperity, in whatever form that may take.

Chapters 3 and 4 similarly focus on larger concerns that order women's lives and storyrealms in the larger context of Maithil patriarchy. Chapter 3 maps out notions of virtue--*dharma* (ethos), *sat* (purity), *pap* (sin), *dushata* (wickedness), and *mamata* (maternal tenderness)--in Maithil women's taleworlds. Davis notes that Maithil morality tales place little emphasis on religious devotion and focus instead on dharmic and adharmic behavior, which is mediated by both gender and caste, that promotes or destabilizes social order. Her analysis of the chapter's tales illustrate that the "main virtuous qualities highlighted in Maithil women's stories are all pro-social and relationally proximate, that is, they are about how a person behaves toward other with whom he or she personally engages" (p. 74). Chapter 4 distills the discussion down to the virtue of compassion as embodied in the figure of the devoted mother. According to Davis, this is the one instance in Maithil women's tales in which there is a clear and strong gendering to virtues. Focusing on mothers and *mamata*, here we see mothers idealized for their loving devotion to their children, in stark contrast to abusive or neglectful stepmothers, evil mothers-in-law, and hardened

fathers. The social and cultural significance of the messages of these tales, Davis argues, is that they “highlight Maithil women’s understanding that the virtue of loving compassion is best exemplified in their own behavior toward children but also prescribes such devotion as an antidote to the constraints and dangers of life in a patriarchal, patrilineal society” (p. 111). One interesting conclusion that Davis comes to in these chapters is that Maithila’s patriarchal, socially stratified society pits women against one another in “their pursuit of security and resources” (p. 161). Therefore, these narratives serve as cautionary tales that highlight the importance of solidarity among women to serve as a counterparadigm of Maithil power structures and practices.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the discussion from vices and virtues to forests, ponds, and the “spatiocultural orientations” of Maithil women and their tales (p. 113). The forest in narrative (examined in chapter 5) represents a “form of alterity to the settlement (village, city, kingdom, etc.),” and as such is a place of both great—but gendered—opportunity and danger for women (p. 114). Here Davis contrasts the Maithil women’s folktales to the normative, male-centric Sanskrit literature and, in particular, the tale of Rama and Sita, whose story dominates the Maithil religious and cultural imagination. Chapter 6 examines the centrality of ponds, which are often “sites for the articulation of women’s insights” (p. 135). Davis observes the women who frequent these ponds in Maithil women’s tales and considers the nature of the insights produced in the ponds’ proximity as a means for understanding the dynamics of *shakti* (primal feminine energy) in these tales and how this relates to *shakti* and the feminine divine in the Hindu tradition. Both chapters highlight these spaces as places that enable critical shifts in women’s actions and knowledge that engender greater agency, freedom, and power, especially in terms of women’s sexuality, either in playing it up or down.

In the final chapter, Davis explores a set of narratives about the initial suppression and eventual telling of women character’s tales of suffering, often at the hands of other women. Her analysis highlights culturally specific forms of patriarchy that render women (fictional and real) unable to share their personal stories of hardship. Noting that suffering women characters who do tell their stories ultimately experience an improvement in their lot, Davis concludes the chapter and the book by asking how this translates to the lives of the Maithil women telling these narratives. Storytelling and other expressive traditions are, she argues, “absolutely central to Maithil women’s selfhood” and are the “building blocks of life for Maithil women” (p. 181). In Davis’s final words: Maithil women and the stories they tell are irrepressible.

The greatest challenge of this beautiful and beautifully written book is keeping pace with Davis as she moves deftly and swiftly from story to story. While it is easy to imagine the difficulty in crafting it, it would have been helpful to have not only a list of all the Maithil women’s tales discussed but perhaps even a table that charted out the key elements, associations, and significance of these tales for readers who have not lived with these stories in our heads and thoughts for as long as Davis certainly has to have written a book such as this. Similarly, Davis paints the ethnographic setting with great precision. For those readers familiar with Janakpur and other areas of the Maithil cultural region in Nepal’s Terai, this will enhance their reading and interpretive experience. For those with less or no familiarity with the region, however, some of these details may be a distraction. These minor critiques in no way diminish the quality or invaluable contribution that this book makes to the fields of anthropology, folklore studies, and women’s and gender studies. This book joins the ranks of Gloria Goodwin Raheja’s and Ann Grodzin Gold’s *Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (1994) and Smita Tewari Jassal’s *Unearthing*

*Gender: Folksongs of North India* (2012), the standard-bearer and another more recent contribution, respectively, of women's expressive traditions. As a scholar of religious studies, I also see great value in her original and vibrant account of a local form of Hindu culture, practice, and ideology in a geoculturally understudied region as seen through the telling of these Maithil women's oral tales and the lives and daily realities of the women who tell them.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

**Citation:** Jessica V. Birkenholtz. Review of Davis, Coralynn V. *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal-India Border*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. December, 2016.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43942>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.