

Research Article

Lure of the Vetāl: Tracing Elements of Supernatural in Agarwal's Retelling

Rupali Kamboj

Research Scholar, Department of English and Cultural Studies, & Guest Faculty, Post Graduate Government College, Chandigarh, India;
rupalikamboj2024@gmail.com

Accepted version published on 5th October 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17294398>

Abstract: What draws us most to the genre of Children's Literature? I attribute this nostalgia to aspects of human affinity, such as the circular structure, the omission of arduous language, a reflection of an innocent time, and themes that can be internalised even by adults. What is clever in these tales is the eccentric characters employed to dispense values. Didacticism is often disguised under the guise of amusement, which aims to keep the target audience engaged; eccentric characters are employed to convey these values. This paper presents a deconstructive reading of Sivadasa's "Listen, O King," as adapted and retold by Deepa Agarwal. It analyses Vetāl, an icon among Indian children who grew up on the wisdom of his riddles, as the ultimate spectre. It reimagines the spirit as an embodiment of practical knowledge, a timeless symbol of sagacity. The entire story is a compilation of mini banters between Vikramaditya and the chatty demon, which are studied to see how Hauntology finds itself intertwined in the oral storytelling tradition. The writer paints a picture of the Terrors of cremation grounds, a blood sacrifice, prophecies, ghouls, ghosts, tricksters, and gods. This celebrated work serves as a potent vehicle for teaching children about the world. The life-death predicament, marriage, duty, as well as kinship, to name a few, form the basis of the archaic tales spewed one after the other, which then lead to a united climax. The past is treated respectfully as the origin of the present. Vikram's Sisyphus-like struggle is often personalised by the children who absorb values through the solutions they provide. Each story conceals some Indian moral philosophy and engages the child in a quest of their own. How are the dead personified to teach the living? How is fantasy utilised to maintain the allure of the charming tales? How does the supernatural transform into agents of dispensing virtues that are of universal potential? What is haunting, and who is being haunted in the tales? How does the darkness of plot feed into the lure in Children's Literature?

Keywords: supernatural; hauntology; deconstruction; didacticism

The past is a priori supposition of the future. Deepa Aggarwal's retelling of the time-worn banter between the poster child of Indian haunting, the Vetāl, and the icon of justice, Vikramaditya, finds the past as the protagonist in what Propp theorises as *Syuzhet*, or the raw material of the story. Hanging upside down on a sycamore tree, Vetāl is a creature of the past. In his tales, we find a destabilisation of time. As an excellent narrator, he keeps both the king and the audience engaged in a moral trance. It makes us reconsider the boundary between being and non-being. At the end of each tale, he encourages his listeners to think about their responses. The icon of Vetāl, his choice of tales, and the subject matter can all be read as quests to selfhood. Swayed by the erring setting of the narration, we find ourselves getting transformed with each telling. Vikram's Sisyphus-like struggle is often personalised by the children who absorb values through the solutions they provide. Each story conceals a philosophy and engages the child in a quest of their own. How are the dead personified to teach the living? How is fantasy utilised to maintain the allure of the charming tales? How does the supernatural transform into agents of dispensing virtues that are of universal potential? What is haunting, and who is being haunted in the tales? How does the darkness of the plot feed into the lure with respect to Children's Literature? These are some of the narrower scopes of this investigation.

Imagine the exhilaration you feel while hearing a ghost story. What makes this engagement between the living and the dead so bewitching? Once we surrender to the charms of the dark side, we are faced with certain predicaments. The past subsumes to be the past and seeps into the present and the future. Agarwal's retelling of the famous banter is dialogic in nature and uses grotesque imagery for plot development. The performance of a corpse hanging down the king's shoulder while he is walking towards a cremation ground with an impending ritual to gain *siddhis* is just one instance of amplification of the dark aesthetics of the tale. The repetitiveness of the action, the story followed by a question, and the retreat can be read as a magnificent drama. The dressing up of the stories as a distraction with an actual moral intention behind them is a clever camouflage, overshadowed only by the macabre elements. Consider the following description of the grounds: "The huge burning ghat was shrouded in smoke, and bones bleached white lay in heaps. Bloody organs were strewn everywhere, as were skulls, used as goblets by ascetics who haunted such sites to participate in various gruesome rituals (Agarawal)."

By invoking fear into the minds of young readers, the narrative promises revelations and confrontations with not only bloodthirsty ghouls but also with inner demons. I have attempted to identify points of commonality between the subplots in order to discern the morphology of this retelling. The purpose is not to homogenise the text, but to narrow down the themes to those of kingship, nobility, wisdom, duty, and worthiness. The tales are of constant negotiations between the narrator and the narratee, building up cases of moral sensibilities along the Way. Gaiman and Gidwiz suggest in *Reading in the Dark* that the "confrontation with horror, with fear, is deeply connected to self-discovery. "They suggest, in fact, that in the darkest zones we find

ourselves" (McCort). Vikramaditya must immerse himself in the yarns spun by the spirit in order to emerge as a true king.

The frame story begins with deception leading to the segregation of the sage's child into three pieces. The decapitation is followed by three children with identical horoscopes being roped into a prophecy. The beginning is revisited in the end as true identities are revealed and normality is reinstated. *The Mysterious Message* is the first of many tales related to the concept of kingship. The signs and the duplicity of gestures in this particular chapter are worthy of a Semiotic study. "Who do you think was at fault here?" The question warns the readers of making ill-informed decisions. A subtle allusiveness is intentionally created through enigmatic and odd characters with a heavy supernatural background. The layered structure enables children to explore and work through very real questions of wisdom. Weaponised by a master storyteller, these tend to have a profound impact on adolescents who often internalise the valour of Vikramaditya allegorically.

Stories like "*The Most Deserving Suitor*," "*The Devoted Servant*," and "*Mixed Up Heads*" employ the age-old plot of bringing the dead back to life. The path through which this resurrection occurs may vary across the book- it is divine intervention, the boon of a Devi, and witchcraft. The tales echo Portia's dilemma, "Who is the most worthy suitor?" The players are almost always royalty, Kings, queens, and sages in a far-off land that adds to the fictitiousness of the narratives. The contrast is sharp, aimed to be obvious. Parallel to these are the ghouls, the yoginis, and the orgs whose maliciousness counters the nobles. These dynamic relationships that come into play then transform into sites of reterritorialization, seeking to liberate, restore, and justify what can be called an Eastern sense of morality. The spirits and non-living things here leave the quiet confinement of the cremation grounds and jump into the text to impart lessons to the living. I want to emphasise that the purpose of this interpretation is not to declare Listen, O King! a horror story or reduce it to formalism, but to try to decode how the supernatural transforms into a tool of dispensing didactic motives.

The text segregates characters into two categories: those who embody human wisdom and those who represent human flaws. The act of close reading highlights the calculated avoidance of complex language as a means to focus on the message being imparted –another marker of Children's literature. The structure offers clear evidence of habitualization and tailored elements that keep the children wanting more adventure. The themes are repetitive and offer the same sets of moral conduct, as if to subtly condition the children into a specific kind of judgment. Leaping out of the constraints of human limitations, the Vetala then becomes a spokesperson of freedom, acting in his own right. After having satiated himself with a plethora of riddles, it chooses to save the king from the clutches of the evil Kshantishila.

The Mysterious Messages, besides being a classic sign-signifier tale filled with language games, employs witchcraft as a turning point in the story. Note the following excerpt from the story: "I came across a group of yoginis here. They were making a circle of red flowers on the round and performing some rituals. They placed a man inside the circle and, before my eyes, they tore him apart (Agarawal)."

This leads to the banishment of the princess without any further investigation. It serves as a caution against making hasty decisions without thorough inquiry. *The Most Deserving Suitor* incorporates elements of resurrection where the choice of the perfect suitor is at stake. It is one of many marital tales in this adaptation. The classic structure offers a choice between three individuals who perform some action in order to be worthy of the beautiful wife. *Jimutavahana's Sacrifice* offers Jimutavahana as a prototype of sacrifice. His motto of living for others and his admirable selflessness make even the mighty creature of myth, the Garuda, rethink his actions. Despite him being the protagonist of the story, Vetā's morality dictates that Sankhachuda is the more magnanimous because it is a king's innate duty to be selfless. Another fascinating tale is *Who is Prince Haridatta's birth father?* The first choice is that of a robber, "Impaled on an iron spike," unable to find deliverance because he does not have a child to perform the last rites. The second choice is that of the Brahmin who birthed him. The presence of divine intervention of Shiva through a dream makes the child the next ruler of the city, making the king the third father. The answers are not always black and white; therefore, it is safe to postulate that Eastern sensibility does not follow the binary dichotomy of its Western counterpart. The systematic redressal of virtues as solutions, and the unveiling of mysteries of these tales, mirrors the discovery of mysteries of life. The king's adventure ultimately becomes the children's own saga of self-discovery.

The tales diverge from traditional ethics, developing a distinctive sensibility rooted in rationality and duty. What does it mean to be a king? This is what is built chronologically through these riddles. The king here is not just a monarch; he is an ideal human being, an epitome of virtues. As though filling up all the 'ifs' in Kipling's poem intended for similar pursuits, Vikramaditya echoes back Vetā's own acumen and fulfils the prophecy of ruling the world. The philosophies encoded in the texts are of universal appeal, although the presentation is highly Indian. It is trying to do, whatever literary work aspires to do, assign meaning to the general absurdity of life.

This paper aligns with Gordon's treatment of the apparition: "We have to talk to the spectre graciously...We have to learn how it speaks and offer it a hospitable reception" (Gordon). One can argue with the solutions presented at the end of each chapter, but you just cannot resist the allure of the Vetā. We learn at the end to sympathise with the body being possessed, just as we come to accept Vetā's wisdom grudgingly. The King's predicament of believing the charming spirit finds resonance within young hearts. We, too, treat the supernatural with a certain distrust, but the conclusion ultimately sides with the ghost. The King repays the spectre by making him immortal. "Please grant these stories narrated by the vetā become famous throughout the world, and whoever hears them gains great merit". This pulls the readers further into the story, making them a shareholder in this treasure.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Works cited

Sivadasa. *Listen, O King!*. Adapted by Deepa Agarwal, Puffin Classics, Penguin Books India, 2005.

Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folk Tale*. University of Texas Press, 3 June 2010.

McCort, Jessica R. *Reading in the Dark*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 28 Apr. 2016.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.