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Review of *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the  
Nepal-India Border* by Coralynn Davis

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

**Coralynn Davis.** 2014. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014. 222 pages. ISBN 9780252034826.

**Reviewed by Anna Stirr**

Stories travel, from place to place, among different social realms, and between inner and outer versions of selves. This sense of stories as facilitating mobility opens Coralynn Davis's *Maithil Women's Tales*. A work of ethnographic folklore scholarship, the book presents tales that Maithil women share with each other,

analyzing the stories for the insights they provide about women's lives in this highly gender-stratified society.

Mithila is a cultural region with a long cohesive history, currently bifurcated by the India-Nepal border, and characterized by orthodox, patriarchal Hindu values and strict relations of purdah and caste segregation. Despite the focus on stories' mobility, this is not a book about the specific human mobility issues in Mithila: cross-border movement and the problems that arise when a cohesive, tight-knit cultural region exists across two different nation-states. This, rather, is a book about Maithil women and the mobility between gendered lifeworlds that their stories afford.

The Maithil women's worlds, and the folkloric themes described here, will be familiar to scholars of the expressive culture of more orthodox Hindu worlds, yet may seem distant to those more familiar with Nepal's hill and mountain regions. In the Nepali context, besides the work of Ram Dayal Rakesh in folklore and literary history, there are few book-length ethnographic studies of Maithil life. Thus, this book is an important addition to the folklore and ethnography of Nepal. The book also gives readers a different way to look at Mithila, as a site of vibrant, contemporary expressive culture, rather than a politically problematic border area. Current political discourse about border life focuses disproportionately on women, who as daughters and wives, following the

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pattern of moving to live with their husbands, often cross the border for marriage and to return to visit their natal homes. The resulting web of generational links across the Nepal-India border has been used as an argument both for and against proposals of dual citizenship or heightened border security, at once symbolizing close familial ties between nation-states, and the potential for divided loyalties. Moving away from this patriarchal discourse that characterizes women as objects of exchange and even "matter out of place" in border-crossing patri- and viri-local kin relations, Davis locates this book in the worlds women make.

Part of the fun of this book is getting to enter into these women's worlds by way of their stories. The Maithil women's tales retold by Davis in this book are finely crafted, entertaining, poignant, and full of delightful imagery (for example, the household tools that gather nightly by the side of a pond to gossip about their owners). Davis includes multiple full stories, and references many more. One thing that may surprise readers familiar with the Mithila region is the dearth of stories about the *Ramayana* heroine Sita, whose legendary birthplace is Davis's research site of Janakpur. However, this makes sense given the ubiquity of the *Ramayana* story and its centrality to the region: Sita is more a symbol of dominant ideals wifehood than she is a subject of new stories, and as Davis notes, Maithil women's stories

provide "very different models for womanhood than those suggested by dominant readings of Sita" (p. 14). The book proceeds from the woman-centered perspective of these stories.

Beginning with a chapter on the irrepressibility of stories, and ending with a chapter on the irrepressibility of women, the book overall shows how stories (and women) have lives of their own, and how attending to these lives has much to tell us about the relations between the world within the story, and the world in which the story is told. The central chapters address the themes of fortune and social stratification; morality and women-centered transmission of ideas of virtue; women's longing for their natal homes; gendered oppositions between town and forest, and the symbolic associations between women and water.

Differences among Maithil women include inequalities of caste, ethnicity, and class, and these differences can also shape their stories. In the chapter "The Motherline of Morality," Davis notices that while Brahmin women frame discussions of virtue in terms of *dharma* (as the concept legitimates their higher status), non-Brahmin women (who would probably rather not legitimate their lower caste status in this way) prefer to discuss *sat* or truth (p. 91). The emphasis on virtuous qualities found in *sat* meets *dharma*, in its sense of "duty," when the stories celebrate intent as equally important to behavior in evaluating

what is virtuous. Righteous acts must be matched with righteous intention, and lying and deceit are acceptable as means to ensure that what is right is accomplished.

The following chapter suggests that maternal devotion is the highest virtue for these women, demonstrated through examples in stories like the Khiriyā and Puriyā Tale, in which a cobra mother saves her adopted human daughter from her cobra husband's wrath, even after the human daughter has inadvertently killed all the cobra babies. Mothers in these tales go to great lengths to protect and help their daughters, even after death. Kinship and friendship across species is another theme common in the tales. Friends' and sisters' fates are linked across incarnations both human and animal, as they try to get virtue right over multiple lifetimes; inter-species adoptions imply a value of kinship with all life. Together these stories, and Davis's situated interpretations, begin to show us strands of Maithil women's creativity in using stories, with their connections among myths and lived experience as enjoyable spaces to comment on life.

Because the book is organized thematically, cross-references between chapters abound. Some readers might find this frustrating, but for me it mostly created enjoyable anticipation: I couldn't wait to get to Chapter 7 to finally read "The Second Wife's Tale," and by the time I got there, I was disappointed

that I had already come nearly to the end of the book. *Maithil Women's Tales* is an excellent introduction to the stories that shape women's lives, and to the women who use the stories in making sense of their worlds and finding pleasure and within them.

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