

Folk Elements And English Poetry From North East India: An Analysis Of Selected Works

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Abstract

Indian English Writings from the north eastern frontier carries with them the perception of being centred on ethnic clashes, regional discontentment, human rights violation and the associated instances of violence. However there is another track herein that traces the rich folk life of the numerous tribes and ethnic groups of the region. As literature is a mirror of the society, hence a study in this regard is necessary to bring out the rich socio-cultural life of the people as depicted in the numerous folktales, legends etc. brought to the fore through poetry and fiction so that universal awareness is generated on these facets of the society. The researcher shall make an analytical study of the folk elements in select works in English in verse of writers from India's north east by concentrating on the four fields of folklore studies: oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and folk performing art. The proposed research shall attempt to analyse the patterns of representation of folk elements and their impact on the everyday life of the people in select works in English of writers from the region in order to present the rich folk heritage of the geographical space.

Key words: *oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and folk performing art*

Introduction

Indian English Writings from the north eastern frontier carries with them the perception of being centred on ethnic clashes, regional discontentment, human rights violation and the associated instances of violence. However there is another track herein that traces the rich folk life of the numerous tribes and ethnic groups of the region. As literature is a mirror of the society, hence a study in this regard is necessary to bring out the rich socio-cultural life of the people as depicted in the numerous folktales, legends etc. brought to the fore through poetry and fiction so that universal awareness is generated on these facets of the society.

India's northeast has always been looked at curiously by those who dwell in the *presumed* Indian *mainland*. The region has a highly heterogeneous social set up with more than 100 different ethnic groups

speaking more than 400 different languages and dialects often restricted to only a few square kilometers of area. Regarding the literature of the region, Mamang Dai in her essay *Contemporary Literary Scenario in the Northeast States* (published in *Atman*, the Diamond Jubilee Souvenir of Gauhati High Court, Guwahati in 2008) says:

“.....a complete presentation of the literature of the region becomes difficult and almost invariably incomplete.” (62)

Known to those outside the region as a ‘conflict zone’, India’s northeast has much for everybody beneath the fabric of ethnic unrest and complex political equations. Literature of the region portrays it in all its manifestations and this is the element that associates literature produced in the regional languages and dialects and in English. However one can mark a detour from the strains of discontentment along with the allied sensations of disillusionment and desperation in the form of an artistic focus on the rejuvenating natural beauty and folk elements of the region. The documentation of tribal beliefs, customs, tales which were initially propagated from one generation to the other orally added new dimensions to their scientific study. While studying the folklife of any community its unwritten literature forms the basis of the written word and that makes the shamans and the story tellers an important link between a generation and another and to an extent between the society and those documenting its various features. However, one apprehension is raised as to whether the authenticity and appeal of the original form has been lost in the process of documentation and subsequent translation(s) and as such it is a writer’s responsibility to be authentic in its portrayal. The artistic presentation of folk tales, legends, customs and other folk elements is more prominent in the writings of the tribal writers of the region. The writers under consideration have been critically acclaimed, widely anthologised and popular among the readers and have been instrumental in showcasing *another face* of north east which is far removed from the ethnic clashes and tales of separatist insurgent movements. The paper shall take into consideration 8 poems of poets from 4 northeastern states that deal with the folk life of the tribes/ ethnic groups that they present in their works.

Objective

The objective of the proposed research is to make an analytical study of the folk elements in select works in English of writers from India’s north east. The justification behind the creation of such a geographical compartmentalization in the arena of Indian English literature requires analysis as the category stands for a sense of unified *otherisation* of eight states with totally diverse socio-cultural beliefs and practices vis-à-vis the Indian *mainland* though for the government machinery the clubbing is more for political convenience while dealing with a *peripheral* region as the north east. This clubbing has aided

considerably in generating an aura of apparent homogeneity as opposed to the rich and vibrant cultural aspects of the various tribes and ethnic groups inhabiting in this geographical space but beneath the surface lies intra-regional differences to the extent that languages become incomprehensible every few kilometers and in socio-cultural and religious practices are distinctly visible.

Hypothesis

The use of English in north east India started with the arrival of the British in the 19th century and gradually it gained popularity. In the 21st century parlance it is one language that has been able to bind the litterateurs of the region into forming their groupings like the North East Writers Forum and hence the selection of the topic. The region under the purview of this research has rich and diverse folklore/ folklife and a study of their representation for perusal of the current and future generations is necessary so that awareness is generated in this field.

Methodology

The research proposes to analyse the selected texts by highlighting upon the indigenous folk tales, legends, customs and socio-cultural belief systems in the fiction in English produced in the region. The various approaches to the study of folklore shall be utilised. The research would be analytical, scientific and comparative as and when necessary.

Folklore and Folkloristics

The term 'folklore' was first coined by William John Thoms in 1846 to replace the then existent 'popular antiquities' and can be seen as an outcome of the words 'folk' and 'lore'. According to Alan Dundes, the term 'folk' refers to any group, the size of which is inconsequential, sharing at least one common aspect/ factor and 'lore' signifies the body of knowledge generally transmitted from one generation to the other orally. Thus, folklore is that body of knowledge of a folk group that is passed from one generation to another orally. Folklore, as a discipline of study, gained prominence in the 19th century. Dan Ben-Amos opines that folklore is the artistic communication in small groups. Folk needs to be presented in a face to face interaction as then only we can have living folklore. It gained gradual academic prominence and with advanced research in the various parameters of folklore scholars like Richard Dorson have viewed that:

In recent years another term, folklife, has vied with and even threatened to dominate folklore. The supporters of folklore studies claim that folklorists are too narrowly preoccupied with verbal forms and neglect the tangible products of folk artisans. They maintain that folklife embraces the whole panorama of traditional culture, including oral folklore. (Dorson 2)

According to Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones:

The term folklore denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviors: (1) that we customarily learn, teach, and utilize or display during face-to-face interactions, and (2) that we judge to be traditional (a) because they are based on known precedents or models, and (b) because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief and feeling. The discipline devoted to the identification, characterization, and analysis of traditional expressive forms, processes and behaviors is folkloristics. (Georges & Owens 1)

Richard Dorson has identified four fields of folklore and folklife studies:

- i) Oral Literature: It is sometimes referred to as verbal art or verbal literature and includes folk speeches, folk songs, traditional utterances etc. Prayers, chants, myth, legends, folk tales form part of the gamut of oral literature. Furthermore there is every possibility that oral literature might assume the written form because of circumstantial compulsions or the demand of the folk group to give permanency to an art form. A distinction between myth, legend and folk tale needs to be made before further discussion on oral literature as these three are prominent verbal art forms in the lore of the folk groups.

Verbal art form	Belief	Time	Place	Attitude	Nature of characters
Myth	Fact	Remote past	Different world	Sacred	Non-human
Legend	Fact	Recent Past	Today's world	Sacred or secular	Human
Folktale	Fiction	No time aspect	No place constraint	Secular	Non-human and human

- ii) Material Culture: Also called physical folklife it is concerned with the visible aspects of the life of a folk group. According to Dorson it corresponds to techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generations and subject to the same forces of conservative tradition and individual variation as verbal art (Dorson 2). Thus, material culture concerns with those tools that is of significance to a folk group for living a comfortable life and also the recipes and sets of

instructions that can direct the people into performing a task in a particular fashion. It can be classified into five categories:

- a) Folk art
- b) Folk crafts
- c) Folk architecture
- d) Folk costume
- e) Folk cookery/ cuisine

Regarding the distinction between art and craft Henry Glassie opines that if a pleasure-giving function predominates, the artefact is called art and if a practical function predominates it is called craft (Glassie 253 in Dorson)

- iii) **Social Folk Custom:** Traditional life stands as a bridge between oral literature and material culture and can be deemed social folk customs. Folk life is marked by different rituals, customs, and observance of festivals which can be both sacred as well as secular, taboos and faiths, indigenous medicines that determines the thread of everyday life of a folk group. It can be classified into five categories:
 - a) Folk customs and beliefs
 - b) Festivals
 - c) Traditional games and leisure activities
 - d) Folk medicine
 - e) Folk religion (outside the scope of institutionalized religion)
- iv) **Performing Folk Arts:**Traditional music forms, dance and drama falls into the category of performing folk arts. Usually a folk group transfers its music to future generations orally. J. Handoo is of the view that folk music is “passes on by ear and performed by memory rather than by the written or printed musical score” (Handoo 22). Folk drama can be deemed as being either composed keeping folk life in consideration or which is composed verbally by the folk imagination. Two most significance elements of folk drama are dialogue and the staging. The attempt to enact the relationship between nature and man forms the resource base of dramatic art out of which is born folk drama.

Folk elements in select English poems

Temsula Ao's *The Old Story-Teller* (categorized in the first field of folklore/ Motif Index: A1480, acquisition of wisdom and learning) is based on the Ao-Naga folktale regarding their script. The tale enumerates how their script inscribed on a hide and hung on a wall so that everyone of the folk group can see was eaten by a dog and since then every aspect of their socio-political, historical and religious life has been transferred from one generation to the other orally and retained in the collective memory of the folk group:

I have lived my life believing
Story-telling was my proud legacy.

The ones I inherited
From grandfather became
My primary treasure
And the ones I garnered
From other chroniclers
Added to the lore. (Ao 11)

The poet lists a number of popular folktales, legends, myths and beliefs that enrich the lore of the Aos: the myth of six stones from which the first forefathers of the folk group are believed to have emerged, the practice of nature worship, legends of brave warriors, were-tigers. She advocates the notion that these tales must be told to the young generation as the identity of a race is rooted on such lore:

Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic:
We would lose our history,
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity.

So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
To instill in the young
The art of perpetuating

Existential history and essential tradition

To be passed on to the next generation. (Ao 12)

The significance of storytelling in any folk group is immense and more so at a time when the young generation appears to be losing interest in taking them to the future. The distraught poet feels that the fading prowess of orality as a mode of taking the tales to future makes her think of the “Original Dog” for whom the people of her tribe lost their script. Her impetus seems to be in the documentation of folklore so that traditional values stay strong in the society forever and forming the future generations aware of their rich cultural heritage.

Ao's *Soul-Bird* (categorized in the third category of folklore/ Motif Index: E720, soul leaves or enters the body) recounts the Ao-Naga belief that the soul of a dead individual assumes the shape of a bird or insect or caterpillar and the sighting of a hawk after the death rites is considered a good omen. It depicts the picture of an old lady watching skywards from the freshly done mound of her daughter's grave and on seeing a hawk circling overhead them whispers to her grandson:

See that keening bird in the sky?

That's your mother's soul

Saying her final good-bye,

It is over

Come, let us go home now. (Ao 15)

Esther Syiem's *The Tale of the Lost Script* (categorized in the first field of folklore/ Motif Index: F10, journey to the upper world) is about the absence of script of Khasi language and the folk belief associated with it. The folk tale enumerates how God had given the Khasi script to a messenger who was sent for the purpose by the forefathers but unfortunately swallowed it as he had kept it in his mouth on being caught in a deluge. The tale further enumerates how another recipient of the script from God, a plainsman, could keep it safe by tying it in his ponytail. Syiem has expressed the dissatisfaction of the folk group at the unexpected as well as unsavoury turn of events thereby depriving them of a script:

he came back

having obtained nothing:

only his own safety. (Syiem 9)

However, though the legend cannot be deemed to be having anything to cheer about for her folk group yet she firmly asserts:

for the legend
must be
though vanquished
must stay... (Syiem 11)

Rah Kla(categorized in the third category of folklore/ Motif Index: F430, weather spirits) is about a spirit Kla who is believed to exist in thick mist and can be averted by wearing clothes inside out. The nature of a folk belief is dependent on the geographical location and the natural world enveloping the people which form the basis of existence for a folk group. The poem starts with a depiction of a hilly area with its typical sights and sounds:

Out of valley gorges
the soundless mist
suddenly spreads itself
over us, spills into our dwellings
and chills our souls. (Syiem 18)

Rah Kla literally means to be kidnapped by the spirit of the mists on not wearing clothes inside out and the poet has attempted to show the conditioned of one who regains consciousness only after the mist is gone thereby rendering Kla powerless:

After the mist retreats,
when he regains possession of himself
atop a smooth boulder or in a rocky crevice cut into sheer cliff
in the middle of nowhere;
he retrieves himself into precarious perches
only to rant
about his brush with the unnatural
to others who've never succumbed
to the cunning hidden in the mist. (Syiem 19)

This depiction is of a lucky individual of the folk group who has been able to escape from the clutches of the spirit but the 'what if' issue remains and that is the issue that bogs down the other members of the group. Again that question is rooted in the natural phenomenon unraveling in that particular geographical space as the fear of the folk group as enumerated in the poem is what would happen to a kidnapped man when the mist does not disappear in the gorges or the person is unable to throw off the spell of hypnosis. Such spirit stories based on the folk belief of the presence of evil powers bent on causing harm to men are present in every society and the beauty of such tales lie in the fact that they, alongside telling a tale, also describe the physical features of the area of the folk group under consideration.

Mylliem (categorized in the second category of folklore) is a small village in East Khasi hills district known for its iron smelting works. This is indicative of the rich presence, at least sufficient for local needs, of mineral ore in the region. The poet believes that being away from the cityscape is a blessing in disguise for the craftsmen as they have lesser chance of seeing their art vanishing in a world witnessing rapid changes in science and technology. A visit to Mylliem is enough to make Syiem associate herself with her beginnings which can be metaphorically studied as her attempt to bind the Khasis to a craft that has been part of their tradition, their everyday life since the time her memory can take her to. For her the remote hamlet is:

Shacks of molten fire that
 Spark with the energy of limbs that
 Strike... hit... strike...
 In an echoing canvas of sound and silence
 That will always lead me back to my distant beginnings. (Syiem 38)

The smithies of the hamlet have endured the test of time. When traditions and customs have either been distorted or have changed the poet could view this facet of material culture of the area thriving to provide newer dimensions to the folk group. It is appropriately said that the prosperity of a society can be judged through its crafts, arts, handloom and handicraft, indigenous tools and utensils. Mylliem is rich not only in that but also in the collective social pride that it generates in the psyche of the folk group. For the poet the smelting art creates an unique sensation inside her and she asserts:

As in your men and in your women
 I find an answering call
 In the aroma of smoked earth in them (Syiem 38)

Desmond L. Kharmawphlang's *Tyrchiang* (categorized in the second category of folklore) is a tribute to the art of pottery and the deft potters of Tyrchiang, a small village in West Jaintia Hills district, who do not make use of the potter's wheel in their creative pursuit. Tyrchiang is situated close to Lyrnai whose earthen pots are an indispensable part of the tribes of Meghalaya. In this fast moving world where designer crockery and utensils have taken hold of the market leaving the traditional and indigenous artisans at the mercy of a few patrons and government schemes and aid, the pots remain indispensable because of certain traditional Khasi cuisines like pumaloi or putharo. Further its usage can also be seen for religious purposes in Nartiang. The task of potters is difficult as they are to collect the earth from the Sung Valley and the process of drying it can only be carried out during the dry season and the unique colour of the pots is provided by bark of locally available fauna. It is because of the extent of significance of these pots in the lives of the tribes of the region that the poet has used the expression "coils of mythology" to describe the ancientness of the craft and the reverence that the artifacts are held with by the natives. Terracota is a living art form in these hills and every experience, the trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows of the people seem to shape the beautiful pots: that's why the elevation of the act of making pots to a higher realm by calling it as being the result of a pact made with the gods. Kharmawphlang has aptly employed personification for describing the process of creation of an urn or any vessel:

Myths construct themselves
Like the birthing of these urns
and vessels, (Kharmawphlang 144)

The hardships and pains of a mother during childbirth and the backbreaking hard work that the artisans undergo in their creative endeavour is an apt comparison as it is through pains only that something sublime emerges. It is art and simplicity of the artisans endeavouring ceaselessly to create something sublime that makes the poet feel ashamed at his state of existence which lacks the spirit and fervor of the people of Tyrchiang.

Yumlam Tana's *The Man and the Tiger* (categorized in the first category of folklore/ motif index: A1710: creation of animals through transformation) traces the Nyishi myth of the brotherhood of man and tiger; how one of two brothers gradually started developing different physical features of tiger and got transformed into a beast with the passage of time. The poet, with the ease of a deft storyteller, says:

We played various games around the house.
 He was my playmate. He was my nurse.
 And I was his soulmate in a world
 Where my young mind could stretch
 ...
 Alas! He grew nails, he grew a tail;
 And asked me to give a scratch
 And my nails marked on his body
 The black stripes of a tiger! (Tana 14)

The gulf that got created between the brothers as a result of that transformation has been drawn by the poet using the metaphor of the Tsangpo that divides a landmass into two segments throughout its course from the Dibang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh till it flows in to the Bay of Bengal. Similar is the case of the brothers distanced by fate who are to live separately though they might share the same “genetic identity”. But the poet’s talent lies in his satiric presentation of man’s state of existence in the contemporary society by exploiting the essence of the popular myth:

So the tiger must stalk in the forest
 To kill and spill blood for blind appetite
 And the man, a social animal,
 Search an Ideology to suit his Intellect. (Tana 15)

The usage of words like ‘Ideology’ and ‘Intellect’ points towards an opinionated existence of men as opposed to the life in natural world where there is freedom from such restrictive nuances and crippling influences. Like most folktales, this tale too cherishes life uncorrupted by complex equations of human society.

Uddipana Goswami’s *Timunny Sahab* (categorized in the first category of folklore/ motif index: P700-P799: miscellaneous motifs) is a popular folktale amongst the tea tribes of Assam telling the tale of love that blossomed between a British tea estate manager and a girl of garden labourers. Timunny is probably the localized pronunciation of Timony. The theme is not uncommon with artists as award winning films like *Chameli Memsahab* have already been made available to the audience/ readers. Set in the banks of the Dhansiri river that flows through upper Assam the tragic tale unfolds in one of the numerous tea

gardens where the British managers were brought in from England with instructions to maintain a distance with the natives in general and the labourers in particular. The poem begins with a somber note:

The Mora Dhonsiriflows no more
It waits (-for something, anything, nothing).
Meanwhile on the dead river,
Floats the song of a dead love... (Goswami 28)

Then it traces the apprehensions of the girl regarding the reactions and responses that the people would make on hearing about the affair. This is followed by the poet mentioning the end of the lore which recounts how the British manager is forced to go back home, and the girl Kajori gets married. There is a pathetic presentation of a deer Jhumka who lived in the Sahab's bungalow but saddened at the sad turn of events wonders around weeping. The folk group believes that so intense was the bond between the two that even nature seemed to express sorrow at the fate of the lovers:

Mora Dhonsiri – a dead river.
Only in the monsoon,
The dead river rises
And sheds tears for a love
Deader than itself. (Goswami 29)

This tea garden lore is enriched with rhythms specific to music of the tea gardens of Assam and like most songs of the tea estate labourers that speak of hardships of daily existence, betrayal by their masters and their passions and sentiments amidst the lush green tea bushes this folk tale also paints the picture of a simple girl of the labour community caught in the cross currents of human passion and societal compulsions.

Conclusion

The authors analysed in the paper assume the role of storytellers who have a strong presence in the socio-cultural aspect of every individual's life in traditional societies. The times have been changing and in this globalized world the relevance of such myths, legends, customs and folktales are debated but it can be stated with conviction that a race unaware of its cultural heritage faces the risk of experiencing acute identity crisis which can be mitigated only when every individual is aware of the nature and patterns of flow of various aspects of the socio-cultural life of his/ her community since the beginnings till date.

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