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T Translating the North East: Reading an Idea of Cultural Mobility

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Abstract

The North East of India is a land of mind-boggling complexities of language, culture and is thus an immense source of knowledge that is only being tapped into. In the recent times, there has been a great influx of creative works from the region into English, thus creating a much-needed diversity in the medium of narration as well as creating a fresh syntax of imagination. The presence of English as a target language is of great importance to the literature and culture of the North East on account of the linguistic demographics of the region. The current literature of the place that is now available to the English reading public is mostly the folktales of the region. There are folktales from every region of the seven north eastern states and sometimes multiple versions of the same. Within these stories lie the valuable cultural code of the people. The way that environment is viewed, the interpersonal relationships, the familial relations that inhabit these stories all manage

to shed light on the ways of life of the people. It could make us increasingly aware of the ideologies that inhabit indigenous cultures and bridge a significant gap in our existing knowledge systems.

The paper proposes to examine select folktales from Manipur, Nagaland, and in particular from the tribes of the Khasi and Garo areas. The aspects of environment, cultural preservation, coping mechanisms against modernity and the ways that these are translated will form the focus of the paper.

Keywords: Myths, Folklores, Cultural Mobility, North East of India, North Eastern Culture

Introduction

Folktales are an integral part of the way our culture shapes our world-view and creates the world that we inhabit. The elements of the folklore go on to populate our immediate and distant environment and shape our vocabulary for interpreting the world that we see around us. This why, there is a considerable interest in learning about the folktales of the North-East of India. The North -East, (NE from this point forward in the paper) is a geopolitical hotbed that has often witnessed violence on account of the desire for secession and sections of it have now been witnessing horrifying incidents of violence and mayhem. There has been little to no knowledge about the NE, and most people of the mainland see them as a homogenous set of people with a common story and history. However, that is far from being the case as most of the NE of India has a distinct culture and language. There are very strong tribal allegiances and the interconnectedness and distinctness between them is not something the 'mainland' can comprehend. The paper seeks to examine two of the numerous folktales of the Khasi people and investigate how these stories become a part of the thought processes of their culture and life-process, despite the incursions that modernity makes.

Folktales or folklore comprises the traditionally derived and orally or by way of imitation transmitted literature, system of subcultures among communities that are indigenous to a certain place or geographical location. The study of folktales evolved as a discipline in the early 19th century, in particular, in Europe so as to understand the evolution of human societies. The term Folk-lore was coined by William John Thomaas in 1846.

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The Grimm brothers collected the Germanic folktales to form the iconic collection that we

know today. Sir Edward Tylor, Andrew Lang and other scholars too began compiling data to put together valuable data to trace the belief systems of ancient human societies. James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) is one of the best known works. This along with Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) went on to inform TS Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922). Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* was also a significant work published in this area. Folktales are studied from anthropological, mythological, migratory pattern, psychoanalytical, structuralist perspectives. Edward Tylor in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871) posited that folklore is to be viewed as a repository of prehistoric human cultures. Max Muller and Theodor Benfey presented the idea that a cultural item or a characteristic of a folktale could have multiple origin points. They can originate in different places at the same time or at different times but will occur at similar stages in human progress. In *The Motif Index of Folk Literature* (1932), Stith Thompson talks about the motifs in folklore. The works of Freud regarding the unconscious self were of vital importance as they involved an in-depth study of folklore materials leading to studies such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), and *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Freud felt that myths were the symbolic of the collective unconscious of a race or a culture. Jung examined the symbols depicting sexual drive in myths. Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord worked on the characteristics of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the implications of their orality versus the implications of written verse. Vladimir Propp extended the scope of the research further by working specifically on folktales. Structuralist and formalist studies by Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss examined the elements of folktales. Towards the late twentieth century, American scholars like Roger Abrahams, Dan Ben-Amos, Alan Dundes, Kenneth Goldstein and Robert Gorges began to take folklore items within multidimensional frameworks. In this new enlightened approach, the items of folklore began to be seen not merely as texts but as events, where the contexts of folk performances (like story-telling, singing, rituals and festivals, and conversations) were regarded as important as the texts.

The North-East, Orality and Folk traditions

The paper wishes to look at the elements of folklores and how they impact cultures that are also affected by modernity. It also looks at folklores as a means of cultural comprehension through a process of identification and recognition.

The North-East of India, which is often called the Seven Sisters is a fascinating place, especially as it is rich in natural resources and not much is known about their cultures and ways of life. The people of the North

East have very distinct cultures and identity based on their tribal affiliations. Some of the

languages have recently acquired a script and there is a lot to decode about the histories and aspirations of the people. There has been an intense investment in recent times in the NE through the government's push for development and tourism sector in the region flourishing, leading to a considerable curiosity about the NEs culture and customs. In her article "Folklore and Northeast History, Meet Deka says

While the importance of folklore as a source increased, the question of protection of traditional knowledge and folklore became increasingly important with the emergence of a "global information society" in recent years, characterized by the rise of modern information technology. Traditional knowledge and folklore are thus receiving increased attention in numerous policy fora and debates, ranging from food and agriculture, the environment, health, human rights, and cultural policy, to trade and economic development. The concept of "traditional knowledge" emerged independently in several contexts such as environment conservation, agriculture and food security, traditional medicine as a source of primary health care, indigenous knowledge, in the context of preserving cultural diversity and protecting minority cultures, especially those of indigenous peoples. (176)

The NE has over 200 of the 635 tribes living in India making it a major cultural repository and in order to understand and respect the diversity of the land, it is important to recognise the pattern of narrative pervading it. Temsula Ao writes,

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity. (Cited in Sarkar, 11-12)

The Khasis are seven tribes. "Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngnam and the now never-heard-of Diko- of the Khasi tribe of North-East India, are a great storytelling people: 'telling', because their alphabet is of very recent history, no older than when Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary, introduced the Roman script in 1842, to form the essentials of the Khasi written word. (vii, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih)

Translating the North-East

The two folktales taken in this paper are titled *The Peacock and the Sun* and *Death in a Hut*. Translated into English by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, they are part of an anthology titled *Around the Hearth* that bring the most representative folk narratives from Khasi to English. Peacock and the sun talk about a time when the peacock was married to the sun and lived in the heavens. One day he is entranced by the sight of a maiden in flowing yellow clothes on earth. The peacock is entranced by the sight and instantly falls in love, forgetting all about his love and wife, the Sun. he tells her that he needs to leave her and go to the earth to be with the beautiful maiden. The sun reluctantly has to let go of him, and she sheds bitter tears. She cries not only because he is leaving, but also because she knows that once he leaves, he may never return. These tears fall on the tail of the peacock and causes the beautiful spots on its tail that we see today. On reaching the earth, he realises that there is no maiden and that what he actually saw was a field full of mustard flowers. He becomes extremely but understands that he cannot return to heaven. Since then, it is said, when the sun comes out in full force, the peacock struts about and tries to fly towards his wife, the sun. *Death in a Hut* is the story of a poor man and his rich friend. Feeling burdened by the many favours of his rich friend, the poor man invites him to have a meal at his house whenever he chooses. The eager and loving friend goes the very next day to have a meal. But the poor man's wife is horrified as there was nothing to eat in the house. The husband asks her to go ask the neighbours. She places a pot of water to boil and goes to ask the neighbours for some rice. But no one helps her. when he comes to know of this, the poor man, in a fit of embarrassment stabs himself to death. Upon coming into the kitchen, the wife realises what her husband did and out of sadness, stabs herself as well. the rich friend who was in the next room, comes into the kitchen, understands what happened and kills himself too out of remorse of having caused the death of his friend. A thief who was escaping from the villagers steps into the house and hides there till morning. He then discovers the dead bodies and understands that he will be held responsible. He knows that a long- winded public humiliation will be in store for him. So, he too kills himself. The villagers finally enter the house and find the bodies. They understand the deaths was caused by the difficulty of offering hospitality. They pray to U Blei the God that there should be alternate means of extending hospitality without having to rely on expensive or difficult to procure materials. God who saw this entire tragic scene, makes the rich man into betel nut, the poor man and his wife become betel leaf and lime which are taken together and the thief was made into tobacco, which the Khasis place in their mouths as if to provide it with a hiding place. It is from here that the custom of *kwai*- that of offering tobacco, lime, betel leaf, and nut so that the rich and poor can visit each other without having to worry about hospitality.

The very cultural heritage that gives indigenous peoples their identity, now far more than in the past, is under threat of extinction. This is particularly true of Northeast India, which is inhabited by over 200 of the 635 tribal groups in the country. The folktales show the way forward in bridging the lass divides that come into the community and also lend very important guidelines

for a people relating to the sanctity of marriage and the dangers of chasing after fleeting pleasures. These tales carry the kernels of the social codes of the Khasi people and become extremely important in understanding the nuances of interacting with them. The translations thus, enable us to understand with great clarity the customs and traditions of the people and make us understand the motifs of folktales- the characters, the anthropomorphism and the lesson that comes at the end. These are the elementals of folktales worldwide, thus giving us an understanding of the rhizomatic connects of human creativity. In their article that examines the impact of folk narratives in order to increase language competence in young learners, Mishra & Satpathy remark, “As a form of common folklore, folktales sugarcoat the hard lessons of life so as to give listeners or readers guidance about how they should behave. In this way, folktales help pass values and beliefs, traditions and cultures across the generations.” (1-2) This point of view is further strengthened by Tulika Dey in her article on *Folk Tales of North East India : A relook for Environmental Studies Classroom Transaction* where she examines a Khasi folktale about how the earth got its current shape. This story is from a time when the earth was monotonously flat. The story goes that one day, the mother of the three goddesses *Ka Ding* (Fire), *Ka Um* (Water), *Ka Sngi* (Sun) came to Earth to visit her daughters. But she fell ill and died. As was the custom, the youngest daughter took on the task of laying her mother to rest. *Ka Sngi* who is the sun goddess unleashes her fiery rays. The earth burns up and all the plants, weeds, water bodies are scorched. But the mother’s body seems unaffected. The second daughter *Ka Um* then tries. She floods the earth with continuous rain, the world is submerged for days on end. When the water subsides, the daughters are dismayed to find their mother’s body untouched. Finally, *Ka Ding* the fire goddess engulfs the world in flames. The fire raged for days, leaving nothing in its wake. When the fire died out, the daughters found that their mother’s body was finally reduced to ashes. They were able to then perform the last rites. The flat earth vanished and, in its place, emerged a new place which had mountains, valleys, gorges, rivers and streams. Dey posits that folktales can lend itself to a new means of interpreting them from the angle of the environment. In these days of intensive climate change, it is important that these angles to the folk narratives are found and propagated.

Conclusion

The act of translating these narratives, enable them to bring the cultures closer and also presents an alternate point of view to the horrors of modernity and capitalism. The respect for the environment and the ways that humankind needs to be sensitive not only towards the humans but also towards other organisms is amply presented in the folktales.

It is important to comprehend and recognise oral and indigenous cultures losing out to written

systems. There will be the politics of gatekeeping in publishing and the norms of publish or perish will impact oral practitioners. As Syiem mentions in *Negotiating the Loss*,

The conceptual notion of what the oral is has received a severe beating at the hands of the practitioners of the written. This is but a natural consequence of the evolution of the written medium in which priorities change and societies are no longer the homogeneous entities that they once were. In such a situation, then, what is clearly needed is retrieval of a kind. Before any attempts are made to do this, however, it has to be understood that lest the exercise itself prove self-defeating, the oral has, to use a Khasi term, its own *rngiew*, the imperceptible aura that in Khasi thought permeates all things living, and which gives them being and identity. (81)

The Khasis invented the custom of storytelling and make sure that the *khanatang* or sanctified stories, which are the core creation stories of the Khasis is conveyed to their people. These stories carry great significance as symbols. Those listening to the stories are made not to feel that they are actually being taught something. Says Nongkynrih

Having realised the tremendous potential of the *khanatang*, the Khasis invented a story for everything....Young Khasis were instructed in this way by elders, and their school was always the hearth around which they gathered after a day's labour, entertained by both fire and tales. Entertainment was, in fact, the overt purpose, the overriding factor and the informing soul of such stories. And the Khasis may be said to have taught with delight. (vii)

This also opens the possibilities of children being taught in less stressful environments and with greater impact. The methodology of the Khasis imparting life-lessons and stories of social customs through simple conversations becomes an excellent advocate for unlearning the existing patterns of learning. The translations are crucial in enabling these pathways of understanding.

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