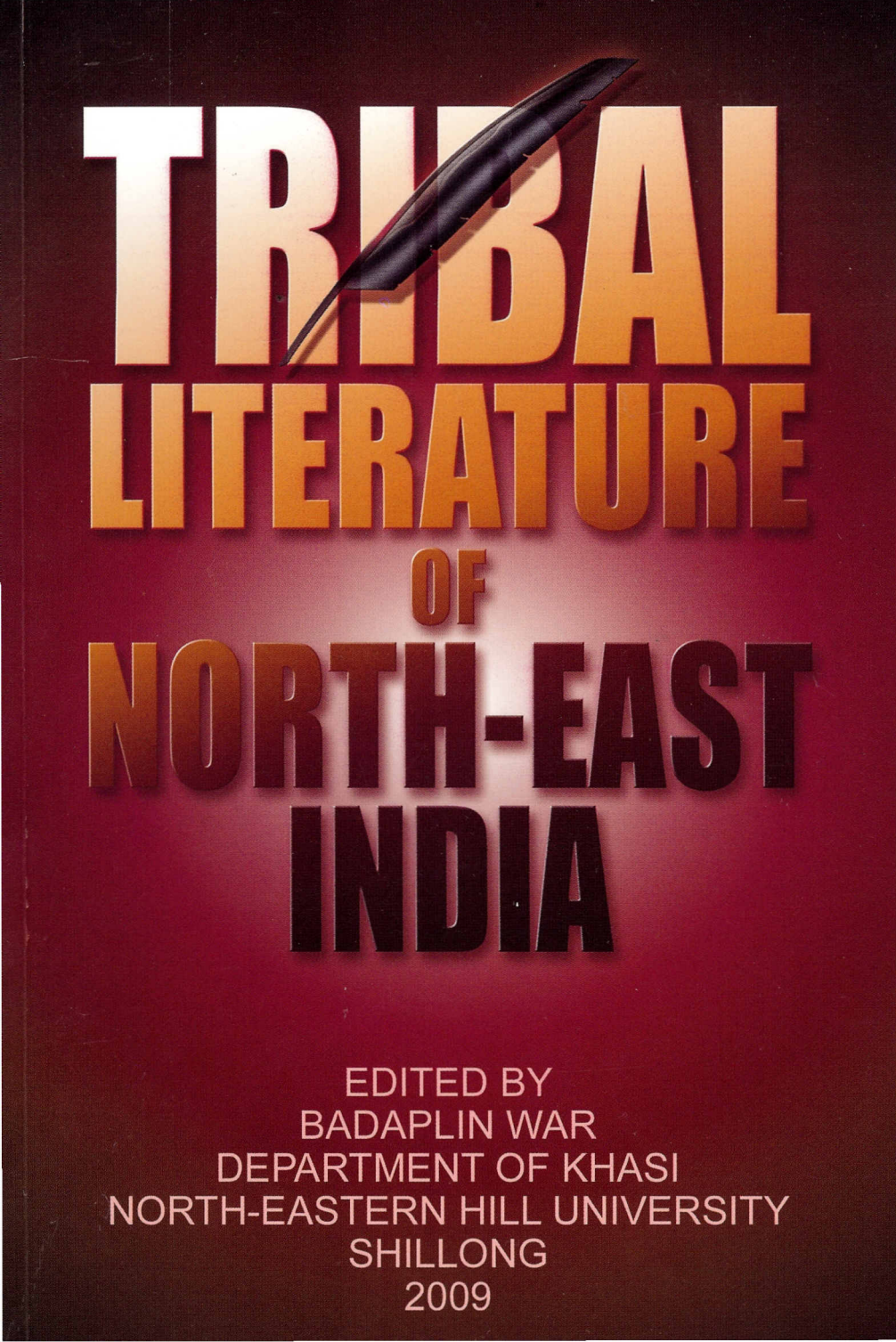

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Contents

Pushing Frontiers : The Continuing Evolution of Khasi Literature

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According to the historian R. S. Lyngdoh,

"Whatever the social scientists may say about the origin of the Khasis, whatever theories they might have advanced - - -, the fact remains that the Khasi have their own theories about their origin - - - according to oral accounts handed down from generation to generation, it appears that the original home of the Khasis was somewhere else."[1]

And in the book *The Khasis Under British Rule,* another historian Helen Giri quotes Davis Scott on the proceedings of the Nongkhlaw court on 3rd November 1826 thus:

"- - - No shouts of exultation, or indecent attempts to put down the orator of the opposite party on the contrary, every speaker was fairly heard out. I have often witnessed the debates in St. Stephen's Chapel, but those of the Cossya Parliament appeared to me to be conducted with more diginity of manners".[2]

The above quotes are important markers in the understanding of Khasi thought in order to interrogate the supposed development of Khasi imagination through the decades after the Khasi were given the written script.

The forces of history abruptly terminated the evolution of Khasi thought that should have taken place after the deliberations at the Nongkhlaw Court. Given the situation then, the Khasis had to bow down to the

powers that be. These were the powers that enabled them to put on the new identity, the so-called literate identity, which was moulded according to the expectations of a dominant literate community, as opposed to the pre-literate identity of the Nongkhlaw Durbar. In retrospect, there was no doubt that it provided a stimulus for growth, but it must be understood that the growth has only been a linear one.

That there were no options availabe but to follow the path of the colonisers was a foregone conclusion. They did give us an important tool, the written script, to help us tackle our changing environment. But when they departed from our hills, they left us derelict of our former identity and floundering for what could have been. The oral form had undergone erosion and the written form was yet to find identity. Weaning ourselves from their influence has proved to be a long drawn out affair that has at times been self-defeating. Although there have been literary evidences of the struggle to reformulate the present and to understand the past, these efforts are not sufficient enough. What is needed is the evolution of a critical discourse that breathes with the spirit of the oral deliberations at the Nongkhlaw Court so that Khasi thought, as it emerges in its new avatar away from a fossilised or romanticised past, is ready to meet the challenges of the 21st century Khasi imagination.

The growth of this enriched body of Khasi literature/thought would hence, no longer be single dimensioned. It would follow the symbolic path of the bow and the arrow, that Sumar Sing Sawian in his essay *Ka Rongbiria U Khun Khasi* recaptures:

U khnam bad ka ryntieh ki dei ki nishan jong u rangbah Khasi, naduh ba jer ba thoh ïa u khun shynrang da ki lai tylli ki 'nam jer. Uwei u ban ïada ïalade, uba ar ban ïada ïa la ka ïing ka sem ka kur ka jait bad uba lai uban ïada ïa ka kur ka hima ka raij ka muluk ka shnong ka thaw. Hadien ba la dkut u 'sai hukum u 'sai rupa, - - - la siat ïa lai tylli ki khnam tympem, uwei shatei, uwei shathie bad sha sepngi, khnang ban synran ïa ka mynsiem ksiar mynsiem rupa, kaba leit phai sha dwar U Blei [3]

Religious associations aside, the three arrows chart a symbolically

significant course in life and in death. They call up associations of flight into unknown realms (ki pyrthei kiba maïan) and opens up possibilities of the journey-motif that is an important aspect of all literature.

The important question here is, how much flight has our literature taken, away from stereotypical themes? How much have we retrieved from our "pre-lietrate" past in order to bring to light the resources of the Nongkhlaw Durbar? Or are we contending with literary midgets who are caught in a time wrap, whose literary ancestors remain the Romantic and Victorian writers brought by the missionaries who gave us the alphabet and their local minions?

How do we respond to the situation at hand? On one hand, we talk about an oral culture that has done its best to imbue the Khasi with a sense of identity. On the other, we consider ourselves to be inexperienced, fumbling for fluency in the art of writing. On one level, society is being threatened by alien imports of culture and language that is transforming Khasi life at an alarming rate. One reads about *hinglish* (a fusion of Hindi and English) used to describe the dialect of urban young, the *yuppies*, in the rest of India. In the same way, does one hear *Khashish*, an affectation of Khasi and English, being spoken by our urban youngsters in the streets of Shillong. Most of them cannot even speak fluent Khasi. At another level there is a revival of interest in one's roots manifested through religious and cultural revival groups.

As we continually hear the cry from pessimists of the region that, the Khasi language will soon die out and that its people are already on the throes of extinction, I think that it is time to make a concerted effort to challenge them to a cause that is worth fighting for; but a cause that requires the use of a different kind of approach.

Tradition as T. S. Eliot defined,

cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which - - - involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence - - - of the timeless as well as of the temporal together, is

what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity[4]

is a living entity that empowers the writer with a deep sense of the extra personal. R. S. Lyngdoh touches upon this dynamic core in the first chapter of his book, *Ka History Ka Thoh Ka Tar.*[5] Although his intensions are clear, merely to document the growth of the written word in the Khasi language, he also emphasises the existence of an already flourishing tradition, the oral one, where the spoken word is valued for what it simply is, its mysterious power to touch and transform. It wields an authority that, for R. S. Lyngdoh, is as transparent as its tragically impeded development in the past. It is from here that reserves of the Khasi imagination are drawn. Its staying power cannot be erased by any human factor. It is a formidable tool in the Khasi set-up. N. Scott Momaday, an American Indian writer says precisely the same:

At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition is a deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language. Words are intrinscically powerful. They are magical. By means of words can one bring about physical change in the universe.[6]

The parallels that may be drawn with other literatures are interesting enough to show that the oral tradition forms the foundational layer of all communities around the world. In the Khasi context, the spoken word spells out the nature of tradition. It does not permit anyone to be indifferent to it. It has penetrated into all spheres of life and, in the light of the receding frontiers of a global village, it has anticipated the inevitable switch into the written. It provides the serious artist/thinker with sufficient skills to intercept it and, initiate its formulations in the written form.

Whereas these other literatures have, however, withstood the onslaught of time and achieved successful transformation into the written word, Khasi literature has a long way to go to breathe life into the written word; to match an oral past that was abundantly refining itself when it had to be partially abandoned, with an equally abandoned written present. The overriding question is, why has the oral tradition with its

rich store of creativity been suppressed, for subjects and techniques that are slavishly imitative of British literature? Khasi literature, must in its continuing development ensure, that the transition from the oral to the written be creatively manoeuvred; the oral must successfully metamorphose into the written, in order to sustain what is. This remains the challenge: that we enshrine but not crystallise the past in our collective memory; that we invoke it to inspire a present that must weave together different strands of our collective oral wisdom. To write the past, te re-invent the present so as to re-present a sense of the unswerving continuity of the Khasi discourse: this remains the ultimate responsibility of the Khasi artist/thinker.

What then is the Khasi writer's relation to this dynamic process of change and growth? Does it have the kind of significance necessary to imbue the Khasi writer and critic with a sense of his/her own tradition? Is tradition a simplified entity for the Khasi writer? Do we define it as the force that went into the making of our oral tradition – our folktales, our chants, our dances, our history and our myths?

Do we trace the growth of our literature from our storytellers, our *kñi, kpa, mei-ieit* or de we begin with Thomas Jones the foreign missionary who gave us the Roman script and taught us to write? What are the metaphoric landmarks of our literature? Are they Lum Sohpet Bneng or Mount Olympus of European literature? It is also common knowledge that in the 1800's the Bengali script was already in use in the translation of the Bible. Had the forces of history swept in favour of indigenous Christian missionaries we would now be using the Bengali script and would be more inclined to Sanskritic culture.

What importance should we give to the formulation of the written Khasi script or do we view the Khasi script as being incidental to the development of the written word that would have taken place anyway in due course of time? How do we map out our literary hsitory then when it would seem that undue weightage has been given to the era of the written word?

The coming of the written script was indeed a singular milestone for a community that actually has its own story to explain the loss of the

script. What we have done, however, is to downplay and trivialise the role of the messenger. When he swallowed the script thus internalising its power, we have to understand that he was inadvertently instrumental in honing the oral to greater profiency. He is indeed iconic. But he is also controversial because he is the ambivalent force behind a community that had to continue to invoke the mystical power of the spoken word when other communities were already documenting themselves with the all powerful script. In depriving us of the written script, however, he actually succeeded in shaping the destiny of the spoken word. As a matter of interest I would like to remind everyone that the Ao Naga script suffered a similar fate when it was believed to have been eaten by a dog.[7]

Do we then detect two strains in Khasi thought and literature – the Christain element and the indigenous element? Do they overlap or do they complement each other or are they antagonistic forces? Does the indigenous transcend the Christian or does the Christian transcend the indigenous?

Is tradition for the Khasi something that he/she has been unconscious or fully conscious of or still in the act of re-defining?

In relation to this I would like to turn to two Black American writers: Ralph Ellison and Alice Walker, literary pioneers who were inspired to write only what they perceived.

Ralph Ellison died in the recent past, but his book *Invisible Man* is considered an epic that re-plays the history of the Black-American from slavery to the present moment. The book was published in 1952. It is a book that offers deep insight into the Black American, providing the reader with a dramatic rendition of Black American history. Narrated from the point of view of the protagonist it uses the motifs of Black American folk culture which is primarily oral and weaves into its pages the image of the folk trickster, the call and response method of the African work-song, jazz, blues, the Negro Spirituals and a sense of history or tradition that is derived from a completely Black American perspective. It set the trend for a new kind of Black American writing.

Broadly speaking, Ralph Ellison did for his people what no one else

could have done. He gave them a sense of tradition completely their own and forged an esthetics of Black writing that transcends the narrow concerns of race.

Another writer, Alice Walker who is also a soicial activist uses her writing to explore the multi-faceted dimensions of the Black American personality. She traverses the past in order to understand her present and traces her lineage to other Black American women who lived before her. She calls it the matrilineal link. She recalls older writers like Zora Neale Hurston and other female predecessors like her grandmother and her mother, to forge the kind of writing that she calls Womanist (as opposed to Feminist). The womanist, is the woman who has lived her life to the full, never denying her inglorious past as a black slave, for whom the inspiration for living has been drawn from the psychological and cultural resourses of her own gender as well as her own race. These are the resources that were once marginalised by the white American. They have re-surfaced as indicators that the Black American identity is firmly rooted in its own history. That history may be at variance with the written history of the White race, it has been termed folk history, but it has, nevertheless, been firmly located at the centre of Black American Writing.

What then constitutes the core of the Khasi imagination? That core must not only illuminate the past but should also provide the Khasi writer with the sense of direction that will open up fresh horizons for him. Bevan Swer in his book *Ka Matïong ki Khanatang* attempts to do this. Tragically, however, with his premature death, he was unable to take up the challenge.

But he succeeds in a provocative display of intellectual and imaginative curiosity that interrogates the symbolic constructions of a past revolving around our myths and legends. It is an open-ended discussion that takes one to assorted highways of the imagination, by initiating a dialogue with the past and claiming the necessity for newer pastures in Khasi literature. He also urgently stresses upon the necessity of a cyclic literary vision in order to bring about a creative transfusion of the past into the present.

Have we taken up from where he left off? This is a vital question that yields no answers for the answers are contained in the asking. It is imperative, therefore, that we symbolically shoot out arrows into the uncharted realms and unsounded depths of newly opening frontiers of the Khasi imagination; to demolish sterile tradition, to infuse the present with the vital strains of a past that has gained depth because of our insights from the present.

The shadow of the messenger with the lost script looms large over us as we must continually try to script the spoken word. Although we have used the tool given to us by the foreign missionary yet we must remain inspired by the messenger's vision of the script that was subsequently lost. We cannot fail ourselves. We cannot fail him.

Endnotes:

1. R. S. Lyngdoh, Government and Politics in Meghalaya (New Delhi: Sanchar Publishing House 1996) p. 118.

2. Helen Giri, The Khasis Under British Rule (1824-1947) (New Delhi: Regency Pubs. 1998) p. 57.

3. Sumar Sing Sawian, Ki Khun Ki Hajar Na Jingkieng Ksiar (Shillong: Future Creations 2004) p. 89.

4. T. S. Eliot, The Sacred Wood Essays on Poetry and Criticism (Madras; B. I. Publications 1976) p. 47.

5. R. S. Lyngdoh, Ka History ka Thoh ka Tar Bynta 1(Shillong 1993).

6. Emory Elliot, Banta, Martin, ed. Columbia Literary History of the United States, (New York: Columbia Univ. Pres 1988) P.7.

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