



**TRIBAL
LITERATURE
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

EDITED BY
BADAPLIN WAR
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
2009

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THE TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL ELEMENTS IN THE KHASI SHORT STORIES.

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The introduction to the "Studies in short fiction" vol. 33, 1996, while commenting on the multi constituency of the short story writers, has in particular drew attention to "their unique visions of their own cultures and the impact of the outer society on the lives they portray". This has a significant relevance to the Khasi short story writers who are deeply concerned with issues affecting the Khasi Society and its cultural heritage. The Khasis as a distinct tribe are guided by age old social conventions, social tenets of Ka akor kaba tam (Politeness Counts). The moral precept of tip-briew-tip-Blei (know man, know God) embodied the essence of an approved, responsible and God fearing life expected from one and all as human persons. These are deeply rooted and still off quoted words in everyday life. An author as a member of the tribe is significantly influenced by these social and cultural legacies, but at the same time he is also impacted by the winds of change. In this regard, the presentation of the lifelike portrayal of these two aspects – the traditional and the social changes – is an achievement which has earned the Khasi short story a special status in its literary contribution.

On the study of these areas, the present paper considers these elements as reflected in the fiction of S.J. Duncan, Hughlet Warjri, Wan Kharkrang and Paul Lyngdoh within the period 1968-1989. These writers fall into two groups: older writers and younger writers. The first represent the traditional way of life and its world view, while the

second present the social changes in the course which achieved what may perhaps be described as a pale shadow of Khasi traditional values.

Within the scope of this paper, detailed attention is given to important stories with general comments on other stories. Among the writers, S.J. Duncan ranks very high with his rare ability to capture the essence of some of the unique feature of the Khasi social and cultural ethos. Two of his specimens may be discussed. In his story "Men Mali" (The Old Gardener) the author with exquisite touches has unfolded the sound concept of the Khasi maternal uncle as envisioned in the age old social order. His role and position is one of responsibility and guidance for the welfare and well being of his clan. His near and far relatives looked to him for all matters of concern. Hence authority and respect are reposed on him.

The old gardener is presented as the senior most maternal uncle who looks after the ancestral lands. However, hard times came and against his wishes and advice, his nieces disposed off the ancestral lands full of valuable hardwood. Pained at this show of disrespect and the loss of lands, the old gardener left his clan for a far away solitary life. Yet, though separated, as an uncle who has the welfare of his clan, the thought of his nieces always tug at his heart. This is evident by the note of anguish in his nightly song as he sung to the beat of his Duitara (Harp). The song in its translated form runs as follows:

*You are now happy my kith my kin
That you have sold your own soul?
My word, oh, my kith, oh, my kin,
As dust trampled underneath your feet*

The song is remarkable for the absence of anger. But what one could not fail to take note is its lingering sense of sadness and melancholy as the erosion of the authority of the maternal uncle implies insecurity and a dark future for the clan. The genuine note arises from the author's unique vision of its wider application. It relates to a similar fate awaiting the Khasis as a matrilineal tribe. In the loss of this unique traditional institution of U Kni the maternal uncle, the Khasis stand to lose the protector and custodian of its welfare and survival.

From the melancholy mode, with equal ease the author shifts to a humorous vein in the story entitled "Ka Akor kaba Tam" (Politeness Counts). While the readers are entertained with spontaneous laughter, the high value implication of the story could not be missed. This is in the author's realistic interpretation of the widely accepted social tenet Ka akor kaba tam emphasized by Khasis in everyday conduct and human relationship.

In narrating this story, the author cleverly opted for the personal narrator, thereby convincingly conveying the delicate nuances of the typical Khasi polite demeanor. The note of polite speech is struck in the first few lines which can be translated as follows:

"I offer my jeep for sale. A man approaches for its purchases.
'Where do you come from', 'who are you' are questions that should be asked first in any transaction."

The tone of the lines conveys a clear un-offensive language which is enhanced by the relaxed pace affected by pauses at regular intervals. In brief the narration is noted for the absence of any negative tone. As the story progresses, through the personal narrator, the author artistically pitches the polite Kpa u Bor (i.e., Bor's father which is the Khasi polite way of addressing the father of the house) against the resourceful but unscrupulous non tribal persons represented by Horipod, Holira and Bhakwandew. These are the faces of the winds of change. Polite as he was and with good thoughts towards others, he was comically shown to first clutch his ears, next his nose and even biting his tongue as he clumsily tried to remind himself to be careful not to be cheated by cunning buyers. Thus the author takes a gentle dig at the need to apply sense and prudence in the practical situation of everyday dealing.

The culmination in the author's interpretation of 'politeness counts' is his projection of its meaning in its real sense. Thoroughly vexed at being repeatedly outwitted by the wily buyers, Kpa u Bor swung to the extreme mood of rudeness and bravado thus shouting rudely at a Khasi gentleman buyer. At this his wife intervened skillfully and sealed the sale. Flabbergasted, Kpa u Bor held on to the money till his wife gently took it from his hands. At this his wife's repeated counsel "When

taking anything from others' hands, take it in a polite way" resounded clearly in his mind's ear.

The other older author is Huglet Warjri who shows a keen interest in developing this genre. Warjri does not appear to be disturbed by winds of change, but is more inclined towards moral issues. However, there is no direct projection of the Khasi traditional approach in his works. Yet the Khasi concept of know-man, know-God as desirable in human persons is implicitly reflected in his character projections and language.

The stories of the younger writers projected a pronounced element of realism which closely fitted the realist tradition interpreted by Raymond Williams. He associated realistic presentation as "a novel which offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any individuals composing it". In such realistic treatment, persons are not presented as individuals but as "persons who are the reality of the general life". A reading of the stories of the later writers showed that they are deeply affected by the winds of change as witnessed in the 20th century as expressed by their comments on their society.

The social issues highlighted by the authors are the evils of corruption, alcoholism, gambling, the silent suffering of the weak and the ignorant, the danger of the increasing influx of outsiders crowding out the native people. There is also an exposition of superstitious beliefs and taboos and conventions which beset the Khasi society. The theme of corruption is seriously dealt by Wan Kharkrang as he presents a scathing attack against corrupt government officials in his brief but telling series of the experiences of Mr. Ta En, an illiterate villager. Learning that the government is giving grant, Mr. Ta En approached the respective office but had to pay his way right from the time of filling up the application form till the final stage. This includes providing a deer to the drunkard inspector. In another episode, the seriously ill Mr. Ta En went to the government hospital. After waiting for a considerable time, his turn was rudely brushed aside by a fat well suited man. The innocent Mr. Ta En was then wrongly arrested for theft for which he suffered severe beatings at the hands of heartless policemen. In all these presentations, the author gives a clear picture

of how far the Khasi society has moved from its noble social character in which it is generally referred to as the community that “know-man, know-God”.

The other expositions are the author’s focus on the foolish conventions and superstitions besetting the khasi community. When death occurs, feasts are offered even if the family is extremely poor by resorting to loans. In case of misfortunes or sickness, superstitions still influenced people to consult a fortune teller only to be duped by such self appointed wise men

The social expression in Paul Lyngdoh in the second category is marked by a poignant note at the erosion of age old values due to the increase of modern day vices such as alcoholism and gambling. These are reflected in broken homes and broken lives. We came across a drunken father in Ka Khmat ba Phuh Samrkhie (A Smiling Face) who due to the infidelity of the mother created terror in the family thus traumatising the helpless young daughter. While in Ka Por San Baje (At Five O’clock) a gambling mother sent her children to bed without food after using her last money for betting. Another trend of the present day society is the onslaught of outside immigrants not only in urban areas but even making inroads into villages. The story U Nongialam (The Leader) narrates how a wily non tribal man, Binod, by clever manipulation managed to grab a prime piece of land to the consternation and dismay of the simple villagers. A revisiting to Shillong by Andrew, a Britisher, born and brought up in Shillong witnessed with regret large numbers of non Khasis at Iewduh (the Khasi name of the biggest market in Shillong). Thus the author conveys the stark reality in which the Khasis are exploited in their own land.

While dealing with social issues the authors succeeded in making their stories extremely interesting and entertaining. This is achieved through uses of telling descriptive phrases such as U Kpa sarong awria (The Prodigal Father) ‘la kyrwang (Striped tiger) and the use of tactile effects such as wiang (sound of a beetle) khru-ru-ru (sound of falling) slew la jew (extreme sour taste). Through these artistic uses, the authors are able to convey their comments on the attitudes and behavior of the people in the day-to-day life.

A comparison of the two categories of writers make interesting studies in terms of characters, language, style and tone. In the older writers we saw individual characters with distinct characteristics and eccentrics which make them lively and fascinating. Considering the brevity of the short story, the characters are so created that they convey the desired image. A case in point is the ‘Old Gardener’ of S.J. Duncan who represents the maternal uncle. The notable details are his quaint dress and an independent solitary life through which the author powerfully conveys the image of confidence and the air of authority associated with the Khasi maternal uncle. Thus in reading about the old gardener, we are reminded of the special effects that the short story could achieved which Thomas Gullason referred to as the “element of renewal”. In this, a short story of a very high order offers more and more to the reader.

The characters of the younger writers are faceless types of characters who represent their age and profession. These are the nameless government officials such as the clerks, the doctors and nurses, the policemen and the helpless ordinary people of the society who suffer silently. In addition to such characters, the special achievement of Paul Lyngdoh is his sensitive projections of a pathetic section of people helplessly lost in their wrong doings and wayward life, groping in confusion in the absence of moral direction. The projection of the ugly and the darker side of life does not leave space for a conscious projection of the Khasi traditional ethos, yet there is no doubt that the younger writers have in an implicit manner clearly point out that this is not the Khasi approved life of “knowing man, knowing God”.

Of interest is also the language, tone and style of the two groups of writers which matches their literary expression. The older writers write in a polite language with an engaging sense of decorum reflecting the Khasi cultural ethos. The language of younger writers use the satirical mode and can be even derisive against the blatant flouting of ethical norms. At times the style is marked with a poignant note, even bordering on the maudlin, at the loss of the Khasi way do life.

The above brief study clearly brought not only the creative ability of the Khasi short story writers but the serious approach with which they have used their craft as a mirror of their society and a medium for their interpretation.

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