# ASPECTS OF KHASI FOLK LITERATURE

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## CHAPTER - I

The treatment of folk literature from a literary stand-point is accepted nowadays, especially in the Indian Sub-continent. There are elements in folklore which attract the student of literature, and those who are dedicated to aesthethics. There was a time when folklore research (especially in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills) has inadvertently become synonymous with folk literature, and this had generated a lot of interest in and produced quite a body of folk literature material.

My intention of working on Khasi folk literature is to assess and focus its intrinsic literary value and aesthetic quality. Considering the theoretical orientation of the literary and aesthetic approach, there appears to be no fundamental difference in both matter and style between folk literature and, say, modern literature. The theme and manner of treatment of a folktale seem identical with the vast medieval European literature, and this is especially true about the literature of most languages of the Indian sub-continent. A literary analysis of folk literature

would be, I believe, very useful and would open up fresh avenues in literary research and here I feel I should quote from Archie Taylor; "Perhaps the most interesting and attractive problems in folklore arise when one regards folklore as literature and ask the question that a literary historian might ask". It would be interesting to note that in some periods, notably in the Middle Ages, and the nineteenth century, poets playwrights, and novelists have seized upon themes from folk literature and exploited their romantic, exotic or horrific qualities, assimilating to mainstream literature their versions of fairyland, ghosts, vampires, withcraft and the like or of individual figures such as King Arthur, Faust or Gargantua.

In the twentieth century, many poets, notably, W.B. Yeats and Georges Seferis have successfully used folk literature material freely in their poetry, using stories, ballads, legends, epigrams, usages and the like.

Folk literature has already influenced writers to produce works which have gained acceptability, and it has provided the rudiments to a considerable body of literature of many languages. It would thus be of scholarly interest to direct attention to the study of folk literature, and in this case, Khasi folk literature, to bring out its value and beauty.

In my work I have attempted to consider the relationship between folklore and literature. While considering this question three problems are raised about three different kinds of relationship; (1) Folklore is, in many cultures, indistinguishable from literature; (2) literature contains elements borrowed from folklore; and (3) writers have initiated folklore. Let us first consider problem one. The *Old Testament* is one example of literature of a high order in the Jewish culture. It contains in it innumerable elements of folklore. This is also true of the *Vedas*, the *Puranas* and the *Upanishads.* Among the Khasis, folk literature and literature have mutually exchanged their positions from oral to written form and from written to oral form through the decades and it is extremely difficult to distinguish them from one another.

As far as style is concerned, there appears to be little or no significant difference between folk literature and literature. The manner of treatment, the themes, the characterisation and the denouement in folktales are almost identical with those of fiction.

Modern Khasi writers have tended to ignore the significance of folk literature, and have not made it an equal partner deserving serious scholarly study. I have attempted to devote sincere attention to the study

of folklore to show that, just as literature, folk literature has literary essence and value and can very well serve to mirror culture.

In the last ten years or so of my research , in the rural areas and certain urban pockets, I have accumulated a huge corpus of material, some of which I have included in this work for the purpose of study. Recorded in notes, audio tapes, transcriptions and translations, almost all the materials have been collected at source, from story-tellers, singers, shaman-singers, traditional healers and informants, during rituals, ceremonies, story telling sessions, festivals and other events which take place from time to time in the villages. I have attempted a faithful reproduction of the tales, myths, ballads, songs, proverbs, lullabies and in this way presented the dynamics of the spoken language fully and completely.

The mass of collected materials under study in this work can be regarded as literary works. They have aesthetic values and properties, and it is by virtue of these properties that a literary work can be assessed and valued critically. They are expressions which are informed by the direct and sensuous experiences of a group of people. They project the mental and emotional interplay of experiences and significantly project

the felt life. This research, I can say with confidence, has opened up fresh avenues of study in a field hitherto neglected especially in Khasi literary studies.

In my attempt to study folk literature I have made use of the accepted methodologies of folklore studies which will lead to a professional investigation. In fact, this is an attempt to meet the urgent and increasing demand for an analytical approach for the investigation of literary concepts and issues in folk literature - and the vast body of folk literature provides ample scope for a rewarding exploration of the literary grain and essence inherent in its poetry, myths, tales, ballads, songs, and proverbs.

## CHAPTER - II

Folktales are prose narratives which are simple and entertaining, with or without a moral, and easy to understand. Folktales deal with situations familiar to listeners and are not usually based on historical facts, but are mostly of fictitious nature and constitute a fair amount of the ideas of the folk. Folktales have no known originator and are

transmitted spontaneously through the oral tradition from person to person or from generation to generation.

Tales are generally told in the evening when people return from work. Sometimes they are told to the accompaniment of musical instruments of the stringed and the percussionary types. I myself have been a listener at numerous hearth gatherings in the Bhoi areas and have recorded innumerable stories on several occasions. In this chapter I have made a study of some. I have also included a few popular tales for analysis.

In my field experiences I have observed that the story teller is adept at verbose expressions in the personification of streams, pools, falls, orchids, peaks, groves, deities, rocks etc and other natural images and gives expression to their traditional philosophical usage. Sometimes, two or more story-tellers participate in the narration which becomes a dramatic performance.

My study of the tales is informed by a concern to evaluate critically their textual beauty, structure and form, their functions, their aesthetic and literary value, and their socio - cultural implications. The study makes use

of technically recognised folkloristic formats and formula to analyse the tales.

Part two of the chapter takes into account the tradition of Khasi trickster tales which are numerous. The tales centre around a figure who is sly, rouguish and often, promiscuous. This figure is represented by U Koh Siang, literally, Old Man Fox, Koh meaning old and Siang fox.

I have done a very detailed study of the tale tradition and of the trickster, and have made a comparative study with the trickster tale traditions found among other cultures the world over.

Through the folktale, men try to speak out their inner feelings. It may be, no doubt, a traditional fictional story told by, in most cases, old men and women to children, but it encompasses a gamut of elements, ranging from the severely didactic to the lewd, from the most profound to the nonsensical. Among a people who have not learnt the art of writing, the story-teller's position is unique, where be is regarded as a historian and a keeper of records.

## CHAPTER - III

The study of Khasi folklore cannot be complete until its folk-songs are considered. Folksongs are mainly distinguised by lyricism and musical appeal. They generally reflect the social heritage, the environment and the life of the folk living in a particular territory.They are usually created by the folk for their own entertainment, enjoyment or emotional outlet. They are easily sung, understood and learnt on occasions like birth, marriage, festivals, while engaged in household or agricultural work or in other activities by almost all the members of a folk group. They require no prior setting and no prior professional skill. They have the capacity of free addition, subtraction and modification and have no known originator or proponent. They are transmitted, circulated and perpetuated spontaneously through oral tradition from person to person or generation to generation.

The definition gives us a clear understanding of the characteristics of a folk song, the most important of which is that it has no known originator and has somehow evolved through a period of its currency in a society.

In this chapter I have made a detailed study of songs which are folk in nature, sung by groups and individuals, the themes of which range from the communal to the familial, performed during work, relaxation and

on special occasions. A special portion is devoted to the study of the traditional poetic creations called *Ki Phawar* and their association with archery.

I reproduce here a few samples from the study :

A.....Ynda khiroh ia I iawbei

Ynda khiroh ia I iawbei

ia u thylliej ynda pynsum

la ioh te ia u nam-shei, ba ieid I Mei Hukum.

When you cajole the ancestral mother

When you cajole the ancestral mother

The tongue must be bathed

the accurate arrow you will get, because the

mother (Hukum) loves you.

As I had stated earlier, the *phawar* is directly linked to the fate of the archers, in that, they determine the accuracy of the arrow and thus, fetching rewards to the most skillful archer. In the above *phawar*, the archer, aided by the *phawar* master, solicits the blessings of the ancestral mother, on his efforts. We understand that the words to be used in the

composition of a *phawar* must be chaste. To say the "tongue must be bathed", is figuratively, to imply that one has to adopt chaste and truthful words. This will lead to a favourable disposition by the *mei hukum.*

A.....ba u thylliej ynda pynsum
ba u thylliej ynda pynsum
koba u khaw jong ki kynthei
Ba ieid I Mei-Hukum, te ba kynmaw tang ia phei.

For when the tongue is bathed
For when the tongue is bathed
rice belongs to the women
the *Ka Mei-Hukum* loves you so much,
She remembers only you.

This verse is a continuation of the first one illustrated and it is obvious that the first *ang* or line is taken from the first verse. This is the technique employed by professional *phawar* masters. A line is taken from a preceding verse to develop the imagery and metaphor in the succeeding verse.

However, there is a subtle syntactical difference. The line occuring in the first verse reads - "The tongue must be bathed" - indicative of the expected action i.e. in the future tense. The line changes to "For when the tongue is bathed" - thus shifting the emphasis to an action already performed. "Rice" in the second line indicates fortune, and "Women" refers to unskilled archers. So it follows that, when the *Ka Mei-Hukum* is treated to proper cajolery, she will favour even the unskilled archers with luck or fortune. Therefore, the side having a *phawar* master of some prowess stands to gain.

A.....I thei I nong Sohra, I thei I nong Sohra,
tang iba lieh tang na shyllang,
I mei I Nongbynta, ha ka ryntieh u khun shynrang.

Maiden from Sohra, Maiden from Sohra,
White only on her forehead,
Mother dispense with care,
this bow only to the men.

"Maiden from Sohra" refers to an unskilled archer from Sohra (Cherrapunjee) who has arrows which are white-feather tipped, instead of having a fully white feather-skein, a symbol of an unusually gifted sharp

shooter. The singer implores the *Ka Mei-Hukum* to ignore that worthy, and instead, direct blessings to his bow.

Folksong comprises the poetry and music of groups whose literature is perpetuated not by writing and print, but through the oral tradition. The songs are known and shared homogeneously throughout the group. They are learnt and remembered by hearing. They are best defined as songs which are current in the repertory of a folk group. Usually there is no technique of teaching connected with the making and singing of folksongs. They are learnt by ear and transmitted in this fashion from generation to generation. A few exceptions are found, sometimes, especially with individual singers, whose skill is recognised in certain aspects, but generally, the average member of the group participates without any hesitation.

All these points are true to the songs of the folk community of Thaiang, in the Bhoi area of Khasi Hills, a remote community of seven villages I have visited regularly to collect songs and stories. I have devoted a considerable portion of my study to these songs. The songs are of two types : (1). The *Krud Ksing* songs ( 2) The *Dat Kba* songs.

The *Krud Ksing* songs are sung during community ploughing, and in fact, *Krud Ksing* means ploughing with a drum, while the *Dat Kba* songs are sung during paddy threshing season. On both occasions, the singing is led by an accomplished singer who is accompanied by the group engaged in the work . The lead singer plays a drum and the other singers who also participate in the singing either wield the *Makhu* or hoe used in the cultivation of paddy, or a stick with which to thresh the paddy. While the main rhythm is provided by the drum beats, the *Makhu* and the stick supplement it in a very orchestrated kind of manner. In my work I have chiefly made references to one single singer who is the most popular and accomplished singer, because he has been faithfully maintaining the tradition which he learnt from his maternal uncle, who, in turn, learnt it from his, the chain going up the clan all the time. I have also made references to *Krud Ksing* singers who have become legends in their own rights and who are no more. I reproduce here a few verses of the *Krud Ksing* songs.

These songs always begin with an invocation which serves as a refrain. It goes :

Langhoi wah o hoi wade o hoi wade

Ka lang ha ha hait.

Tymmen ba shade me te ong re nga

shi rep lang kha te U pa ei nga

Don't tell me you are an old man

plough with me and you will be my man.

The singer here adopts the persona of a seemingly wanton woman who is singularly determined to have someone she has fancied as her man. One can detect a sexual overtone in the last line of the couplet. Although the woman is not mentioned by name, I am sure she is a true-to-life character of one of the seven villages of Thaiang, and is probably still living. I say this because in many of the following couplets and songs, certain individuals are named and I have met a few, though most are dead.

Duhau ki ni sympen o da marain

U kising U tymmen

Duhai ka eribon o da marain

U pa san ki khon.

A surrogate uncle I have not at all

a shame, have no old one

Listen o good wind I have none

an uncle for my children.

The word construction is a little complex but the idea is clear. This verse is attributed to a woman who is perhaps orphaned, and whose husband has died. In a close-knit village society, this is a miserable situation for a woman and her children to be in, not only in terms of income for the family but in the social context. Family rituals and ceremonies are all performed by the maternal uncle, whose role in the Khasi matrilineal society is very significant. He also counsels, guides and instructs his nephews and nieces and their children. In the verse we find the woman without any living relatives. Under the circumstances, she is compelled to seek a *sympen* or a surrogate uncle from some other clan. But we are informed that even this is not possible, as possibly, no elderly males from other clans are willing to accept this responsibility. Hence, the poor woman bemoans her fate. This song throws an interesting light on the surrogate avuncular practice, and the fact that it finds mention in a song goes to show that one can be driven to adopt a *sympen* due to the pressures of social entailment.

Ha la ka step ka singi te pa,
jepan tulun nga ka bom me pa
ha la ka lait ka singi te pa,
jepan tulun nga ka 'sing ne pa.

Come the morn and the day, father,

If only I could roll the drums away

Come the dusk, and the evening, father,

If only I could roll away the big drums.

This verse is again attributed to the same woman who is bereft of family and who misses her departed husband sorely. She says that she does not want to set eyes on the drums which the husband had played, when he was still alive. She uses the word "father" to mean the father of her children, her husband, a common Khasi practice, especially in the villages. The musicality of the household is suggested and the grief even more pronounce when viewed in that context. The drum is usually used on festive occasions, and is movingly juxtaposed in an atmosphere of grief.

There are over thirty songs in this chapter and all of them have been analysed fully. These are short as well as long ones, simple as well as complex in nature. The songs depict a range of themes celebrated through generations, in the lives of people who are real and full-blooded, who go through the ironies of life with amused resignation, but with a sense of celebration doubtlessly.

## CHAPTER - IV

This chapter concerns itself with a detailed study of Khasi proverbs, maxims and aphorisms. Proverbs are a very important consitutuent of folk literature. A proverb is a terse, didactic statement that is current in tradition or, as an eipigram says "the wisdom of many and the wit of one". It ordinarily suggests a course of action or passes a judgement on a situation. Many manners of speaking that are found in tradition and literature are akin to the proverb.

The origin of proverbs is obscure. We must suppose that, at some time, some individual formulated an idea in words or drew a lesson from a scene, but the result was only a sententious remark or an instructive exemplification of a truth until tradition accepted it, if necessary, in an inimitable fashion. Both the invention and the acceptance are essential to make a proverb. This very character complicates any attempt in trying to arrive at the origin of certain proverbs, because, very often, traditional currency differentiates a proverb from an individuals sententious or epigrammatic remark, and in the absence of traditional parallels, only a feeling of the idiomatic use of a languages enables us to recognise a proverb.

Like most proverbs current all over the world, Khasi proverbs are metaphors drawn from daily life or the observation of nature or are terse summaries of experience. Khasi proverbs are often made on the models of already existing types, and like all folklore materials, has many traditional variations, which is aimed at summing up of everyday experience in getting on in the world as it is. Inherent to many Khasi proverbs, is the councel to avoid excess.

Proverbs are very effective in exercising social control in most societies, and their applicability can be traced in the 'from the cradle to the grave' span of any human. This is also true among the Khasis.

The study of Khasi proverbs that I have made has not merely been the recording of texts, but the investigation of the context, documentation of informer's valuations, assessing the appropriateness of occasion and place, and marking the intensity of user - addressee relationship. Apart from this I have employed the structural method of analysis of certain proverbs by placing the text against their morphological and binary positions. I reproduce here a few to illustrate my point :

For instance, to put a boastful man in his place, the following proverb is used ;

U Hati dang ha khlaw, ka bniat lah tyrwa die.

Translation :

You are making offers for ivory, while the elephant is still in the jungle.

Parties :

(a) The hunter

(b) Elephant (Ivory)

Functions (f)

(x) The boastful hunter

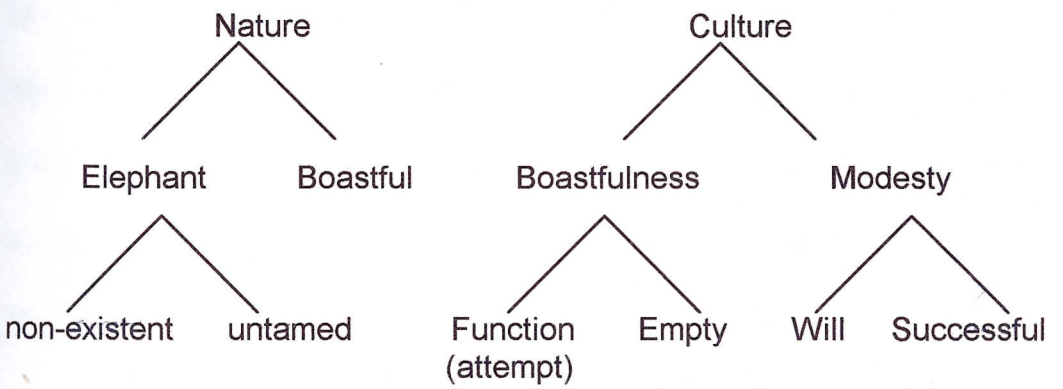
(y) The non-existent ivory

Thus, according to the formulation, it follows :

$FX(a) : Fy(b) : : FX(b) : F_a^{-1}(y)$.

This means one has to have the ivory in hand before making offers for its sale. It is only when one is absolutely sure that he will achieve something, that he can openly talk about it. The two opposing forces are the boastful hunter and the ivory and they are linked by the question of real achievement. The elephant obviously represents nature, untamed, elusive and fearful, while the hunter, by being presumptous, is made to look ridiculous if he does not get what he sets out for. In the deep structure of this proverb, some home truths as the one equivalent to the English "counting the chicken before they are hatched" or even another Khasi one about "fish is still in the stream, while he has already prepared the spices", are elucidated. An attempt can even be made to cull out the nature - culture relationship and place the binary elements in a frame as sketched below :

You are making offers for ivory, while the elephant is till in the forest.



Apart from the structural study of proverbs, I have also done a substantial exercise in bringing out the literary and artistic ideas imbued in several other proverbs and aphorisms. I reproduce here a few :

Wat long tiew lalyngngi pep shad

Translation :

Do not be like the *lalyngngi* flower who missed the dance.

This proverb is used to caution people who are in the habit of being late. This has a reference to a folktale where a young woman, symbolised by a flower, who was invited to a dance and who missed it because she was so obsessed getting ready for the dance, dressing, combing her hair and sprucing up that she lost all count of time and by the time she was ready, night had fallen and the dance was over. This is a highly artistic usage which is derived from folk roots and is still being used today. This chapter deals extensively with proverbs of this type. These sayings, terms, proverbs and aphorisms are vibrant illustrations of the terse, didactic, metaphorical statements containing home truths and folk-

wisdom relating to various aspects of life. They are at the core of folk knowledge and morality and their relevance cannot be overlooked or underestimated.

## CHAPTER - V

Folklorists, especially in these parts, face an uphill task in trying to present a detailed study of city life as one of the chief concerns of folklore. However, in this chapter I propose to show that the city also breeds its own folklore with its own urban idiom.

The chapter is a detailed study of urban slangs and colloquialism, which constitutes a considerable part of verbal communication in Shillong, and which, in turn, reflects the social milieu in all its manifestations. The study is to underscore the contemporaneity, as opposed to the antiquity, of folklore. One of the areas of study is the dynamics or the transmission of urban folklore.

The study of urban folklore has its origins in the works of some obscure authors as early as the nineteenth century. Traditions of Edinburgh by Robert Chambers is a work which investigates the verbal usages of "ancient natives " in the old parts of the town. This book is

based on the interviews the author makes. One of the most significant works which has given direction to the study of urban folk speech is Roger D. Abrahams' Deep down in the jungle : Negro narrative folklore from the streets of Philadelphia. The book is an interpretive collection of black expression in northern cities of the U.S. The expressions are obscene in nature and are referred to as "toasts" (long, often obscene exchanges of insults). Abrahams in this milestone work revealed the existence of a powerful black folk expression in northern cities, which is quite at variance with Southern plantation lore. These expressions reflected the new toughness of ghetto street life.

In the last twenty five years or so, Shillong has undergone tremendous changes, the city bustling with shops and stores, motor traffic, offices and banks and thousands of people teeming every corner during the day. This metropolitan scenario would, apparently, seem unfit for the generation and perpetuation of folklore. But times have changed, and nowadays, folklorists have begun to think urban, dealing with a living and vigorous tradition and with aspects of contemporary custom, social and cultural behaviour, usages and beliefs.

The slangs and colloquialism under study in this chapter reflect the lore of the city folk representing the variegated dimensions of urban

social, cultural, political and religious life. These words find place in the everyday spoken Khasi language and with all seriousness are considered slangs, euphemisms or even idioms and in one way or the other have made valuable contribution to the language. I reproduce here a few for the purpose of illustration.

In the modern Khasi society, the politician is always under keen scrutiny. How he behaves and what he says will have significant bearing on his career. The politician is dependent upon his constituents for retaining public office and as such his rapport with the people is excellently cultivated, by his ability to attend social events, be they marriages, feasts, funerals, social meetings and cultural festivals. It has been known, (in fact, it is widely practiced) that politicians can attend a marriage as well as a funeral one, immediately after the other, and he carries himself appropriately, almost with theatrical aplomb. His presence is implicitly demanded at all occasions, and he accordingly makes his presence felt. Thus, he is often referred to as *u piat* or the onion. This is an imaginative verbal use of cooking item, which demonstrates the point that no dish preparation is complete without onions.

Among criminal elements, handcuffs are referred to as *Khadu* or bangles, and to endure a spell in a police lock-up or gaol, is to *bam ja dai*

or to eat dal or lentils as, unaccountably, the belief is that this constitutes the only diet in incarceration.

Shillong, the city is a teeming laboratory for the folklorist, giving him scope and the possibilities to investigate and document the lore among varied ethnic, occupational, socio-economic, religious and professional groups. The city, it must be emphasized, breeds a new lore enveloping its diverse residents, by heaping layer upon layer of folk cultural traditions as quickly as the last gets eroded.

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