



**TRIBAL
LITERATURE
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

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

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THE ISSUE OF VISUAL DISABILITY IN KAMELODY

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Although love relationship amongst characters is central to all Khasi novels, yet it is true to say that novelists have used this central theme mostly as a hub round which other issues pertaining to different aspects of human life are woven. Problems caused by personality conflict, greed, jealousy, forces beyond human control, social and cultural issues have been dealt with successfully by most novelists. In *Ka Melody* a short novel by Khraw Kupar Kharlukhi love relationship between characters (U Kitlang bad Ka Melody) is there of course, but the focus that the novelist raised here centers round the issue of visual disability. Reading the novel between the lines, one feels sure that the novelist must have felt convinced in his heart that the disabled who so far have not been included into society must now be included and that they should be empowered so as to enable them to lead their lives like any other person in the society. It seems to me that Khraw Kupar Kharlukhi wrote the novel particularly with the intention of bringing about an attitudinal change towards the disabled knowing full well that Khasi society has not really addressed the various issues relating to the differently abled. I'm wondering if the novelist had not written this novel as a response to the UN World Programme of Action for Disabled People (3.12.1982) which itself was an offshoot of the declaration by the UN that 1981 be celebrated as International Year of Disabled Persons. It may however, be pointed out that this novel in question was published in 1992, ten years after the World Programme of Action

mentioned above, but even so its impact is felt, I'm sure, by most of its readers.

Now let us turn to the novel to see how the issue of disability is treated. U Kitlang (main male character) whose voice we hear in the narrative fell in love with Ka Melody whose name was also the title of the novel. It was a case of love at first sight. Ka Melody was sitting on a guard wall on a part of the Guwahati-Shillong Road which overlooks the Umiam Lake when U Kitlang first saw her. Her beauty was stunning that he thought perhaps she was a fairy that had been teased out of the lake by the two males, one elderly and another young, who were with her. As he was thinking about this he saw that Ka Melody along with her companions went into a volkswagen which sped down the G. S. Road and finally cruised to a grove of pines on the lake shore on the way to the Union Christian College, Barapani. Having been so captivated by her beauty, U Kitlang followed the car in his Jeep. He took a few strides towards where Ka Melody was sitting. Ka Melody who was now sitting beneath a pine tree, feeling the presence of someone, a male, she understood by his heavy gait, asked if he like the scenic beauty of the place. Her question started the conversation which finally led to U Kitlang's discovery that the beauty he was chasing was blind. Before the discovery, U Kitlang was so enthralled by her beauty that he thought in her he would find everything he ever hoped to find in a woman. But the discovery shocked him beyond words. At that time he felt as if he had been hit by a sledge hammer, as if an elephant has placed its foot on his chest, so heavy it was, that he could not even breathe. He felt as if the earth was slipping away, and that he was sinking into an endless pit. The only thing he wanted then was to run away as from a nightmare, but his feet fixed on the ground just like a trapped bird.

This is a shocked reaction indeed. Like any other person whose mind is close to the idea of falling in love with a blind person, U Kitlang thought that it was sheer madness on his part to cast his lot with a blind woman. But immediately after expressing this attitude, he realized that this beautiful woman though blind had more sense of values than other women he knew. He mentally compared them with Ka Melody and argued within himself if it was not better to be physically disabled

than to be morally impaired. Who among them would be better people? he asked. This question did not need an answer. The fact that he was asking himself this question shows that U Kitlang had already changed his mind about Ka Melody's disability. Whereas five minutes ago he had wanted to against all harm and danger that he knew people like Ka Melody face everyday. A wave of pity, a feeling of tenderness coupled with anxiety for her swept over him. When Ka Melody told him that the only thing she was sad about was that she had no friends, he immediately understood her pang of loneliness, a psychological need he perceived and thought he could meet. At this point he forgot all about erotic love which had at first been the cause of his chasing her. Now he saw her need more than his desire and so offered her his friendship.

To befriend a visually impaired was a step that U Kitlang could take because his mental eyesight had been sometimes blindness is more in those with normal eyesight, their eyesight having been blinded by unthinking minds and prejudice. There was once a news item which said that a school for the blind could not be opened in a certain locality simply because it was considered unlucky to be seeing 'blinds' everyday. This is outrageous of course but what we are looking at is a strong combination of superstition and prejudice standing against the visually impaired; a combination which in itself is a fortified attitudinal barrier which the visually impaired have to face. Our Indian Society is still in the grip of a far greater blindness than that of the visually impaired. To get back to the novel, we can see that the act of befriending Ka Melody is used as a step towards fulfilling the psychological need mentioned earlier and also the need to integrate such people into the society. People like U Kitlang's mother and his sister would rather see that they along with U Kitlang had nothing to do with Ka Melody. Rather than bringing her into their circle of friends and relatives they were more concerned with whether she would not be burden too difficult for their son and brother to bear. Perhaps this was natural way of responding to U Kitlang's decision to befriend Ka Melody. But what we can see is that they were not thinking about what a changed life it would be for Ka Melody if U Kitlang took up the challenge of caring for her. In this connection, it may be mentioned that most characters

in the novel did not see how and why U Kitlang cared for Ka Melody. The only character who drew U Kitlang's attention to the need to consider the matter carefully and then take the challenge up just like a man should was his father. This was a very positive attitude- an attitude which the novelist used to bring U Kitlang to where he was at the end of the novel. U Kitlang's mother however could understand until much later that U Kitlang was doing all this because his attitude had undergone a change. His eyes had been opened and now he was seeing life differently.

He saw that life for Ka Melody was not easy. In her own home she could cook, bathe, knit, plant and water her flowers much to U Kitlang's amazement. But outside her home, the environmental barrier was always a cause of sadness and concern. He wanted to remove this barrier by making arrangements at the All India Institute of Medical Science for he eye transplant. He had found a donor in her father who then was dying in that very institute. The attempt on the part of the novelist to bring in medical science in the novel is a way of bringing about an awareness that people in any society should get involved to see if medical help is available to the disabled people. The fact that the novelist also brought in a local organization which takes cares for the visually impaired indicates that he had not only done his homework before he wrote the novel but that he strongly wanted to see that removal of environmental barrier and empowerment of the visually impaired is possible because of medical science and organizations that care.

It may be mentioned that disability is seen as a social issue the problems of which are to be understood within the context of society and culture and therefore the novel *Ka Melody* may be said to have been characterized by a system of values. From the point of view of Khasi society within which the problem of visual disability is featured, it may be said that the society is finding itself unable to cope with it. There are no rules yet pertaining to easing problems of them walking on roads/streets. the use of white walking stick to indicate to motorists/ cyclists and other co-walkers that holders of such stick are visually impaired is not operative here. Trained 'seeing dogs' that can take

care of such people have not been in use here. As it is now, people such as Ka Melody are usually left to themselves and their families are without much organized help from outside. People in general are not averse to them being included into society but they do not know how to handle them. They just cannot figure out how such people cope with life. A general feeling about them is that they are burden too difficult to be borne. This is exactly why U Kitlang's mother was against his having a relationship with Ka Melody.

Ka Melody understood too well this general attitude of the society to want to be having a relationship of any sort with anybody. Well, she had been a burden to her family. This was something that could not be helped. But to be a burden to U Kitlang and a grave concern for his family violated her sense of respectability. This was why she said she was not begging for friendship when she told U Kitlang that she was sad because she had no friends; neither would she accept his offer of a ring which he said would seal his proffered friendship and love. To her, life revolved round her home. An occasional visit to the society for the visually impaired at Laitumkhrah where she took gifts and cookies she herself made, made her life meaningful. When U Kitlang took her to meet his family she was not sure if she would be happy and feel welcomed there. However, U Kitlang's continued care for her and a show of acceptance by U Kitlang's folks instilled some trust and confidence in her. But a shadow of doubt and distrust always clouded her mind. This was what made her say to U Kitlang that if he ever wanted to dump her in case she became too burdensome for him she would not mind. She would on the other hand freely let him go. This attitude of self-denial probably arose out of a sense of self-respect coupled with a sense of bitter acceptance in most cases. Ka Melody also showed signs of bitterness, of course but her bitterness was not a hardened one. Towards the end of the novel the novelist made sure that readers understood that the disabled in spite of their disability, they enjoyed as much peace of mind as any other. He also made Ka Melody to say that even though she missed many things in life she was happy because her heart was overflowing with serene peace- a rare commodity these days.

U Kitlang loved Ka Melody enough to marry her with eyesight or without. He decided to postpone marriage only after they returned from Delhi where as mentioned earlier, an eye transplant would be done U Kitlang thought that by marrying her he would be in a position to care for her in every detail of her needs. This was his very original attitude shared only by his father. But the novelist did not allow this to happen. The trip to Delhi did not take place the reason being that Ka Melody was done to death by another character who looked upon Ka Melody as her rival. The question now is why did the novelist allow fulfillment and perhaps empowerment to Ka Melody by means of marriage? Was it because it had not been heard that there was anyone marrying a visually impaired? It was the case then the novelist, it may be said, was sacrificing his very intention of writing the novel at the altar of reality. The novelist had localized the setting too closely, and perhaps it was the reality of the setting that did not allow him to move further in his attempt to bring about an attitudinal change towards people with visual disability.
