

**A PERCEPTION OF KHASI CULTURAL LIFE
AS REFLECTED IN THE CHARACTERS OF
W. TIEWSOH'S NOVELS**

(ABSTRACT)

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Worning Tiewsoh has written and published four Khasi novels, two novelettes and a few short stories. Tiewsoh is no more with us but I have had the privilege of interviewing him on his life and literary contributions while he was alive. After a series of interviews with him and my preliminary study of his novels, I decided to undertake a research on one aspect of his novels, namely, a perception of Khasi cultural life as reflected in the characters of his three novels, namely, *Kam Kalbut* (An Act of Folly), *La Bakla* (A Mistake), and *Ka Jingkwah U Kpa* (Expectation of A Father).

After taking stock of the information I collected from him through interviews, I decided to devote the first chapter of the thesis on his life and works with special reference to his contribution to Khasi literature. This is seen to be relevant as most of the incidents in his novels reflect his own experiences of his village and other places of posting during his career in Government service. Tiewsoh came from an area generally known as 'Ri War Shella', and looking at his characters, we see much of the Khasi cultural life which the author brought into focus. The characters in his novels are at times made to represent many of the author's various experiences during his career in the Air Force and in the Assam Civil Services.

The experiences he had in the plain areas of Assam and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) made him present through his characters much of what he sees as the 'real life'.

Tiewsoh, with his wide travel experiences, met a cross section of people and interacted with them. His works, therefore, are a reflection of a keen observation on the daily activities of people in different walks of life, especially those inhabiting the Shella region, their customs, culture, their status and the art of fictionalizing into a written form, has made him a prominent Khasi novelist.

Chapter II deals mainly with Tiewsoh's art of characterization. The world of Tiewsoh's novels is populated by men, women and children each one of whom the author had given their own names. Creating convincing characters appears to be a problem for a majority of Khasi novelists. The art in character-making or characterization involved a critical study of:

- (1) Characters as created by the novelist and their moral qualities;
- (2) Types of characters: round and flat characters;
- (3) Tragic and comic characters and stock characters or stereo-types;
- (4) Characters who resemble real living persons, that is, convincing the readers of their life-like qualities.

After examining his novels, it was found that Tiewsoh was able to make his characters attain certain heights, which characters in a novel should attain. They exhibit their own character through action, thought or utterances.

The novelist brilliantly portrays some of his characters and they are therefore truly convincing, as Forster pointed out: 'a character in a novel lives and is true to life if it is convincing.'

The third chapter is a crucial chapter in the study as it presents a textual analysis of the major characters and their roles in different settings and situations. Most of his characters are made to reflect on and to represent Khasi culture, especially that of Shella area. Turning to the novel *Kam Kalbut* (An Act Of Folly), the author highlights on the daily activities of the people of that region. The children of Ri War are adept in bamboo and cane works. Through the character of U Mel, the author has elaborately described the art of making bridges by the people of Ri War in the southern slopes of Khasi Hills bordering Bangladesh, where the hills streams turn turbulent, specially in the monsoon season, before the gushing waters spread out into the plains. The author created a particular scene when U Mel and Ka Noli were caught in a heavy rain and were at a loss as to how to cross the roaring waters of the Umsong river. However, being the children of Ri War, U Mel and Ka Noli managed to cross the river simply by using the bamboo and cane creepers to make a bridge. At this moment, it was a test for their skills to ultimately create a bridge, just as they would weave baskets and other bamboo household articles.

Through the character of Ka Noli, the author projected another cultural practice prevailing in the War Shella in the festive season of plucking sun-ripened fruits, where much of the economy of the people depends on, namely; the marketing of fruits. It is a season of joy if the harvest of the fruits is good and brings about handsome profits. The earnings could sustain every family

till winter sets in. It is a season of festivity as people organized a community feasting called '*Bam Khana*'. It is in such festival signifying bounty and plenty, that people also offer thanks giving to God the Creator. Such festivities, however, are not held when the harvest of fruits is lean. The author gives a vivid description of the enthusiasm of the people of Ri War during harvest time. The festivity also includes a thanks-giving dance to God the Creator, where people perform the rituals of "*Nguh Trai Kynrad*".

Ka Noli as a village damsel was also still close to a cultural practice that was prevailing in the village. She loved to participate in the rites and rituals during the festive season of "*Ka Phur Ka Siang*" as proscribed by elders and took part in dancing for three consecutive years as a young virgin. It was on such occasions when youths in their prime would choose their life partners.

Ka Noli was a young woman who possessed good character, yet she had to face much difficulties and distress in her life. Firstly, she got herself into serious trouble when she ran away from home to stay with U Mel, much against the wishes of her father. She left her home because she could no longer bear the harsh treatment of her father. However, after giving birth to a child, she tried to reconcile with her father but he chased her away along with her child. Lastly, when their family's turn came to carry the head-loads for the British soldiers, U Mel was down with sickness. Ka Noli begged her father to allow her to stay back from work, specially as she had just given birth to a child, until U Mel recovers from his sickness. Her father, however, was adamant and instead went to the extent of asking her to pay the fine if she could not comply with his order. Ka Noli had no alternative but to physically force

herself to carry the heavy load, till she fell ill and subsequently passed away.

Through the character of U Along, the author depicted the inflated male ego and sheer dominance of the husband in the family, in the society and also in the affairs of the administration of Mustoh village, and even at the level of the Hima of the Shella Confederacy. U Along was the village elder or '*Rangbah Shnong*' who acted as a dictator in the village administrative affairs, who never listened to the opinion and views of others. He had the feeling that he was above everybody and looked down upon others. When we look at the role of "*U Tymmen Shnong*" (Village Elder) in Ri War, as can be gathered from books and documents, we find that they were very influential and powerful and they held that office during their whole life time. Rev. T. Rodborne comments on this: "*Shisien ba la thung ia ki, ki sah kumta baroh shirta. Kine ki dei ki khliehduh jong ka shnong kiba bat ia ka jinglong sandi.*" ("Once elected, they hold that office for a life time. They are the top officials who control the authority of Sandi.") In official term, the word "*Sandi*" means a village durbar of each of the nine (9) villages of Shella, Mustoh, Nongtraï, Dewshaw, Tyngnger, Lyngkhom, Umtlang, Rumnong and Nongwar.

The absolute power vested on the Headmen of Ri War can be understood again from Rev. T. Rodborne who further states: "*Kine ki Headmen ki bat ia ka shab (seal) jong ka shnong ka thaw*". ("*These Headmen hold the official seal of the village.*") Because of their powerful status, these headmen sometimes tended to be arrogant and abused their authority. Tiewsoh showed these traits in U Along.

In the former days, Shella was under the control of the four Wadars

who were the supreme authorities over the administration of Shella. The elections of the four Wadar were disposed of through a democratic process where the electors elected the candidates of their choice. However, during the election of the Wadar, the Rangbah Shnong have a very important role to play as they were the head of their respective villages over which they had almost absolute control. The corrupt practice of bribery is very much prevalent as projected by Tiewsoh in the character of U Along who was selfish and greedy and who tried to take full advantage of the situation. His cunning in adopting corrupt practices during election times through bribery and gratification was seen when U Along said:

“Kaba shisha ka tyngka ka don la ka dor...Nga kwah ban tip katno ei ei kan lut?” (It is true that money has its own value...I want to know how much will it involve?)

The election of the Wadar, therefore, exposed U Along as a deceitful and corrupt leader. His heartless, cruel nature was the immediate cause of his daughter's untimely death

Through the characters of U Kordon and Ka Eno, the author brought into focus the economic scenario in which trade and commerce flourished, especially through the border markets known as '*hats*', which were held once a week. Hectic trade activities were carried on with the people of the Bangla plains across the border, giving us a glimpse of the border trade between the Khasis of those times, who were well experienced in trading business with the non-Khasis, especially with the people of the Bangla plains. The couples

were childless but were a tremendous source of strength and comfort to U Mel and Ka Noli during their days of great trial and suffering.

In the novel *La Bakla* (A Mistake), the author brought forward another aspect of life, that is; the difference of religion under a single roof. U Lambor the main character was drawn into the rigidity of the indigenous Khasi religion practiced in his home. Yet, he yearned to become a Christian partly to escape the prohibition in relation to marriage. U Lambor appreciated and was convinced of Christian teachings. He, therefore, went against his father's stricture who termed his relationship with Ka Shondra as '*Sang*' ('Sang' is a taboo which includes a prohibition on marriage amongst certain clans.) U Lambor's position revealed the conflict between the Khasi indigenous faith and Christianity. Such a situation where members of the same family follow different religions is found to prevail in many Khasi families, and Tiewsoh has highlighted this important social issue in this novel.

The author also highlighted another important aspect of Khasi culture known as '*Tang Jait*'. Ka Shondra was the progeny of her ancestress named Ka Arti, a Hindu woman. Her father was a Khasi, a Wadar of Hima Shella. The author, in this particular situation, illustrated the customary induction of children belonging to a non-Khasi mother and a Khasi father into the Khasi society. The Khasis, being a matrilineal society, take their lineage from their mother's side. In case of a mixed marriage where the mother is a non-Khasi, a new clan or '*Jait*' will be conferred on the offspring of such a couple after the performance of a ritual known as '*Tang Jait*', provided that such conferment has the consent and sanction of the close relatives of their father, especially

his mother, the maternal uncles and the local headman. In the ‘*Tang Jait*’ ceremony, a name or title of a new clan will be pronounced. It is wrongly assumed that all new clans have to prefix the word ‘*Khar*’ to their titles. The ‘Sengbah Ki Nongshat Nongkheĩn Hynñiew Skum Hynñiew Trep’, a body recognized by the ‘Seng Khasi’ (Central Body), pointed out:

Ban ioh jait ne tang jait ban long ki Hynñiew Skum
 Hynñiew Trep kam dei da kaba shu pyniasnoh
 ‘Khar’, ym dei ka thaw mon, dei kaba da iapan
 iathong halor ki dak ki shin katkum ka Niam Tynrai
 hakhmat ka Durbar Bynriew Durbar Blei, ka long
 ka kam kaba kyntang katkum ki Riti ki Dustur jong
 ka Niam Tynrai U Hynñiew Skum Hynñiew Trep.

English translation:

To be conferred with a new clan to be a part of U Hynñiew Skum Hynñiew Trep, is not merely by prefixing the word ‘*Khar*’, it cannot be done at one’s own will, it is based on divination on the signs according to the indigenous faith before a solemn assembly. It is a sacred ritual according to customs and conventions of the indigenous faith of U Hynñiew Skum Hynñiew Trep.

Tiewsoh in the same novel also reflects on some evils prevalent in the society, such as the flesh trade in the foothills of Bhutan where he gives us a vivid picture of sexual exploitation of women. This is one of the main themes of this novel where ka Shondra was depicted as a victim caught in the trap of

prostitution. Ka Shondra was kidnapped by Ka Rahep and was whisked away to Bhutan where she was sold to serve in a house of ill fame. It was here that she was taught the tricks of the flesh trade, but Ka Shondra boldly resisted. Consequently, she was punished severely for being stubborn and uncooperative. The novelist purposely brought in this episode to warn the society of the growing danger of women trafficking in our land.

The role of '*U Kñi*' (maternal uncle) in Khasi society is also seen to be of great concern to the novelist and he presents this through the character of U Naisingh. The male has a dual role in Khasi society, as a father in the upbringing and providing for his children and as '*U Kñi*' he has the responsibility as a guide and mentor to his sisters' children, his nephews and nieces. In the novel *Kam Kalbut*, the novelist depicted the role of U Nai Singh as '*U Kñi*' who failed to protect his niece and her children from holding a portion of the clan property. His weak character was totally exploited by his brother-in-law, U Along.

In his other novel *Ka Jingkwah U Kpa (Expectation Of A Father)*, Tiewsoh brought into focus the Khasi religious concept of '*Ka Dawiing*' (Domestic reason which causes misfortune in the family or clan). Ka Sandhya's father, being a non-Khasi, could not understand the concept of '*Ka Dawiing*', nor could he appreciate the conviction of U Sonny's family that the strange events of Ka Nilima's violent death and U Sonny's accident were bad omens, which might be caused by the engagement of their son with Ka Sandhya when he said these words:

Kata ka dei ka dustur jong ki haba iap kiba haiing hasem, ban lait na kano ma ka jingmysaw kaba ki lah ban ia kynduh. Mynta U Sonny u la mynsaw. Ngam tip lada ka dei ka raibi jong ka jingngeit jong ki ne em tangba imat dei ia kum kine kiei kiei ba ki kiar. Haba jia kumne, nga sngew bieit ia lade wat la kin shym la kynnoh ia ngi. (pp 111-112)

English translation:

That is their custom when somebody dies in their family, to prevent any accident which may befall on them. I do not know whether the injury of U Sonny was caused by the hereditary taint which they believe but it appears that they try to avoid such things. This accident makes me feel very bad, though they did not put the blame on us.

H.O.Mawrie, a renowned Khasi writer, observed that:

When there is any strange event-taking place in the personal life of an individual or in the family, a Khasi believes that there must be a cause, which might relate to personal or to 'Ka Dawiing'. He takes it that somehow he has incurred the displeasure of the Godhead or that the Ancestress or the Ancestor and the Maternal uncle have been aggrieved and dissatisfied. In such an event, he has to try to find out the cause.

The Khasis believe that ignoring '*Ka Dawiing*' will cause the '*raibi*' or 'taint' where more such misfortunes will re-occur and befall on the family or

clan. H.O.Mawrie again pointed out that:

In marriage, for instance, any uncertainty concerning this generates the fear that the 'raibi' or taint of this failure may come to his own family or clansmen. In important functions or deeds he proposes to do, in particular, he should consult God through divination, for he is afraid that what he does may turn back against himself.

In this particular incident in the novel, the author had incorporated this traditional Khasi belief even in the homes of those who have embraced Christianity.

The author also highlighted some aspects of Bengali culture through the characters of Ka Nilima and Ka Sandhya. Bengali culture was depicted in the form of dress, manners and the performance of various ceremonies during puja. Ka Nilima was the eldest daughter in the family, and she had no brothers. Therefore, according to their custom, she had to see to the welfare and interest of her younger sisters before she could think of getting married.

Chapter IV deals mainly with minor characters. These also have an important role to play in the novel. The author has his own intention in creating these characters, specially to reflect the evils prevalent in Khasi society. In *Kam Kalbut*, Ka Nana Suchiang, a minor character had an illicit relationship with U Mel later on in his life and spoiled his upright character and almost destroyed his family. Ka Rahep in *La Bakla* portrays women involved in the flesh trade of many young girls, which is a tragic occurrence in Khasi society.

In bringing the person of U Palong Pajat in *Ka Jingkwah U Kpa*, Tiewsoh highlighted the science of traditional Khasi medicine in healing broken bones. In the case of the injured U Sonny, when everything else had failed to cure the fractured bone, a simple person from the village was able to heal his leg through the application of medicinal herbs and treatment, according to the indigenous system of medicines. There are other minor characters in these novels that are equally important in depicting the different aspects of Khasi culture in the novels of W.Tiewsoh.

Tiewsoh as an observer on Khasi social and cultural life was able to portray through his characters what he perceives of that life. He has accomplished a successful attempt in placing his characters according to their social roles. The ability of the author in imparting different roles to his characters has enabled him to create a number of incidents and events, which reflect real events, incidents and experiences generally found in life. He has managed to bring out circumstances pushing young lovers to the point of death as a result of parental prejudice and harsh treatment.

Tiewsoh introduced the readers to some of his tragic characters who ended up their lives by committing suicide. In the novel *La Bakla*, the author based the tragedy that befalls them on the traditional narratives of Khasi folklore. The story of '*Noh-Ka-Likai*' is one such tragic story. '*Noh-Ka-Likai*' is a moving story of a woman named Ka Likai and her only child, a daughter. The girl's stepfather was a cruel man. He hated his stepdaughter and ill-treated her in the most inhuman manner. One evening, after returning home, Ka Likai found that her daughter was not at home. However, after washing herself, Ka Likai

took her meal, and thereafter, she took the small betel nut basket known as '*shangkwai*' to have a piece of betel nut. To her horror and disbelief, Ka Likai saw the fingers of her dear little girl in the basket. She shockingly realised that she had eaten the body parts of her own little girl whom her evil husband had murdered and made a curry out of the poor girl's body. Wailing in hysteria, Ka Likai ran towards a nearby waterfall and in her despair plunged herself into the cascading waterfall. To this day, this waterfall, which is in Sohra, is known as Kshaid Nohkalikai or 'Nohkalikai Falls'. This is one tragic tale in Khasi folklore. Likewise, the waterfall called Kshaid Suna Pani (Suna Pani Falls) in Shillong is named after a girl, who committed suicide by jumping into the waters of the falls, as she could no longer tolerate the miserable life that her stepfather meted out to her.

Similarly, Ka Shondra in the novel *La Bakla*, had to face many obstacles in life. She was humiliated and looked down, and she was mentally tortured beyond the limits she could bear after the episode of being kidnapped to a brothel in Bhutan. Her lover's father taunted her on her tainted reputation and warned her not to carry on the relationship with his son. Ka Shondra was engulfed with total despair and found neither comfort nor solace in her life. Such tribulations led her to find peace in death by jumping into the cold waters of Ward's Lake. U Lambok too met the same fate when he committed suicide by jumping into the river Brahmaputra, after he knew that Ka Shondra had sacrificed her life for his sake. He also found no reason to carry on living after his beloved had ended her life.

The author, therefore, creates such situations of distress and sufferings beyond human endurance. He brings in appropriate characters to portray the torments, both physical and mental, that a person had to undergo. Such persons inflicted with the wounds of misery cannot find a way to escape. To them, life is a dead-end, and ceases to have a meaning. The ultimate solution to their pathetic existence, sadly is death itself, ending one's own miserable life. It is the folk narratives that have captured such tragic dramas, which have a touch of reality of a sad ending.

As a creator of characters, therefore, the author's expertise is clearly seen in allotting and assigning the different roles that fit the characters, his ability in maintaining the flow of events and his adeptness in bring out a meaningful dialogue in his novels which eclipsed all his short-comings in connection with the description of the physical features, costumes and modes of dress of his characters, both males and females. As a fiction writer in the Khasi language, Tiewsoh's creative genius and art of novel writing made him deserve a prominent position in the field of Khasi fiction.

The last chapter is an analysis of the previous chapters. Having entered into deeper insight of Tiewsoh's work, we cannot but admire the ability of the novelist to throw open his ideas and thoughts through his characters. The author has, therefore, succeeded in depicting a story through different characters on various cultures and traditions prevailing amongst the Bangalees and the Khasis during those days, especially those living in Shella region.
