



**TRIBAL  
LITERATURE  
OF  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA**

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

Rs 150/-

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# LITERARY CRITICISM AND TRADITION: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO CRITICAL ACTIVITIES IN KHASI.

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## **I. Introduction:**

Literary criticism as a discipline of thought over centuries has been a multi-disciplinary art, always attempting to refine its methodological apparatus. Although it has been accorded a secondary status to creative writing, the critical act has its value for in its absence a creative work will remain silent or voiceless. Each creative act is an attempt to communicate. Where as critical activity, facilitates communication in attempting to answer the whys and whats of work of literature. The genesis of criticism is to be found in aesthetic pleasure, but pleasure as such, is disinterested and is not to be confused with the pleasure of ordinary emotions. A work of art having a unique ontology produces a unique impression. With such assumptions 'the meaning of meaning' was interpreted to reveal the peculiar identity and integrity of a work. The aim of the critic therefore was to elucidate this meaning by examining the organization of the words in a text, their arrangement patterning of varying stresses and tensions so as to repose the density and wholeness of the structure. The critic's business then is to scrutinize, explore, replicate and interpret the text to help the reader to understand and enjoy it. Besides, the literary critic from time to time speculates about the nature, character and organization of literary work. From this follows that the centre of attraction is the literary work which appears as it were, to have an independent existence as an object – a product of language, imagination and having some sense of beauty.

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Criticism or literary criticism is a broad term which is concerned with a systematic study of any work of literature. Although criticism in its scope and operation is very broad, it has come to function mostly as an academic study of literature. Since literature deals with life, a critic should draw its understanding from life itself and test it by the standard of the best ideas which are acceptable by the society and by the world at large.

## II. Critical Traditions:

No creative literature develops without a strong critical tradition of its own. The so called critical practice also has its own tradition. Competing schools of thought from the classical period to the modern period underline strong differences on issues such as the author, text and the reader. However, these disputes instead of weakening the business of criticism have expanded its horizons of expectation. There are two aspects of a critical tradition, i.e. (i) that it is historical, and (ii) that it evolves like its object of study literature from the socio-cultural milieu. It is for this reason that we have Greek, Latin, English and Indian critical traditions. Each one of these critical traditions is self-reflexive to its own literature. However, their methods of enquiry are universal and possibly applicable to other literatures as well.

India has a strong critical tradition. However, this tradition has been for long put to disuse after the hegemonic presence of colonialism. Although some of the classical Sanskrit Indian critical tradition is present in some important Indian languages, it is no longer functioning as a mainstream critical discourse. What is interesting is that, in many Indian languages, there is a kind of critical practice heavily loaded with Western critical concepts and methods. Besides, there are a number of Indian writers who write criticism in their native languages and in English as well. It is obvious that bilingualism both in critical and creative works has become a common practice in many Indian languages, including the tribal languages of North East India. This has given rise to a new kind of critical activity which we may term as Indian English Criticism.

In this way most of the Indian literary criticism cannot escape the influence of English tradition. Tribal literature of the North East like

Khasi, Garo, Mizo etc. which neither have much linguistic affinity with each other nor with any one of the major Indian languages, do not have a strong critical tradition, because these literature in their written form are not very old. In this paper the background of critical activities in Khasi needs to be looked into. Between the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a cultural revival when three native Khasi writers published a number of important books. Contrary to the initiative of the missionaries, Jeebon Roy took his firm step to write about Khasi religion and in 1897 he published two of his works – (1) *Ka Niam jong ki Khasi* (The Khasi Religion) and (2) *Ka Kot Shaphang uwei U Blei* (The Book about the oneness of God). Jeebon Roy also took on himself the translation of Indian Classics like *Hitopodesa* (1898) and *Ramayana* (1900) into Khasi language. Radhon Singh Berry's *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen Part – I* (1902) and *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen Part – II* (1903) contain the Khasi maxims or precepts. While Rabon Sing Kharsuka attempted to document Khasi oral literature and tradition. Rabon Sing's *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (1905) is a collection of rhymed couplets found in Khasi oral tradition and his *Ka Jingiathuh Khana Puriskam* (1908) contains many short stories and fables. However, these books were not included in the school curricula. Had these books been included as text books in schools, the thoughts, values and virtues of the Khasis could have been interpreted or appreciated properly and Khasi poetics could have been developed by those among the first native writers who were equipped with a more indepth understanding of the past. Unfortunately during the colonial rule, the Government attached no importance to the teaching of Khasi literature. It was only after 1947 that a serious attempt was made by the college authorities to teach Khasi properly. However, prior to 1976 there was no paper in literary criticism in the Under Graduate. Syllabus. Since 1976 the North Eastern Hill University introduced the Honours Course in Khasi with one paper in literary criticism. But then, as there were very few critical texts in Khasi, most of the course components for the paper were selected from critical writings found in the form of essays, prefaces and introductions or forewords to cover the weightage of 50 marks out of 100. The rest of the marks was covered from English texts. When such was

the situation, Western literary traditions influenced and shaped the mind of the Khasi writers and critics.

### III. Influence of Western Theories:

Before the introduction of English literature into the Indian education system, many Indian languages already had their own literatures. Famous Indian languages like Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, Gujarati and others, already had a long and living literary tradition. It is said that prior to the introduction of English in School and University courses, Indian literatures had had well developed literary forms, such as poetry, drama and prose.

When the British political domination was well established in India in the nineteenth century, the colonial officers adopted a new education system introducing English as one of the subjects for Indian students. Since English literature was introduced by the rulers, its role soon become very significant in the country. Traditionally, Indian people loved literature, so when English language and literature were initially introduced to Indian students, there was a large response, where many people felt the need to learn the language and literature of the rulers. Besides, literary bilingualism has been a regular phenomenon in India, so during the British colonial rule, many Indians started writing in English as well.

Since the study of English language and literature flourished very fast in the country, Indian critics realized that English critical texts which were circulated in England and America were also available in India. Although a number of native languages had their strong literary traditions, the search for more literary theories from the English texts created a tendency among Indian writers to neglect their own traditions.

With the influence of western theories many Indian writers moved away from Sanskrit poetics and adopted western concepts. Therefore, the native traditions were gradually neglected and forgotten. Recounting the damaging impact of colonialism, G.N. Devy writes:

Colonialism creates a cultural demoralization..... And as a combined results of amnesia and disorientation, bhasa

literatures with literary histories ranging from five to ten centuries seemed to suffer damage from what it obviously an accurate crisis in Indian criticism<sup>1</sup>.

In the post-colonial period, more and more regional languages have emerged as independent literary languages, such as Khasi, Garo, Mizo etc. The influence of western theories in these new languages which have emerged as literary languages during the colonial rule was very strong. Moreover, since these languages assumed the status of literary languages in a very recent past, they are lacking behind in regard to an indigenous critical tradition. The thoughts and ideas of oral tradition were not appreciated or defined properly as most of the important literary concepts are borrowed from the English tradition. In view of this practice, the influence of Western ideas in these languages seem to continue a long way. This situation poses tough challenges for the present and future writers to rediscover or redefine the ideals, thoughts and wisdom of the past. Infact a knowledge of the native tradition is essential while studying the world theories and especially when one realized that there is need to evolve a theory based upon their own culture and tradition.

### IV. A Revivalist tendency:

The more advanced Indian languages, on the other hand have made considerable efforts to revive the Sanskrit poetics. In these languages, Sanskrit poetics is generally included in the University syllabus for criticism courses. This revivalist tendency will help the Indian critics to overcome the loss of cultural memory, and to escape the influence of western thoughts. A healthy sensibility of the Indian critics is reflected when at the present time they choose to maintain a dual trend. There are elements of westernization which are considered useful for the development of a native literature and criticism and also an alertness about the Indian critical tradition. This attitude shows that the sense of inferiority has been removed from the minds of the Indian scholars and the critical thinking is molded with a more nativist awareness G.N. Devy rightly says:

If literary criticism does not grow organically from the native soil, or take root in it when it is of alien origin it will fail to

function as criticism, even though it may have that outward linguistic form. Perceiving this fundamental truth, literary criticism in Indian languages is gradually turning to Nativism, a more alert historical awareness of tradition<sup>2</sup>.

In recent years, we cannot deny the fact that there is a kind of cultural awakening among the Khasi authors as well. In this regard the attempt of B.L.Swer in his *Na Pneh Ka Rynsan* (1904) deserves appreciation for he writes about the traditional concepts of the Khasi folk dramatic performance in various religious and social function S.S.Majaw in one of his critical essays entitled "Ka Jingroi Jingsan Ka Novel Khasi" (Development and Growth of the Khasi Novel) express his own critical thinking, a kind of nativist awareness saying – "To me, the English yard-stick has got no right to measure appropriately over that of the Khasi yard-stick". What Majaw means in his essay is that the norms suggested by the English critics may not always be the just criteria by which to judge the stature and form of the Khasi novel, since the Khasi writers have to consider the inherent Khasi thought and tradition. His essay reflects the idea of trying to infuse the inherent thought of the Khasis in the minds of other Khasi authors and critics. At the same time he does not deny the fact that it is necessary for the Khasi novelists to try to attain higher stature as suggested by different critics of the world.

#### V. Status of Critical Activities in Khasi:

##### *A period of Pre-critical response:*

Critical activities in Khasi had begun in the early decades of the twentieth century in the forms of appreciations, remarks, essays, prefaces, introductions etc. on various genres or books of literature. During the period between the second decade of the twentieth century and the 1960s, Owen Rowie, Soso Tham, H.Elias, D.N.S. Wahlang, Primose Gatphoh and F.M. Pugh were prominent among those who had made such contributions. Although these learned men were capable of critical thinking, a critical study of literature was not strongly felt as Khasi literature during that time was at its infant stage. Thus, the period may be called a period of pre-critical response. However, the

seeds planted by the above few writers in the arable area of literary criticism have now begun to attain greater heights.

##### *The Real Beginning of Critical Activities in Khasi:*

It was since the 1970s that literary criticism in Khasi began to take its firm steps. F.M. Pugh's publication entitled *Ka Prosodi bad ka Retorik* published in 1970 marked his serious attempt in the field of literary criticisms and B.L. Swer's *Katto katne Shaphang ka Sonnet* published in 1979 is another important contribution during the period. H.W. Sten appeared as the more influential critic of the period when he brought out four books of criticism including (i) *Ki Poetry U O.M. Wahlang* (1976) (ii) *Ka Poitri U Primrose Gatphoh* (1979) (iii) *Ki Sur Khasi Na Ka Duitara Ksiar* (1979) (iv) *Ka Jingbishar Bniash* (1979). Thus, the period between 1970 and 1979 has undoubtedly marked the real beginning of Critical activities in Khasi.

##### *A more Rapid Development:*

The period between 1980 and 1999 takes another kind of growth. This period witnesses a more rapid growth and development when many writers, teachers and scholars of Khasi literature including women contributed more substantially for the enrichment of Khasi literary criticism. Over 20 critical works have been brought out during this period. Many of these works are critical analyses of literary texts, while some of them are concerned with literary theories on different types of literature. This period may be called a period of critical awakening. The major critics who belonged to this period are H.W. Sten himself, B.L. Swer, S.S. Majaw and J.S. Shangpliang among many others.

##### *The Dawn of Modern Criticism in Khasi:*

In the first decade of the twenty first century literary criticism in Khasi seems to maintain its steady growth when some new and promising writers appeared on the scene. I. War Pakma published his *Ka Pyrshiauw* in 2000 wherein some critical essays were contained. In his critical analysis of H.W. Sten's Novel *Ka Kwah Bymjukut*, War Pakma looks into the psychological aspects of the work. This approach is nowadays considered very useful, since "literature" as Jacques Lacan

maintains – “Consist of the imagined or fantasized, fulfillment of wished that are denied by reality or are prohibited by the social standards of morality”. The author of this paper published two of his books. In the same year: These are – (1) *Literary Criticism and Bhasa Literature with Reference to Khasi Literature* and (2) *Ka Thew ka woh ha ka Jingbishar Bniah Halor ka Novel Khasi*. Besides discussing the development of literary criticism in Khasi, some important modern criticism in Khasi was made by M.B. Jyrwa when she published her book *Halor Ka Nobel Ka Bynrap*. This book reflects the author’s understanding on realism which she may have gained from Henry James’ critical writings on fiction. The recent development of critical activities in Khasi marks the beginning of the spirit of critical enquiry on the new theories. This trend offers a new impetus to critical activities in Khasi and shows that in near future scholars of Khasi literature will be able to keep pace with the contemporary development of criticism around the world.

## VI. Conclusion:

Having discussed the status of literary criticism in Khasi, it is found that although literary criticism in Khasi is only about four decades old and still remain in its developing stage, however, its role in developing different forms of creative works is very significant. Creative works in Khasi literature can attain higher positions only if critical activity develops towards the standard of other important literatures of the world. Considering the role of criticism in the development of the world’s famous literatures Matthew Arnold maintains:

Of the literature of France and Germany and of the intellect of Europe in general the main effort for now many years has been a critical effort the endeavour in all branches of knowledge, theology, philosophy, history, art, science to see the object as in itself it really is<sup>5</sup>.

Expressing the need of critical activity in English he further says: “Almost the last thing for which one should come to English literature is just that very thing which now Europe most desires – criticism”. What Arnold had said of the need of criticism in English literature is

also applicable to Khasi literature. Another critic John Oliver Perry also expressed his view on criticism at the present situation in India in the following words:

With a variety of traditions that draw strength from multiple indigenous and foreign sources – ancient, medieval, modern, post modern – Indian Criticism can boast of being very lively these days with a fairly free flowing mix of movements, directions, possibilities, occasions, productive encounters<sup>7</sup>.

Considering Perry’s view, it is high time that Khasi Literature and other tribal literatures should not remain in isolation from other more advanced languages. At this point, there is a need to emphasize that no literature or literary theory can remain in isolation from other languages including those of the ancient medieval and modern periods as well as those of the East and of the West. On the other hand, no literature can just imitate the pattern of foreign literatures or accept all their principles and concepts without considering its own tradition from which the very literary culture has developed.

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