

# Literary Criticism And Bhasa Literature

*A Study with Reference to  
Khasi Literature*

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*D.R.L. Nonglait*

**2005**

*This Book  
is dedicated to  
My Parents*

*Mr. Dramwell Sohtun*

*and*

*Mrs. Dressina L. Nonglait*

*who by their prayers have  
pulled my small head, my  
humble heart and my feeble  
hands together to turn a few of  
their dreams into reality.*

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Khasi Literature*

*D.R.L. Nonglait, M.A, M.Phil, PGDTE, Ph.D.*

2005

The Design (Sketch-maps) on the Front Cover Page contains some ideas for the development of critical thinking and it has no connection with the correctness of states or international boundaries.

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### Foreword

I am thankful to Dr. D.R.L. Nonglait for the opportunity he has given to me to see his valuable contribution to the study of Khasi Literature - "Literary Criticism and *Bhasa* Literature". I have gone through it with a great deal of interest, and I have been impressed by the mark of studious scholarship that is apparent throughout the pages of this valuable study, which has left me with a sense of satisfaction and pleasure. Here I could see that serious concern for the healthy development of Khasi Literature, which itself comprises different genres of creative writing of comparatively recent origin, going back to the early 1840's, though it is also true that the Khasi language has established itself as a recognized language, incidentally, the first one to be so recognized among the tribal languages of North-East India. The importance of Khasi literary studies is obvious.

The role of Criticism in bringing about a conscious growth of literature is clear and indisputable. It has to be acknowledged, however, till very recently we had not seen enough of a critical approach to the study of Khasi Literature, apart from what would appear to have been passing remarks on their own works by the Khasi writers themselves, notably by the acknowledged King of Poetry, U Soso Tham, himself as in the Preface to his *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep*. The need for a general and more comprehensive study is obvious and in this regard, I feel that Dr. D.R.L. Nonglait's present study serves this purpose at a very relevant point of time. As such the work is a valuable contribution to Khasi Studies and as such it merits the thoughtful attention of serious Khasi writers, teachers and students alike.

Dr. Nonglait has age in his favour, and I trust that in time he will come out with more studies of this type. This is my hope and expectation and I am confident that I shall not be disappointed.

I wish the author of this valuable study all success in the years that lie ahead, and for the personal satisfaction that I have derived from a perusal of his manuscript, I have this Word of Thanks to express : *Khublei!*

  
(Prof. I.M. Simon)  
Mawlai-Umjaiur,  
Shillong - 793 008

## On The Book

First of all, I congratulate Dr. D.R.L. Nonglait for bringing out this outstanding book on Literacy Criticism. This book will provide the readers, the ideal step in understanding Literary Criticism and *Bhasa* Literature. Through this book, *Literary Criticism and Bhasa Literature A Study With Reference to Khasi Literature*, Dr. Nonglait a specialist on Khasi Literary Criticism has :

- enlightened the readers about the nature and functions of literary criticism.
- thrown to the readers (particularly students and scholars of Khasi literature) the major approaches to literature which are represented by Literary Criticism.
- shown the general development of criticism in its historical context.
- critiqued the development of Khasi Literary Criticism and focused on the need to develop the 'critical mind'.
- reviewed the Khasi M.A. syllabus on Literary Criticism and emphasized the need to revise and strengthen the present syllabus.

This is an ideal book for anyone who is interested in Literary Criticism in general and on Khasi literature in particular. The author has done an excellent job in bringing the gulf between literature and criticism. I sincerely hope this book will provide us with the basic foundation on the subject.

  
(Dr. (Mrs.) A. Kharmalki)

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## Preface

*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 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.*

*It was since the 1970s that literary criticism in Khasi began to take its firm steps. With the exception of F.M. Pugh's publication entitled *Ka Prosodi bad ka Retorik* in 1970 and B.L. Swer's *Katto katne Shaphang ka Sonnett* in 1979, H.W. Sten appeared as a lone 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 Primose Gatphoh* (1979), (iii) *Ki Sur Khasi Na Ka Duitara Ksiar* (1979) and (iv) *Ka Jingbishar Bniah* (1979). The period between 1970 and 1979 has undoubtedly marked the real beginning of Khasi literary criticism.*

*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. 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.*


*Khasi is one of the major Indian languages which do not have much affinity with any other famous or more developed languages of the country. However, as of now, it has emerged as one of the developed bhasas. With Shillong as the centre of education in the region since the time of the British rule, one cannot deny the fact that Khasi language has comparatively made good progress over the years. Now when criticism has been growing side by side with creative writings, Khasi language is asserting itself to places held by other developed Indian languages.*

*This study is a brief survey of the development of literary criticism in Khasi which is one of the new bhasas. Its finding is that, a balanced growth of both creative and critical writings is inevitable. While trying to achieve this goal, this study also suggests that the teaching of language and criticism components at the College and University levels needs to be strengthened.*

*I am deeply indebted to Prof. I.M. Simon for the pains he has taken in reading the manuscript of this book, for his valuable advice and his words of encouragement and good wishes. I express my gratitude to Dr.\* (Mrs.) A. Kharmalki for her comment and her words of appreciation that have been contained in this book.*

*My sincere gratitude is also due to Prof. K.C. Boral, my teacher and my guide who has rightly suggested to write a book of this kind. Last but not the least, much thanks go to my friend, Andrew Marbaniang for his kind help, without which the publication of this book may not be possible at this point of time.*

*Dated Lumdiengjri, Shillong,  
The 30<sup>th</sup> May, 2005.*

  
(D.R.L. Nonglalt)

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## CHAPTER – II

### An Overview of the Origin and Development of Criticism

In the field of Literary Criticism, one has to think globally and act locally. Criticism as a discourse always innovates on its old assumptions and finds new ways of interpreting texts in that a historical sense is always already embedded. Further, in the Arnoldian sense 'poetry as a criticism of life' also implies that literature in a general sense is "criticism of life." Thus criticism can be both creative as well as analytical. From the times of Aristotle to the present, criticism as a discipline has taken different forms and followed different trajectories. But the later part of the 20th century has witnessed another development called "critical theory." Theory is in many respects different from our traditional notions of criticism. Theory provides a framework within which the interpretive action is carried out. Further, under the regime of theory, until now the ways of knowing and asking questions to a text have undergone radical transformation. First of all, theory has inaugurated what is called an interdisciplinary awareness of literature and it has also offered us newer ways of interrogating a text, in exploring its contexts, subtexts and pretexts, its socio-cultural assumptions and generic implications to issues such as race, gender, marginality, colonialism etc. Therefore, any study of literature should include methods of traditional criticism and contemporary critical theories for a more transparent understanding of any text.

While doing so, many students of literature who are not familiar with the various forms, types and approaches adopted by critics of

different periods and schools might be confused when they come across terms which sound similar but in practice are not the same. Without a clear understanding of methodological implications of criticism and theory, one may not be an effective interpreter.

There are critics who follow the methods of Legislative, Aesthetic or Descriptive Criticism while others follow Historical, Biographical and Moral - philosophical approaches. Some others prefer Practical or Applied Criticism which is sometimes distinguished from Impressionistic Criticism and Judicial Criticism. We also frequently came across terms such as Textual Criticism, Theoretical Criticism, Formalistic Criticism, Marxist Criticism, Sociological Criticism etc. As stated above these various schools and methods might sometimes confuse the readers, but actually, the use of various literary or critical strategies having different or similar meaning or practice, instead of confusing the function of criticism has opened more scope for interpretation.

In this chapter, it is felt necessary to present an overview of the origin and historical development of literary criticism. However, it is neither possible nor desirable to make a detailed discussion of the several phases or periods and examine the theories developed by different critics in the long history of about twenty four centuries. Hence, the approach of study adopted here is prefatory in nature. Nevertheless, a brief discussion on each critical tradition and theory in this chapter is attempted to provide a basis for understanding the development of traditional theories, and how the ancient theories have influenced modern theories and modern literary traditions which include Khasi literary criticism.

Though an exact date of the beginning of literary criticism cannot be agreed upon, it is felt that the critical study of literature had begun in ancient Greece. During the fifth century B.C. there was a period of intellectual awakening in Athens when scholars and learned men such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Socrates and Aristophanes raised

critical questions relating to religion, philosophy, morality, politics, art and literature. Aristophanes was the first to apply his mind to a critical consideration of literature in his book *The Frogs*. With him began the first critical activities of the Western world. Plato had also raised many critical questions in the study of literature, but Aristotle's *Poetics* may be considered as the foundational text of literary criticism. Aristotle developed the Mimetic Criticism and defined literature as an imitation of life.

The Roman critical tradition, on the other hand began with Horace (65 B.C. – 8 B.C.) who made substantial contribution to the field during the glorious Augustan age. To this belong the greatest of Roman writers, such as Horace himself, Virgil, Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid and Livy. Horace, in his *Art of Poetry (Ars Poetica)*, stresses that literature should please and instruct. While another eminent critic, Longinus wrote his treatise *On the Sublime* and speaks of the soul and the greatness of the author. The Renaissance began in Italy before the end of the fourteenth century. It then spread to other European countries and created a significant impact in England in the middle of the sixteenth century. The term "renaissance" emphasizes the complex whole consisting of a number of intricately related features which had led many countries between the 14th and 16th century to achieve major developments and reformations in the fields of literature, art, science and technology, trade and commerce, religion, culture etc. The era has been described as "the birth of the modern world out of the ashes of the Dark ages; as the discovery of the world and the discovery of man and as the era of untrammelled individualism in life, thought, religion, and art".<sup>1</sup>

A number of events and changes took place in many countries in Europe especially among the scholars, thinkers, artists, writers, adventurers and other learned men of the society. Historians and critics of the world contributed to many developments during the span of this period of which the following stood out prominently.

The Renaissance scholars developed a new kind of learning by reviving the knowledge of the Greek language, discovering the writings of the Greek and Roman authors. The revival had opened out "the sense of the vastness of the historical past, enlarged the stock of ideas, materials, literary forms and styles available to the Renaissance writers."<sup>2</sup> The historical event of Reformation led by Martin Luther (1483–1646) had struck at the very foundations of the institutionalism of the Roman Catholic Church, then the Puritans developed a new type of religious institutionalism in the theocracy proposed by John Calvin (1509–64) and which organized its own way into Protestantism under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The adventure and exploration of the new continent made by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the settlement of the new world by Europeans gave new materials to the literary imagination. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* relates to voyages to the new world. Another significant development is the new hypothesis published by Copernicus in 1543 who rejected the Ptolemaic world view in which the earth was thought as stationery "around which rotated the successive spheres of the moon, the various planets and then the fixed stars."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, "the Copernican theory proposed a system in which the centre is the sun, not the earth, and in which the earth is not stationery, but only one planet among many planets, all of which revolve around the sun."<sup>4</sup> Thus, all these developments and changes which occurred during the renaissance period were the causes of the awakening that have affected and influenced the thinking of many theologians, scientists, philosophers, writers and rulers on issues such as God, man, religion, society and the creation of the whole universe. It may also be said that the impact of these developments have deeply influenced creative writers and critics of later periods.

Comparing the beginning of the ancient Greek and Roman traditions, the critical activity in England which took place only in the middle of the sixteenth century could not be considered to have begun from a very ancient past. The impact of the Renaissance reached late in England in the sixteenth century and its effects are clearly seen only in

the seventeenth century. Legouis and Cazamian discussed the peculiarities responsible for the slow impact of the Renaissance in England. Their discussion may be quoted as under:

The renewal affected literature later and more slowly in England than in those countries. Not because humanism was tardily introduced, for England's initiation into humanism was, if subsequently to that of Italy, yet quite as early as that of France. But humanism in England had for a long time no decided effect on poetry and prose. The national language was still immature. Prose lacked a strong tradition and glorious precedents and the best humanists still made use of Latin.... It was therefore in a generation enriched by all the substance of France and Italy that England realized for the first time her high literary ambition.<sup>5</sup>

Legouis and Cazamian further maintain that English literature in the preceding century "had been almost all imported from France, had mainly consisted of translation and adaptations. It had not assumed a truly national shape."<sup>6</sup> The situation appears similar to that of critical writings in Khasi during the last part of the 20th century, where many writers have appropriated in their writings as found in the English texts. It is also an undeniable fact that there was passionate patriotic spirit among the English scholars which had given rise to an ambition to rival the masterpieces of Greece and Rome as well as those of Italy and France. Moreover, patriotism inspired antagonism to foreign influences which are perceived to threaten the national genius.<sup>7</sup>

In the middle of the sixteenth century, a group of prominent English writers such as Sir John Cheke, Sir Thomas Wilson and others, attempted to apply their minds to the critical study of literature whom B. Prasad writes as "the first regular critics to do so were three Cambridge friends of the Tudor period, namely, Sir John Cheke, Roger Ascham and Thomas Wilson, sometimes called the Cambridge School."<sup>8</sup> Their criticism follows a dual trend, namely, it advocates the purity of the native literature from foreign influences, such as Latin, French and Italian

and it attempts to improve English literature after the ancient Greek and Roman literatures. B. Prasad further adds:

As English prose was still in its infancy, these three Cambridge scholars paid more attention to it than to any other literary problem. While they followed the classics closely in their critical approach, they never lost sight of the need to improve native language and literature along its own lines.<sup>9</sup>

During the Renaissance period, and more specifically in the Elizabethan age (1558-1603) there was a conflict or "the battle of tastes" between the followers of classical discipline and the native ideals in England. A number of brilliant critics including Sir Philip Sidney, Gabriel Harvey, Spencer and others advocated the view that the ancients should not be neglected. R. Dwivedi and V. Rai observe "for them the ancients were perfect models deserving of worship and the rules discovered by them were as essential and immutable as the laws of nature."<sup>10</sup> Ben Jonson, who was also a neo-classical critic, figures his noble example by drawing the rules from the ancient masters but with a determination not to follow them blindly. While following the ancient classics, "neo-classicism stood for three things in particular, that poetry imitated nature to delight and instruct, that it had distinct kinds to which each new writing must improve and that in both these respects and in all else, the poet must follow the rules of the ancient."<sup>11</sup> The prominent neo-classical writers include John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Joseph Addison, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson. However, there were no significant changes concerning the critical study of literature as critics of this period maintained and followed to a large extent the Renaissance doctrines.

The movement against the neo-classical period began to gain ground in the second half of the eighteenth century known as the Age of Sensibility (1745-1785). During the Romantic period (1785-1830) critics such as S.T. Coleridge, William Hazlitt and others rejected the neo-classical theory and preferred the opposite ideal of aesthetic sensibility.

The period from 1830 to 1901 was known as the Victorian period where we notice the change in the system of governance and the progress in education and science. Prasad observes:

By the Reform Act of 1832 power was transferred from the upper to the middle classes leading as we shall see, to new trends in literature and criticism. The introduction of free education and the establishment of new universities making for a larger reading public and a potentially greater number of writers worked to the same end. Science wrought a still greater change in the modes of men's living.<sup>12</sup>

During this period, Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater figured as the most prominent critics. Arnold opposed the Romantic theory and as mentioned earlier defined the function of criticism with a wider outlook, as "a disinterested endeavour to propogate the best that is known and thought in the world" while Walter Pater advocated art for art's sake.

This short overview of the origin and development of traditional criticism covers a long span of time from the ancient Greece to the Victorian age. As this section is ended here, a few more sentences are added to note how criticism has developed from the ancient to the modern period. Although the discussion has been condensed only within few pages, the extent of its significance cannot be undermined since this kind of work needs a thorough study of many relevant and voluminous history books of literature and criticism. It is a kind of work that collects the seeds of world criticism which have already been implanted in a small but fertile area of Khasi literature and criticism. It is also an attempt to see and understand how one language or literature of the world develops by following and criticizing the theories formulated by other more advanced literatures. Teachers and scholars of Khasi literature are aware that some critics of the world, from Plato to Matthew Arnold, have influenced the minds of many Khasi writers. Nevertheless, there has been no serious attempt among scholars of Khasi literature to present

a study on the development of literary criticism and how it has evolved from ancient and medieval periods to the modern period. Since Khasi has emerged as one of the major Indian languages, it is time for students, scholars and teachers of Khasi literature to make an exhaustive study of the development of criticism and to see what has happened around the country in order to fully ascertain the status of critical studies in Khasi literature.

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