

Reading Folklore in the Novels of Lummer Dai

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Abstract: *Lummer Dai was one the first generation of literary luminary of Arunachal Pradesh writing in Assamese. Dai showed his interest in creative writing quite early in his life and he completed writing his first novel Paharor Xile Xile (In the Midst of Rocks of Hill) in 1961 while he was only a student. Later he published four more novels Prithibir Hanhi (The Smile of the Earth) (1963), Mon Aru Mon (Heart to Heart) (1968), Kainar Mullya (Bride Price) (1982) and Upar Mahal (Higher Level) (2003). The novels of Lummer Dai present a realistic description of tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh. Lummer Dai belonged to the Adi tribe and all his novels centre round the life, rituals, beliefs, social practices and culture of Adi community living in Arunachal Pradesh. This paper is an attempt to study the folklore of the Adi community of Arunachal Pradesh as represented in two select novels of Lummer Dai.*

Keywords: *Lummer Dai, Adi, Arunachal Pradesh, Folklore.*

I. Introduction

Folklore as an academic discipline emerged only in the nineteenth century. A quick look at the evolutionary history of the term 'folklore' reveals that the first use of the term was made by William John Thoms in 1846. On 22 August 1846 Thoms wrote a letter in the pen name of Ambrose Merton to the Athenaeum, a London based magazine catering to the needs of intellectuals and academicians and suggested a good Saxon compound folklore, - the lore of the people. However Thoms' coining of the term does not mean that systematic study of folklore materials did not take place before that. Terms like 'popular antiquities', 'popular literature' etc were in use to designate such materials. But the coining of the term folklore in the middle of nineteenth century caught on the eyes of the academicians and proved its value in defining and enquiring the age old materials. However the process of looking 'closely at the ways of the lower classes' (Dorson 1972: 1) began long before 1846. In 1812, the German brothers Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm collected some folktales and published in the name of *Deutscher und hausmarchen* meaning Household tales for the Children and Family. These folktales were combination of oral folk narrative and interpretations of Germanic mythology. They used the German word *Volkskunde* to denote the subject. But it was William J. Thoms alias Ambrose Merton, who first coined the term. With the establishment of the folklore society of London in 1877 'the word folklore established itself as the generic term under which are included the traditional institutions, beliefs, arts customs, stories, songs and sayings current among backward people or retained by the less cultured classes of more advanced people (Goswami 1960: 2).

Folk life: the new conception-

Though the term folklore became prevalent and created a new discipline of inquiry, it could not avoid confusion and controversy. As a result of such opinions, a new term 'folklife' has emerged in recent years which has 'vied with and even threatened to dominate folklore' (Dorson 1972: 2). The supporters of folk life believe that the term folklore is misleading as 'folklorists are too narrowly preoccupied with verbal forms and neglect the tangible products of folk artisans' (Dorson 1972: 2). They maintain that folk life includes everything under traditional culture which was being neglected by folklore. On the other hand the supporters of folklore counter that their term is inclusive of traditional arts and crafts. Richard M. Dorson has elaborately discussed the nuances of these two terms by categorizing folklore and folk life into four major divisions-

- (i) Oral literature
- (ii) Physical folk life
- (iii) Social folk custom
- (iv) Performing art

The term folklore can be divided into two parts - 'folk' meaning people and 'lore' meaning the knowledge. Hence the word folklore summarily means the knowledge or wisdom of people. Keeping aside the literal meaning of the term folklore, a deep insight into the basic conception of the term makes the whole thing clearer. According to Alan Dundes, "the term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language or religion- but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some tradition

which it calls its own. In theory, a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of the traditions belonging to that group to have a sense of group identity. (Dundes 1978: 7)

II. Review Of Related Literature

The present study deals with the use of folklore in the novels of Lummer Dai. Looking into the nature of the present study the researcher has reviewed literature related to folklore in literature and also available literature on the novels of Lummer Dai. The review of related literature reveals that a large number of studies have been carried out across the world on the use of folklore in almost all the literary genres- poetry, drama, novel and so on. Ashton, J.W. (1957) in his *Folklore in the Literature of Elizabethan England* observes that in the Elizabethan world the folk belief was to a large extent a matter of common belief. So the literature of that period was a reflection of folk belief and practice. He gives examples from Spenser's *The Fairie Queen* and *Epithalamion*. Ashton observes that in *The Fairie Queen* Spenser had not merely used the folk materials as ornaments or chance reference, but these are an integral part of the whole work from the beginning to the end. Ashton also gives a of Shakespeare's plays that reflect the popular beliefs and folktales of the period. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* all uses folk and fairy lore. Leisy, E.E. (1946) in his *Folklore in American Literature* has observed that the American authors- both major and minor have made a consistent use of the materials and motifs of folklore. Leisy gives examples from writers like Robert Frost, Mark Twain, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Edward Eggleston, Owen Wister, O'Henry etc to show that folk sources have given richness to much of the best and most characteristic American literature. Briggs, K.M. (1972) in his *Folklore in the Nineteenth Century English Literature* examines how Romantic Revival in English literature brought poetry from London to the rustic life. He gives example of Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* where he describes the wandering minstrels already extinct in Scotland of his day. Briggs also discusses Wordsworth's Lake District characters and local customs, Coleridge's use of supernatural in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Keats' use of Lamia type of fairy in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and folk calendar custom in *St Agnes Eve*. Among the novelists Briggs discusses Stevenson's dealing with witchcraft, the Bronte sisters' use of supernatural, Dickens' use of folk belief and practice in all his novels and Thomas Hardy's poems and novels of Wessex, full of folk life and folklore. Manuel da Costa Fontes (2000) in his *Folklore and Literature: Studies in the Portuguese, Brazalian, Sephardic and Hispanic Oral Tradition* proves that the modern oral tradition enhances the understanding of early literature in several ways. Besides documenting how writers adapted and used folklore in their works, the author also demonstrates how modern folklore enables us to understand crucial passages of early works whose learned authors took for granted a familiarity with oral tradition, thus enabling the readers to restore those passages to their intended meaning. The book also shows how the folk accepted and adapted some originally learned works, transmitting them orally to the present.

III. Justification And Relevance:

The study of folklore has attained a worldwide dimension in the present day. Therefore the importance of folklore as an independent discipline of study is accepted by one and all concerned with it. In the subjective discussion of folklore, the historical, psychoanalytical, archeological, linguistic and literary projections are regarded as primary factors. To know about the total form of a nation's literature and its subject matter and technique, the study of folklore of that nation is very important. Both folklore and literature are parts of culture and their study expands our knowledge of its makers and possessors. The simultaneous study of these two related cultural phenomena points out their shared roots in a cultural tradition. Again the study of folklore especially oral literature and written literature reveals the continuities and relationships between the two forms of art. The study of literature in relation to folklore offers insight into both the lore and the folk, allowing us to see lore as part of a complex whole having function and meaning in the lives of people. Therefore it is quite relevant to study the folklore materials in the novels of Lummer Dai.

IV. Objectives Of The Study

In the present study focus will be laid on the folk elements in the novels of Lummer Dai. We propose to make a detailed study of the novels of Lummer Dai and the use of folklore materials in his novels.

V. Methodology:

The present study is based both on primary and secondary sources. Primary source consists of the select novels of Lummer Dai. The available literatures on the use of folklore in literature are searched in both printed form as well as from website. Available literatures on the novels of Lummer Dai are collected from printed and e-resources. In the present study we propose to make a detailed study of two novels of Lummer Dai- *Paharor Xile Xile (In the Midst of Rocks of Hill)* (1961), *Prithibir Hanhi (The Smile of the Earth)* (1963).

VI. Discussion

Oral literature

The novels of Lummer Dai record the oral literature that has been transmitted orally among the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh. In Prithibir Hanhi Lummer Dai refers to a myth related to the origin of delong and ponung dance. Delong and ponung dance are performed in the etor festival. Delong is performed by the boys and ponung is performed by the girls. Before performing the dance, hymns addressing musup is sung by the miri (priest) and after that he sings the myth of the origin of delong and ponung dance. As per the myth Karpung and Kardug were the two children of Mangkar. Both of them grew up roaming about and dancing among the meadows and riverbanks. In course of time Karpung invented delong dance and Kardung invented ponung dance. While dancing, they gradually became attracted to each other and as a result of physical intimacy Kardung became pregnant. They were condemned by the society but the dance forms delong and ponung are still performed by the Adi people. (Prithibir Hanhi: 70)

In Prithibir Hanhi little Oyi thinks that Kardug is ill and he will feel good if she tells him a story. She asks Kardug-

“Are you ill?” Oyi again says, “I will tell you a story. You will feel good. Look at me. I am telling the story.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 102)

Oyi tells Kardug a folktale-

“Once, a man from our village set a trap to catch animal in the forest far away from the village. He took some crops and other edibles and set out to see the trap and spent the night in the forest. He made a shade under a banyan tree, kept his things there and went to see the trap. When he returns he finds someone has cooked for him. This happened repeatedly but the man could not know who cooked for him. Then the man made a plan. The next day he said that he was going out to see the trap. He went out, walked some distance and then returned and hid himself near the banyan tree. After some time he saw a beautiful girl coming down with the help of a climber plant from the top of the tree and cooked for him. As she finished cooking he came out of his hiding place and caught hold of her hand. He asked her, “Who are you?” She answered, “I am the daughter of Banadevta.” He again asked, “Why are you cooking for me?” She answered, “I am your wife.” The man married the girl and brought her home. They had children. When the children grew up she fled away to the forest. He did not find her. The story is true as people say that the grand children of the daughter of Banadevta are still living.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 102-103)

Folk Institution

Musup or dere is very the essence of every Adi village. The social, political and cultural activities of the village are carried out in the musup or dere. In every Adi village, every young male on reaching the age of reason approximately aged between 14-20 years should become musup koo. It varies from region to region or sub-tribes. After becoming musup koo/dere koo (caretaker of musup/dere i.e. community hall/kebang house) they become the ex-officio member of kebang (Pertin: 1). Lummer Dai, in his novels, have given a realistic picture of how a musup functions in the Adi society. The musup is a platform for the youths and they spend their nights in the musups till their marriage. The youths living in the musup are called musup deka. The musup dekas are entrusted with the responsibility to protect their village from the enemies. The village chief or the Gaonburha also sends the musup dekas to other villages as messengers. The musup has certain laws which have to be followed by the musup dekas. The musup has the authority to fine a defaulter and the fine consists of both cash and animals like pigs and mithuns. The youths are also accountable to the musup for their inability to be present there. In Lummer Dai's Paharor Xile Xile we find that the protagonist Jalam is fined for his absence in the musup. Jalam arrived late in the musup as he went to meet his beloved Bati, as a result could not accompany the musup dekas who went to another village. The leader of the musup dekas says,

“Listen Jalam, you have to pay Rs. 50 and a pig to the musup as you have not obeyed the rules of the musup.” (Paharor Xile Xile: 28)

When somebody is fined of animal, the musup dekas enter the household of the defaulter at night and cuts the pigs and mithuns. In the morning they come to inform the head of the household about it. The leader of the musup comes with two other members of the musup and informs Bijog, Jalam's father-
“We have cut the pig from your pig stay.” (Paharor Xile Xile: 31)

The musup even has the authority to raid one's house depending on the gravity of the offence. When Bati was accused of burning the rice fields, her house was raided by the musup and cuts two mithuns. (Paharor Xile Xile: 59)

Lummer Dai's second novel Prithibir Hanhi opens with a description of the musup where Kardug is seen sleeping in the musup. In Paharor Xile Xile we find that the rules of the musup are very rigid. His second novel Prithibir Hanhi also shows a gradual transformation that has been taking place in the Adi society. The

younger generation no longer shows deep faith in their traditional social institutions like the musup and the kebang. When Gasi asks Bongkong if he was late for the musup, he replies-

“Yes, but it is not a serious matter. The rules of the musup are no longer as rigid as earlier. There are no hard and fast rules anymore.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 76)

Kebang is a traditional village council of the Adis. It is a three tier indigenous governing institution: at the village (Dolung), inter-village (Banggo) and inter-banggo or covering the entire community (Bogum-Bokang) (Pertin: 1). Verrier Elwin in his book *A Philosophy for NEFA* (1957) says that, “The most highly developed and effective of all the tribal councils is the Adis’ kebang which may well become a model for the whole NEFA” (As quoted in Pertin: 1). The kebang functions, through unwritten code of conduct, are based on customs and traditions which are passed from generation to generation (Pertin: 1). The kebang plays an important role in the plots of the novels of Lummer Dai. Whenever there is a conflict the village people take the help of the kebang.

In Prithibir Hanhi we find Liyi protesting against the verdict of the kebang as she speaks openly against Kardug in the kebang. Kardug also shows disrespect to the kebang as he lends Liyi a fatal blow in the presence of the members of the kebang. There is a reference to kebang even in the casual conversation of Bati with his sister-in-laws. (Paharor Xile Xile: 45)

Folk Belief

The novels of Lummer Dai exhibit the varied folk beliefs prevalent among the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. In Prithibir Hanhi there is a reference to a belief associated with the bat. As Kardug sees the bat in morning he thinks-

“May be the bat foretold some impending misfortune. The bat is very ominous.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 9)

Again, when Kardug enters the forest in search of his mithuns, he comes across a snake and he gets angry as seeing a snake at the time of journey is considered to be ominous by the Adis. He thinks, “It is ominous to see a snake in the forest”. He cuts a leafy branch of a tree and puts it in the place where he sees the snake. Then he spits at the place and says, “Go away, I hope I will not see you again.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 16)

The Adis have a deep faith in Bandevta (Spirit of the Forest) and almost all the novels of Lummer Dai have a reference to Bandevta. When Kardug, Bongkong and Lib go out for hunting and spend the night under a fig tree; Lib, a typical Adi boy expresses his fear of Bandevta as he deeply believes that spirits are there in the forest (Prithibir Hanhi: 52). In their hunting expedition, when Lib was able to hunt a deer in the very first attempt, Kardug’s mother says to him-
“You should offer worship to Bandevta. He has showered his blessings on you. Few people have the blessings of Bandevta. If you can satisfy Bandevta by offering worship, you will be able to be an expert hunter in future.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 65)

The Adis also believe in dreams and interpret them in many different ways. In Paharor Xile Xile, we find Jalam the protagonist is also not free from this traditional belief system. The Adis believe that if a person does not succeed in climbing mountains or crossing river in their dreams, it is an indication of failure in their life. As Jalam proposes Bati, he sees such a dream that makes him believe that he will face hardships on the way of winning the love of Bati. Jalam marries Bati after the death of his mother. Their conjugal life is happy as Bati was able to take the place of his mother-taking care of Jalam’s siblings as well as the household. But the dream he saw had a deep impact on Jalam’s mind as the narrator narrates-

“Jalam got a new life. Although his mother is no more Bati has taken her place. The days are passing happily ... Perhaps this happiness is transitory. Perhaps God is deceiving them. May be the entire family will face some crisis in near future.” (Paharor Xile Xile: 46)

Folk Customs

Every society is unique in its rituals associated with birth, death and marriage. In his novels Lummer Dai depicts the varied folk beliefs and rituals of birth, death and marriage that exist in the traditional Adi society.

A custom associated with child birth is the unique system of naming children. Dai elaborates this as the last syllable of the father’s name is the first syllable of his sons and daughters. In Prithibir Hanhi Karpung says that Gasi and Kardug’s son will be named Dugbang. This unique system of naming the children is also evident in the names of the characters- Mingkar’s son is named Kardug, Pagbang’s son is named Bangkong.

A custom prevalent among the Adis regarding marriage is ape i.e. the custom of marriage of the groom’s sister with bride’s brother. When a boy marries a girl, it becomes obligatory that the boy’s sister should be married to someone in the girl’s family. Jalam who proposed Bati time and again was rejected by Bati on the ground that it was a moral responsibility of Jalam to marry the sister of the boy who married his sister (Paharor Xile Xile: 4). When Gasi tries to make a match between Liyi and Bongkong, she says-
“Bangkong, you will have to give an ape for Lib, or you will not get Liyi.” (Prithibir Hanhi: 48)

Another tradition of the Adis is the bride and the groom are socially allowed to sleep together at the bride's place after they get engaged to each other. Dai introduces his readers to this custom through Gasi as she thinks-

"Kardug will sleep here from tonight. She used to share the same mat with her sister. But from today I will have to arrange a separate mat." (Prithibir Hanhi: 30)

In the morning as Kardug awakes late and he thinks-

"I am late. People will see me. It is a matter of shame if one is seen entering and leaving the bride's place. People will ridicule me as lazy. One should enter the bride's house after everyone goes to sleep and leave the place before it is dawn." (Prithibir Hanhi: 36)

In the Adi society the bride does not go to the groom's house immediately after the engagement. She stays with her parents and it is only after two/three years that the bride goes to her husband's house. Lummer Dai introduces this custom of the Adis when Jalam says to Bati-

"You will have to go to our house immediately after engagement ... Because my father might change his mind later on." (Paharor Xile Xile: 47)

Festivals and Religious Beliefs

The Adis celebrate a number of festivals. The festivals are mainly associated with the agricultural activities. Solung is celebrated in the first week of September for five or more days. It is a festival associated with agriculture and is celebrated after the sowing of the seeds and transplantation is finished. The women folk perform Ponung dance during the celebration. The Adis worship the goddess of wealth in the Solung festival.

Solung etor is celebrated in the month of May. The youths perform delong dance in etor festival on a full moon night. The boys dance delong till midnight and while dancing the girls catch hold of the boys and dress them up in girls' attire and ornaments. Similarly the girls also dress up like a boy.

"Liyi, Gasi, Odeng and many other girls are searching their friends. They have also taken ornaments along with them. They will enjoy to see the handsome boys performing delong being dressed up in girls attire and ornament." (Prithibir Hanhi: 67)

Lummer Dai gives a vivid description of the celebration of solung festival- people waiting eagerly at the musup for delong to begin. Etor festival is celebrated in the musup and the miri initiates it by singing the myths of creation. The youths of the village stood in lines and then the miri began to sing the myths. He first addressed the musup and the God of musup and then sang the myths related to the origin of delong and ponung dance (Prithibir Hanhi: 69-70).

The Adis are the follower of animist religion of Donyi Polo. Donyi means the Sun and Polo means the Moon. Besides worshipping Donyi Polo, the Adis perform to get rid of different diseases. Worshipping different Gods and Goddesses constitute an integral part of the healing process among the Adi tribe. When bati suffers from malaria Baman performs Deo-puja (worship of the spirit) twice. He thinks that Bati is under the spell of some evil spirit when she is not cured even after performing Deo-puja. (Paharor Xile Xile: 7)

Material culture

In a traditional Adi society the house type constructed by the people demonstrate their attempt to meet the challenges of the environment. In the novels of Lummer Dai we get reference to three types of houses of the Adi people-

- Individual houses
- Granaries and
- Community hall

The individual houses have a raised floor, supported by wooden or bamboo structure. These houses are called chang-ghar. The interior of the house is wide open but every space has its specific function. There is space for sitting in the evening, for sleeping, for cooking, for preparing among etc. As the houses have a raised floor they use ladder to climb up. There are two separate ladders to the house which are separately used by the male and the female folk. The raised floor of the house protects them from the attack of the wild animals and also helps to avoid dampness. The individual houses that Lummer Dai refers to in his novels are all chang-ghar. The open lower portion of the house is used to keep domesticated animals.

The community hall is a common feature of almost all the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The Adis call their community hall dere. All the village rituals and ceremonial gatherings are conducted in the dere. It is the centre of the social and cultural life of the Adis. The kebang is also held in the dere. Apart from these house types the Adis also construct some activity specific huts in their fields. In Paharor Xile Xile there is reference to tangi, a specific type of house built in the field where they keep their necessary things to be used in the field.

There is a reference to jim cloth in almost all the novels of Lummer Dai. The jim cloth is used both as bed sheet and blanket by the Adi people. The Adi women spin yarn and weave jim cloth for their use. The Adis

have a custom of covering the graveyard of a dead person in the family with a new piece of jim cloth. The reference to this custom of the Adis is expressed in the casual conversation of the Adi women as they were unable to weave a new jim cloth because of the rainy season. The brass objects and beads form an integral part of the material culture of the Adi people. The brass objects constitute- plate, bowl etc. and are exchanged during marriage. The beads are also one of the valuable possessions of the Adis and they store it in their granary. The necklaces of beads are the possessions which are handed down from generation to generation.

VII. Conclusion

Lummer Dai's use of folklore gives voice to a generation whose stories have remained untold and unheard. Dai attempted writing in an age when the tribal society of Arunachal Pradesh was undergoing a change. Although the novels of Lummer Dai exhibit a preoccupation with the past, he does not lament the past. Rather he seeks to reclaim what is useful for his people to survive in the present. His works encode a desire to preserve a vanquishing way of life through his fictions.

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