

Khasi Folktales: Redefining Landscape through Storytelling

Dr. Sudipta Phukan

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English

S.B. Deorah College, Guwahati

Email id- sudipta.phukan@gmail.com

Abstract

Folktales are the heart and soul of an indigenous community or tribe. This paper highlights folktales from Meghalaya, in an attempt to analyse them with recent landscape studies. North-east India is a land of lush green hills and winding rivers, its landscapes and people radiating vibrant colour and deep-rooted indigeneity. Its rich body of oral and written literature reflects the region's mysticism, ethnic diversity, cultural identity, and echoes of pre-modern belief systems and traditions. Meghalaya, as part of the culturally rich north-east region of India, resonates with this same spirit. In Khasi folktales from the state, the presence of various natural objects like mountains, caves, forests, valleys, giant stones, waterfalls etc. contribute significantly to acquire the 'sense of place and people'. The selected stories for discussion are taken from the collection *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007), compiled by Dr. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. The stories particularly reflect upon the ancient mythic tales of creation.

Key Words: Khasi Folktales, Landscape, Storytelling, North-East India, Meghalaya.

Introduction

Indigenous literature in the form of folktales, myths and legends reflect the true picture of a particular community or tribe. This paper tries to dissect the existing Khasi folktales in the recent development of landscape studies and how they create a new ambiance of re-telling and re-analysing. The north-east India, consisting of eight naturally rich states, is inhabited by people belonging to numerous tribes, sub-tribes, caste and creed. The hill tribes particularly have their own custom, tradition, rituals, dialect and religious beliefs. In absence of written scripts, most indigenous literatures from the north-east India exist in oral forms, handed down from generation to generation. The entire landscape along with its people is vibrantly colourful and indigenous. The gamut of literary products both oral and written reflect the mysticism, ethnicity, cultural identity, heathenism and primitivism of the north-east India.

The substantial existence and nobility of are truly reflected in the folktales as they carry the heart and soul of the community. John Smith in this vein remarks that "Folktales or folk narratives are frequently linked to specific regions, cities, or entire landscapes " (45). Likewise, in Khasi folktales, the presence of various natural objects like mountains, caves, forests, valleys, giant stones, waterfalls etc. contribute significantly to acquire the 'sense of place and people.' Nongkynrih introduces the Khasis that include "all the seven sub-tribes-

Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and the now never-heard-of Diko- of the Khasi tribe of North- east India are a great storytelling people” (vii). He gives shape to twenty beautiful and different Khasi folktales, collected from various oral sources in his *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (2007). These stories particularly include “*khana pateng* (legends), *purinam* (fairy tales), *puriskam* (fables), *khana pharsi* (parables)” (x-xi).

Khasi Folktales and Landscape: Literary and Theoretical Implications

Beliefs based on the creation of the world and Nature co-exist along with the human societies from the time immemorial, passed down orally that finally take the form of folktales, myths, legends and folk songs. The indigenous literatures both written and oral in turn shape the inbuilt faith and ideology among the natives helping in the formation of their unique identity. In a way, the ideology driven traditional beliefs and folktales structure the entire society. In the words of Stith Thompson, folktales are “all forms of prose narrative, written or oral, which have come to be handed down through the years” (4). The tribes by preserving their incredible treasure of folktales can re-trace and re-establish their national identity. The mythical components available in the folktales showcase a different perspective of the race or tribe. Due to the oral nature, the folktales get variously shaped, re-shaped, modified, altered or interpreted down the generations. So, their actual originality and singularity is always marked in doubts, confusions and questions, quite irreplaceable due to time and space. The existing tales available in today’s society are in reality the fractured or manipulated versions, told by various narrators or storytellers. However, the folktales being once get printed, it works as a rewarding preservation, easily available and accessible for the future generations to come.

“All traditional folktales,” as observed by Amie A. Doughty in *Folktales Retold* (2006), “have undergone (and continue to undergo) some kind of reshaping, even though most modern readers think of them in terms of a specific version read during childhood” (9). The fairy tales particularly become an indispensable part of children’s literature that carry an image of Said’s “orient” from the folktales. The Khasi folktales also carry an inbuilt oriental spirit that speak of the place and people in abundance. When transforming a folktale into a fairy tale, the storyteller keeps in mind to attract a child reader first. So, each and every element is presented in a suitable and easy manner for better understanding.

The geographical landscape and climactic changes create a world in itself in the north-east India. Seasonal changes, beautiful flora and fauna and rainforests are significant in shaping the lifestyle of the people. The present era of globalization helps in bringing back the marginalized territorial locations, unheard voices and discovery of the lost route with great attention. While discussing the concept of landscape as a discourse of cultural geography, John Wylie maintains,

As an artistic genre and as a culturally conditioned habit of visual perception, one arguably unique to European and Western societies, landscape is a particular way of seeing and representing the world from an elevated, detached and even ‘objective’ vantage point. (3)

The north-east India falls into such a location where explorations are getting under way. The British and the missionaries created their own stories regarding the land and its people, being unable to internalise the core or sense of the place and people of the region.

Colonial intervention thus created a new chapter in making and unmaking of its history. Colonization reshaped the entire geographical boundaries including the pre-existing indigenous culture and tradition. The colonialist produced knowledge suitable from their perspectives, where the native voice was silent and ignored. In the whole process, a dominating power strategy worked in shaping the colonial period. As such, the enriched, vibrant and prosperous pre-colonial culture and tradition got highly erased which was difficult to restore.

The Khasis from Meghalaya has a rich traditional and cultural heritage. Being a plateau, Meghalaya is located 4,908 feet above sea level. Meghalaya is full of natural resources and scenic beauty with its green hills, mysterious caves, numerous waterfalls, giant ancient trees and living root-bridges, larger than life rocks, valleys and many more. It is a tourist hotspot attracting people from all over the world, a venture for both adventure and trekking. However, there was no written script available for the Khasis in absence of alphabet. Thomas Jones, a Welsh Presbyterian missionary who visited Meghalaya for the spread of Christianity introduced the Roman script for the Khasis in 1842. Though there was no written script or documentation earlier, the Khasis had always been an enlightened, advanced race with civilized activities.

Due to its unique geographical landscape, the Khasi folktales are abundant with nature and natural objects like landscape, flora, fauna and their interconnections with human beings. The topography that possesses scenic and aesthetic appeal is referred to as landscape. Depending on their mode of application in a literary text, terrains or landscapes appear in a vivid and varied manner, be it physical, mental, metaphorical or imaginary. The concepts of both literal and symbolic landscape are seen to be dominating extensively in folktales.

Folktales, in particular, prominently use extensively the concepts of landscape both literally and symbolically. Roger Ebbatson, in his *Landscape and Literature 1830–1914: Nature, Text, Aura* (2013), delves deep into the significance of landscape and its representation in various literary works. He discusses the symbolic relationship between place and landscape in the ‘Introduction: The Shifting Landscape.’ While doing so, he cites Denis Cosgrove who believed landscape as ‘social and cultural’ product. Thus, Ebbatson observes,

If ‘landscape’ in this formulation is to be related to artistic or literary representations of the visible world, the term also tends to suggest a detached mode of observation, with the observer powerfully dominating the observed. There is thus an element of complexity here, in that landscape designates a material unit of area, a visual or literary composition, and also a natural ‘region’. (10)

In Khasi folktales, landscape appears as a living entity, a benevolent force, standing just below their God U Blei. The world view of the Khasis believes in the existence of God U Blei, one living almighty in the ‘universe as a cosmic whole.’ The story named “The Seven Clans” talks about “a vast emptiness on Earth” (Nongkynrih 1) where God created two beings, the guardian spirit of Earth Ramew, and her husband Basa, later believed to be the patron god of villages. They prayed God for several times to grant them ancestors to which God offered them five children of “great powers and accomplishments, five children that people have come to call elemental forces” (2). The children consisted of four daughters including the Sun, Water, Wind and Fire and a son the Moon. But due to their respective

duties and limitations, these children were unable to take proper care of the earth. So, God picked up seven out of sixteen clans residing in heaven, and sent them to earth to “till the land, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and be the crown of all creation” (4).

The absence of a written script is beautifully connected to the myth of creation which the Khasis term as ‘khanatang’ or sanctified stories. The story “The Lost Manuscript” depicts the incident where a Khasi ancestor lost a fragile, precious manuscript containing profound philosophical and religious teachings. The Khasi ancestor and a man from Surma were given instructions by God on history, religious rites, moral principles at a tall mountain summit. On their return journey, they had to cross a wide, turbulent river. The Surma man was accustomed to swimming and crossed the river easily but the Khasi couldn’t do so as he belonged to the hills and never had the experience of swimming. So, he could not safeguard the manuscript and accidentally swallowed the document.

The story “The Lost Manuscript” depicts how a Khasi ancestor once lost a fragile, precious manuscript that contained profound philosophical and religious teachings. The Khasi representative and another man from Surma were familiarized with the history, religious rites, moral principles by God at a tall mountain summit. While coming back, they needed to cross a wide, turbulent river. The Surma man easily swam across but the Khasi, being a Hillman could not safeguard his manuscript and accidentally swallowed the document. The Khasi therefore started dispersing the knowledge received from God’s teaching in oral form, recollected from memory, among his fellow people. Thus, ‘storytelling’ emerged among the Khasis from the ancient time onwards which still carries relevance, faith and belief.

Landscape, as mentioned by Liz Wells, is a social product which reflects culture, history and tradition of a particular tribe. Landscape results from, as Wells observes “human intervention to shape or transform natural phenomena, of which we are simultaneously a part. A basic useful definition of landscape thus would be vistas encompassing both nature and the changes that humans have affected on the natural world” (1-2). “The Lost Manuscript” is a good example how living in a particular terrain affects the life style of its inhabitants. The Khasi could not save the manuscript of God’s teachings since he was naturally unaccustomed to swimming, being from the hills. The mountain and the flooded river are symbolic of diverse landscapes and their association with folktales.

Another story “The Fight between Kyllang and Symper” talks about how two mountains got engaged in a frightful war to become enemies forever. There were two powerful mountain spirit brothers named U Kyllang and U Symper who dwelt side-by-side at Kmawan. U Kyllang was warlike, malignant spirit using his terrible weapon as a fierce cyclonic storm to uproot trees and destroy houses wherever he went. However, U Symper, a gentler one by nature than his brother, was equally competent and powerful. U Symper was very sympathetic towards the people, animals, trees and other natural objects but his brother U Kyllang always behaved violently and destructively. Being very rude and adamant, U Kyllang mostly misused his power and created havoc from time to time. Once, he destroyed not only the villages and uprooted the trees, but also spread deadly diseases like measles, chickenpox, and smallpox everywhere, by his toxic force. U Symper got highly offended for such gruesome activity of his brother and scolded him. This sparked the incident more and U Kyllang, feeling insulted for being termed as coward and demon slapped back his brother. Thus, there was a war between the brothers but unfortunately U Kyllang had no luck. He wanted to attack his brother with stones but no stone was left on his hill. So, he gathered large

chunks of earth to smother Symper with mud. However, Symper was well-equipped to safeguard himself and started throwing large boulders till Kyllang left the place forever. Such story shows landscape plays a pivotal role in Khasi folktales, by personifying hills to glorify the unique landscape of the state.

The story “Ka Likai” is a tragic story with the saddest and bizarre end. After the death of her first husband, Likai remarried, but her new husband grew resentful of her daughter. One day, while Likai was away at work, he murdered the child out of jealousy and cooked her flesh into a meal. Likai unknowingly ate the meal containing her daughter’s flesh. Later, she discovered a severed finger in the betel nut basket that she realized the horrific truth. Overcome by grief and madness, Likai fled and leapt from a waterfall, which was later named Nohkalikai Falls, meaning ‘Where Likai Jumped.’ Such stories implicate the power of storytelling and traditional belief system that remain significant and unique among the Khasis. Nohkalikai Falls is regarded as India’s highest plunge waterfall which attracts tourists from all over the world due to its serene and unique beauty, depth and mystery.

Thus, the heritage of folktales particularly dignifies the hidden glory of the lost past. Folktales are true representatives of a golden past which cannot be revoked or experienced. A society which is rich in oral tradition is also rich in cultural and traditional heritage. The folktales carry the spirit of the place to become an intangible property for a particular race or tribe. Dr. Nongkynrih represents the folk tales in a hybrid and ambivalent manner. His presentation of the folktales as fairy-tales has a universal appeal which are read and understood in a global platform. Re-telling gives him a space to re-analyse and re-document the oral traditional folktales in a new and attractive dimension and perspective. Vanessa Joosen in her work *Critical and Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue Between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings* (1977) talks about an inter-textual appeal of folktales and fairy tales. She says,

The Intertextual relationship between fairy-tale re-tellings and traditional fairy tales has a double effect. By critically distancing themselves from the fairy tale, retellings invite readers to reconsider the traditional texts... Although a large number of fairy-tale retellings problematize the traditional fairy tales, they are an important factor in its canonization process. (16-17)

Conclusion

Each story-teller uses his/her own interpretation and manipulation while re-telling the stories. So finally, there remains the narrator’s version which s/he transforms into written manuscripts and the printed version gets a bolder outlook. Benson thus observes,

The newly composed tales seek to change the direction of both particular stories and of the genre as it is known, giving a voice to an often passive, silenced presence, a voice that speaks both against the grain of the narrative and through the breaks and gaps in the overlaid moralities of previous generations. This is achieved by pulling submerged stories through these gaps, stories both in the sense of alternative life stories and submerged, parallel folk narratives. (200)

However, there works a certain inbuilt faith and ideology escaping from which seems quite impossible. The preservation of folktales of a particular region helps in discovering and

establishing the national identity of its people. The presence of mythical elements gives folktales another perspective to the race and nation. Landscape plays a vital role in preserving heritage and memory, even though its history often becomes entangled in competing political narratives. As Paul Claval observes, landscapes as sites of memory continually evolve to “interrogate the construction of identity and the politicization of space” (85). In a postcolonial world marked by complex socio-cultural and spatial transformations, people increasingly depend on collective memory to shape their identities.

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Author's Bio-note:

Dr. Sudipta Phukan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, S.B. Deorah College, Guwahati, Assam. She also worked in Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsha Mahavidyalaya (PDUAM), Amjonga, Goalpara, Assam previously. She obtained her Ph.D in English literature from the North- Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, India. Her research focuses on postcolonialism, women's writing, South Asian literature, literatures from northeast India, memory and landscape studies. She has to her credit one book publication and more than 15 research articles published in journals of national and international repute as well as in edited books.

Email id- sudipta.phukan@gmail.com

ORCID id- <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4775-411X>.

Phone No.- +91-8638839245
