

Impact Factor: 6.017

ISSN: 2278-9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Special Issue on Tribal Culture, Literature and Languages

National Conference Organised by
Department of Marathi, Hindi and English

Government Vidarbha Institute of Science and
Humanities, Amravati (Autonomous)

13 Years of Open Access

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

Guest Editors:

Dr. Anupama Deshraj

Dr. Jayant Chaudhari

Dr. Sanjay Lohakare

www.galaxyimrj.com

About Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/>

Archive: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/>



Exploring the Mystical Symbolism in the Select ‘Borok’ Folk Tales of Tripura

Muktalata Jamatia

Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of English,
SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai.

Abstract:

The folk tales of the ‘Borok’ communities i.e., the people who belong to the ‘Kokborok’ language speaking communities from the state of Tripura narrates the stories of their native inhabitants - all about what the people have seen, believed and experienced in their lives; and can indeed be considered as the stories that narrates and portrays the replica of life. These tales ranges from the stories about the traditional jhum cultivation practised by the native people; to the stories of the young men and women who had to face hurdles in their love life; to stories of animals and their fights with their counterparts etc. The themes and components contained in these tales are the presence of mystical or occult elements, recurring symbols, myths, history and moral messages etc. The culture, traditional beliefs, societal norms, means of livelihood etc., of the native inhabitants are also revealed through their folk tales. These tales were initially narrated orally and then written down and compiled into the printed forms, which later got its audio-visual representation through the mediums of films and cinema. In order to trace out and understand the meanings of the mystical or occult elements present in the folk tales, one needs to delve into these tales and carry out a detailed study. This paper is an attempt to explore the presence of mystical symbolism in the three select folk tales of the ‘Borok’ communities titled: “Chethuang” (Chittam Tree), “Nuwai” (Migratory birds), and “Kherengbar” (The Flower of Heaven) by using both the printed as well as the audio-visual forms of narration or storytelling, using psychoanalytic methodological approach as a medium of study, in order to interpret the messages that these folk tales give to the readers and to the audiences.

Keywords: Borok communities, Replica of life, Themes and components, Mystical symbolism, Psychoanalytic methodological approach.



Introduction

Tripura is the state which lies in the Northeastern part of India, and is the third smallest state of India, after Goa and Sikkim. It shares its border with Bangladesh in the north, south and west, and with Assam and Mizoram in the east. Tripura is a demographically heterogeneous state with both the tribal/indigenous communities and the Bengali communities living together. There are nineteen scheduled tribal or indigenous communities in Tripura, and from amongst these nineteen communities, eight tribal communities speak the native Kokborok language. They are - Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Kolo, Rupini, and Uchoi. As these eight communities speak the common Kokborok language, which belong to the Bodo-Garo branch of the Sino-Tibetan group of languages, they are also referred as the 'Boroks' which translates into English language as the people or human beings speaking the Kokborok language in Tripura. The literature from Tripura can be traced out from the book *Rajmala* which is also known as the "Garland of Kings" or "Chronicles of Tripura". However, this book only provides the information documented about the rule and the lives of 179 kings in Tripura (Lalkulhpuia, 1-3). Therefore, there occurs the need to look into and trace out how the ordinary native people, here referring to the 'Boroks' have lived their lives in the state of Tripura. Now, in order to know about the everyday livelihood, experiences, beliefs and customs, etc., of the 'Boroks' one need to go through their folk tales which were initially narrated orally and then written or printed down due to the availability of writing materials and introduction of the printing press, and then these folk tales eventually got adaptation into the audio-visual forms like films and cinemas due to the advancement of digital technology. Thus, Dustin Lalkulhpuia in the first chapter titled: "Tripura: The Land of The Boroks", of his book titled: *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below* mentions that:

"...a more nuanced understanding of the Borok people's history and experiences requires an analysis of their oral traditions, including their folk tales, songs, and other forms of creative expression. It is through these cultural artefacts that one can gain insight into the psyche and cultural ethos of the Borok people, and their contribution to the development of Tripura's diverse and vibrant society. (Lalkulhpuia, 5)

Although in the late twentieth century, there also emerged other literary and artistic forms such as poetry, songs, short stories, dramas and novels etc., which exhibits or narrates the everyday livelihood, socio-economic conditions and cultural heritage of the 'Boroks', the oral narration, mostly the narration of the folk tales was the initial medium through which the artistic



imagination as well as the native identity of the ordinary 'Borok' communities can be traced out. The folk tales of the 'Borok' communities, which comes under the Kokborok literature also challenges the stereotypes created by the 'mainstream' literature in Tripura. As stated by Dustin Lalkulhpuia in the first chapter of his book titled: *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below* - the folk tales serve as a counter narrative to the dominant meta-narrative like those in the *Rajmala* etc (Lalkulhpuia, 8-9).

The writings in Kokborok language are relatively a new one, which got its place into the printed form by the mid twentieth century, believed to be dated around 1945 (1 Lalkulhpuia). These writings, broadly known as Kokborok literature, are written either using the Roman i.e., in the English script or in the 'Bengali' script. Due to rapid urbanization, the state had moved towards what is called 'modernity' and has incorporated the westernized methods of teaching and learning, and also because of the starting up of English medium schools by the missionaries, at present the state has a large number of artists and writers of the indigenous communities, having the knowledge and competence of speaking in more than one language. The bilingual or the multi-lingual capability of the people brought in the tradition of translation of the oral and the written narratives, say for example the translation of narratives written in Kokborok language into English language and vice versa. Later, due to the advancement of technology we can also witness the stories of the indigenous communities being adapted into the audio-visual forms in films and cinemas, which is again a method of translation or trans-creation.

Because these folk tales were transmitted orally by word of mouth, variants of the same tales started to develop as the narration of word-for-word and note-for-note cannot be maintained accurately. These folk tales serve as educational purposes for the young children, with an intent to teach moral lessons and inbuilt discipline within them as well as pass on the cultural traditions to them. Apart from teaching, folk tales are also forms of entertainment to the people as these tales can be narrated while people are having their leisure time or can be performed as plays on stages, or sang and narrated in the form of a song during cultural festivals and celebrations, as well as made into a film and watched. The stories in these folk tales portrays the real livelihood patterns of the people living and working together in their jhum fields, along with their cattle; as well as involves the mystical and supernatural happenings in their natural surroundings. There are also tales where one can find animals having the human tongue and are speaking and interacting with the people as well as with other animals. The stories of the kings and queens are also present; however, these stories are narrated from the point of view



of the ordinary people. All these elements present in the folk tales, creates curiosity not only in the minds of the children but also in the mind of the adults.

In Kokborok language folk tales are known as ‘Kerang Kothoma’ of which ‘Kerang’ means ‘Folk’ and ‘Kothoma’ means ‘Tale’ (Bhattacharjee, 4). Biprajit Bhattacharjee in the Introduction of his book titled: *Kerang Kothoma: A Modern Re-Telling of the Folk Tales of Tripura* writes that:

“It is these folk tales that preserve the minutest details of the evolution and growth of a community, its people and their culture”. (Bhattacharjee, 4)

Therefore, these folk tales help in tracing out the roots of the indigenous ‘Borok’ communities. Their folk tales not only reveals the past historical identity and culture of the native inhabitants; the portrayal and description of the geographical location and the societal surroundings of the region are also provided through the narration of the folk tales. These folk tales were narrated and expressed orally by the word of mouth; through the use of sound, word and then later through script are ideas and images formed in the mind of the native inhabitants which gets expression through the physical sense organs i.e., via mouth (Tulika Dey, 14). Therefore, the folk tales which originated in the mind of the people, which was initially psychological gets its expression through the physiological acts and were transferred from generation after generation.

The elements present in the folk tales carries a message and possesses significant meanings attached to it which explains the reasons behind following of the age-old traditional customs and beliefs of the native inhabitants, as well as explains the link and relationship between nature and the human beings (Krzyżanowski, 17). Therefore, the meanings of certain elements and symbols present in the folk tales of the ‘Borok’ communities need to be analysed in order to understand the logic behind its presence or existence which will indeed reveal the psyche or the mindset of the native inhabitants who initially narrated these tales.

Dr. Arimardan Singh, referring to the characters present in the folk tales of the ‘Borok’ communities, mentions in the ninth chapter titled: “Folklores of Tripura”, in his book *Folklore of North East India* that:

“The characters in such folk tales include both animate and inanimate objects. Stones, trees, creepers, angels, gods and goddesses, sages, rivers, river- gods, clouds and lightning, etc. rub shoulders with one another in the given frame-work of a mutuality of relations.” (Singh, 234)



All these characters and elements present in the folk tales of the ‘Borok’ communities and their interaction and inter-relationship between each other showcases the mystical nature, recurring in these folk tales.

Recurring mystical elements present in the three select ‘Borok’ folk tales

The mystical elements present in the three select ‘Borok’ folk tales namely: “Chethuang” (Chittam Tree), “Nuwai” (Migratory birds), and “Kherengbar” (The Flower of Heaven) are heard or known of taking place either when there’s an interaction or conflict that arises between the human beings, or between human and animals, within their natural environment; as the native indigenous people are dependent on the forest resources, water bodies, natural vegetation, wild flora and fauna etc., for the survival of their livelihood, and therefore these people are connected to nature in all possible ways (Raha, 1). Hence, D. K. Tyagi in the preface of his book *Tribal Folk Tales of Tripura* writes that:

“The Folk tales of Tripura tribals depict the intimate relationship between tribals and forest. They also reflect the socioeconomic system and social values of the society. Most of the folk tales are related to wild animals and plants which reflect the symbiotic relationship that exists between tribals and animals”. (Tyagi, *Preface*)

The tribals or the indigenous ‘Borok’ communities are also known or believed of worshipping their Gods in their natural environment; in fact, most of the Gods that they worshipped are animate, natural objects or spirits like the Sun God, the Moon God, the River God, the Bamboo God etc., and therefore, it is obvious that all the mystical, supernatural or divine interventions are bound to happen amidst the natural surroundings. All these kinds of happenings can be traced out from the three select folk tales titled: “Chethuang” (Chittam Tree), “Nuwai” (Migratory birds), and “Kherengbar” (The Flower of Heaven) taken for this research.

The folk tale titled: “Chethuang”, is a story about an elder brother’s desire to marry his younger sister, which is considered as a taboo in their society. In the climax of this story the younger sister plants a Chethuang (Chittam tree), climbs on it and reaches in to the sky to escape the marriage which happens by divine intervention, and the elder brother is killed by the Chethuang tree’s branch which falls on him. However, there are other retelling of this tale which states that the brother is killed by a wild boar. In this particular folk tale, we can find the mystical elements or symbols in the dream that the girl had, in which she is asked by a God or a



Goddesses to find out a Chethuang tree from the forest and worship that by saying a mantra, which will magically grow taller and taller and reach up to the top of the sky. Now, according to the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, dreams are “Physical phenomenon of complete validity – Fulfilment of Wishes; they can be inserted into the chain of intelligible waking mental acts; they are constructed by a highly complicated activity of the mind”. On the other hand, C. Jung attaches far greater importance to dreams and believes that dreams can reveal a great deal about the psychological and psychical state of the dreamer. So, if we follow Freud’s and C. Jung’s psychoanalytic theory of interpreting the girl’s dream then we can say that her escape dream was her own conscience giving her the ideas and ability to avoid the marriage; however, we can’t ignore the presence of divine intervention in this tale which made the Chethuang tree grow taller up to the sky’s limit.

In the second folk tale too, which is titled: “Nuwai” (Migratory birds), we can find similar mystical elements or supernatural happenings. This story is about the two sisters who finds a ripe melon in the jhum field which they decide to eat near their grandparent’s pond. Over there, they saw a swinging creeper on which they decide to climb and swing turn by turn. While swinging on that creeper, the younger sister met with an accident as she falls into the water and is swallowed by a big fish. Although the younger sister was recused later by her grandparents, this incident had made their family members detest the elder sister and she is blamed for causing the accident of her younger sister. The elder sister was locked inside the bird’s cage and treated cruelly by everyone at home, and therefore, she eventually flies away with the Nuwai (Migratory birds) after having stitched the feathers on to her arms, which she had asked and collected from the Nuwai birds. This unrealistic happening is a sign or a symbol of mystical elements present in this folk tale, or we can say that divine intervention also took place, which if interpreted through psychoanalytic understanding shows the desire of freedom or escapism of the girl from the sufferings of life.

The third folk tale titled: “Kherengbar” (The Flower of Heaven), is a story about the hurdles faced by a pair of lover belonging to different economic class status which becomes the reason for their family members to disagree to support their relationship, which compelled them to elope into the deep jungle where they saw the ‘Kherengbar’ i.e., the flower of heaven and due to the persistence of the woman to get her the flowers, the man climbs the tree, plucks the flowers and gives it to the woman which she smells it before the man climbs down from the tree, which resulted in the metamorphosis of the man into a monkey and the woman into a big lizard as a result of disobeying a norm. This metamorphosis of human beings into animals



shows us the presence of mystical elements in this folk tale and their unfulfilled desire, when interpreted through Freud's psychoanalytic theory can be referred to as the interplay between ID, Ego and Super-ego; - wherein ID refers to the pleasure principle and dwells in the unconscious part of the mind; Super-ego refers to the social or the moral conduct which a person needs to follow and is therefore considered as the conscience of an individual which guides him or her to decide between what is right and wrong and Ego refers to the logical or conscious part of the mind which balances the demands of ID and Super-ego. In this tale ID can be related to the temptation and the desire of the woman to get the Kherengbar flowers and smell it; Super-ego can be related to the man's warning to his beloved that it's a taboo to pluck the Kherengbar flowers and smell it before offering to the Gods and also not to smell or put the flowers on her hairs until and unless he climbs down from the tree. The Ego, which is also known as the reality principle in this particular folk tale can be related to the realization and the regret of both the lovers that they had made a mistake and will now get metamorphosed into different animals, and their acceptance that they have to live apart from each other in this particular life as a result of the punishment they have received.

All of these three folk tales have also been performed as play dramas by the members of "Tiyari Drama and Cultural Center", Agartala and adapted into audio visual filmic version into films and cinemas by Doordarshan Kendra, Agartala and by other local artists and directors. Some of the videos of these folk tales are also available in You Tube channels, which became possible all because of the advancement of the digital technology.

Conclusions

In today's contemporary era, we can see that people of Tripura have become more concerned towards preserving their rich cultural heritage and therefore we find that the folk tales of the 'Borok' communities are also getting incorporated more into the printed mediums, in the form of books and journals; and in the digital platforms, in the form of films or movies, along with being performed as play dramas and songs on stages in programs and community festivals etc. These tales help people to identify the roots and origins of their distinctive indigenous communities and are also a rich treasure house of environmental concerns and studies, educating the children and adults alike to preserve and have concerns for the environment as well, and is a recommended book not only for the children but also for the adults. The psychoanalytic interpretation of the mystical elements or symbols present in the select folk



tales of the ‘Borok’ communities not only helps us to understand the nature of the minds or the thought process of the characters present in the tales, it also somehow tells us about the thought process of the narrators who had initially narrated these tales, and also the thought process of all those transcribers, script writers and film makers who had created the retelling of these folk tales as the stories are the creation of their artistic and creative minds which had also undergone slight variations when narrated by different story tellers or are changed from one particular artform into another artform, such as from written/printed form into audio visual form etc. Therefore, Dustin Lalkulhpuia in the second chapter titled: “Folk tales as a reflection of culture”, in his book *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below* states that:

“Folktales are thus artistic creations that are not a chronicle of facts but rather are stories that are placed in a timeless setting. They are stories that have evolved through time and emerged from the common people; they serve as a vehicle through which people can express their aspiration and creative thinking”. (Lalkulhpuia, 34)

References:

Lalkulhpuia, Dustin. “Tripura: The Land of the Boroks”. *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. First published 2023. Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK. ISBN (10): 1-5275-3041-8. ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3041-6

Lalkulhpuia, Dustin. “Folktales as a Reflection of Culture”. *Kokborok Literature from Tripura: Voices from Below*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. First published 2023. Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK. ISBN (10): 1-5275-3041-8. ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3041-6

Lalkulhpuia, Dustin. “Little Narratives of The Boroks from Selected Folktales, Poems and Short Stories: A Study.” Mizoram University, Department of English, Aizawl – 796004

Bhattacharjee, Biprajit. *Kerang Kothoma: A Modern Re-Telling of the Folk Tales of Tripura*. Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 2020. 128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor. New Delhi – 110049

Dey, Tulika. “Folk Tales of North East India: A relook for Environmental Studies Classroom Transaction”. *International Refereed Journal of Education*. Pedagogy of Learning, Vol.-3,



Issue-2, pp.14-27, Oct. 2015. P-ISSN: 2320-9526, E-ISSN: 2395-7344. Indexed and Impact Factor: 0.787 (GIF)

Krzyżanowski, Julian. “The Cultural Background of Folk Tales”. *Literary Studies in Poland* 8, 15-28

Singh, Dr. Arimardan. “Folklores of Tripura”. *Folklore of Northeast India*. NE Book and Publications, Assam (India). National Highway, Silchar-788005, Assam, India. ISBN: 978-93-84275-58-7

Raha, Dr. Debopam. “Folk Tales of North-East India: A Tryst with Nature”. *International Journal of Novel Research in Interdisciplinary Studies*. Vol. 6, Issue 6, pp: (1-3), Month: November - December 2019. ISSN 2394-9716

Tyagi, D.K. *Tribal Folk Tales of Tripura*. Published by Tribal Research & Cultural Institute Government of Tripura. Kalika Press Pvt, Ltd., Kolkata. First Edition: January, 1997. Reprint: February, 2020. ISBN: 978-93-86707-51-2