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## Oral Tradition, Language and Two Arunachali Writers

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### **Abstract:**

*In the midst of variation and differences perhaps it is a sense of commonness and togetherness which is an important aspect to be appreciated in the much underrepresented North-East. The present paper does not attempt to encompass the entire gamut of North-East with its rich and varied culture, but an attempt has been made to concentrate on two writers from Arunachal Pradesh and how they deal with the rich oral tradition and the problematics of language both in their works as well as their roles as writers adopting foreign languages to convey their thoughts and feelings.*

**Key words:** North-East, Arunachal, Oral tradition, storytelling, language.

The Assamese language itself has served as the lingua Franca of the neighboring hill states around Assam where the tribal people speak their own language. As Tilottoma Misra has mentioned in her introduction to The Oxford Anthology of Writings from The North East India, that before the advent of identity politics amongst the various ethnic groups in the region whose mother language was not Assamese, the writers from different communities used the Assamese language as the medium for creative writing. Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi belonging to the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is a significant writer in this context. Thongchi is one of those who have successfully rendered their work in the Assamese language. The Assamese language which writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century used was indeed a language which contained elements from the existing speech practices of communities such as Persian, Hindi, Bengali and other languages which people of the region came across in their day to day political and commercial encounters. The basic reason behind these writers using the Assamese language for writing their works is that they went to Assamese medium schools and hence often used Assamese as a means of communicating their thoughts.

With the passage of time, a significantly large number of writers both from Assam and the neighboring hill states have started writing in the English language. This was because many of the writers who received their education in English or rather to be more precise who went to English medium schools found it more comfortable to express themselves in English rather than their mother tongues. Moreover, some of the hill states have also adopted English as their official language. While a considerable number of writers from Arunachal Pradesh like Lummer Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi wrote in the Assamese language because Assamese was the medium of instruction in their schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, some of the contemporary writers from Arunachal Pradesh like Mamang Dai have chosen to write in English. As Tilottoma Misra has said

“ At present, however, the new generation has accepted the prime position of English in the intellectual sphere of the country and would rather write in that universally powerful language than in their mother tongue or any of the Indian languages.” (pg xviii, The Oxford Anthology of Writings from the North-East, Fiction)

With the standardization of the Assamese language as a result of the encounter with the Christian missionaries, (source: Tilottoma Misra) on one hand, on the other most of the communities of the North-East can pride themselves of possessing a rich oral tradition- a vibrant story telling tradition. In fact, in the present times, collecting, printing and re-telling the folklore of various indigenous communities or communities which have been pushed to the periphery in the colonial and early post colonial times has become a vogue to assert one's identity.

The basic objective of this paper is to explore the nuances of language and assess whether language is as simple a mode of communication as it appears. It deals with language both in the oral as well as the written form though it is quite evident that oral tradition has been dealt with more details. Browsing through the topic of oral tradition, the story telling element has been considered for discussion. For the purpose of study two writers from Arunachal Pradesh has been selected both belonging to different times. These two writers are Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi and Mamang Dai. The differences between these two writers is quite evident although both belong to the post colonial era. While Thongchi chose Assamese as a medium to write his works, Dai comfortably deals with English as a means of conveying her thoughts and feelings in her works. The paper deals with these two texts- Yeshe Dorjee

Thongchi's novel *Mouna Out Mukhar Hriday* and Mamang Dai's novel *The Legends of the Pensam*. Both the original text of Thongchi as well as its translated version by Deborshi Prasad Nath as *Whispering Lips and Murmuring Hearts* has been used for study "Today, I might say that these stories of gods and demons have no basis in logic, but the storyteller will tell me that they were born out of reason, out of the minds of men. The stories do not come out of nowhere like the bolt of lightning. Life generated it in us and the significance of songs and stories is that they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded in memory and the magic of words and in oral tradition." (Mamang Dai)

North East Frontier Area (NEFA) or what is presently known as Arunachal Pradesh is a land of stories. In fact, there are many stories that link the clans which inhabit this area and although perhaps sometimes they forget how these connections were made but everything is interconnected. In Mamang Dai's *The Legends of the Pensam*, the author herself has got a story to tell; a story of the "hidden land", multiple stories in multiple voices. Although it is a novel, it contains multiple stories which are complete by themselves.

The word legend itself in Mamang Dai's *The Legends of the Pensam* refer to tales- tales of a daughter who returns to her origin, tales of tribes with their beliefs and faiths, tales of the British who came to this "hidden land" way back before the Indian Independence, tales of the daughters of the area who shared a sense of belongingness with the region and yet welcomed the transition that was to take place. There is a story even regarding the origin of the universe. The Adi tribe believes that in the beginning, there was only "Keyum" which means nothingness:

".....Keyum is the remote past, way beyond the reach of our senses. It is the place of ancient things from where no answer is received. Out of this place of great stillness, the first flicker of thought began to shine like a light in the soul of man. It became a shimmering trail, took shape and extended and became the pathway. Out of this nebulous zone, a spark was born that was the light of the imagination. The spark grew into a shining stream that was the consciousness of man and from this all the stories of the world and its creatures came into being." (Page 56, *The Legends of the Pensam*)

These various stories whether it has to do with the origin of the universe or whether it has to do with the history of various clans are not scripted down but rather these histories are recorded by the shamans and rhapsodists and in time of need when a person falls ill or there is some disaster all remembered links of kinship are called up and word is sent to the clan members to come to the aid of their brethren. At other times, these stories are reborn in the song of the Ponung dancers. Stories in the novel are not just narrated but they are sung and as well as danced. The novel contains a section titled "Songs of the Rhapsodists" to draw attention to the storytelling element. It is a set of stories interconnected in the fact that these stories are passed from one generation to the other giving it the form of a novel. There is a host of characters steeped in traditional beliefs and practice animistic faith, they believe in the existence of spirits and supernatural powers and this has been shown in the very first chapter where Hoxo, one of the characters is supposed to have "fallen from the sky". It is spirits which have a considerable impact upon man's life and no surprise is shown when people disappear or are killed in hunting expeditions. The Miri (priest) in the Adi society has a very important role to play. He is the storyteller, the healer, the rhapsodist par excellence. He invokes the memory by singing legends and chanting chants. He even instructs the tribesmen by advising them regarding the day to day activities. Above all he acts as the mediator between man and the spirits by conveying to the spirits man's grievances and requesting them for Redressal.

The pathos, the fear and the confusion that these tribal people encounter in the transitional state nearing modernity has been very intricately brought out in these stories. Even the foothills of the Himalayas are not far from the touches of modernity. The *Legends of the Pensam* become an example of negotiation of modernity with the traditional storytelling technique. The stories in the book take the reader on a long ride from the origin of the tribe to the appearance of the "migluns" (British), the Abor expedition to the modern times of development that throw their lives into disarray. Besides these, there is a remarkable story of a tribal girl named Nenem and her love affair with a British officer which represents one of the various such love affairs that developed between the colonizer and the colonized at that point of time. Some came to the forefront while others were wiped off. Although the British officer David wants to take Nenem along with him, Nenem does not agree to accompany him, she is held back by the love for her land and her people. Dai deals very tenderly with the pangs of their separation. Finally when the village in which Nenem lives is drowned and she has to move to another place along with her family, she cannot tolerate that and drowns herself in the river.

Language plays the most significant role in Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi's *Mouna Outh Mukhar Hriday*. Although language is an inefficient tool in articulating the crisis of the underdeveloped societies, we see that these two Arunachali writers, that is, Mamang Dai and Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi have successfully crossed the linguistic boundaries. While Mamang Dai in her book *The Legends of the Pensam* has comfortably made use of the English language to beautifully express her thoughts, Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi has used Assamese to write his works. These writers from Arunachal Pradesh have decisively crossed linguistic boundaries to create a literature of their own. In the words of Tilottama Misra:

" Their fictional works can claim a double parentage and are "twice-born" in the true sense of the term because they belong both to the tradition of Arunachali literature as well as to the literatures of the native speakers of the languages which they have chosen to make the vehicles of their own thoughts." (Crossing Linguistic Boundaries)

The absence of a common language is a basic theme in Thongchi's novel. The novel centers round a pair of lovers Rinchin and Yama who belong to different tribes of Arunachal and hence speak different languages. They cannot even understand each other's language. Separated by both the norms of society and language barrier, these two lovers are unable to give vent to the deepest feelings of their heart and use the medium of touch to express themselves. It is silence which reigns supreme as a language between them. This central theme of the novel finds expression in the following poignant passage:

There is a great wall between Yama and Rinsin – the wall of language. How will they reach out to each other through this wall and speak the language of their hearts? They can never do it, never! They are helpless like a pair of dumb doves. Their only language is that of furtive glances, trembling lips:

“I knew I would find you here”, said Yama’s heartily, “I don’t know where you come from, what is the name of your village, where your home is... But, from the moment I saw you, I have felt that I have always known you... How will you understand my situation, rinsin? I am an object that has been sold to another. I have no identity of my own, no voice, no opinion. But, if you had been a Bangni man or me a woman born into your society, there would have been no such mighty wall of language and race between us...” (p 72, Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts).

It is pidgin Assamese that Rinchin makes use of to communicate with the people from the plains specially Dilip Saikia. Saikia infarct appoints him as the Sardar because of his ability to speak pidgin Assamese. Later on he and Tadak, who is Yama’s brother, is appointed as the state interlocutor because of the same ability. But even pidgin Assamese proves to be inadequate to convey inner feelings of the heart. Hence Rinchin himself admits towards the end of the Novel:

“Tadak, I don’t know how to speak to you. How easy it would have been to convey my feelings to you had your Bangni tongue been the same as my Bhutiya. I have so much inside here (touching his chest), but I cannot speak in this language of the plainsmen. God has given our people the same eyes, lips, hands, but different tongues...” (P 117, Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts).

Thongchi is aware of the fact that the pidgin language, though it might be a natural mode of communication for the tribes, is not a “respectable” language, nor is it equipped to convey complex human emotions. He does not refer to this hybrid speech as a distinct creolized language, but merely calls it “broken Asamiya”. This is evident when Dilip Saikia remembers his sister and sister in law teasing him not to pick up the language which his uncle adopted. He took vows never to pick up “ that hybrid and defective mode of speech.”

As Tilottama Misra has said in her essay “Crossing Linguistic Boundaries” perhaps this gap in communication between the two lovers Rinchin and Yama also suggests the gap in communication that Thongchi felt was present between himself as a writer and his readers, more specifically the readers of Arunachal. Perhaps it points out to his own plight where he had to adopt the Assamese language to reach out to his readers. Had he been able to communicate in his works in his native tongue things would have been different, but it remains so far an assumption. Just like Thongchi’s Rinchin and Yama, language is the barrier also for Mamang’s Nenem and David. Moreover, it is the differences of language that bring about differences among the various tribal groups residing in the same region. In Thongchi’s novel the different clans misunderstand each other because of differences in language. Although Dilip Saikia is appointed to supervise the road construction, his major purpose is also to bring together these different tribes residing in the area and hence the metaphorical build a road through their minds. He keeps on reiterating this motive throughout the novel and insists that the two tribes- the Nyishis and the Sherdukpens should work for the construction of the road together. When the two tribes come face to face, they look at each other with suspicion:

“ On seeing a group of an unfamiliar tribe approach them, the Nyishi laborers came out of their camps. A sense of surprise was writ large on their faces when they saw this group of people from an alien tribe- unfamiliar faces, strange dresses, outlandish mannerisms. The same was true of the members of Rinchin’s group.” ( Page 34, Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts)

Noticing the hostile attitude of both the tribes towards each other, Dilip Saikia tries to convince Rinchin:

“ Along with the construction of the road, we should strive to bring unity and harmony amongst the different tribes and inhabitants of the different villages by removing their misgivings. That is the reason for asking you to stay along with the Nyishis and work with them.” (Page 38, Silent Lips and Murmuring Hearts)

In fact when a love affair blossoms between Rinchin and Yama, Dilip Saikia is glad to see that the process of the two lovers coming together is paralleled by the process of the two tribes converging with each other as they come to believe and accept that they are really people belong to the same human race with only superficial differences of dress, customs and rituals. On a larger level, the building of the road not only facilitates the coming together of different tribes of the region but it also enables the people of the hills to come in contact with the people of the plains.

Thus, we see that in the works of both these writer's language as a means of communication works at two levels: while these writers portray the problem of language concerning the characters in their novels, they at another level raise questions on language and its usage that they have made, then problems that they as writers have encountered. Alienated from the mainstream, crippled in expression, the Arunachali writers do confront a dilemma with tradition. The North-East being an underrepresented area and Arunachal Pradesh is a “hidden land”, these writers have to fight against all odds to make their voices heard. Rich in oral tradition, devoid of a script of their own, these two writers have chosen other languages to express themselves. The choice of “the other language” not only confronts them with the possibilities of being misunderstood but at the same time it does provide them with a larger readership. Hence Deborshi Prasad Nath has rightly said in his essay “ Africa and India in the Novels of Dai and Emcheta”:

“Leaving the track of an exclusive preoccupation with any single culture or literary tradition, the Arunachalee writer, akin to women writers of postcolonial nations such as Nigeria, accommodates the twin processes of rejection and acceptance as a survival strategy.”

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