

Funeral Nights* as a ‘sthalapurana’: Representation of culture, oral history, folk custom and identity in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s *Funeral Nights

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Abstract

In the foreword to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao aptly pointed out that every part of India has its own folklore, its own ‘sthalapurana’ that is largely transmitted through oral tradition. The ancient rite and folk custom of Ka PhorSorat, the feast of the Dead, a unique six-day-long funeral ceremony of the Lyngngams, a Khasi sub-tribe, forms the focal point of the novel *Funeral Nights*. The ceremony, along with the vast collection of stories about life, indigenous customs of the Khasi tribes provide a profound insight into the working of the tribal psyche and their worldview. The novel is born out of an innate desire to be heard, understood and respected as a tribe. It is also an attempt to write back to the Centre as Khasis were (and still are) subjected to racism, humiliation, marginalization and dismissal both by colonial historians who saw them as “wild-looking demons” (Nongkynrih 24) and postcolonial mainstream journalists who labelled them as “good for nothing” (Nongkynrih 24). The paper critically analyses the text as it represents indigenous customs, oral history, folk traditions and foregrounds voices that needs to be heard and understood in the context of India’s multicultural mosaic.

Keywords: culture, folk, history, customs, tribe, identity

In the foreword to *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao aptly pointed out that every village of India has its own folklore, its own rich ‘sthalapurana’ or legendary history that is largely transmitted through oral tradition (viii). This incorporation of folk traditions, legends, myths and customs pave a way through which the past mingles with the present and enriches the present. The present can only exist meaningfully if it develops deep connections with the past or to quote from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Kotha O Kahini*, if it engages into a meaningful conversation with the past (9-10). *Funeral Nights* as a ‘sthalapurana’ is noteworthy as it is an honest attempt to bring the marginalised voices of the

tribals to the centre. These are voices that needs to be heard and understood in the context of India's multicultural mosaic.

The 'Northeast' is a blanket term that ends up homogenizing a geographical area of nearly 2.55 lakh square kilometres that consists of eight different states namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. Each area varies greatly in terms of traditions, culture, religion, language and dialects. The nomenclature 'Northeast' does not justify the rich diversity of the region (Basu 419). In fact, in the imagination of the mainland, the region continues to remain the mysterious 'other' even after seventy-five years have passed since India got independence from the British Raj'. In absence of adequate representation of the region's socio-historical-cultural diversity, creative writers of the region often take up the role of cultural historians. Place novels such as Dhruva Hazarika's *A Bowstring Winter*, Siddhartha Deb's *The Point of Return*, Mamang Dai's handling of myth, orality and legends in *The Legends of Pensam* and *Once Upon a Moontime*, Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* deserve special mention as these texts foreground the experiences of the people living in this territory. This territory is ancient and modern, mythic and contemporary. It is a place where indigenous faith and practices, tribal customs and ecological wisdom coexist with issues related to identity, modernity, patriotism, political violence, borders and boundaries. These diverse themes find representation in the literary output of the region.

In the essay titled "Speaking, Writing and Coming of the Print Culture in Northeast India" Tilottoma Misra points out that orality has been the strength of these tribal communities. They traditionally give more credibility to the spoken word as it is fluid, indestructible and can be easily recalled while the written word can be destroyed. Memory also plays a very important role among the tribal communities since time immemorial as much of their stories, legends, myths are transmitted orally from one generation to another. But the Western world associates the written word with modernity and progress while orality is associated with primitivity and backwardness. The coloniser imposed his Eurocentric biases on the colonised people of the region. As a result of which their strength was depicted as their weakness (14-25). This biased view carried the sanction of the colonial master and hence it was regarded as truth. Thus, the western missionaries taught them to write and introduced them to western education but they also labelled their traditional culture, knowledge and wisdom as primitive. In the *Blood of Other Days*, Temsula Ao brings out the effect of this hegemonic colonial design on the psyche of the colonised tribals:

Then came a tribe of strangers
Into our primal territories
Armed with only a Book and
Promises of a land called Heaven

Declaring that our Trees and Mountains

Rocks and Rivers were no Gods
And that our songs and stories
Nothing but tedious primitive nonsense

We listened in confusion
To the new stories and too soon
Allowed our knowledge of other days
To be trivialized into taboo. (qtd in Baral 5)

Funeral Nights is an attempt to write back to the Centre, to tell (his)story and the story of his people in order to clear their ‘wounded name’ (Nongkynrih 26). The novel is sub-divided into twelve chapters and structurally resembles Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* and *The Arabian Nights*. The ancient rite and folk custom of Ka PhorSorat, the feast of the Dead, a unique six-day-long funeral ceremony of the Lyngngams, a Khasi sub-tribe, forms the focal point of the novel *Funeral Nights*. This is also the time when a wide range of stories are exchanged as people spend the ‘funeral nights’ drinking and gossiping together. The ceremony, along with the vast collection of stories about life, indigenous customs of the Khasi tribes provide a profound insight into the working of the tribal psyche and their worldview. The novel is an attempt to write back to the Centre as Khasis were (and still are) subjected to racism, humiliation, marginalization and dismissal both by colonial historians who saw them as “wild-looking demons” (Nongkynrih 24) and postcolonial mainstream journalists who labelled them as “good for nothing” (Nongkynrih 24).

Ap Jutang, the narrator of *Funeral Nights*, begins this ‘sthalapurana’ with self-introduction and introduction of his birthplace Sohra. The epigraph to the introductory chapter encapsulates the theme of the novel:

In all my writing, I tell the story
Of my life over and over again.

-Issac Bashevic Singer (Nongkynrih 1)

Ap Jutang is a Khasi man, acutely aware of his history, heritage and customs. A member of the ‘Ki Khasi’ sub-tribe, Ap Jutang begins by mentioning to the readers that his name in Khasi means ‘keeper of the covenant’. He also explains the legendary history associated with the name Sohra. The place Sohra is named after a gentlewoman of divine grace who had mysteriously appeared out of nowhere and declared to the founding clans of the place that her purpose was to teach “grace and good manners to the people” (Nongkynrih 7). A strong believer in the legendary history of Sohra, Khasi tribes regard it to be the “birthplace of Khasi etiquette and good conduct” (Nongkynrih 8). Thus, myths and legends are not removed but become an integral part of their lives. It shapes their ethics and worldview. The sensibility of Ap Jutang is shaped and moulded by Sohra. Sohra with its beautiful hills, rivers, woods and customs shape his worldview. Khasi religion recognises that God is same not only for every human being but also for

every creature on earth. This inclusive belief makes them tolerant and holistic in their approach to life. They see man as a “caretaker of the earth” (Nongkynrih 356) and not as a “master of everything he finds on it” (Nongkynrih 356). The Khasi religion does not promote anthropocentrism which “encourages man to indulge in all sorts of earth wrecking activities in the name of progress and development (Nongkynrih 357).

Ap Jutang deftly integrates the history of Sohra with the history of colonialism as the British re-named Sohra as ‘Cherrapunjee’. They mis-pronounced the original Khasi name as ‘Cherra’ (Nongkynrih 10). The new name carried the authorising stamp of the coloniser and easily replaced the “rightful name” (Nongkynrih 10). Being a colonial import, the name Cherrapunjee is not connected to the history of the Khasi tribes.

Sohra is the wettest place on earth and rain in Sohra is an “unforgettable presence” (Nongkynrih 11) to the Khasis. They have several names for it such as lapbah (heavy rain), lapsan (immense rain), lappraw (light rain), u kyllang (stormy rain) (Nongkynrih 12). Rain time in Sohra is also special as it is the time for stories, myths, legends to be transmitted orally from one generation to another as adverse weather conditions often bring outdoor activities to a halt.

Ap Jutang is the main focaliser of this novel. Along with his friends he journeys to the “jungle hamlet” of Nongshyrkon where the ancient folk rite of Ka PhorSorat is to take place. Like Odysseus’ journey to the island of Ithaca, this journey too becomes an enriching experience as Ap Jutang and his friends set out to discover the soul of the Khasi race. The readers of the novel also partake in this journey. Ap Jutang and his friends reach the hamlet of Nongshyrkon seven days before schedule. Their stay in the jungle hamlet of Nongshyrkon turns out to be a life changing experience for them as they understand the nuances of the tribe’s history and culture.

Funeral Nights not only focuses on folk customs and folk traditions but beautifully juxtaposes the same with representation of issues of contemporary relevance. The conversations between Ap Jutang and his friends- Kynsai, Dale, Hamkom, Halolihim, Su, Raji, Bah Kit, Magdalene- enriches the text as they are acutely aware of the socio-political, religious and economic realities of Meghalaya. They do not represent Meghalaya as an idyllic land. Issues as diverse as corruption among political leaders and bureaucrats, problem of drunken driving, illegal coal mining, menace of coal mafias, effect of timber ban by environmentalists, Bangladeshi infiltration in Assam and Meghalaya, encroachment of territories in Meghalaya by the neighbouring State of Assam in absence of proper borders, presence of armed forces as a boon or curse to the residents of Meghalaya, dangers of uranium mining in the hills, militant operations in the area are brought up, discussed and debated. Again there are discussions regarding glorious and rich history of the region such as catalogue of famous people who have graced the region with their presence like Rabindranath

Tagore, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Swami Vivekananda and C.V. Raman (Nongkynrih 76). Khasi words of every day usage such as Jadoh (meat-rice) (Nongkynrih 80), Khublei (a popular form of greetings) (Nongkynrih 82) and babu (a term of respect for teachers) (Nongkynrih 83), traditional Khasi dresses, importance of betel nut in Khasi culture, history behind choice of names among Khasis and different racial features of people living here are mentioned. These discussions enrich the text.

Ap Jutang chokes up with nostalgia as he says, “Mine is a vanishing tribe” (Nongkynrih 254). In a desperate attempt to cling to the past as the “past is dear” (Nongkynrih 141) he explains the Creation Myths of Khasis. Khasi mythology is sacred to the Khasis (Nongkynrih 353) and have deep symbolic significance in their lives. It also determines their worldview.

In *An Introduction to Cultural Studies* Pramod Kumar Nayar, following a line of thought put forward by Susan Sontag, notes that remembering is an ethical act as it requires aligning memory with reflection (203). Recollecting and simultaneously reflecting on the richness of folk memory and folk traditions, Ap Jutang explains to his friends that as per the Creation Myths of Khasis the world began as a vast empty space. God had created only two beings- Ramew, the guardian spirit of the earth and her husband Basa. They prayed to their God, U Blei, for children. Their prayers were answered and they had five children. “Sun was their first daughter, followed by their only son, Moon, and three other daughters, Water, Wind and Fire (Nongkynrih 344). Their children changed the world into a pleasant land. But Ramew wanted someone to tend to the bounty of the earth as her heavenly children were “ill-equipped to look after all that they have created” (Nongkynrih 345). In order to address the concerns of Ramew, God created the diverse creatures and the “two powerful spirits of the mountains as the guardians of the earth” (Nongkynrih 345). Soon these mountain spirits began a tussle for power and the Tiger was made the administrator of the earth. The Tiger too turned despotic and encouraged the law of ‘might is right’ (Nongkynrih 345). As anarchy set in, Ramew again turned to God for help and requested God to send wise “overseers” to the earth who would be a blessing to all living beings on earth (Nongkynrih 345). God sent sixteen clans living in heaven to be the caretakers of all creation. These clans known henceforth as Ki HynniewTrep or the seven huts would later become the ancestors of the seven sub-tribes of the Khasi people. God gave them Lai Hukum or the Three Commandments as part of a Covenant. These are ka tip briew tip Blei (the knowledge of man, the knowledge of God), ka tip kur tip kha (the knowledge of one’s maternal and paternal relations) and ka kamaiia ka hok (the earning of virtue) (Nongkynrih 358).

Thus, the Creation Myth of the Khasis views man as a caretaker of the world. He must act responsibly and be above petty selfish interests. Again, whenever man is in distress, he can call for divine aid. Man’s relationship with God is personal. Hence, the place of worship is not important in Khasi religion. The worship takes

place in Khasi homes. The Three Commandments are of supreme importance to them. The First Commandment places knowledge of man before knowledge of God. Man must love and respect his fellow men and establish harmonious relations within the community. Feasts and celebrations are a manifestation of this harmony. “Service to man is service to God” (Nongkynrih 360). Knowledge of God alone can turn a man into a fanatic. Hence, man must place “knowledge of man as the basis of all human actions” (Nongkynrih 360). Maternal and paternal relations are given due importance and marriage within the same clan is prohibited. In Khasi traditional marriages the maternal uncle initiates the discussion with the maternal uncle of the man’s clan. The Last Commandment gives importance to earning of virtue. One must “work hard” (Nongkynrih 369) to earn virtue for only then can he understand the true essence and value of virtue.

The funeral rite and folk custom of Ka PhorSorat forms the focal point of this novel. Ap Jutang and his friends have undertaken the journey to the jungle hamlet of Nongshyrkon to participate in this folk ritual. The funeral rite begins with a procession to the tree house in the jungle where the body had been preserved for nine months for the ritual to take place in all its glory and splendour. There are different rituals to be performed on different days. Sixteen drummers and four pipers act as musicians for the occasion. They accompany the shamans and elders from Nongtraï, a village located near the Garo Hills border. Traditional drums and wind instruments are used for the occasion. KsingKynthei is a “small rectangular drum made from the wood of the rare lakiang tree” (Nongkynrih 332). It is reserved for the main ritual while a small bowl-shaped drum called ksingpadiah is used for the initial rituals. The pipers use the “tangmuri wind instrument” which is shaped like a trumpet and is made from the horn of a buffalo (Nongkynrih 332). The shaman begins the ritual of Ka duwaikhaw or prayer with rice grains. He tosses some rice grains to the left and right of the entry to the tree house as the musicians start a slow, haunting music. He begins by addressing the departed soul as “mother” and “queen” (Nongkynrih). This shows the respect that the tribes have for the dead and their belief in the purity of the rites. He informs the soul of the dead that all the members of her family and her clan have accumulated for the ancient rite to take place, the ritual cleansing of the dead body will commence and these elaborate rites are a preparation for the final liberation of the soul.

The ritual of duwaikhaw or the prayer with rice grains follows the initial ceremony. As part of the ritual the shaman invokes God and the guardian spirits of the Shykon clan and informs them about the proceedings of the ritual. A rooster (mythically significant to the Khasi religion and metaphorically associated with the best qualities in the human heart such as humility, self-effacement, selflessness and self-denial) will lead the departed soul in its final journey to the abode of the spirits at Krangraji and hence a rooster is cleansed by sprinkling holy water and rice on it. The body of Ka We Shykon is carefully

brought down from the tree house by six people for the occasion. The process of bathing and feeding is largely symbolic. The body is clothed in the best clothes of the deceased woman and decked with some jewellery. Direct payment to the cremators is not allowed in the customs and hence the jewels are an indirect way of paying for the process of cremation. Canons are fired to announce the arrival of burang uncles as these relatives bring the bulls which are sacrificed during the main ceremony. Apart from burang uncles, the dead woman's grandchildren, nieces, nephews also give buffaloes for the rite. The ritual of fund collection or on-ki-shaw-kti follows wherein not only close relatives but voluntary contributors donate money for the occasion. Each voluntary contribution is carefully documented as such donations are customarily reciprocated whenever there is a death in the family of the contributors. The ritual shows the strong community feelings among the villagers of the hamlet. They live by the basic tenants of the Khasi religion and adhere to its customs and rituals. The ritual of fund collection ends with formal thanksgiving using rice grains and traditional beer.

On the day of the final ceremony rituals begin from dawn. Monolith and other stones are carefully brought in. The senior shaman begins the rituals by paying homage to God. The Shaman begins the rituals only after receiving a positive signal from God that the way is clear for the dead spirit to begin final journey to the abode of spirits. He throws eggs on the ceremonial pit; each egg is accompanied by prayers till one egg breaks signaling the approval of God. This is followed by the planting of the monolith. The menhir or the upright male stone is planted facing west, the vertical stones are placed in front of it, two on each side while the female stone, the dolmen, is laid on them to form a structure which resembled a little chair with a straight back (Nongkynrih 833). The monolith is washed, five pieces of betel nut and five betel leaves are offered to the soul of the dead along with a broken egg. The first bull or pahja bull is sacrificed next amidst holy prayers and an oath taking before God that the flesh of the bull will feed the multitude while his soul will guide the dead spirit in the final journey. The bull is a beast of burden in this world but according to Khasi belief it is the "most knowing in the world of the dead" (Nongkynrih 835). The sacrificial blood of the bull is collected and the mawnop monolith is washed with it. But, the journey of the soul is long and full of dangers as demons and evil spirits try to stop the soul from reaching its destination. Hence, the ceremony involves sacrifice of fifty bulls so that armed with the spirits of these sacrificial bulls the soul can reach its final destination. Music is played nonstop during the process of this sacrifice as the soul of the dead is finally reaching the abode of spirits, its final resting place after loitering in the jungles for nine months. It is a moment of celebration in spite of being a sad event. Blood from fifty bulls is poured on the monolith. The next phase of the ceremony continues after the ceremonial feast where guests and relatives are served with rice, vegetables and buffalo meat. The professional drummers dance paying homage to mother earth through their performance. It is a dance to pay homage to "life and death, God and his creation" (Nongkynrih 841). This is followed by ritual lamentation by the two daughters of the dead

woman. They recount their association with the dead and lament their loss in a traditional song of lament. The body is finally taken out for cremation in a long procession after a red rooster is sacrificed. The soul of the rooster will guide the departed soul in its final journey. As part of a ceremony called kaikong or visiting houses the dead body is carried to the houses of the maternal and paternal relations as a “kind of leave-taking” (Nongkynrih 848). Finally, as the body is taken to the cremation hills and put on the pyre along with firewood, a white rooster is sacrificed and the sacrificial blood is poured on the dead body along with yiadhiar or traditional beer. The male relatives set the pyre alight and once the body turns to ashes the fragments are carefully collected in a large gourd. These remains will be placed beneath the female stone of the mawnop after three nights have passed since the day of cremation (Nongkynrih 849). Thus, the elaborate ritual of Ka Phor Sorat finally comes to an end.

Ap Jutang and his friends, like the wedding guest of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* become wiser and more experienced with the ways of the world as they witness the elaborate funeral rites and folk customs of Ka PhorSorat or the feast of the dead. They learn to evaluate life and its challenges. The feast of the dead gives them a rare opportunity to acquire a deep understanding of the soul of the Khasi race.

Funeral Nights as a ‘sthalapurana’ is noteworthy as it brings the margin to the centre. The novel is born out of an innate desire to be heard, understood and respected as a tribe. In *Affinities between Folkloristics and Historiography* Birendranath Datta points out the importance of folk customs and traditional practices in writing people’s history (102). *Funeral Nights* is also a brave attempt to write the cultural history of the Khasi race.

Notes

¹ The nomenclature ‘North-East’ is a blanket term that implies a homogeneous province. However, the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are inhabited by people greatly varying in traditions, culture, religion, language and dialects. Again, they are often subjected to racial discrimination by people from the mainland as they look different from them.

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