

Elements of Cultural Beliefs and Animistic Faith in the Text “And that is Why (Manipuri Myths Retold)” by L. Somi Roy

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Myths embedded with its rich cultural tradition and with its variation in form have been passed on since time immemorial. It serves as an important factor of cultural heritage and identity in Manipuri literature and conveys important information about humanity. Myths encompass symbolic narratives dealing with creation, origin, religion, morality, historical and psychological conditions of a society.

Functioning both as a microcosm and macrocosm of human lives and the vast universe and exhibiting their interconnection allegorically to deliver moral messages, myths are coded with complex underlying cultural meanings, sacred history and religious practices assimilated from different eras throughout history. The religious practices include veneration of clan rulers, giving reverence to old ancestors, sacred rituals and offering to local deities.

Since ancient myth makers are believed to have existed in close proximity to nature, myths generate certain primitive knowledge on how to deal with the vastness and wildness of nature and universe. For instance, beginning with the invention of fire, techniques to tame wild animals to the adoption magic spells that are often overlooked by scientific advances. Myths are intended mainly to help men cope with the inexorability of reality.

It plays a significant role in tracing the course of mental history as receding back to nature and finding clues to the actual experience of nature and life plays a vital role in studying the process of imagination that leads to the formation myths and culture.

Myths with its course of events, sometimes invented and sometimes not, have left imprinted in people's minds which in turn shapes the people's worldview and their perspectives. The centuries old myths though often appropriated have delivered ideas and knowledge that remain deeply ingrained in their mental faculty. It as well serves to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. To fully understand the mentality of people and to study the core of Manipuri literature and their culture deeply rooted in their belief system, a critical analysis of Manipuri myths is inevitable.

Despite the changing environmental, social and political conditions, myths continue to survive appropriating to suit the social needs and to provide a guidance for mankind. Having said so, it being orally transmitted picks up bits and pieces of the historic facts, religious practices and the animistic faiths of different eras carrying the same essence as in the original form.

This research paper seeks to uncover the mythological element of supernatural and animistic faiths, the sacred history conveying moral values and the underlying framework for understanding reality to which lays the groundwork for the formation of Manipuri culture and identity in the text “ And that is why (Manipuri Myths Retold)” by L. Somi Roy.

Analysis

Creation myths play a huge role in shaping the cultural traits of Manipuri people. It gives an account of the beginnings of the origins and a sacred history regarded as a true story. Based on the tradition of customary ancestral worship , Sanamahism , the traditional ethnic religion of Meitei people often deals with cosmology , the origin of universe and is described in ancient manuscript called Puyas and performed in Lai Harouba festival as well. Mankind in Manipuri mythology is believed to have been created from clay and Soraren to have provided the breath of life to it.

The chapter “And that is why the Manipuri Pony is sacred” illustrates the conflict between Sanamahi and Pakhangbam over the succession of their father's throne. Though orally transmitted, the stronghold primitive belief of people that Sanamahi as the deity of household and Pakhangba of the whole kingdom along with its core tenets is accepted as ‘truth’ by the Meitei community and is established as a general conviction by which doctrine people conduct their lives . Furthermore, “And that is why man is creative and can think” and “And that is why man gets wrinkle and a stoop in his old age” as well explain the evolution of mankind from its creation and details the superiority of mankind over other forms of species.

The mythological narratives are constructed so as to describe a historical memory of the introduction of Porieton Chakhou and the origin of Polo in the narratives “and that's why the fire in the village of Andro never goes out” and “And that is why Manipur is the birthplace of Polo” respectively. Besides, the origin of weaving of silk in Khurkhul of Manipur is explicitly brought out in the narrative “and that is why the weavers of Khurkhul make silk “ultimately revealing the native's custom and their speciality of weaving silk.

Myths dealing with common historical memories preserve the cultural identity of the Meitei community. Creation myths operate well in the fact that the people belonging to the Meitei community understand themselves by shared common experience and acts a medium of uniting people belonging to their community.

The myth-makers in myths particularly fables endeavour to rationalize stories for increased information and use evidences required to make the narratives realistic which in turn targets to educate people to some extent. Myths in other words, are knowledge in stories. The narratives “And that is why the cat buries his poop”, “And that is why the deer does not eat rice”, “And that is why the duck does not brood her own eggs” and “And that is why the pied cuckoo drinks only rainwater” exhibit the inclination of the myth-makers that their culturally associated knowledge regarding the inherent nature of animals to be passed down to posterity.

The cultural knowledge embedded in myths is in some cases interwoven with animistic faith. The doctrine of animism according to Tylor, deals with the animism of all nature, rising at its highest pitch to personification. Animism is believed to have been taken in several doctrines which so forcibly conduce to personification that give consistent individual life to phenomena thereby allowing man’s mental fancy to personify in conscious metaphor.

Dwelling with the mythical narratives in the text, the act of personifying and worshiping inanimate objects following the core tenets of animism is evidently brought out. The chapter “And that is why the deer does not eat rice” mentioned the adherence of inanimate objects - rice, water, fish and salt to Manipuri goddess name - Phou Oibi, Ireima, Ngareima and Thumleima respectively and are depicted as daughters of the divinely father of heaven, Soraren. These four inanimate objects are considered as the basic sustenance for survival in the daily life of Manipuri people and its personification in mythology highlights the native people’s animistic faiths. On the other hand, worshiping of doll in the narrative “And that is why a doll is worshiped in Kakching village” and the influence of local shamans making people to believe it as the soul of Gailu vividly portrays the mysterious occurrences in their primitive social environment.

Primitive men with their limited knowledge couldn’t fully conceive or explain the world of nature. Often they ended up worshiping the mysteries of nature that ultimately resulted in cultivating sacred ritual practices. As evident in the tale, the family of Gailu remain in fear of the unknown mysterious and eerie sound produced from the box with doll. Apart from being influenced by local Shamans (Maibis), it is due to their deep seated conviction that is grounded on the assumption of the potentiality of spirits capable of giving both positive and negative results. Hence, the family of Gailu in an act of appeasing her spirit with simple offerings believed their conduct will bring order and peace in their family.

Surviving with the unknown supernatural forces of nature, primitive men are believed to often left with two choices - one is to become subservient to it and worship it with rituals and the other is to control it by magic spells. As seen in the narrative “And that is why the weavers of Khurkhul make silk”, the soldier’s mother conjured up withcraft to create a fearsome storm that blew the Burmese away implying the use of magic spell for the security of their family members. Moreover, in the narrative “And that is why a magic bamboo grows on Karang island”, Tomba, the Kabui Cheiftian muttered a powerful incantation upon his nine sharp tips of the fishing spear made from reeds to completely terminate the existence of Paobirai, the serpent god. His conduct is to save the inhabitants of Moirang from devouring by the serpent god, Paobirai.

Myths being a carrier of a community’s belief system, the idea of incarnation in Manipuri mythology is seen in the text. Akongjamba and Phou Oibi are mentioned in the text as the first of the seven incarnation of the star crossed lovers of the Kingdom of Moirang and Chahiu Leirong Pamba is mentioned to be reborn as Khamba (the last hero of the seven incarnations of the star crossed lovers of Moirang). Furthermore, in the tale of “And that is why a magic bamboo grows on Karang Island”, Tomba, the Kabui Cheiftain’s reed from which a nine sharp tips of the fishing spear is made is mentioned to be reincarnated as a strong hard bamboo to make Khamba’s spear to kill the ferocious tiger of Moirang.

Conclusion

The mythology of Manipuri literature is closely associated with sacred history that determines the reader’s interpretation and perspective of viewing Manipuri culture and tradition. The present research paper unfolds the underlying social customs, belief systems and the rituals and reveals the composite thoughts and behaviour of the native people.

Works Cited

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