Chapter 2

CULTURE, ETHNICITY, SOCIAL REALISM AND NOVEL AS A CULTURAL FORM: SOME THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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The most distinguishing feature of the novel, more than any other literary form is its 'formal realism' that provides a living reality of a society and culture. Rarely any other literary genre depicts the social and cultural environment pertaining to a community where vivid pictorial images are drawn in words. The novel therefore, reflects a history and culture of society and is thus a distinct cultural form. The novel is also a popular literary form having "a set of narrative procedures which are commonly found together in the novel." (Watt 1957: 28) As a cultural form the novel documents social situations, confronted by a community, the cultural trajectories and nuances that a society inherits from the past. It also traces gradual change and transition which a society also assimilates to its matrix in various proportions as viewed by its narrator. The ethnic communities, in which the change and transition from tradition to modernity are taking place, do not always mean their economic development. Novels portraying images of such ethnic communities present interesting phenomena and they need to be studied in keeping the dimensions of culture, ethnicity, representation, folklore in mind. The present chapter attempts to understand and analyse the novels on some ethnic communities of Assam and North East India in the light of some theoretical formulation relating to such subjects.

2.1 CULTURE

Culture, being one of the most widely discussed subjects, encompasses ideas, objects, values, attitudes, and expressive behaviours and meanings in varying contexts. With its intrinsic relationship with a society or community, culture as a concept and a behavioural way, also denotes institutional spheres which produce meanings based on or in relation to social structures in a society. The study of culture is directed towards the ideas and actions formulating such institutions and taking place within institutional spheres and deciphering meaning produced in them. There has also been a shift of meanings in the term and the

concept of culture itself as referred to by Raymond Williams in his seminal work *Culture and Society* (1960):

> …culture, similarly changes, in the same critical period. Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of the mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean 'the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual, and spiritual'. It came also, as we know, to be a word which often provoked either hostility or embarrassment. (Williams 1960: Introduction - XIV)

> The history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions, in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life. Our meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define. (ibid: 314)

Culture is not limited to ideas in abstractions alone. It causes action and cultural expressions are organised actions along social stereotypes and dynamically demonstrate the fact that "culture has to do with the schemata employed in practice at least as much as it has to do with 'representations of or for practice." (Biernackt 1999: 75) Being regularly in use through a process of continuity and change rather than being an inventory of stored materials, culture is a living reality over time. The present study will attempt at mapping contours of culture among certain ethnic communities of Assam as found to be a reflection in a set of novels by individual authors either belonging to the community themselves or remaining outside them. The novel a cultural form, essentially deals with a society which is also invariably a cultural group or community, always working within a schemata of certain cultural norms and practices. Dealing with an ethnic group and narrating its life under a set of cultural norms and experiences the novel makes, a holistic representation of cultural moors of a community as viewed or even experienced by the author.

The novels taken for discussion in the following pages bring to fore characteristic features of various ethnic communities such as beliefs, attitudes, (sometimes verging on

superstitious) – values, customs, institutions, material objects, practitional ways and other folkloric expressions and also factors causing changes and transition in a given community as observed in works like the *Yaruingam* (Chapter IV).

These norms and practices are continuing for generations in respective communities to constitute an accumulated experience and a system as can be observed in several novels taken up for discussion in the present study, and they provide guidelines for the community in their day to day or social life. The system as a whole constitutes a tradition which a community adheres to, incorporating changes from time to time demanded by changes in environment. The developments taking place in a community, provide culture and tradition too, with newer dimensions. Developments as well as transitions find subdued portrayal in most of the novels referred to the present study.

The cultural features characterising various communities and the roles played by individuals in sustaining cultural practices and the engagement with changing environment are dependent on the social configurations and strength of community members in negotiating with increasing political and economic changes confronting them. Under such changing situations:

> A culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized. The making of community is always an exploration, for consciousness cannot precede creation, and there is no formula for unknown experience. A good community, a living culture, will, because of this, not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need. We need to consider every attachment, every value, with our whole attention; for we do not know the future, we can never be certain of what may enrich it; we can only, now, listen to and consider whatever may be offered and take up what we can. (Williams 1960: 354)

> A literary work can never authentically mirror a culture not only because that culture is not at one with itself but also because the work is a literary presentation and hence not a transparent medium but a formal structure. Furthermore, the criterion of authenticity tends to equalize all cultures in a relativist haze and thereby destroys any possibility of differential judgment and comparison. (Bernheimer 1995: 8)

2.2 ETHNIC, ETHNICITY AND REPRESENTATION OF ETHNICITY IN NOVEL

In pursuance of my aforesaid discussion it needs to be emphasized that the novel as a cultural form and a representation of reality draws visual images in words of social groups or communities which are culturally distinctive and retaining certain cultural boundaries and differences that can be called ethnography.

"Social character is the product of social forms; in that sense, man is made by his society." (Riesman 1967: 1) Such characters working within cultural boundaries of certain social forms often lead to the issue of being ethnic and ethnicity. The boundaries limiting ethnic affiliations relate to cultural and biological differences in terms of kinship, language, religion, folklore and blood relationships and such other cultural symbols like dress, food, architecture etc.

> Ethnicity has always been experienced as a kinship phenomenon, a continuity within the self and within those who share an intergenerational link to common ancestors. Ethnicity is partly experienced as being 'bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood.' …we recognize ethnicity as a tangible, living reality that makes every human a link in an eternal bond from generation to generation – from past ancestors to those in the future. Ethnicity is experienced as a guarantor of eternity. (Fishman 1996: 63)

Ethnicity in a social group, as commentators agree, refers to the "social elaboration of collective identities whereby individuals see themselves as one among others like themselves. Collectively, people – whose boundaries may be loosely or tightly defined – distinguish themselves from the other people. Thus ethnicity is about social classifications emerging within relationship." (Fenton: 1999: 6) Along with the issues of culture, language and other features, ancestry also plays a role in mobilising social transactions in a community characterized as ethnicity.

> The concept of ancestry illustrates perfectly the way in which ethnicity constitutes a socially grounded, a culturally elaborated and a socially constructed phenomenon. …But the way in which people connect themselves to their ancestors is also a function of how ancestry is socially constructed and culturally elaborated. …What is true of ancestry is

true of ethnicity – both are simultaneously socially grounded and socially constructed. (Fenton 1999: 7)

The present study deliberates upon the notion of ethnicity and ethnic communities of Assam and North East India, as represented in a set of Assamese novels, as it naturally relates to the question of ethnicity and contextualization of ethnic identities of the communities taken for representation in the novels under discussion.

The question of ethnicity concerning a group or community leads through a process of alignment and politics of culture to a growing sense of ethnic identity within the group, which has been defined by De Vos "as consisting of the 'subjective, symbolic or emblematic use' by a 'group of people' … of any aspect of culture in order to differentiate themselves from other groups." (De Vos 1975: 16) Such groups aspiring for assertion of identity "-being, in their civil rights, or in their educational opportunities" and are engaged in a form of use ethnicity to make demand in the political arena for alternation in their states, in their economic well group politics." (Brass 1991: 19) In this context we may refer to the growing tendency of ethnic assertion in North East India which has rocked the Indian republic since independence. Apart from the issue of cultural distinctiveness of various communities of the region demanding separate homeland or autonomy, another factor which led to trigger ethnic movements is the question of underdevelopment and cultural as well as political domination by majority communities. We can in this respect cite the example of the Tangkhul Nagas in the state of Manipur which is also the focus of one of the novels i.e. the *Yaruingam* taken for discussion in the present study.

> The other notable element is the mark of underdevelopment in the regions of indigenous peoples. In the process of colonialism (and colonization in some cases) and post-colonialism (and post-colonization) much of the unique cultures and identities have been uprooted. Hence, it is no wonder how the indigenous peoples have been struggling to either restore their lost cultures and identities or resisting the hegemonic forces of the states and 'outsiders' (dominant communities and ruling classes). (Vashum 2014: 9)

The notion of ethnic or ethnicity growing is allied with cultural distinctiveness, through identity often becomes a rallying point of ethnic nationalism as observed in several tribal societies in Assam. The assertion of ethnic identity mediated by nationalistic fervour has

created a series of political movements many a time attended by insurgency and violence on both the parts of the state and political activists. This has developed historical stereotypes in several areas of the North East India.

With reference to ethnicity and ethnic consciousness in Assam and North East India the seeds of alienation have been further enforced by continued apathy on the part of the government in power and other agencies responsible for development in respect of education, economy, communication and such other aspects of modern life. Such apathy and lack of development continuing for ages even after years of India's independence have considerably hurt the 'tribal self-image and identity' paving the way for resentment and alienation. Studies have been undertaken, more particularly in anthropology and also in sociology "on the tribal life which are more from the researcher's angle and not from a tribal point of view. In the circumstances, we are left only with the choice of reading the relevant literature on Indian tribes and building our profiles of tribal self-image and identity from there." (Sahay 1977: 8)

The present study profiles the question of ethnic identity of a few tribal communities of Assam and neighbouring areas and the gradual process of assertion of their identity and self-image as represented in a set of novels by various authors in which the people belonging to these communities are depicted to speak for themselves while the themes of the novels narrate graphic picture and situations arising of the stagnating conditions of the areas where the communities inhabit, the characters drawn from various strata speak of the hopes and aspirations, frustration and anguish including rights and privileges which they are deprived of. As is observed in the novels studied, the element of anguish fuelled by apathy and neglect has caused a deep psychological chasm in some communities so much so that they are prompted to demand secession from the existing federal framework of the country causing turbulence. The novels this way depict the winds and tremors of change in many of the ethnic communities of the region which are palpably felt in each of these narratives.

A critical remark by an acknowledged author appears to be relevant in this context:

….some ethnic groups in other contexts go further and demand that corporate rights be conceded to the group as a whole, that they be given not just individual educational opportunities on the same basis as others, but that they be given control over the public system of education in their areas of concentration so that they can teach the history, language, and culture of their group to their own children. They demand a major say for the group in the political system as a whole or control over a piece of territory within the country, or they demand a country of their own with full sovereignty. In the latter case, the ethnic group aspires to national status and recognition. (Brass 1991: 20)

In the Indian context nationalities fromed on the basis of language and ethnicity are in the process of being created by the "transformation of a linguistic or an ethnic group in a multi-ethnic and multilingual state into a self-conscious political entity or by the amalgamation of diverse groups and the formation of an inter-ethnic homogenous national culture through the agency of the modern state. .…This effort, however, creates its own problems because the selection of additional symbols inevitably involves either the loss of potential adherents or the need to persuade or coerce group members to change their language, religion, behaviour, or dress. It also may lead nationalist leaders into expansionist military adventure and conflicts with other states when the drive to achieve multi-symbol congruence involves irredentist claims." (Brass 1991: 20, 21) This has been true particularly in respect of the political condition in the states inhabited by major ethnic groups or summarily speaking, ethnic states in the North East India getting more and more acute in recent years. This however, is not within the purview of the present study as ethnic expansionism and border tensions are not taken up by the novelists referred to in the study.

2.3 REPRESENTATION AS PERCEIVED IN THE WORKS

The present study also looks at the question of representation as the novels selected for study are works which to a large extent represent the social conditions as well as cultural traits of the ethnic communities finding depiction in the narratives. The concept of representation occupies an important place in the study of any culture as it connects meaning and language to the culture in question.

'Representation means using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people.' You may well ask, 'Is that all?' Well, yes and no. Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this is a far from simple or straightforward process, as you will soon discover. (Hall 2003: 15)

Representing is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the 'real' worlds or objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events. (Hall 2003: 17)

With multifocal approaches to the concept of representation connecting meaning and language adopted by Ferdinand Saussure and the discursive approach associated with the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault, representation has come to play an important role not only in the study of culture belonging to any society, but also in the field of literary criticism or literary works as cultural expressions. Deciphering meaning in any work of culture:

…depends on the relationship between things in the world – people, objects and events, real or fictional – and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representation of them. …At the heart of the meaning process in culture, then, are two related 'systems of representation'. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things – people, objects, events, abstract ideas, etc. – and our system of concepts, our conceptual maps. (Hall 2003: 18 -19)

The following discussion of the *Yaruingam* by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya and the *Rangmilir Hanhi* by Rang Bang Terang(Chapter IV), brings to the fore the kaleidoscope of what constitutes the Tangkhul and the Karbi societies. These two novels in particular unfold the traditional set up inhering the culturally distinctive features of these two ethnic societies within their natural environment to which they are deeply attached. It is from the natural environment that they derive their spiritual strength to sustain their cultural existence. However this self-contained and exclusive social process is found to be in a state of not-in-equilibrium in changing social and cultural spheres which impact heavily in the process of domesticating the impact of such agencies of change. The crucial period of

political and social history of these two communities are susceptibly pictorialized by the two authors.

2.4 FOLKLORIC DIMENSION REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS

The present study takes into account the folkloric dimensions of various ethno-cultural communities as represented in the novels brought for discussion. "Folklore here will mean …field folklore also includes the folk-life encompassing the whole panorama of traditional culture, including the oral folklore… and traditional arts and crafts." (Dorson 1972: 1-2).

The authors of the novels under review in the present study – are from the native communities - Rong Bong Terang and Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya. Narratives are mostly derived from material from personal encounters with the community or from the repositories of social memory and oral traditions because of the paucity of written material or archival records in these societies. Novels being fictionalised writings on a society or individuals also involve the writers' imagination and personal views with whatsoever objectivity he or she adopts. Even in societies with a long history and a large repository of words produced in the form of texts through writing and in print, there is always an interface between oral and written culture as mode of communication. The cultural repository system is to a great extent transmitted as social memory from generation to generation. Novelists such as Rong Bonag Terang and Jatin Mipun, who are natives of their subject communities, combine their lived experiences within their cultural environment which consist of a large trajectory of folklore material. The advent of Christianity and written literature in most of the tribal societies entered hand in hand. And so is the case in respect of the Tangkhul Naga society as portrayed by Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya in the *Yaruingam*.

The novels referred to in this study present an overview of the folk-life of the communities which include oral literature, social folk customs, rituals, festivals, myths and miracles, folksongs which are frequently encountered in the novels (particularly in the *Rangmilir Hanhi* and the *Mikchijili* by Rang Bang Terang and Jatin Mipun respectively). The above mentioned forms are however not mutually exclusive specially among the tribal societies – one interacting with and seeping into the other. All the novels

irrespective of authors – tribal or non-tribal – bring to fore a larger view of folkways or folklore material in narrating lives of the people belonging to a particular community as folkways incorporate "habitual actions, such as manners, customs, usages, and mores" including "values and meanings in an attempt to describe the complex interlocking parts of a cultural system" (Brunvand 1996: 296)

The study of the selected novels refers to myths prevailing among the communities in question. Myths relating to the origins of various communities and their migration to their present habitat, and ritualistic practices concerning the life cycle, agriculture and attachment to land or the relationship between land and community which together present a holistic worldview.

> ….Myths having "a number of subtly inter related meanings… at its most fundamental are narrative about supernatural beings. The importance of the myth lies in the way in which it encapsulates and expresses beliefs and values that is shared by, and definitive of, a particular cultural group. Thus, a myth may explain the origin of the group (or of the world in general), the place of the group in the world, and its relationship to other groups, and illustrate or exemplify the moral values that are venerated by the group. (Edger 2004: 248)

The novels in question also carry evocative responses to the myths prevalent in the societies represented in their narratives. Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya's Yaruingam for example in addition to portraying the turbulent period of history among the Tangkhul Nagas refers to the myths among the people of the community pertaining to the myths of their origin, immigration and the sacred image of the land. It thus reminds us of an observation by a native Tangkhul scholar made relating to the importance of myths in the Tangkhul society.

> Tangkhul myths, oral history, and folklores contain strong sentiment which expressed their attachment to land. In the mythical narratives of the Tangkhuls, the origin of the community was traced to a cave in the earth called 'Murringphy'. ….the myths concerning 'cave origin' of the Tangkhuls can be considered in terms of conceptualizing 'land' as a significant historical symbol of community's primordial past. Land as the mother of a nation or community is not unique to the Tangkhuls; however, the significant feature of land being personified as mother and origin of life among the Tangkhuls

pointed towards the sacred belief that land has been construed as the 'custodian', and 'life-giver' of the community. …Ritualistic practices and festivities are closely interconnected in Tangkhuls society. Rituals involved invocation of the sacred, and its sanction for the activities of individuals or community and generally to look after their fate on earth. (Shimreiwung 2012: 125)

In appraising various images of ethnic communities, the novels have also elaborate references to festivals and rituals, attended with sessions of music and dance that are often related to agricultural practices, food habits, dress and costume, housing and material implements which essentially form important areas of folklore study. Each of these components offers challenging areas for theoretical analysis which is however outside the purview of the present study. The study relates only to the ethnic societies as represented in the novels on the communities as reflected in the novels. Summarising the point it can be said that each of the novels brought for discussion in smaller or larger degrees, is a rich documentation of folklore material that has been in practice for generations and subjected to change under the influence of situational factors.

The study takes into account the aforementioned theoretical concerns in approaching the novels and reading them. However it is not limiting itself to any particular theoretical formulation in abstraction. They are taken as tools for understanding the intricate social and cultural issues embedded in the novels as mentioned earlier in the Introduction (Chapter I). The study is not analyzing the form of the novel nor is it literary criticism, but the study researches the cultural form embodying the social and cultural mind and other attending issues that the novelist envisions to depict within the narrative frame. The novel thus is a pictorial representation of the vicissitues of a society or a community in 'words'. The 'word' here functions as a vehicle of painting the images of a society and it also holds in it orality or oral tradition of a community embracing folk narratives, rhymes, and songs, folk speech derived from local and regional tunes of phrase that deviate from the standard language. (Dorson 1972: 2)The 'word' here that goes to construct the language in the novels and the language of the communities in representation here or the linguistic features as parts of the oral treasure is also not brought as an independent analysis. Because we read the novels through languages used by the novelist which are always Assamese and it does not represent the languages of the concerned community or its structural or other features.

The present study thus tries to appropriate these theoretical arguments in analysing the novel from the praxis of Cultural Studies without overlapping or jumping from one to the other.

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